

April 14, 1836

Forten, James Jr.

An Address Delivered Before the Ladies

Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia

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AN ADDRESS, &c.

LADIES—There is nothing that could more forcibly induce me to express my humble sentiments at all times, than an entire consciousness that it is the duty of every individual who would wish to see the foul curse of slavery swept for ever from the land—who wishes to become one amongst the undaunted advocates of the oppressed—who wishes to deal justly and love mercy. In a word, it is my indispensable duty, in view of the wretched, the helpless, the friendless condition of my countrymen in chains, to raise my voice, feeble though it be, in their behalf; to plead for the restoration of their inalienable rights. As to the character of the ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY, it requires but one glance from an impartial eye, to discover the purity of its motives—the great strength of its moral energies; its high and benevolent—its holy and life giving principles. These are the foundations, the very architecture of Abolition, and prove its sovereignty. In fact, all associated bodies which have for their great aim the destruction of tyranny, and the moral and intellectual improvement of mankind, have been, and ever will be, considered as bearing a decided superiority over all others. And how well may this Association, before which I now have the honour to appear, be deemed one of that description; and still more is its superiority increased from a knowledge of the truth that it is composed entirely of your sex. It stands aloof from the storms of passion and political tumult, exhibiting in its extended and Christian views a disposition to produce an immediate reformation of the heart and soul. Never before has there been a subject brought into the arena of public investigation, so fraught with humanity—so alive to the best interest of our country—so dear to all those for whose benefit it was intended, as the one which now calls you together. How varied and abundant—how eloquent and soul-thrilling have been the arguments advanced in its defence, by the greatest and best of the land; and yet, so boundless is the theme—so inexhaustible the fountain, that even the infant may

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be heard lisping a prayer for the redemption of the perishing captive.

LADIES—The task you are called upon to perform is certainly of vital importance. Great is the responsibility which this association imposes upon you; however, I need scarcely remind you of it, feeling confident that long before this you have made a practical and familiar acquaintance with all its bearings, and with every sentence contained in your society's sacred declaration; ever remembering that in it is concentrated one of the noblest objects that ever animated the breast of a highly favoured people—*the immediate and unconditional abolition of Slavery*. It is the acknowledgment of a broad principle like this, and recommending it to a prejudiced public, who have been all along accustomed to reason upon the dangerous doctrine of gradualism, viewing it as the only safe and efficient remedy for this monstrous evil which has brought about such an excitement, and convulsed our country from North to South; an excitement which I have every reason to believe will prove a powerful engine towards the furtherance of your noble cause. As to this opposition now arrayed against you, terrible as it appears, it is no more than what you might anticipate; it is a fate which, in this age of iniquity, must inevitably follow such a change as your society proposes to effect. For what else is to be expected for a measure the tendency of which is to check the tide of corruption—to make narrower the limits of tyrannical power—to unite *liberty* and *law*—to save the body of the oppressed from the blood-stained lash of the oppressor—and to secure a greater respect and obedience to Him who wills the happiness of all mankind, and who endowed them with life, and liberty, as conducive to that happiness? What else, I repeat, can be expected but opposition, at a time like this, when brute force reigns supreme; when ministers of the Gospel, com-

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missioned to spread the light of Christianity among all nations are overleaping the pale of the church, forsaking the holy path, and sowing the seeds of discord where they should plant the “olive branch of peace.” When liberty has dwindled into a mere shadow, its vitality being lost, shrouded in darkness, swallowed up as it were in the eternal dumbness of the grave. This, my friends, is the present situation of things, and warns you that the desperate struggle has commenced between *freedom* and *despotism—light and darkness*. This is the hour you are called upon to move with a bold and fearless step; there must be no lukewarmness, no shrinking from the pointed finger of scorn, or the contemptuous vociferation of the enemy; no withholding your aid, or concealing your mighty influence behind the screen of timidity; no receding from the foothold you have already gained. To falter now, would be to surrender your pure and unsullied principles into the hands of the vicious and perverted portion of the community, who are anxiously waiting to see you grow weak and faint-hearted; you would be casting the whole spirit and genius of patriotism into that polluted current just described. To falter now would retard the glorious day of emancipation which is now dawning, for years, perhaps for ever. But why should you pause? It is true that public opinion is bitter against you, and exercises a powerful influence over the minds of many; it is also true that you are frustrated in nearly every attempt to procure a place to hold your meetings, and the hue and cry is raised, “Down with the incendiaries—hang all who dare to open their mouths in vindication of equal rights;” still, this would be no excuse for a dereliction of duty; you are not bound to follow public opinion constantly and lose sight of the demands of justice; for it is plain to be seen that public opinion, in its present state, is greatly at fault; it affixes the seal of condemnation upon you without giving you an opportunity to be fairly heard; therefore I think the obligation ought to cease, and you pursue a more natural course by looking to your own thoughts and feelings as a guide, and not to

