

[from an undated, pre-Civil War pamphlet by Henry Field James, titled *Abolitionism Unveiled: or, Its Origin, Progress, and Pernicious Fully Developed*]

He's imagining a discussion between two escaped slaves.

When a slave runs away, very soon the master or agent will be found in hot pursuit. He comes in among us, we are kind and obliging, make great promises, but are sure to fail in the performance. The slave-hunter, when he gets on our side of the river, is like Samson shorn of strength, weak and blind. While they are working to his injury, we have plenty of Delilahs, who will lull him upon their laps."

"Yea, verily, friend Shan, nothing could be uttered more strictly true. Thou wilt recollect, that when Samson awoke, finding his strength had departed—a true emblem of slave-hunters in Ohio—he sternly accused the Philistines of having plowed with his heifer. So it may be with these slave-hunters—they may rail out against us for our perfidy, but that will avail them nothing; we will still put out their eyes, and lead them wheresoever we please.

"To be sure the laws are rather against us, denouncing tolerably severe penalties against us for thus aiding or secreting, but what care we for that, there is a *higher law*. God's Law, you know, must be obeyed rather than man's: in this way, we creep out of a great responsibility."

"Indeed we do, friend Moon, just in that very way. Tell me about laws—they have not the strength of a spider's web to restrain us in this holy work. What is the stake? what is the boon? *Freedom* to millions of my race that have for centuries groaned in bondage; the day

of liberation has at last dawned upon the land. Congress may pass Fugitive Slave Laws—pile one upon another—but we shall heed them not; catching precedes hanging. Our secret operations have no witnesses, and without those, the Commissioners of the United States under the act, will have *no cases* to try. Why, laws are mere nothings in our onward march. From that source we have not now, nor ever had any dread.”

“Yea, verily, friend Shan, it seems so. The work of running off slaves has not in the least abated. All laws prove inefficient to check this strong tide of elopement. They come in shoals to us, begging a passage on the ‘underground railway’ to the land of freedom. We ticket them through, as you have been apprized.”

“Yes, friend Moon, to your lasting honor be it said, your acuteness in running off slaves from the Queen City deserves all commendation. Only once you came near being entrapped. I allude to the Piatt slaves—that case, you have not forgotten.”

“Nay, friend Shan, it is still fresh in my memory; the arrangement in that case was wisely and judiciously made. The partial failure was no fault of ours. These slaves were owned by A. Piatt, of Boone County, Kentucky, living opposite Lawrenceburg, Ia. We made a clean sweep that time, not leaving one negro on the place to call him master.

“Our emissaries do not *mince* their work. The whole plan was fixed days beforehand. Our committee was advised of this intended emigration. The night of their departure—the hour of their arrival at the railroad depôt, were all fully understood. Through tickets to Sandusky City for the right number of persons were procured and paid. At the hour expected, sure enough, the slaves arrived. New clothing being in readiness, the old rags were cast off—the women appeared in silks—the men in broad-cloth—all dressed in the most fashionable manner.”

“That is the right way, God bless you, old friend Moon, what munificent liberality. Now, go on, tell me how they came to be betrayed?”

“Just in this way, friend Shan. They were placed on the cars on the Express train. Our calculation was, they would be on their way to Canada about the time they



would be missed at home. Before the owner would have time to make the necessary arrangements to pursue, we had hoped to land them at the Lake, where a steamer would be in waiting to convey them forthwith to Canada. But Wycoff Piatt, an attorney from Cincinnati, and relative of the owner, being on the cars, happened to recognize those slaves. When the cars arrived at Urbana, what does he do but takes them off, and places them in the custody of another Piatt, the son-in-law of the owner. Hence, the owner, Abraham Piatt, was immediately telegraphed of the apprehension of his fugitive slaves, and requested to hasten there with the requisite proof to identify and prove them."

"Wasn't this a tight place, friend Moon. I should have thought this time you wouldn't have come out with flying colors. But let's hear how you extricated yourselves out of this difficulty?"

