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FEW THOUGHTS

ON

THE ABOLITION

OF

COLONIAL SLAVERY.

BY

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THE following Paper was prepared upwards of two years ago, as a Preface to one of Mr. CLARKSON's Pamphlets, which was to have been put in circulation around the neighbourhood of Glasgow, by the ABOLITION SOCIETY that is instituted there. But the process which I have ventured to recommend, does not altogether meet the views of many Abolitionists; and neither have I found that it meets, at every point, the views of the West India Planters. Nevertheless, there is at least a theoretical beauty in the process, which might, perhaps, gain for it some degree of attention; and as to the experimental soundness of it, we have the testimony of Humboldt, who, in the course of his travels through the Spanish part of South America, saw whole villages of emancipated Negroes, who had achieved their liberation in the way that is here delineated.

It should be understood, that our numerical details are given only for the purpose of illustration.

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THOUGHTS ON SLAVERY.

It must be still fresh in the remembrance of many, that the efforts of the British public, for the abolition of the Slave Trade, created the liveliest alarm in the minds of those who were connected, either by trade or by property, with the West Indies. And now that the measure has been carried into effect, and the trial has been made for years, of finding the requisite labour without the importation of negroes from abroad, it is palpable to all, that the forebodings which were then awakened have not been realized. That the West Indian interest has had to sustain reverses and difficulties, under the new system of things, is undoubted, but these were not at all connected with the abolition of the Slave Trade. It is even the opinion of many proprietors, that an impulse of prosperity was given to our whole colonial system in the west, by a measure which was regarded beforehand with all the terror of an approaching death-blow; and that it in fact warded off the very extermination

of which it was proclaimed to be the harbinger. At all events, the dread imagination has turned out to be a bugbear. Both Liverpool and Glasgow have survived an event which, in the belief of many, was to annihilate them; and both are alike the living evidences of a native and inherent vigour in commerce, that places it far above the need of such wretched auxiliaries as either fraud or violence to sustain it.

Another abolition is now in contemplation,—an abolition not of the Slave Trade, but of Slavery itself; and the perfect safety of the first, seems to have had no effect in softening the dread or the disquietude that is felt because of the second. There is a recent pamphlet by Mr. Clarkson, that is well fitted to meet, and, perhaps, to remove the apprehensions of the West India proprietors. It is entitled, “Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the condition of the Slaves in the British Colonies, with a view to their ultimate Emancipation; and on the practicability, the safety, and the advantage of the latter measure.” He first addresses himself to the question of right, and occupies sixteen pages with what might be called the juridical part of his argument; which, perhaps, is neither so useful nor so convincing as are the statements that follow, and throughout which he addresses himself to the interest of the slave owners. By these statements he seems very clearly to prove the success wherewith large and even sudden

emancipations have been already accomplished, besides the happy result of certain partial experiments which have been made within the limits of the British colonies. The comparison, in point of cheapness, between free and forced labour, is particularly important; and, on the whole, it is fondly hoped, that the perusal of this little work, by the most eminent labourer in the cause, will serve both to enlighten its friends, and to disarm the antipathy of its adversaries. It is worthy of especial notice, that he who is best fitted to expound the views of the abolitionists, nowhere supposes that the emancipation is to be immediate, or that the work is to be done with a rash and rapid hand, but that in every step of the preparation for this great event, regard should be had to the interest of the proprietor, as well as to the comfort and principles of the slaves.

It is much to be regretted, that the abolitionists and the planters have hitherto stood at such an impracticable distance from each other; and more especially that a whole class of men, comprising in it many humane and accomplished individuals, should have had such an indiscriminate stigma affixed to them, by the more intemperate advocates of a good cause. There is a sacredness in property, which a British legislature, in that calm and equitable spirit by which it is so honourably characterised, will ever hold in reverence; and every thing ought to be done consistently with the great

object of a full and final emancipation, to tranquillize the natural fears of the slave-holders, and, it may be added, to meet and to satisfy their natural appetite for justice. On the part of the abolitionists, there is a frequent appeal to the abstract and original principles of the question. But, on the part of the proprietors, it may be asked, Who ought to be at the expense of reforming the mischief that has arisen from the violation of these principles?—whether the traders who have hitherto acted under the sanction and the shelter of existing laws, or the government that framed these laws?—whether the party that have been lured into a commerce which they found to be tolerated and protected by the state, or the party that, by this very toleration, may be said to have given their promise and their authority in its favour?—whether the children who have been misled, or the parent who has misled them?—whether, in a word, the men who have been singled out for the execration of the public, or that same public, under whose observation, and by whose connivance, the property that they would now seize upon has been legalized, and its present possessors have made their sacrifices of time, and labour, and money, to obtain it? It were a noble achievement, this conversion of slaves into freemen; and therefore the more important for its ultimate success, that in every step of its prosecution there should be an even-handed justice to all the parties concerned. More especially, would it

serve to accredit the philanthropy that is now so widely and so warmly embarked upon this undertaking, did they who advocate its designs also bear their part in the expenses of them; and it would do much to allay the fermentation that now is among the West India planters, could they have any satisfying demonstration from Parliament, that, however intent on the emancipation of their slaves, it should be so devised and carried into effect as not to infringe on the present worth of their patrimony.

