

How Boston Received the Emancipation Proclamation **By Fanny Garrison Villard**

[In the following article Mrs. Villard, the daughter of the Anti-Slavery leader, William Lloyd Garrison, complies with the request of the REVIEW OF REVIEWS to relate her personal recollections of the way in which the news of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, fifty years ago, was received at the center of the Anti-Slavery agitation. – THE EDITOR.]

When a great moral agitation—after years of painful struggle – triumphs over unreasoning prejudice and fierce opposition, he who had no part in it may be lost in admiration of the victory, but he cannot rightly measure the sacrifices that were necessary for its achievement. Thus I realize the impossibility of presenting to the imagination of the present young generation a sufficiently graphic picture of the hold that the slave power had upon Church and State throughout the country, and upon all commercial relations between the North and the South when the Anti-Slavery movement was started.

To have dreamed at that time of a Lincoln or a Proclamation of Emancipation would have seemed as absurd and chimerical as the story of Munchausen's quick-growing ladder that enabled him to reach the moon with the greatest ease. Yet of such stuff are true reformers made that no one of that small band of abolitionists doubted that slavery would ultimately be overthrown, however dark and apparently hopeless the outlook. My father said: "Two cannot make a revolution, but they can begin one, and, once begun, it can never be turned back." And again: "Moral influence when in vigorous exercise is irresistible. It has an immortal essence. It can no more be trod out of existence by the iron foot of time, or by the ponderous march of iniquity than matter can be annihilated. It may disappear for a time; but it lives in some shape or other, in some place or other, and will rise with renovated strength."

Looking back to the Anti-Slavery meetings, which were to the children of abolitionists more exciting and uplifting than any other influences that later came into their lives, that which impresses me beyond all else is the range of vision gained there in regard to the need of still other reforms – true indeed of all good but unpopular causes. The subject of Anti-Slavery became, as it were, a moral touch-stone quickly revealing the difference between lip professions and real Christianity.

Of course, there were many then, as there are many now, who deprecate the use of strong language in denunciation of a national sin against God and man. My father replied to one who said, "Mr. Garrison, you are too excited, you are on fire!" "I have need to be on fire for I have icebergs around me to melt."

The recent celebrations of the Proclamations of Emancipation have brought vividly before me the "Watch Night" of New Year's Eve fifty years ago in a crowded African Church in Boston, at which I was present together with a small party including Moncure D. Conway and my brother, William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., we being the only white people present. When my father's name was mentioned we were at once given seats.

The solemnity and intense excitement of the occasion were indescribably thrilling, and I almost felt as if I could hear the heart-beats of those present, as well as my own. The black preacher said, in substance: "The President of the United States has promised that if the Confederates do not lay down their arms he will free all the slaves to-morrow. They have not laid down their arms, and to-morrow will bring freedom of the oppressed slaves. But we all know that the powers of darkness are with the President, trying to make him break his word, but we must watch and see that he does not break his word." A great sensation was caused when he exclaimed: "The old serpent is abroad, and he will be here at midnight in all his power. But don't be alarmed, our prayers will prevail and God Almighty's New Year will make the United States a true land of freedom." Loud hisses were heard in different parts of the house, and there were cries of "He's here, he's here!" Shortly before midnight, we

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were asked to kneel in prayer, and when the bells of the city rang in the New Year, we all joined in singing the old Methodist hymn:

“Blow ye the trumpet, blow!
The gladly solemn sound:
Let all the nations know,
To earth’s remotest bound,
The year of jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.”

Going forth into the beautiful star-lit night we realized that our emotions were of a kind too deep for expression. I doubt if sleep came quickly, for we waited the dawn with feverish impatience lest, indeed, the terrible serpent had accomplished his deadly work. Early in the morning we looked in the papers for the good news from Washington that the Proclamation had become the law of the land, but it was not to be found. The reason for this great disappointment was afterwards explained by the fact that Lincoln did not sign the document until after he had held his New Year reception. As the day wore on, the suspense continued, the enthusiasm of the colored people, especially, being dampened by it.

A great concert had been arranged at short notice for the afternoon in Music Hall, the committee having it in charge being composed not only of the most distinguished musicians in Boston, -- chief among them Mr. Otto Dresel, -- but also of well-known literary and business men. The hall was thronged by an audience that found vent on that day of jubilee for its pent-up feelings, although it was undeniable that a vague feeling of unrest pervaded it at first.

Never, it seems to me, was music rendered more wonderfully than on that occasion, noble compositions of Händel, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven stirring us in our inmost souls. Emerson’s “Boston Hymn,” which has been brought to our special attention of late, was written for that occasion and read by the distinguished man himself before the music began. During the intermission at last came real exaltation of spirit with the announcement by some one from the platform that the President’s proclamation was coming over the wires. Nine cheers were given for Lincoln and three for William Lloyd Garrison. I can imagine what my father’s feelings were at that happy beginning of the end of slavery to which he had given more than thirty years of his life, but I know that I stood up in the gallery beside him when he received the plaudits of the audience with joy in his heart that was akin to pain. Then the concert proceeded in a still more inspiring way than before to the end of that memorable occasion. But there were no newspapers to be had to confirm the glad tidings when we left the hall.

The evening that followed that exciting afternoon was spent with my father at the house of Mr. George L. Stearns (the friend of John Brown) in Medford, where a bust of Brown was unveiled in the presence of an unusual company, the faces of Phillips, Emerson, Julia Ward Howe, and Sanborn coming distinctly before me as I write. My brother, Francis Jackson Garrison, in the clear picture that he has just given of that day, never-to-be-forgotten by those who have been so fortunate as to have an Anti-Slavery heritage,-- describes the meeting at Tremont Temple that evening in celebration of the great historic event. Even then no paper had been issued giving the text of the proclamation, but Judge Thomas Russell had seen the proof of it in the office of the *Journal*, which he did not hesitate to take without asking. He ran with all possible speed to the meeting, where it was read and received with deafening applause. Fresh courage with which to work still longer must have taken hold of all those present, until not only over three million slaves should be free, but the whole four million, -- and the foul blot of slavery thus wiped from our escutcheon.

The question that concerns us to-day is, more than all else, whether our duty to the liberated bondmen has been fulfilled. The answer is, alas! No. Untutored, ignorant of the meaning of liberty, they were for a long time after the war abandoned both by the North and the South (save for few exceptions) and we are still to-day repairing the harvest of our neglect. Yet in spite of it, the colored people are rising

industrially and intellectually, and – take it all in all – far more rapidly than we had a right to expect. But justice must be meted out to them if we would preserve it for ourselves, and every benefit than can be conferred by democracy bestowed upon each and every colored person, North or South, in common with every other inhabitant of this fair land. Only in this way can we make reparation for the complicity of the North with slavery, the Proclamation of Emancipation having been the initial step in the right direction.