

1854

SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Henry David Thoreau

I LATELY ATTENDED a meeting of the citizens of Concord, expecting, one among many, to speak on the subject of slavery in; but I was surprised and disappointed to find that had called my townsmen together was the destiny of Nebraska, not of Massachusetts, and that what I had to say would be entirely of order. I had thought that the house was on fire, and not the; but though several of the citizens of Massachusetts are now in prison for attempting to rescue a slave from her own clutches, one of the speakers at that meeting expressed regret for it, not even referred to it. It was only the disposition of some wilda thousand miles off which appeared to concern them. The of Concord are not prepared to stand by one of their own, but talk only of taking up a position on the highlands beyond Yellowstone River. Our Buttricks and Davises and Hosmers are hither, and I fear that they will leave no Lexington between them and the enemy. There is not one slave in Nebraska; are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts. They who have been bred in the school of politics fail now and to face the facts. Their measures are half measures and merely. They put off the day of settlement indefinitely, meanwhile the debt accumulates. Though the Fugitive Slave Law not been the subject of discussion on that occasion, it was faintly resolved by my townsmen, at an adjourned meeting, as learn, that the compromise compact of 1820 having been repudiated by of the parties, "Therefore, ... the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 must be repealed." But this is not the reason why an iniquitous law be repealed. The fact which the politician faces is merely that is less honor among thieves than was supposed, and not that they are thieves. As I had no opportunity to express my thoughts at that meeting, will allow me to do so here? Again it happens that the Boston Court-House is full of armed men, prisoner and trying a MAN, to find out if he is not really a. Does any one think that justice or God awaits Mr. Loring's? For him to sit there deciding still, when this question is decided from eternity to eternity, and the unlettered slave and the multitude around have long since heard and assented to decision, is simply to make himself ridiculous. We may beto ask from whom he received his commission, and who he is received it; what novel statutes he obeys, and what precedents to him of authority. Such an arbiter's very existence is an. We do not ask him to make up his mind, but to make up pack. I listen to hear the voice of a Governor, Commander-in-Chief of forces of Massachusetts. I hear only the creaking of crickets the hum of insects which now fill the summer air. The Governor's is to review the troops on muster days. I have seen him on, with his hat off, listening to a chaplain's prayer. It that that is all I have ever seen of a Governor. I think I could manage to get along without one. If he is not of these to prevent my being kidnapped, pray of what important use is likely to be to me? When freedom is most endangered, he dwells in deepest obscurity. A distinguished clergyman told me that he chose profession of a clergyman because it afforded the most leisure for pursuits. I would recommend to him the profession of a. Three years ago, also, when the Sims tragedy was acted, I said to, There is such an officer, if not such a man, as the Governor Massachusetts- what has he been about the last fortnight? Has he as much as he could do to keep on the fence during this moral? It seemed to me that no keener satire could have been at, no more cutting insult have been offered to that man, than what happened- the absence of all inquiry after him in that. The worst and

