

The Tocsin

“If the pulpit be silent, whenever or wherever there may be a sinner, bloody with this guilt, within the hearing of its voice, *the pulpit is false to its trust.*”

D. WEBSTER

Wake! children of the men who said,
‘All are born free’!—Their spirits come
Back to the places where they bled
In Freedom’s holy martyrdom,
And find *you* sleeping on their graves,
And hugging there your chains,—ye slaves!

Ay—slaves of slaves! What, sleep ye yet,
And dream of Freedom, while ye sleep?
Ay—dream, while Slavery’s foot is set
So firmly on your necks,—while deep
The chain her quivering flesh endures
Gnaws, like a cancer, into your!—

Hah! say ye that I’ve falsely spoken,
Calling ye slaves?—Then prove ye’re *not*:
Work a free press!—ye’ll see it broken:
Stand, to defend it!—ye’ll be shot.—
O yes! but people should not dare
Print what ‘the brotherhood’ won’t bear!—

Then from your *lips* let words of grace,
Gleaned from the Holy Bible’s pages,
Fall, while ye’re pleading for a race
Whose blood has flowed thro’ chains for ages;—
And pray—‘Lord, let thy kingdom come!’
And see if ye’re not stricken dumb.

Yes, men of God! *ye* may not speak
As, by the Word of God, ye’re bidden;—
By the press’d lip,—the blanching cheek,
Ye feel yourselves rebuked and chidden;
And if ye’re not cast out, ye fear it:—
And why?—‘The brethren’ will not hear it.

Since, then, through pulpit, or through press,
To prove your freedom ye’re not able,
Go,—like the Sun of Righteousness,
By wise men honored,—to a stable!
Bend *there* to Liberty your knee!
Say *there* that God made all men free!

Even there,—ere Freedom’s vows ye’ve plighted,
Ere of her form ye’ve caught a glimpse,
Even there, are fires infernal lighted,
And ye’re driven out by Slavery’s imps.
Ah well!—‘so persecuted they
The prophets’ of a former day!—

Go then, and build yourselves a hall,
To prove ye are not slaves, but men!
Write ‘FREEDOM’ on its towering wall!
Baptize it in the name of PENN;

And give it to Her holy cause,
Beneath the Ægis of her laws:—

Within, let Freedom’s anthem swell;—
And, while your hearts begin to throb,
And burn within you—Hark! the yell—
The torch—the torrent of the MOB!—
They’re Slavery’s troops that surround you sweep,
And leave your hall a smouldering heap!

At Slavery’s beck, the prayers ye urge
On your own servants, through the door
Of your own senate,—that the scourge
May gash your brother’s back no more,
Are trampled underneath their feet,
While ye stand praying in the street!

At Slavery’s beck, ye send your sons
To hunt down Indian wives or maids,
Doomed to the lash!—Yes, and their bones,
Whitening mid swamps and everglades,
Where no friend goes to give them graves,
Prove that ye are not Slavery’s slaves!!

At Slavery’s beck, the very hands
Ye lift to heaven, to swear ye’re free,
Will break a truce, to seize the lands
Of Seminole or Cherokee!
Yes—tear a flag, that Tartar hordes
Respect, and shield it with their swords!

Vengeance is thine, Almighty God!
To pay it hath thy justice bound thee:—
Even now, I see thee take thy rod:—
Thy thunders, leashed and growling round thee—
Slip them not yet, in mercy!—Deign
Thy wrath yet longer to restrain!—

Or—let *thy* kingdom, Slavery, come!
Let Church, let State, receive thy chain!
Let pulpit, press, and hall be dumb,
If so ‘the brotherhood’ ordain!
The MUSE her own indignant spirit
Will yet speak out;—and men shall hear it.

Yes:—while, at Concord, there’s a stone
That she can strike her fire from still;
While there’s a shaft at Lexington,
Or half a one on Bunker’s Hill,
There shall she stand and strike her lyre,
And Truth and Freedom shall stand by her.

But should she *thence* by mobs be driven,
For purer heights she’ll plume her wing:—
She’ll soar,—where she can safely sing—
God of our fathers, speed her thither!
God of the free,—let me go with her!

Introduction

This single-page broadsheet contains a poem by antislavery writer John Pierpont (1785-1866). The poem also appears in his volume, *Anti-Slavery Poems* (Boston: Oliver Johnson, 1843) at pp. 15-20, in an annotated and slightly different version. For further on John Pierpont, see the editorial introduction to Pierpont's *Anti-Slavery Poems*, in the Antislavery Literature Project collections [<http://antislavery.eservr.org/poetry/antislaverypoems.doc>].

Although it is not known for what specific occasion this broadsheet was published, it was probably printed prior to 1843 in connection with antislavery public meetings. The poem is an indignant religious and political jeremiad, condemning the clergy, politicians and press for failure to oppose slavery. It asserts that individual and institutional failures to oppose slavery emerged from a prevailing social fear of mob violence (stanzas 8, 9, 16). Stanzas 8 and 9 reference the mob burning of Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia in 1838. The poem is unusual among anti-slavery poems for linking the expansion of slavery to the mistreatment of the Cherokee and Seminoles.

— Joe Lockard

This is an annotated edition of the original text of John Pierpont's 'Tocsin,' a broadsheet with no date or place of publication. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained.

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