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A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery, and To the Non-Slaveholders of the South

Lysander Spooner

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1858

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WE, the subscribers, residents of the Town of in the County of in the State of believing in the principles, and approving generally of the measures, set forth in the foregoing *“Plan for the Abolition of Slavery,”* and in the accompanying address *“To the Non-Slaveholders of the South,”* hereby unite ourselves in an Association to be called the League of Freedom in the Town of for the purpose of aiding to carry said plan into effect. And we hereby severally declare it to be our sincere intention to co-operate faithfully with each other, and with all other associations within the United States, having the same purpose in view, and adopting the same platform of principles and measures.

at farthest—to detach the government and the country at large from the interests of the Slaveholders; to destroy the security and value of Slave property; to annihilate the commercial credit of the Slaveholders; and finally to accomplish the extinction of Slavery. We hope it may be without blood.

If it be objected that this scheme proposes war, we confess the fact. It does propose war—private war indeed—but, nevertheless, war, if that should prove necessary. And our answer to the objection is, that in revolutions of this nature, it is necessary that private individuals should take the first steps. The tea must be thrown overboard, the Bastile must be torn down, the first gun must be fired, by private persons, before a new government can be organized, or the old one be forced (for nothing but danger to itself will force it) to adopt the measures which the insurgents have in view.

If the American governments, State or national, would abolish Slavery, we would leave the work in their hands. But as they do not, and apparently will not, we propose to *force* them to do it, or to do it ourselves in defiance of them.

If any considerable number of the American people will join us, the work will be an easy and bloodless one; for Slavery can live only in quiet, and in the sympathy or subjection of all around it.

[The following note is to be addressed to some person at the South, and signed by the person sending it, giving his own residence.]

Sir:

Please accept, and exhibit to your neighbors, this copy of a document, which we are intending to distribute very extensively through the South, and which, we trust, will give birth to a movement, that shall result not only in the freedom of the blacks, but also in the political, pecuniary, educational, moral, and social advantage of the present non-slaveholding whites. Please let me hear, from you often, informing me of the progress of the work. Direct to me at

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5. Forming and disciplining such military companies as may volunteer for actual service.

6. Detaching the non-slaveholders of the South from all alliance with the Slaveholders, and inducing them to co-operate with us, by appeals to their safety, interest, honor, justice, and humanity.

7. Informing the Slaves (by emissaries to be sent among them, or through the non-slaveholders of the South) of the plan of emancipation, that they may be prepared to co-operate at the proper time.

8. To encourage emigration to the South, of persons favoring the movement.

9. When the preceding preliminaries shall have sufficiently prepared the way, then to land military forces (at numerous points at the same time) in the South, who shall raise the standard of freedom, and call to it the slaves, and such free persons as may be willing to join it.

10. If emancipation shall be accomplished only by actual hostilities, then, as all the laws of war, of nature, and of justice, will require that the emancipated Slaves shall be compensated for their previous wrongs, we avow it our purpose to make such compensation, so far as the property of the Slaveholders and their abettors can compensate them. And we avow our intention to make known this determination to the Slaves beforehand, with a view to give them courage and self-respect, to nerve them to look boldly into the eyes of their tyrants, and to give them true ideas of the relations of justice existing between themselves and their oppressors.

11. To remain in the South, after emancipation, until we shall have established, or have seen established, such governments as will secure the future freedom of the persons emancipated.

And we anticipate that the public avowal of these measures, and our open and zealous preparation for them, will have the effect, within some reasonable time—we trust within a few years

In general, nothing will excuse men in the non-performance of this duty, except the pressure of higher duties, (if such there be,) inability to afford relief, or too great danger to themselves or others.

This duty being naturally inherent in human relations and necessities, governments and laws are of no authority in opposition to it. If they interpose themselves, they must be trampled under foot without ceremony, as we would trample under foot laws that should forbid us to rescue men from wild beasts, or from burning buildings.

On this principle, it is the duty of the non-slaveholders of this country, in their private capacity as individuals—without asking the permission, or waiting the movements, of the government—to go to the rescue of the Slaves from the hands of their oppressors.

This duty is so self-evident and natural a one, that he who pretends to doubt it, should be regarded either as seeking to evade it, or as himself a servile and ignorant slave of corrupt institutions or customs.

Holding these opinions, we propose to act upon them. And we invite all other citizens of the United States to join us in the enterprise. To enable them to judge of its feasibility, we lay before them the following programme of measures, which, we think, ought to be adopted, and would be successful.

1. The formation of associations, throughout the country, of all persons who are willing to pledge themselves *publicly* to favor the enterprise, and render assistance and support, of any kind, to it.
2. Establishing or sustaining papers to advocate the enterprise.
3. Refusing to vote for any person for any civil or military office whatever, who is not publicly committed to the enterprise.
4. Raising money and military equipments.