The following suggestion is the more valuable that it hath come from a gentleman who is himself a very extensive West India proprietor; and that, while it holds out a complete remuneration to the owners of slaves, promises the conveyance of them into a state of freedom with a speed and a safety that ought to satisfy the most sanguine abolitionist.

The scheme may be expressed generally thus:—Let Government purchase from the West India proprietors, at a fair valuation, one day's labour in the week of all the slaves in their possession. This can be done by paying one-sixth of their whole price; after which, each slave hath at least one day every week, in which he is a free labourer, and might earn for himself. He of course becomes the absolute owner of what he thus earns; and let it be competent for him, when it has accumulated to a sufficient sum, therewith to purchase, at a certain

regulated price, another free day in the week. Having thus two days to himself, he is able to accelerate his future purchases of freedom; and thus, as the fruit of his own industry and care, might he, in a very few years, work out his complete emancipation.

Or the scheme may be made still more intelligible, when illustrated by numbers. Let the whole slave population of the British colonies be 800,000. At £50 each, which is a high estimate when thus made to include all ages, the sixth part of their whole value to the owners is short of seven millions. By funding this sum to the credit of the proprietors, one day's free labour to each slave might become the universal law of the British West Indies. The registry of slaves gives every facility for assigning the shares of this stock to the respective proprietors, whether they be principals or mortgagees upon the estates. And when once this arrangement is made, a patent and a practicable way is opened for the full deliverance of the negroes from a state of slavery. Whole gangs are not unfrequently hired out at 3s. 4d. currency a head per day, and their maintenance: and there can be no doubt, from the difference between free and forced labour, that an ordinary working slave could earn for himself, on the day that is his own, at least 3s. 4d. sterling.* This sum weekly is more

* It should be remarked, however, that free negroes are hired at rates which are exceedingly various in the different colonies.

than £8 a year, or about a sixteenth part, perhaps, of his whole value; and for which last sum, therefore, he could, in less than three years, purchase another free day each week. With the earnings of two free days, he could, in another three years, purchase two more, and then, in a year and a half, could work out the freedom of his whole week, or his entire emancipation. At all events, in seven or eight years, each individual, if in health and full strength, could work out his own deliverance from slavery; after which he might proceed to do the same for others of his family, if he has one. The freedom of a woman, when once accomplished in this way, would, by the existing law, secure the freedom of all the children that are afterwards born by her; and this would be of prime importance in extending the work of emancipation. The process is easily apprehended; and seems to meet all the formidable difficulties, and to combine all the most desirable advantages both to the slave and to his proprietor.

For, first, in reference to the slave, his emancipation cannot take effect till after he has been fully prepared for it, by the habits acquired during a long course of industry. These habits form the best guarantee of his fitness for the new state of freedom on which he is to enter. And there is nothing sudden or desultory in this transition. He at first is made to taste of liberty by having one day of it in the week; and this liberty can

only be enlarged by the good use that he makes of that which he has gotten. He at length reaches the condition of entire freedom, by a process, the very description of which is, in itself, the best proof of his being a right subject for freedom, as well as the best preparation for it. No artificial education that can possibly be devised, would answer so well as this wholesome stimulus to exertion and good management.

But, secondly, the slave who idled his free time, whether in sleep or in amusement, would of course make no further progress towards a state of freedom. He would live and die a slave because he chose to do so. They from whose liberty most danger is apprehended, because of their idle or disorderly habits, would, by the very tenure on which it was held out to them, be debarred for ever from the possession of it. And yet there can be little doubt, that slavery would rapidly decay and ultimately disappear under such an economy. There would be a piece-meal emancipation going forward—a gradual substitution of free for forced labour—an increase of regular and family habits—the growth of a better constituted population—an experience, on the part of planters, of the superior advantage of free labour, that would at length incline them to forward the cause of emancipation, and establish such a common interest between the two extreme classes in the colonies, as might ward off that threatened explosion which has so long hung over them.

And, thirdly, were such a process established, there would be an effectual protection to the colonies from the disquiet and the disturbance of any other proposals for emancipation. For were this object once set a-going in this one way, no other way could or ought to be entertained for a moment. The slaves must, under the system that is now recommended, be made conclusively to understand, that it is by their own persevering labour and frugality, and by this alone, that they are to make sure and speedy progress towards the consummation to which they are so fondly looking forward. Otherwise, the method is paralyzed. The industrious slave, who might otherwise embark with ardour upon this attempt, and persevere in it with unwearied constancy, and be cheered onwards by the brightening of his hopes, as he advanced nearer every week to the fulfilment of them,—he would be quite distracted and disheartened did he know of other methods in agitation, by which the idlest of the gang might come to emancipation as well as he, and all his labours have been rendered useless. It were a sore provocation to him, that he had wrought so fatiguingly, and paid so faithfully for a deliverance, which at length others had come at without any such expense, either of money or of enjoyment. So that, if this particular method shall be adopted, it seems quite indispensable that all other methods, but those of purchase, shall be finally closed.

