

The Servile War

Joseph Déjacque

26th October 1859

Quote:

Property is robbery.

Slavery is murder.

— P. J. Proudhon

Quote:

We are Abolitionists from the North, come to take and release your slaves; our organization is large, and must succeed. I suffered much in Kansas, and expect to suffer here, in the cause of human freedom. Slaveholders I regard as robbers and murderers; and I have sworn to abolish slavery and liberate my fellow-men.

— John Brown

A handful of *free soilers* have just attempted a relief of slaves on the frontiers of Virginia and Maryland. They have not won and they are dead, but they have at least died fighting; they have sown the future victory in the fields of defeat. John Brown, who had previously fought in Kansas, where one of his three sons had been killed by the slave-holders and whose other two sons have just perished at his side. John Brown is the Spartacus who called the modern helots to break their irons, the blacks to take up arms. The attempt has failed. The blacks have not responded in any numbers to the call. The standard of the revolt is sunk in the blood of those who carried it. That standard... it was that of liberty... and I salute it! and I kiss its bloody folds on the pierced bosom of the vanquished, on the battered brow of the martyrs! — Let it sparkle in my eyes, standing or fallen. Let it provoke the slaves, black or white, to revolt: let it unfurl on the barricades of the old continent and the new. Let it serve as a screen to the *soldiers* of the legal order. Let it be pierced by the bullets of the bourgeois assassins of Washington or Paris; trampled under foot by the national guards and *gardes mobiles* of France or America, insulted by the prostitutes of the press of the *model* Republic or of the *honest* and *moderate* Republic; from far or near, whether there is peril or not in approaching it, that flag, it is mine! Everywhere that it appears, I rise to its call. I answer: *Present!* I line up behind it. I proclaim moral complicity, solidarity with all its acts. Whoever touches it, touches me: — Vendetta!!

The insurrection of Harper's Ferry has passed like a flash. The clouds are dark once again, but they contain electricity. After your flashes the thunderbolt will erupt, oh Liberty!...

In France, in 39, another John Brown, Armand Barbès, also made a skirmish. That political riot was one of the precursory flashes of which February was the lightning strike. (June 48, the first exclusive uprising of the Proletariat, commences the series of precursory social flashes of the libertarian Revolution.) The privileged have treated Barbès as a mad assassin, as they treat Brown as an insane bandit. The one was a bourgeois, the other a white, both enthusiasts for the freedom of slaves. Like Barbès in 39, Brown is a heroic fanatic, an enthusiastic abolitionist who marches to the accomplishment of his designs without seriously considering the causes of success or failure. More a man of feeling than of thinking, given over entirely to the impetuous passion that inflames him, he has judged the moment opportune, the place favorable for action, and he has acted. Certainly, I won't be the one to blame him for it. Every insurrection, be it individual, be it vanquished in advance, is always worthy of the ardent sympathy of revolutionaries, and the more audacious it is, the more worthy it is as well. Those who today disclaim John Brown and his companions, or insult them with their drivel: — the makers of abolitionist banalities who lie tomorrow in their daily spreads, should at least have delicacy about the mouth, for want of the heart that they lack; — the mercenaries of the French empire, these henchmen of the throne, these scribes of the altar, these traitors who daily chant *Te Deum* to the glory of the armies and sprinkle with holy-ink the brave harvesters of laurels, the heroes of the battlefield crowned with the turban of the zouaves or the turcos; those especially should recall that the *free soilers* of Harper's Ferry, these fighters for liberty, have at least on virtue which merits their feigned respect: valor in the face of the enemy! It is then to the soldier of the emperors or kings that they would know how to say: "Honor to the courageous in misfortune"? These insurgents, whom the *soldiers* and volunteers of slavery have murdered with arms or that the bought judges will murder with the law, they have fought one against one hundred, even... and those who have been left for dead and who, like Brown, have survived their wounds, will be hung, it is said... Infamy! That these mercenary pens who hammer away with a cold rage on the bodies of the defeated and distort the features eagerly. Hideous scribblers, they only have only the faces of men; their skulls conceal the instincts of a hyena. It is those or their ilk who, eighteen hundred years ago, before another gallows, cast in the face of Jesus, bloodied Jesus, the bloody muck of their words!!

But let us leave these daughters of the press to their abject state. There are insults that honor as there are kisses that sear: these are the insults and the kisses of prostitution!

Let us examine the facts and draw out the lessons.

