

## CHAPTER XXV.

LETTER ON SLAVERY—TRACTS ON PEACE AND WAR—MR.  
POLK PRESIDENT.

SCOTT'S views on the question of negro slavery are strongly alluded to, but not fully developed, in the foregoing narrative. Begging the reader to forgive a partial repetition of the same ideas and expressions, he inserts his formal letter on the subject here:

DEAR SIR:

I have been waiting for an evening's leisure to answer your letter before me, and, after an unreasonable delay, am at last obliged to reply in the midst of official occupations.

WASHINGTON, February 9, 1848.

That I ever have been named in connection with the Presidency of the United States, has not, I can assure *you*, the son of an ancient neighbor and friend, been by any contrivance or desire of mine; and certainly I shall never be in the field for that high office unless placed there *by a regular nomination*. Not, then, being a candidate, and seeing no near prospect of being *made* one, I ought, perhaps, to decline troubling you or others with my humble opinions on great principles of State Rights and Federal Administration; but as I cannot plead ignorance of the partiality of a few friends, in several parts of the Union, who may, by possibility, in a certain event, succeed in bringing me within the field from which a Whig candidate is to be selected, I prefer to err on the side of frankness and candor, rather than, by silence, to allow any stranger unwittingly to commit himself to my support.

Your inquiries open the whole question of domestic slavery, which has, in different forms, for a number of years, agitated Congress and the country.

Premising that you are the first person who has interrogated me on the subject, I give you the basis of what *would* be my reply in greater detail, if time allowed and the contingency alluded to above were less remote.



In boyhood, at William and Mary College, and in common with most, if not all, my companions, I became deeply impressed with the views given by Mr. Jefferson, in his "Notes on Virginia," and by Judge Tucker, in the Appendix to his edition of Blackstone's Commentaries, in favor of a gradual emancipation of slaves. That Appendix I have not seen in thirty odd years, and, in the same period, have read scarcely anything on the subject; but my early impressions are fresh and unchanged. Hence, if I had had the honor of a seat in the Virginia Legislature in the winter of 1831-'2, when a bill was brought forward to carry out those views, I should certainly have given it my hearty support.

I suppose I scarcely need say that, in my opinion, Congress has no color of authority, under the Constitution, for touching the relation of master and slave within a State.

I hold the opposite opinion in respect to the District of Columbia. Here, with the consent of the owners, or on the payment of "just compensation," Congress may legislate at its discretion. But my conviction is equally strong that, unless it be step by step with the Legislatures of Virginia and Maryland, it

would be dangerous to both races in those States to touch the relation between master and slave in this District.

I have from the first been of opinion that Congress was bound by the Constitution to receive, to refer, and to report upon petitions relating to domestic slavery as in the case of all other petitions; but I have not failed to see and to regret the unavoidable irritation which the former have produced in the Southern States, with the consequent peril to the two colors, whereby the adoption of any plan of emancipation has everywhere among us been greatly retarded.

I own, myself, no slave; but never have attached blame to masters for not liberating their slaves—well knowing that liberation, without the means of sending them in comfort to some position favorable to "the pursuit of happiness," would, in most cases, be highly injurious to all around, as well as to the manumitted families themselves—unless the operation were general and under the auspices of prudent legislation. But I am persuaded that it is a high moral obligation of masters and slaveholding States to employ all means, not incompatible with the safety of both colors, to meliorate slavery even to extermination.



It is gratifying to know that general melioration has been great, and is still progressive, notwithstanding the disturbing causes alluded to above. The more direct process of emancipation may, no doubt, be earlier commenced and quickened in some communities than in others. Each, I do not question, has the right to judge for itself, both as to time and means, and I consider interference or aid from without, except on invitation from authority within, to be as hurtful to the sure progress of melioration, as it may be fatal to the lives of vast multitudes of all ages, sexes, and colors. The work of liberation cannot be *forced* without such horrid results. Christian philanthropy is ever mild and considerate. Hence all violence ought to be deprecated by the friends of religion and humanity. Their persuasions cannot fail at the right time to free the master from the slave, and the slave from the master; perhaps before the latter shall have found out and acknowledged that the relation between the parties had long been mutually prejudicial to their worldly interests.

There is no evil without, in the order of Providence, some compensating benefit. The bleeding African was torn from his savage home by his fero-

cious neighbors, sold into slavery, and cast upon this continent. Here, in the mild South, the race has wonderfully multiplied, compared with anything ever known in barbarous life. The descendants of a few thousands have become many millions; and all, from the first, made acquainted with the arts of civilization, and, above all, brought under the light of the Gospel.