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the words of others. Again—in order to promote your anti-slavery principles you should make it the topic of your conversation amidst your acquaintances, in every family circle, and in the shades of private life. Be assured that by acting thus, hundreds will rise up to your aid.

I will now claim your indulgence for a few moments while I make some remarks on the subject of natural rights. It certainly is one of great magnitude. I will not, however, enter into an extensive discussion of its various branches; but would earnestly suggest it for the future consideration of our friends. Of what incalculable value must these rights be to those who possess them unrestricted? And yet they were intended for all—high and low—rich and poor—of whatever clime or complexion. They were spoke into existence along with the world; and although the establishment of legal authority was unknown to us, and there “subsisted not a vestige of civil government any where, still they would belong to man.” Or, if we who form this present assembly were, by some sudden and unknown cause, thrown upon a desolate spot in the remotest corner of the Globe, we would, from the very first moment, be entitled to these rights—the right to the produce of our own labour, to our limbs, life, liberty and property—perfect rights, not human institutions, but Divine ordinations. Now, with these facts before you, the question should arise, whether all your fellow creatures are in the full enjoyment of these rights. If you look to the South, you will see how they are violated—how outrage, oppression and wrong has blighted them—how man, (corrupted worm of the earth) forgetting his accountability to God, suffering passion and avarice to dethrone reason, has torn them from his fellow man. Yes, the poor slave is deprived of these rights—these great essentials to man’s happiness—these bountiful gifts of nature—he does not possess even as much freedom “as the beasts that perish.” My friends, reflect for a moment upon what constitutes natural rights; analyze them, search deep into their component

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parts, and then ask yourselves if slavery recognises any of them? Why, every rational being who has bestowed one thought upon the inhuman traffic must come to the conclusion that it does not. Again, look on the other side of the picture—turn your eyes to your own city, and behold that class of American citizens with whom I am identified; see them borne down by the weight of innumerable persecutions, their situation but little better than the millions of their brethren now suffering under the galling yoke of servitude; they are nearly stripped of their rights. The remorseless hand of prejudice—the despoiler of our rights—our inveterate foe, whose birth place is the nethermost pit—year after year wages an ignoble warfare against us. If we are arrested on suspicion of having stolen our own bodies, and run away with them, so few are the advocates we have at the Bar of Justice, that the pleadings of humanity are silenced, and we too frequently consigned to hopeless bondage. If our property be destroyed by a cowardly and ruffian mob, our persons maltreated and our limbs broken, the hand of charity is scarcely extended to the sufferer; seldom do we find that redress shown to us which would be fully bestowed upon any other class of people similarly situated. The omnipotent Being said, “Let there be light.” Is it permitted to shine brightly around our path? No. Where is that all-powerful light of knowledge? Where are the academies thrown open for our reception, that we may come in and quench our parched lips at the fountain of Literature? With but few exceptions there are none; even the doors of the sanctuary, devoted to all that is sacred, are closed against us. And is this fair—is it noble—is it generous—is it patriotic—is it consistent with the professions of our republican principles? Was it ever intended that man should lift his rebel hand against the natural rights of his brother, and try to uproot them from his breast? That he should thus tamper with the works of nature?—should thus presumptuously exercise his own will in defiance of the benevolent and