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the most I chance to know of him is that he not improve that opportunity to make himself known, and worthily. He could at least have resigned himself into fame. It to be forgotten that there was such a man or such an. Yet no doubt he was endeavoring to fill the gubernatorial all the while. He was no Governor of mine. He did not govern me. But at last, in the present case, the Governor was heard from. After and the United States government had perfectly succeeded in robbing poor innocent black man of his liberty for life, and, as far as they, of his Creator's likeness in his breast, he made a speech to accomplices, at a congratulatory supper! I have read a recent law of this State, making it penal for any of the "Commonwealth" to "detain or aid in the...", anywhere within its limits, "of any person, for the reason he is claimed as a fugitive slave." Also, it was a matter of that a writ of replevin to take the fugitive out of the of the United States Marshal could not be served for want of force to aid the officer. I had thought that the Governor was, in some sense, the executive of the State; that it was his business, as a Governor, to that the laws of the State were executed; while, as a man, he took that he did not, by so doing, break the laws of humanity; but there is any special important use for him, he is useless, or than useless, and permits the laws of the State to go. Perhaps I do not know what are the duties of a Governor; if to be a Governor requires to subject one's self to so much without remedy, if it is to put a restraint upon my, I shall take care never to be Governor of Massachusetts. I not read far in the statutes of this Commonwealth. It is not treading. They do not always say what is true; and they do always mean what they say. What I am concerned to know is, that man's influence and authority were on the side of the, and not of the slave- of the guilty, and not of the of injustice, and not of justice. I never saw him of whom speak; indeed, I did not know that he was Governor until this occurred. I heard of him and Anthony Burns at the same time, and, undoubtedly, most will hear of him. So far am I from being by him. I do not mean that it was anything to his discredit I had not heard of him, only that I heard what I did. The worst I say of him is, that he proved no better than the majority of his would be likely to prove. In my opinion, he was not equal the occasion. The whole military force of the State is at the service of a Mr., a slaveholder from Virginia, to enable him to catch a man whom calls his property; but not a soldier is offered to save a of Massachusetts from being kidnapped! Is this what all soldiers, all this training, have been for these seventy-nine past? Have they been trained merely to rob Mexico and carry back slaves to their masters? These very nights I heard the sound of a drum in our streets. were men training still; and for what? I could with an effort the cockerels of Concord for crowing still, for they, had not been beaten that morning; but I could not excuse a rub-a-dub of the "trainers." The slave was carried back by such as these; i.e., by the soldier, of whom the best you say in this connection is that he is a fool made conspicuous by painted coat. Three years ago, also, just a week after the authorities of Boston to carry back a perfectly innocent man, and one whom they to be innocent, into slavery, the inhabitants of Concord caused bells to be rung and the cannons to be fired, to celebrate their and the courage and love of liberty of their ancestors who at the bridge. As if those three millions had fought for the to be free themselves, but to hold in slavery three million. Nowadays, men wear a fool's-cap, and call it a liberty-cap. do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to a post, and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring bells and fire the cannons to celebrate their liberty. So some of my townsmen took the liberty to ring and fire. That was the of their freedom; and when the sound of the bells died

away, liberty died away also; when the powder was all expended, liberty went off with the smoke. The joke could be no broader if the inmates of the prisons were to for all the powder to be used in such salutes, and hirejailers to do the firing and ringing for them, while they it through the grating. This is what I thought about my neighbors. Every humane and intelligent inhabitant of Concord, when he or she those bells and those cannons, thought not with pride of the of the 19th of April, 1775, but with shame of the events of the of April, 1851. But now we have half buried that old shame a new one. Massachusetts sat waiting Mr. Loring's decision, as if it could in way affect her own criminality. Her crime, the most conspicuous fatal crime of all, was permitting him to be the umpire in such case. It was really the trial of Massachusetts. Every moment that she hesitated to set this man free, every moment that she now to atone for her crime, she is convicted. The Commissioner her case is God; not Edward G. God, but simply God. I wish my countrymen to consider, that whatever the human law may, neither an individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act in justice against the obscurest individual without having to pay penalty for it. A government which deliberately enacts, and persists in it, will at length even become the stock of the world. Much has been said about American slavery, but I think that we do even yet realize what slavery is. If I were seriously to propose Congress to make mankind into sausages, I have no doubt that most the members would smile at my proposition, and if any believed me to be in earnest, they would think that I proposed something much than Congress had ever done. But if any of them will tell me to make a man into a sausage would be much worse- would be any than to make him into a slave- than it was to enact the Slave Law- I will accuse him of foolishness, of incapacity, of making a distinction without a difference. one is just as sensible a proposition as the other. I hear a good deal said about trampling this law under foot. Why, need not go out of his way to do that. This law rises not to the of the head or the reason; its natural habitat is in the dirt. was born and bred, and has its life, only in the dust and mire, a level with the feet; and he who walks with freedom, and does with Hindoo mercy avoid treading on every venomous reptile, will tread on it, and so trample it under foot- and Webster, its, with it, like the dirt- bug and its ball. Recent events will be valuable as a criticism on the of justice in our midst, or, rather, as showing what the true resources of justice in any community. It has come to, that the friends of liberty, the friends of the slave, have when they have understood that his fate was left to the tribunals of the country to be decided. Free men have no faith justice will be awarded in such a case. The judge may decide this or that; it is a kind of accident, at best. It is evident that is not a competent authority in so important a case. It is no time,, to be judging according to his precedents, but to establish a for the future. I would much rather trust to the sentiment the people. In their vote you would get something of some value, at, however small; but in the other case, only the trammeling of an individual, of no significance, be it which way it. It is to some extent fatal to the courts, when the people are to go behind them. I do not wish to believe that they were made for fair weather, and for very civil cases merely; think of leaving it to any court in the land to decide whether than three millions of people, in this case a sixth part of a, have a right to be freemen or not! But it has been left to the of justice, so called- to the Supreme Court of the land- and, you all know, recognizing no authority but the Constitution, it has that the three millions are and shall continue to be slaves. judges as these are merely the inspectors of a pick-lock and's tools, to tell him whether they are in working order or, and there they