From the promise made to Abraham, some two thousand years had elapsed before the advent of our Saviour, and the Israelites, the chosen people of God, were, for wise purposes, suffered to remain in bondage longer than Africans have been on our shore. This race has already experienced the resulting compensations alluded to; and, as the white missionary has never been able to penetrate the dark regions of Africa, or to establish himself in its interior, it may be within the scheme of Providence that the great work of spreading the Gospel over that vast continent, with all the arts and comforts of civilization, is to be finally accomplished by the black man restored from American bondage. A foothold there has already been gained for him, and in such a scheme centuries are but as



seconds to Him who moves worlds as man moves a finger.

I do but *suggest* the remedies and consolations of slavery, to inspire patience, hope, and charity on all sides. The mighty subject calls for the exercise of all man's wisdom and virtue, and these may not suffice without aid from a higher source.

It is in the foregoing manner, my dear sir, that I have long been in the habit, in conversation, of expressing myself, all over our common country, on the question of negro slavery, and I must say that I have found but very few persons to differ with me, however opposite their geographical positions.

Such are the views or opinions which you seek. I cannot suppress or mutilate them, although now liable to be more generally known. Do with them what you please. I neither court nor shun publicity.

I remain, very truly, yours,

WINFIELD SCOTT.

T. P. ATKINSON, Esq., Danville, Virginia.

*Peace and War.*

WASHINGTON, March 24, 1845.

I have received your letter of the 21st instant, accompanied by certain proceedings of the General Peace Convention.

My participation in war, as well as endeavors on several occasions to preserve peace, without sacrificing the honor and the interests of my country, are matters of public history. These antecedents, together with my sentiments on the abstract question of *peace and war*, inserted a year ago in a Peace Album, and since published, I learn, in several journals, might be offered as a sufficient reply to your communication.

I have always maintained the moral right to wage a just and necessary war, and, consequently, the wisdom and humanity, as applicable to the United States, in the present state of the world, of *defensive* preparations. If the principal nations of the earth liable to come in conflict with us in our natural growth and just pursuits, can be induced to disarm, I should be happy to see the United States follow the example. But without a general agreement to that effect, and a strong probability that it would be carried out in good



faith by others, I am wholly opposed to giving up *home preparation*, and the natural and Christian right of *self-defence*.

The published sentiments alluded to may not have fallen under your observation. I enclose a copy.

I remain respectfully,

Your most obedient servant,

WINFIELD SCOTT.

J. C. BECKWITH, Esq., Corresponding Secretary.

[Written in a Peace Album.]

*Peace and War.*

If war be the natural state of savage tribes, peace is the first want of every civilized community. War no doubt is, under any circumstances, a great calamity; yet submission to outrage would often be a greater calamity. Of the two parties to any war, one, at least, must be in the wrong—not unfrequently both. An error in such an issue is, on the part of chief magistrates, ministers of state, and legislators having a voice in the question, a crime of the greatest magnitude. The slaying of an individual by an individual

is, in comparative guilt, but a drop of blood. Hence the highest moral obligation to treat national differences with temper, justice, and fairness; always to see that the cause of war is not only *just* but *sufficient*; to be sure that we do not *covet* our neighbor's lands, "nor any thing that is his;" that we are as ready to give as to demand explanation, apology, indemnity; in short, we should especially remember, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." This divine precept is of universal obligation: it is as applicable to rulers, in their transactions with other nations, as to private individuals in their daily intercourse with each other. Power is intrusted by "the Author of peace and lover of concord," to do good and to avoid evil. Such, clearly, is the revealed will of God.

WINFIELD SCOTT.

WASHINGTON, April 26, 1844.

On the approach of the next Presidential election, it was agreed by all Whigs, the chances of success seeming favorable, to leave the field without a convention to Mr. Clay; but Mr. Polk was chosen and inaugurated March 4, 1845.



Mr. Tyler, doubtless, like several of his successors, was weaker in office than Mr. Polk, whose little strength lay in the most odious elements of the human character—*cunning and hypocrisy*. It is true that these qualities, when discovered, become positive weaknesses; but they often triumph over wisdom and virtue before discovery. It may be added that a man of meaner presence is not often seen. He was, however, virtually, the nominee of General Jackson.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## WAR WITH MEXICO—GENERAL TAYLOR.

HOSTILITIES with Mexico, might, perhaps, have been avoided; but Texas lay between—or rather in the scale of war.

At an advanced stage of the diplomatic quarrel, Brigadier-General Taylor was ordered, with a respectable number of regular troops, to Corpus Christi, near the Mexican frontier, as a good point of observation. This selection of the commander was made with the concurrence of the autobiographer, who, knowing him to be slow of thought, of hesitancy in speech, and unused to the pen, took care, about the same time, to provide him, unsolicited, with a staff officer, Captain