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comprehensive wisdom of Providence? My friends, ought not the united efforts of every Christian to be aimed at the destruction of this persecution, which, like a universal pall, overspreads our prospects? Is not the call imperative? What have we done to merit this abuse? Have we usurped the authorities of the land? No. Are we out-laws—cut-throats? No. Are we not men, in common with other men; fully capable of appreciating the inestimable worth of these rights, which are our own? True, we are told by our enemies that we are inferior to them in intellect—our mental faculties being of the lowest order—that we stand but one degree above the brute creation; these are assertions without a shadow of proof; they tie our feet and seal our mouths, and then exclaim, “see how superior we are to these people!” They have no authority for crushing us to the ground, therefore we will not cease to urge our case, calmly and dispassionately. We are stimulated to act thus by the instinct of our natures. There is nothing that our enemies can bring against us but the colour of our skin; and is this not a mean, pitiful objection to the elevation of any one? Oh! what a shameful prejudice. If this is to be our judge, if the uncertain and wavering shades of colour are to decide whether we shall be entitled to rights in common with our fellow citizens, (which is all we ask,) if mercy and compassion is to be disregarded, and beneficence utterly annihilated, no longer to strengthen, guide and ennable the hearts of men, then has our country’s grandeur fallen—then has she sunk into a state which would have disgraced the dark ages, when civilization was unknown, and man had not yet begun to do homage to the potency of mind. We claim out rights, then, not as a mere boon, for that would be doing violence to that honest pride which is always found pervading the breast and flowing through every vein of conscious innocence, but we claim them as rights guaranteed by the living God—natural, indefeasible rights.

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“Resolved, That the formation of Abolition Societies, and the acts and doings of certain fanatics calling themselves Abolitionists, in the non-slaveholding states of this confederacy, are in direct violation of the obligations of the compact of Union, dissocial and incendiary in the extreme.

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Resolved, In order that a salutary negative may be put on the mischievous and unfounded assumption of some of the Abolitionists—the non-slaveholding states are requested to disclaim, by legislative declaration, all right, either on the part of themselves for the government of the United States, to interfere in any manner with domestic slavery, either in the states or in the territories where it exists.”

Was ever a request so modest? There never was a request more unreasonable, more abominable—evincing in its tone the greatest insult that could be offered to a free and independent people. But what do the majority of the citizens in the North about the matter? Why, I regret to have it in my power to say, that, with few exceptions, they are yielding to their daring presumption of the South; tamely acquiescing without venturing even as much as a word in reply. They ask of them to relinquish the sacred and legitimate right to think and act as they please. Freemen are, in one sense, threatened with slavery; the chains are shaken in their faces, and yet they appear unwilling to resist them as becomes freemen. Such votaries are they at the shrine of mammon that they have not courage enough to join the standard of patriotism which their fathers reared, and with the dignity of a free and unshackled people, repel with scorn, this unheard of infringement upon their dearest rights—this death-blow to their own liberties. My friends, do you ask why I thus speak? It is because I love America; it is my native land; because I

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feel as one should feel who sees destruction, like a corroding cancer, eating into the very heart of his country, and would make one struggle to save her; —because I love the stars and stripes, emblems of our National Flag—and long to see the day when not a slave shall be found resting under its shadow; when it shall play with the winds pure and unstained by the blood of “captive millions.”

Again, the South most earnestly and respectfully solicits the North to let the question of Slavery alone, and leave it to their bountiful honesty and humanity to settle. Why, honesty, I fear, has fled from the South, long ago; sincerity has fallen asleep there; pity has hidden herself; justice cannot find the way; helper is not at home; charity lies dangerously ill; benevolence is under arrest; faith is nearly extinguished; truth has long since been buried, and conscience is nailed on the wall. Now, do you think it would be better to leave it to the bountiful honesty and humanity of the South to settle? No, no. Only yield to them in the one particular and they will find you vulnerable in every other. I can tell you, my hearers, if the North once sinks into profound silence on this momentous subject, you may then bid farewell to peace, order and reform; then the condition of your fellow creatures in the southern section of our country will never be ameliorated; then may the poor slave look upon his weighty chains, and exclaim, in the agony of his heart, “To these am I immutably doomed; the glimmering rays of hope are lost to me for ever; robbed of all that is dear to man, I stand a monument of my country’s ingratitude. A *husband*, yet separated from the dearest tie which binds me to this earth. A *father*, yet compelled to stifle the feelings of a father, and witness a helpless offspring torn by a savage hand from its mother’s fond embrace, no longer to call her by that endearing title. A wretched slave, I look upon the departing brightness of the setting sun, and when her glorious light revists the morn, these clanking irons tell me I am that slave still; still am I to linger out

feel as one should feel who sees destruction, like a corroding cancer, eating into the very heart of his country, and would make one struggle to save her;—because I love the stars and stripes, emblems of our National Flag—and long to see the day when not a slave shall be found resting under its shadow; when it shall play with the winds pure and unstained by the blood of “captive millions.”