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think that their responsibility ends. There was prior case on the docket, which they, as judges appointed by God, no right to skip; which having been justly settled, they would be saved from this humiliation. It was the case of the murderer. The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the free. They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law the government breaks it. Among human beings, the judge whose words seal the fate of a man into eternity is not he who merely pronounces the verdict the law, but he, whoever he may be, who, from a love of truth, unprejudiced by any custom or enactment of men, utters a true or sentence concerning him. He it is that sentences him. can discern truth has received his commission from a higher than the chiefest justice in the world who can discern only. He finds himself constituted judge of the judge. Strange that should be necessary to state such simple truths! I am more and more convinced that, with reference to any public, it is more important to know what the country thinks of it what the city thinks. The city does not think much. On any question, I would rather have the opinion of Boxboro' than of and New York put together. When the former speaks, I feel as if had spoken, as if humanity was yet, and a reasonable being asserted its rights- as if some unprejudiced men among the hills had at length turned their attention to the subject, by a few sensible words redeemed the reputation of the race. When, some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most one that is ever assembled in the United States. It is evident that there are, in this Commonwealth at least, two, becoming more and more distinct- the party of the city, and party of the country. I know that the country is mean enough, I am glad to believe that there is a slight difference in her. But as yet she has few, if any organs, through which to express. The editorials which she reads, like the news, come from seaboard. Let us, the inhabitants of the country, cultivate respect. Let us not send to the city for aught more essential our broadcloths and groceries; or, if we read the opinions of the, let us entertain opinions of our own. Among measures to be adopted, I would suggest to make as earnest vigorous an assault on the press as has already been made, and effect, on the church. The church has much improved within a year; but the press is, almost without exception, corrupt. It that in this country the press exerts a greater and a more influence than the church did in its worst period. We are a religious people, but we are a nation of politicians. We do care for the Bible, but we do care for the newspaper. At any of politicians- like that at Concord the other evening, for how impertinent it would be to quote from the Bible! how to quote from a newspaper or from the Constitution! This is a Bible which we read every morning and every, standing and sitting, riding and walking. It is a Bible every man carries in his pocket, which lies on every table and, and which the mail, and thousands of missionaries, are dispersing. It is, in short, the only book which America printed and which America reads. So wide is its influence. This is a preacher whom you voluntarily support. Your tax is one cent daily, and it costs nothing for pew hire. But how of these preachers preach the truth? I repeat the testimony of an intelligent foreigner, as well as my own convictions, when I, that probably no country was ever ruled by so mean a class of as, with a few noble exceptions, are the editors of the press in this country. And as they live and rule only by servility, and appealing to the worse, and not the better, of man, the people who read them are in the condition of that returns to his vomit. The Liberator and the Commonwealth were the only papers in Boston, far as I know, which