"Well, friend Shan, we were resolved not to be outdone. In our elections we have always made it a rule, to put in judges of the *right stamp*. We never trust those fellows that talk about precedents, law reports, and the principles settled by former adjudications. That is all stuff—it never suited our ideas at all. Therefore, we are sure to select the proper material to answer our purposes. The municipal law, in the old Books, has been defined *to be a rule of civil conduct prescribed by the supreme authority of the State*. But that definition, we consider entirely too *antiquated* to please Western philanthropy. This age is progressive—in jurisdiction as in everything else. We hold to *unfixedness* in everything, except that there is one only thing certain; and that is, *the law cannot prescribe for us*. That is the only *certainty* in this uncertain world."

"That's it, friend Moon—the only true doctrine that ought to be proclaimed. Talking about *fixed rules* to us, is like trying to stop a tornado with a feather. Ours are made pliable, so as to be bent and twisted to suit every emergency. We couldn't live or prosper, tied down by fixed rules. No, no—they will do to catch and hold small insects that know no better; but we are rather *too cunning* to be held by such flimsy cobwebs."

"Yea, verily, friend Shan, I was going to show thee

how we got out of this scrape—as harmless as Daniel did out of the den of lions. We were apprized the owner would be on quickly with his proof—the time was short, and hence we went to work in earnest. There was lawyer Dart, imbued with true fellow-feeling—to him, we gave the case, assuring him, there was not a moment to lose.”

“ ‘Don’t fear,’ replied he, ‘I will have them liberated in time—upon application to Judge Drake, he will grant me a writ of *Habeas Corpus*, and if I can once get them before him, *all will be right*. He don’t quibble at straws; he is the man for the times, ready to say God-speed to the panting fugitive. The telegraph and cars are *slow*, compared to the way he dispatches business.’

“ The writ was issued, served, and in a few hours, the slaves were standing in the presence of Judge Drake. His honor inquired if the claimants were in Court, and ready for trial.

“ A. Piatt, son-in-law to the owner, informed the judge, he was expecting the claimant with his witnesses in a very few hours. By telegraph, he was just informed the party would be here prepared for trial, on the morning train from the city, and he prayed for a delay in the trial, for three hours. If his honor had any *doubts* as to their being slaves, he and W. Piatt, would be qualified to that fact.

“ ‘As I understand the law,’ replied his honor, ‘no one can hold these negroes in custody for *a moment*, unless it be the claimant, or his regularly authorized agent. As I am advised there is no such party present to go into trial; the negroes are therefore discharged from custody.’

“ At these words, the crowd immediately bore them off triumphantly to a carriage in waiting, and where they went, no one knew. They had barely got out of sight, ere the shrill whistle of the cars, announced their near approach from the city. The owner and witnesses were all on the ground in a few moments, but a *little too late*—the birds had flown.”

“ That, friend Moon, is too good—commend me to such faithful lawyers and true judges. This mincing of matters and splitting of hairs, won’t do for these fast times. Only think of the consequences! If precedents were allowed to be pleaded, old musty decisions hunted up and brought

forth, the *precious moment* would have been lost—irretrievably lost. How plainly this shows, we need fast men for these hurried times.”

“Yea, verily, friend Shan. *Dilatoriness* would be fatal in such cases. How subservient to our purpose have we made this great writ of *habeas corpus*. That instrument works like a charm in such emergencies. It runs in every possible case—it has outwitted Uncle Sam—it has undermined the Fugitive Slave-law, and left no legs upon which it can stand. By it we can cheat the United States Commissioner out of his prey, and make the Marshal answerable to our courts. When Crittenden, while Attorney-General, conceded this writ to us, that act lost its vitality—it made it a complete humbug. The chicanery of these county attorneys is too great for estimation. Let them scent a negro—even if he is in legal custody—they will have him released in despite of the Jews. Their ingenuity and legal subterfuges surpass all understanding. This great writ was originally designed as a remedy against false or illegal imprisonment; it was never intended to take cognizance of commitments made by due process of law. But these notions have grown obsolete also.”

“And very justly, friend Moon. Old *Fogyism* don't suit our latitude.