And it does seem no small recommendation of the plan in question, that while compensation is thereby rendered to the planter for each of his slaves who is liberated, it is done by a process which at once trains them for a state of freedom, and confines them to the only safe and slow way by which they become prepared for the full enjoyment of it.

And again, in reference to the planters, it is thought by many, of such a proposal, that it is peculiarly accommodated to their interest. For, not to speak of the instantaneous satisfaction and calm which it is fitted to impart to the now restless and ruffled mind of the slave population—not to speak of its efficacy to rivet the most energetic and intelligent amongst them to a pacific career of diligence and good conduct, instead of unsettling and throwing them into dangerous excitement—not to speak of the union of interest and policy that is thus established between the master and the more influential part of his labourers, who will now feel their interest to be at one with the peace and good order of the colony, and to be separate from that of those who seek, by violence and insurrection, the object which they are pursuing by a steady course of industry and accumulation,—over and above all these advantages, it is thought that, in this method, there is a peculiar adaptation to the present exigencies of the trade. For, by it the planter can disengage immediately

one-sixth of his capital in slaves, and have the full command of it. Should he choose to limit his West India business, he might transfer this capital to other uses. Should he choose to keep it up to its present amount, or even to extend it, he can have the free labour that will be thrown by this measure upon the market. As the process advances, and the slaves begin to purchase additional days of freedom for themselves, there will be the successive withdrawal of more capital—thereby enabling him to come gradually out of the business altogether, or to perpetuate, and even enlarge it, according to circumstances. In this way, the market for colonial produce may be lightened; or, if there be encouragement, it may be more abundantly supplied. A very likely diversion for a great part of this free labour, would be to ordinary agriculture, for raising the means of subsistence; and this, of itself, might prove a wholesome diversion, to relieve and disembarass an overdone trade. It is seldom that a merchant can extricate himself from the difficulties of such a trade, by withdrawing from it part of his capital, and obtaining an equivalent for the part thus withdrawn. There is generally a sinking, a surrender, a positive annihilation, and loss of capital, on these occasions. It is hoped that the public, who are intent on the abolition of slavery, will not, through Parliament, which is the great constitu-

tional organ for the utterance of their voice,— it is hoped that they will not refuse this advantage to the West India proprietors. And, on the other hand, it were equally desirable, that the other party, the proprietors, should cease their opposition to a measure thus accompanied with what appears, on every view that is taken of it, to be a very fair and beneficial compensation.

But lastly, in reference to the Abolitionists,— what a field would be opened by this measure for the enterprises of their philanthropy! What a coincidence would be brought about between the interest of the planters, and their own benevolent designs for the amelioration of the negroes! With what a mighty argument might they go forth among these neglected outcasts, when urging them to peace and contentment, and the calm prosecution of their ulterior objects, the fulfilment of which will at once enrich their masters, and emancipate themselves! Upon such a footing, the Missionaries of the good cause might be admitted, without suspicion, and with perfect safety, among all the plantations; and there is not one of them who could possibly inflict such an outrage on all right and humane policy, as to encourage the expectations of freedom in any other way than the one which the Legislature had provided, and for which it had granted so liberal and advantageous an outset. Every lesson which they urged, would be on the side of thrift,

and sobriety, and regular labour ; and, enforced, as they could not fail to be, by the rational hope of a great earthly reward, there would be a delightful harmony between these and the higher lessons of Christianity. We should soon see the charm of a Moravian transformation on the habits of many ; and it may be confidently predicted, of those who laboured most sedulously on their own day for the sum that was to purchase an immunity to themselves, that they would be the most faithful, through the remaining days, in the service of their proprietors. European friends would not be wanting, to aid and to foster their generous aspirings after liberty ; and never was a safer and a quieter path opened for the attainment of this great blessing, than the one that is here recommended—not by a series of exasperations, and struggles, and horrid barbarities, but by those slow and pacific exertions which should bring them onward to liberty in successive footsteps, and thoroughly prepare them for the use and enjoyment of it, by the time that they had been conducted to its verge. It were indeed a mild, yet noble triumph of Legislation, if such an experiment, on such a theatre, could, without the infringement either of peace or of justice, be guided onward to its successful termination—if it so re-united all interests, as to cement and to satisfy all parties ; and it was at length found, that the security of the higher classes was best con-

sulted by the gradual extension of light, and liberty, and the benefit of equal laws, to the very lowest in the scale of society.

There are subordinate details which cannot be entered upon, and which yet, if unexplained, might leave a doubt or difficulty in the mind. It is thought, however, that, in practice, there is no insuperable, even no formidable barrier against the accomplishment of this scheme. The interest of mortgagees could be as effectually guarded as it is now, under the proposed arrangement. And as to the alleged danger of holiday riot and disturbance among the negroes, on their free day, it is not necessary that it should be on the same day of the week to all, either on a whole island, or even throughout a whole plantation. At the first, there need be no more at liberty than one sixth of the negro population at a time, upon any estate; many of whom would most certainly be at hard, though voluntary work, and all of whom would be under the restraint of those laws which enforce decency and good conduct among all classes.

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