made themselves heard in condemnation of the and meanness of the authorities of that city, as exhibited⁵¹. The other journals, almost without exception, by their referring to and speaking of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the back of the slave Sims, insulted the common sense of the, at least. And, for the most part, they did this, one would, because they thought so to secure the approbation of their, not being aware that a sounder sentiment prevailed to any in the heart of the Commonwealth. I am told that some of them improved of late; but they are still eminently time-serving. Such the character they have won. But, thank fortune, this preacher can be even more easily reached by weapons of the reformer than could the recreant priest. The free of New England have only to refrain from purchasing and reading sheets, have only to withhold their cents, to kill a score of at once. One whom I respect told me that he purchased's Citizen in the cars, and then throw it out the window. would not his contempt have been more fatally expressed if he not bought it? Are they Americans? are they New Englanders? are they inhabitants of and Concord and Framingham, who read and support the Post, Mail, Journal, Advertiser, Courier, and Times? Are the Flags of our Union? I am not a newspaper reader, and may to name the worst. Could slavery suggest a more complete servility than some of these exhibit? Is there any dust which their conduct does not lick, make fouler still with its slime? I do not know whether the Bostonis still in existence, but I remember to have seen it about the when Sims was carried off. Did it not act its part serve its master faithfully! How could it have gone lower on belly? How can a man stoop lower than he is low? do more than his extremities in the place of the head he has? than make his lower extremity? When I have taken up this paper with my turned up, I have heard the gurgling of the sewer through column. I have felt that I was handling a paper picked out of public gutters, a leaf from the gospel of the gambling-house, groggery, and the brothel, harmonizing with the gospel of the Exchange. The majority of the men of the North, and of the South and East West, are not men of principle. If they vote, they do not send men Congress on errands of humanity; but while their brothers and are being scourged and hung for loving liberty, while- I might insert all that slavery implies and is- it is the mismanagement wood and iron and stone and gold which concerns them. Do what you, O Government, with my wife and children, my mother and, my father and sister, I will obey your commands to the. It will indeed grieve me if you hurt them, if you deliver them overseers to be hunted by bounds or to be whipped to death; but,, I will peaceably pursue my chosen calling on this fair, until perchance, one day, when I have put on mourning for dead, I shall have persuaded you to relent. Such is the attitude, are the words of Massachusetts. Rather than do thus, I need not say what match I would touch, what endeavor to blow up; but as I love my life, I would side with light, and let the dark earth roll from under me, calling my and my brother to follow. I would remind my countrymen that they are to be men first, and only at a late and convenient hour. No matter how valuable may be to protect your property, even to keep soul and body, if it do not keep you and humanity together. I am sorry to say that I doubt if there is a judge in who is prepared to resign his office, and get his living, whenever it is required of him to pass sentence under a which is merely contrary to the law of God. I am compelled to that they put themselves, or rather are by character, in this, exactly on a level with the marine who discharges his in any direction he is ordered to. They are just as much tools, as little men. Certainly, they are not the more to be respected, their master enslaves their understandings and consciences, of their bodies. The judges and lawyers-

simply as such, I mean- and all men of, try this case by a very low and incompetent standard. They, not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whetheris what they call constitutional. Is virtue constitutional, or? Is equity constitutional, or iniquity? In important moral andquestions, like this, it is just as impertinent to ask whether ais constitutional or not, as to ask whether it is profitable or. They persist in being the servants of the worst of men, and notservants of humanity. The question is, not whether you or your, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement tothe Devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; butyou will not now, for once and at last, serve God- in spite ofown past recreancy, or that of your ancestor- by obeying thatand only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or, has written in your being. The amount of it is, if the majority vote the Devil to be God, thewill live and behave accordingly- and obey the successful, trusting that, some time or other, by some Speaker'svote, perhaps, they may reinstate God. This is the highestI can get out or invent for my neighbors. These men act asthey believed that they could safely slide down a hill a littleor a good way- and would surely come to a place, by and by, wherewould begin to slide up again. This is expediency, or choosingcourse which offers the slightest obstacles to the feet, that is,downhill one. But there is no such thing as accomplishing areform by the use of "expediency." There is no such thing asup hill. In morals the only sliders are backsliders. Thus we steadily worship Mammon, both school and state and church,on the seventh day curse God with a tintamar from one end of theto the other. Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality- that itsecures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient?the available candidate- who is invariably the Devil- and whathave his constituents to be surprised, because the Devil doesbehave like an angel of light? What is wanted is men, not of, but of probity- who recognize a higher law than the, or the decision of the majority. The fate of the countrynot depend on how you vote at the polls- the worst man is asas the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind ofyou drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind ofyou drop from your chamber into the street every morning. What should concern Massachusetts is not the Nebraska Bill, norFugitive Slave Bill, but her own slaveholding and servility. LetState dissolve her union with the slaveholder. She may wriggle and, and ask leave to read the Constitution once more; but shefind no respectable law or precedent which sanctions theof such a union for an instant. Let each inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her, asas she delays to do her duty. The events of the past month teach me to distrust Fame. I see thatdoes not finely discriminate, but coarsely hurrahs. Shenot the simple heroism of an action, but only as it iswith its apparent consequences. She praises till she isthe easy exploit of the Boston tea party, but will besilent about the braver and more disinterestedlyattack on the Boston Court-House, simply because it was! Covered with disgrace, the State has sat down coolly to try forlives and liberties the men who attempted to do its duty for it.this is called justice! They who have shown that they can behavewell may perchance be put under bonds for their good. They whom truth requires at present to plead guilty are,all the inhabitants of the State, preeminently innocent. WhileGovernor, and the Mayor, and countless officers of theare at large, the champions of liberty are imprisoned. Only they are guiltless who commit the crime of contempt of such a. It behooves every man to see that his influence is on theof justice, and let the courts make their own characters. Myin this case are wholly with the accused, and whollytheir accusers and judges. Justice is sweet