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a life of ignominious servitude, till death shall unloose these heavy bars—unfetter my body and soul.”

Will not the wrath of offended Heaven visit my guilty brethren? My friends, this is no chimera of the imagination, but it is the reality; and I beseech you to consider it as such. Cease not to do as you are now doing, notwithstanding the invidious frowns that may be cast upon your efforts; regard not these—for bear in mind that the future prosperity of the nation rests upon the successful labours of the Abolitionists; this is a certain as that there is a God above. Recollect you have this distinction—you have brought down upon your heads the anger of many foes for that good which you seek to do your country; you are insulted and sneered at because you feel for the proscribed, the defenceless, the down-trodden; you are despised because you would raise them in the scale of beings; you are charged as coming out to the world with the Bible in one hand and a firebrand in the other. May you never be ashamed of that firebrand. It is a holy fire, kindled from every page of that sacred chronicle.

You are called fanatics. Well, what if you are? Ought you to shrink from this name? God forbid. There is an eloquence in such fanaticism, for it whispers hope to the slave; there is sanctity in it, for it contains the consecrated spirit of religion; it is the fanaticism of a Benezet, a Rush, a Franklin, a Jay; the same that animated and inspired the heart of the writer of the Declaration of Independence. Then flinch not from your high duty; continue to warn the South of the awful volcano they are recklessly sleeping over; and bid them remember, too, that the drops of blood which trickle down the lacerated back of the slave, will not sink into the barren soil. No, they will rise to the common God of nature and humanity, and cry aloud for vengeance on his destroyer's head. Bid them think of this, that they may see from what quarter the terrible tempest will come; not from the breakings out of insurrections, so much dreaded, but for which men are in-

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debted to the imagery of their minds more than to fact; not from the fanatics, or the publication of their papers, calculated to spread desolation and blood, and sever the Union, as is now basely asserted, but it will come from HIM who has declared "Vengeance is mine, and I will repay."

You are not aiming to injure your southern brethren, but to benefit them; to save them from the impending storm. You are not seeking the destruction of the Union; but to render it still stronger; to link it together in one universal chain of *Justice, and Love, and Freedom*. The Faith you have embraced teaches you to live in bonds of charity with all mankind. It is not by the force of arms that Abolitionists expect to remove one of the greatest curses that ever afflicted or disgraced humanity; but by the majesty of moral power. Oh! how callous, how completely destitute of feelings, must that person be, who can think of the wrongs done to the innocent and unoffending captive, and not drop one tear of pity—who can look upon slavery and not shudder at its inhuman barbarities? It is a withering blight to the country in which it exists—a deadly poison to the soil on which it is suffered to breathe—and to satiate the cravings of its appetite, it feeds, like a vulture, upon the vitals of its victims. But it is in vain that I attempt to draw a proper likeness of its horrors; it is far beyond the reach of my abilities to describe to you the endless atrocities which characterize the system. Well was it said by Thomas Jefferson, that "God has no attribute which can take sides with such oppression." See what gigantic force is concentrated in these few words—God has no attribute which can take sides with such oppression.

Ladies—I feel that I should have confined my remarks more particularly to your society, and not have extended them to the whole field of Abolition. Pardon me for the digression.

I rejoice to see you engaged in this mighty cause; it befits you; it is your providence; your aid and influence is greatly to be desired in this hour of peril; it never was, never can be in-