For a successful insurrection in the slave states, is the initiative of a few fired-up, free, white abolitionists enough? No. The initiative must come from the blacks, from the slaves themselves. The white man is suspect to the black man groaning in helotism and under the whip of the whites, his masters. In the so-called free states, the people of color are regarded like dogs; they are not permitted to go by public carriage, nor to the theater, nor elsewhere, if there is not a spot reserved: they are lepers in a lazaretto. The white aristocracy, the abolitionists of the North hold them at a distance and drive them back with contempt. They cannot take a step without encountering idiotic, absurd, and monstrous prejudices which bar them passage. The ballot box, like the public coach, the theater and the rest, is refused them. They are deprived of their civil rights, treated always and everywhere as pariahs. The black people of the slave states know this. They know that they are the subject and stake of all sorts of intrigues; that for the masters of the North, the exploiters of the proletariat and the electors, the owners of white slaves, abolition-

ism means industrial and commercial profits, nominations for political employment, government appointments, piracy and sinecures. They also mistrust some whites, with good reason; so that the good, those who are sincerely fraternal towards them, suffer for the bad. And then, what is that liberty to which we generally invite them? The liberty to die of hunger... the liberty of the proletarian... So they show little urgency to risk their lives to obtain it, though their lives might be most miserable and liberty their greatest desire. Many of the negroes, moreover, are held in such a profound ignorance, such a rigorous captivity, that they hardly know what happens a few miles outside the plantation where they are penned up and they readily take those limits for the limits of the world!... The foray of John Brown is good, in that the story will resound, with echoes upon echoes, to the remotest of shanties, that it will stir the independent streak of the slaves, will dispose them to sedition, and will be a recruiting agent for another insurrectional movement. But the uprising of Harper's Ferry had one fault, and a grave one: it is to have been insanely generous, when he was master of the field; to have spare the lives of the legal criminals; to have been content to take prisoners, to take hostages, instead of putting to death the planters that he had in hand, traffickers in human flesh, and to have thus given hostages to the rebellion. Property in man by man is murder, the most horrible of crimes. In such a circumstance, one does not negotiate with the crime: one suppresses it! When one has recourse, against legal violence, to the force of arms, it is in order to use it: he must not be afraid to shed the blood of the enemy. For slaves and masters, it is a war of extermination. Steel must be brought first, and then, in case of setbacks, flame must be brought to all the Plantations. There must be—if victorious—not one planter,—if vanquished—not one Plantation left standing. The enemy is more logical. He gives no quarter!...

Every producer has a right to the instruments and products of their labor. The Plantations of the South belong by right to the slaves who cultivate them. The masters should be expropriated in the cause of public morality, for the crime of lèse-Humanity. This is what John Brown seems to have recognized in the Provisional Constitution that he wanted to proclaim, an elaboration of ideas barely lucid and full of darkness, but which testify to the need for justice and social reparations with which his valiant heart was animated, and, as a consequence, with which the hearts of the masses, source and seat of his own, is animated. Sooner or later, the drop will become a flood, the spark will become a flame! So demands Progress, natural and enduring Law.

1860 will soon dawn over the world, the daybreak of great revolutionary events.

All Europe is under arms:

It is the last rattle of the kings...

Kings of high and low degree. In America, let the proletarian of the North and the slave of the South outfit themselves for the great war, the proletarian and servile war, the war against "the master, our enemy;" and, then, let the old and the new continent utter with one fraternal voice that cry of social insurrection, that cry of human conscience: — Liberty!!!

And you, Martyrs! John Brown, Shields, Aaron C. Stephens, Green, Copie, Copeland, Cook, you will be no more, perhaps! Given over to the executioner, strangled by the cord of the laws, you will have rejoined your companions, fallen before iron and lead... And we, your accomplices in the idea, we will have been powerless to save you... we have even, I say, been the accomplices of your murderers!... by not taking up arms to defend you, by acting only with speech or pen, with sentiments, instead of also acting with the sword and rifle, with the muscles. What! We, your assassins? Alas! yes... It is horrible! Isn't it? — Ah! Let that blood fall back on us and our children... let our consciences and theirs be soaked in it... let it make them overflow with hatred

and insurrection against Legal Crime!... — The time of Redemption is near. Captives that we are
in the web of civilized institutions, we will redeem then our forced faults, our painful inaction...
Martyrs! You will be avenged!...
Oh! Vendetta! Vendetta!!!...

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