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and musical; but is harsh and discordant. The judge still sits grinding at the organ, but it yields no music, and we hear only the sound of the mill. He believes that all the music resides in the handle, and the crowd toss him their coppers the same as before. Do you suppose that that Massachusetts which is now doing these which hesitates to crown these men, some of whose lawyers, and judges, perchance, may be driven to take refuge in some poor, that they may not wholly outrage their instinctive sense of duty do you suppose that she is anything but base and servile? she is the champion of liberty? Show me a free state, and a court truly of justice, and I will fight them, if need be; but show me Massachusetts, and I refuse her my, and express contempt for her courts. The effect of a good government is to make life more valuable- of a bad one, to make it less valuable. We can afford that railroad and merely material stock should lose some of its value, for that only us to live more simply and economically; but suppose that value of life itself should be diminished! How can we make a demand on man and nature, how live more economically in respect to virtue and all noble qualities, than we do? I have lived for the month- and I think that every man in Massachusetts capable of the patriotism must have had a similar experience- with the having suffered a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost a country. I had never respected the government near to which I, but I had foolishly thought that I might manage to live here, my private affairs, and forget it. For my part, my old and pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their, and I feel that my investment in life here is worth many cent less since Massachusetts last deliberately sent back a man, Anthony Burns, to slavery. I dwelt before, perhaps, in an illusion that my life passed somewhere only between heaven and, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell wholly in hell. The site of that political organization called is to me morally covered with volcanic scoriae and, such as Milton describes in the infernal regions. If there is hell more unprincipled than our rulers, and we, the ruled, I curious to see it. Life itself being worth less, all things that minister to it, are worth less. Suppose you have a library, with pictures to adorn the walls- a garden laid out and contemplate scientific and literary pursuits and all at once that your villa, with all its contents is located in hell, and that the justice of the peace has a cloven foot and a tail- do not these things suddenly lose their value in your? I feel that, to some extent, the State has fatally interfered with lawful business. It has not only interrupted me in my passage Court Street on errands of trade, but it has interrupted me every man on his onward and upward path, on which he had trusted to leave Court Street far behind. What right had it to remind of Court Street? I have found that hollow which even I had relied for solid. I am surprised to see men going about their business as if nothing happened. I say to myself, "Unfortunates! they have not heard news." I am surprised that the man whom I just met on horseback be so earnest to overtake his newly bought cows running away- all property is insecure, and if they do not run away again, may be taken away from him when he gets them. Fool! does he not that his seed-corn is worth less this year- that all beneficent fail as you approach the empire of hell? No prudent man build a stone house under these circumstances, or engage in any enterprise which it requires a long time to accomplish. As long as ever, but life is more interrupted and less available a man's proper pursuits. It is not an era of repose. We have up all our inherited freedom. If we would save our lives, we must for them. I walk toward one of our ponds; but what signifies the beauty of when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity in them; when we are not serene, we

go not to them. Who be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting her. But it chanced the other day that I scented a white water-lily, a season I had waited for had arrived. It is the emblem of purity, bursts up so pure and fair to the eye, and so sweet to the scent, if to show us what purity and sweetness reside in, and can be from, the slime and muck of earth. I think I have plucked first one that has opened for a mile. What confirmation of our is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not so soon of the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that time may come when man's deeds will smell as sweet. Such is the which the plant emits. If Nature can compound this fragrance annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, who is fitted to perceive and love it. It reminds me that has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no in the fragrance of the water-lily. It is not a Nymphaea. In it, the sweet, and pure, and innocent are wholly from the obscene and baleful. I do not scent in this the serving irresolution of a Massachusetts Governor, nor of a Boston. So behave that the odor of your actions may enhance the general of the atmosphere, that when we behold or scent a flower, we not be reminded how inconsistent your deeds are with it; for all is but one form of advertisement of a moral quality, and if actions had not been performed, the lily would not smell sweet. Foul slime stands for the sloth and vice of man, the decay of; the fragrant flower that springs from it, for the purity and which are immortal. Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower, to charm the senses of men, for they have no real life: they merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy. We do not complain that they live, but that they do not buried. Let the living bury them: even they are good for manure.

THE END