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significant. Examine the records of history, and you will find that woman has been called upon in the severest trials of public emergency. That your efforts will stimulate the men to renewed exertion I have not the slightest doubt; for, in general, the pride of man's heart is such, that while he is willing to grant unto woman exclusively, many conspicuous and dignified privileges, he at the same time feels an innate disposition to check the modest ardour of her zeal and ambition, and revolts at the idea of her managing the reigns of improvement. Therefore, you have only to be constantly exhibiting some new proof of your interest in the cause of the oppressed, and shame, if not duty, will urge our sex on the march. It has often been said by anti-abolitionists that the females have no right to interfere with the question of slavery, or petition for its overthrow; that they had better be at home attending to their domestic affairs, &c. What a gross error—what and anti-christian spirit this bespeaks. Were not the holy commands, "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them," and "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you," intended for woman to obey as well as man? Most assuredly they were. But from whom does this attack upon your rights come? Not, I am confident, from the respectable portion of our citizens, but invariably from men alienated by avarice and self-importance from the courtesy and respect which is due to your sex on all occasions; such "men of property and standing" as mingled with the rank breath, and maniac spirit, of the mob at Boston; men (I am sorry to say) like the Representative from Virginia, Mr. Wise, who, lost to all shame, openly declared you to be devils incarnate. And for what? Why, because the ladies in the several states north of the Potomac, in the magnitude of their philanthropy, with hearts filled with mercy, choose to raise their voices in behalf of the suffering and the dumb—because they choose to exercise their legal privileges, and offer their time

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and talents as a sacrifice, in order that the District of Columbia may be freed, and washed clean from the stains of blood, cruelty and crime. It is for acting thus that you received so refined a compliment. Truly, some of our great men at the South are hand and hand in iniquity; they are men after the heart of the tyrant Nero, who wished that all the Romans had but one neck that he might destroy them all at a single blow. This is just the position in which these Nero's of a modern mould would like to place all who dare to utter one syllable against the sin of slavery,—that is if they had the power.

But, Ladies, I verily believe that the time is fast approaching when thought, feeling and action, the three principal elements of public opinion, will be so revolutionized as to turn the scale in your favour; when the prejudice and contumely of your foes will be held in the utmost contempt by an enlightened community. You have already been the means of awakening hundreds from the deep slumber into which they had fallen; they have arisen, and put on the armour of righteousness, and gone forth to battle. Yours is the cause of Truth, and must prevail over error; it is the cause of sympathy, and therefore it calls aloud for the aid of woman.

Sympathy is woman's attribute,
By that she had reign'd—by that she will reign."

Yours is the cause of Christianity; for it pleads that mental and physical powers of millions may not be wasted—buried for ever in ruins; that virtue may not be sacrificed at the altar of lasciviousness; making the South but one vast gulf of infamy; that the affections of a parent may not be sundered; that hearts may not be broken; that souls, bearing the impress of the Deity—the proof of their celestial origin and eternal duration—may not be lost. It is for all these you plead, and you must be victorious; never was there a contest commenced on more hallowed principles. Yes, my friends, from the height of your holy cause, as from a mountain, I see already rising the new glory and grandeur of regenerated—FREE—America! And on the corner stone of that mighty fabric,

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posterity shall read your names. But if there be the shadow of a doubt still remaining in the breasts of any one present as to your success, I would beg them to cast their eyes across the broad bosom of the Atlantic, and call to mind the scenes which transpired a short time since. (There shone the influence of woman!) Call to mind the 1st of August, a day never to be forgotten by the real philanthropist; when *Justice*, mantled in renovated splendour, with an arm nerved to action—her brow lightened up by a ray from Heaven, mounted on the car of *Freedom*, betook her way to the spot where *Slavery* was stalking over the land, making fearful ravages among human beings. There, the “lust of gain, had made the fiercest and fellest exhibition of its hardihood.” There, *Justice* looked, on the one hand, to the “prosperity of the lordly oppressor, wrung from the sufferings of a captive and subjugated people;” and on the other, to the “tears and untold agony of the hundreds beneath him.” There, was heard the sighs and stifled groans of the once happy and gay; hopes blighted in the bud. There, cruelty had wrought untimely furrows upon the cheek of youth. She saw all this; but the supplicating cry of mercy did not fall unheeded upon her ear. No. She smote the monster in the height of his power; link after link fell from the massive chain, and *eight hundred thousand human beings sprang into life again.*

It was WOMAN who guided that car! It was woman who prompted Justice to the work. Then commenced the glorious Jubilee; then the eye, once dim, was seen radiant with joy—

“Caste and proscription cease,
The Bondsman wakes to Liberty; he sleeps in peace.
Read the great charter on his brow:
‘I am a MAN, a BROTHER, now.’”

Ladies, ought not this to be enough to induce you to persevere? I am sure you are just as capable as your sisters of England; let me entreat you, then, to be for ever on the watch; let your motto be—*onward*. Oh! forget not the

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