

Plaindealer (New York), "The Blessings of Slavery," 25 February 1837

Occasion: Newspaper editorial in response to recent speeches in the Senate concerning slavery.

An extraordinary colloquy took place in the United States Senate some short time since between Mr. Rives and Mr. Calhoun, in which the latter Senator maintained with much vehemence that slavery is not an evil, but "a good, a great good," and reproached Mr. Rives, in sharp terms, for admitting the contrary. As his remarks were reported by the stenographers at the time, they contained some very insulting allusions to the free laborers of the Northern States, whom Mr. Calhoun spoke of in the most contemptuous terms as serfs and vassals, far beneath the Negro bondmen of the South in moral degradation. An elaborate report was some days afterward published in the Washington papers, which probably had undergone the revision of the several speakers; and from that the offensive expressions relative to the free citizens of the North were wholly omitted . . .

We have Mr. Calhoun's own warrant for attacking his positions with all the fervour which a high sense of duty can give; for we do hold from the bottom of our soul that slavery is an evil, a deep, detestable, damnable evil; an evil in all its aspects; an evil to the blacks and a greater evil to the whites; an evil, moral, social, and political; an evil which shows itself in the languishing condition of agriculture at the South, in its paralyzed commerce, and in the prostration of the mechanic arts; an evil that stares you in the face from uncultivated fields, and howls in your ears through the tangled recesses of the Southern swamps and morasses. Slavery is such an evil that it withers what it touches. Where it is once securely established, the land becomes desolate, as the tree inevitably perishes which the sea-hawk chooses for its nest; while freedom, on the contrary, flourishes like the tanner, on the loftiest and least sheltered rocks, and clothes with its refreshing verdure what without it would frown in naked and incurable sterility.

If anyone desires an illustration of the opposite influences of slavery and freedom, let him look at the two sister States of Kentucky and Ohio. Alike in soil and climate, and divided only by a river whose translucent waters reveal, through nearly the whole breadth, the sandy bottom over which they sparkle, how different are they in all the respects over which man has control! On the one hand, the air is vocal with the mingled tumult of a vast and prosperous population. Every hillside smiles with an abundant harvest; every valley shelters a thriving village; the click of a busy mill drowns the prattle of every rivulet, and all the multitudinous sound of business denote happy activity in every branch of social occupation.

This is the State which, but a few years ago, slept in the unbroken solitude of nature. The forest spread an interminable canopy of shade over the dark soil, on which the fat and useless vegetation rotted at ease, and through the dusky vistas of the wood only savage beasts and more savage men prowled in quest of prey. The whole land now blossoms like a garden. The tall and interlacing trees have unlocked their hold, and bowed before the woodman's axe. The soil is disencumbered of the mossy trunks, which had reposed upon it for ages. The rivers flash in the sunlight and the fields smile with waving harvests. This is Ohio, and this what freedom has done for it. Let us turn to Kentucky, and note the opposite influences of slavery.

A narrow and unfrequented path through the close and sultry canebrake conducts us to a wretched hovel. It stands in the midst of an unweeded field, whose dilapidated enclosure scarcely protects it from the lowing and hungry kine. Children half-clad and squalid, and destitute of the buoyancy natural to their age, lounge in the sunshine, while their parent saunters apart to watch his languid slaves drive

the ill-appointed team afield. This is not a fancy picture. It is a true copy of one of the features, which make up the aspect of the State - and of every State where the moral leprosy of slavery covers the people with its noisome scales. A deadening lethargy benumbs the limbs of the body politic. A stupor settles on the arts of life. Agriculture reluctantly drags the plough and harrow to the field, only when scourged by necessity. The axe drops from the woodman's nerveless hand the moment his fire is scantily supplied with fuel; and the fen, undrained, sends up its noxious exhalations to crack with cramps and agues the frame already too much enervated by a moral epidemic, to creep beyond the sphere of the material miasma.

Heaven knows we have no disposition to exaggerate the deleterious influences of slavery. We would rather pause far within the truth, than transgress it ever so little. There are evils, which it invariably generates a thousand times more pernicious than those we have faintly touched. There are evils, which affect the moral character, and poison the social relations, of those who breathe the atmosphere of slavery, more to be deplored than its paralyzing influence on their physical condition. Whence comes the hot and imperious temper of Southern statesmen, but from their unlimited domination over their fellowmen? Whence comes it that "the church-going bell" so seldom fills the air with its pleasant music, inviting the population to religious worship? Whence comes it that Sabbath schools diffuse to so small a number of their children the inestimable benefits of education? Whence comes it that the knife and the pistol are so readily resorted to for the adjustment of private quarrel?

The answer to these and many kindred questions will sufficiently show that slavery is indeed an evil of the most hideous and destructive kind; and it therefore becomes the duty of every wise and virtuous man to exert himself to put it down.