We present to you herewith “A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery,” and solicit your aid to carry it into execution.

Your numbers, combined with those of the Slaves, will give you all power. You have but to use it, and the work is done.

The following self-evident principles of justice and humanity will serve as guides to the measures proper to be adopted. These principles are—

1. That the Slaves have a natural right to their liberty.
2. That they have a natural right to compensation (so far as the property of the Slaveholders and their abettors can compensate them) for the wrongs they have suffered.
3. That so long as the governments, under which they live, refuse to give them liberty or compensation, they have the right to take it by stratagem or force.
4. That it is the duty of all, who can, to assist them in such an enterprise.

In rendering this assistance, you will naturally adopt these measures.

1. To ignore and spurn the authority of all the corrupt and tyrannical political institutions, which the Slaveholders have established for the security of their crimes.

2. Soon as may be, to take the political power of your States into your own hands, and establish governments that shall punish slaveholding as a crime, and also give to the Slaves civil actions for damages for the wrongs that have already been committed against them.

3. Until such new governments shall be instituted, to recognize the Slaves as free men, and as being the rightful owners of the property, which is now held by their masters, but which would pass to them, if justice were done; to justify and assist them in every effort to acquire their liberty, and obtain possession of such property, by stratagem or force; to hire them as laborers, pay them their wages, and defend them meanwhile against their tyrants; to sell them fire-arms, and teach them the use of them; *to trade with them, buying the property they*

may have taken from their oppressors, and paying them for it; to encourage and assist them to take possession of the lands they cultivate, and the crops they produce, and appropriate them to their own use; and in every way possible to recognize them as being now the rightful owners of the property, which justice, if administered, would give them, in compensation for the injuries they have received.

4. To form Vigilance Committees, or Leagues of Freedom, in every neighborhood or township, whose duty it shall be to stand in the stead of the government, and do that justice for the slaves, which government refuses to do; and especially to arrest, try, and chastise (with their own whips) all Slaveholders who shall beat their slaves, or restrain them of their liberty; and compel them to give deeds of emancipation, and conveyances of their property, to their slaves.

5. To treat, and teach the negroes to treat, all *active* abettors of the Slaveholders, as you and they treat the Slaveholders themselves, both in person and property.

Perhaps some may say that this taking of property, by the Slaves, would be stealing, and should not be encouraged. The answer is, that it would not be stealing; it would be simply taking justice into their own hands, and redressing their own wrongs. The state of Slavery is a state of war. In this case it is a *just* war, on the part of the negroes—a war for liberty, and the recompense of injuries; and necessity justifies them in carrying it on by the only means their oppressors have left to them. In war, the plunder of enemies is as legitimate as the killing of them; and stratagem is as legitimate as open force. The right of the Slaves, therefore, in this war, to take property, is as clear as their right to take life; and their right to do it secretly, is as clear as their right to do it openly. And as this will probably be their most effective mode of operation for the present, they ought to be taught, encouraged, and assisted to do it to the utmost, so long as they are unable to meet their enemies in the open field. And to call this taking of property stealing, is as

not hesitate to buy of them cotton, or any other property which they may have taken from their masters; and give them, in exchange, weapons, or any other articles they may need. If you will but do this, you will soon put an end to Slavery.

Non Slaveholders generally of the South! If it is right for the Slaves to take the property of their masters, to compensate their wrongs, it is right for you to help them. Your numbers, compared with those of the Slaveholders, are as five or six to one. It will be perfectly easy for you, by combining with the Slaves, to put them in possession of the plantations on which they labor, and of all the property upon them. They could afford to pay you well for doing them such a service. They could afford to let you share with them in the division of the property taken. We hope you will adopt this measure. It will not only be right in itself, it will be the noblest act of your lives, *provided you do not take too large a share to yourselves; and provided also that you afterwards faithfully protect the Slaves in their liberty, and the property assigned to them.*

Finally, we say to all, correspond with us of the North. Let each person who receives or sees one of these sheets, send his letters to the one who sent it—with liberty to publish them in the northern papers. This correspondence, we are confident, will be a more interesting literature than the South has ever furnished; and will enlist the feelings of northern people to such a degree, that we shall be induced to go, in large numbers, to your assistance, whenever you shall need us.

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A PLAN FOR THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

When a human being is set upon by a robber, ravisher, murderer, or tyrant of any kind, it is the duty of the bystanders to go to his or her rescue, *by force, if need be.*

different as to whom you serve, we advise you henceforth to serve the Slaves, instead of their masters. Turn about, and help the robbed to rob their robbers. The former can afford to pay you better than the latter. Help them to get possession of the property which is rightfully their due, and they can afford to give you liberal commissions. Help them flog individual Slaveholders, and they can afford to pay you ten times as much as you ever received for flogging Slaves. Help them to kidnap the Slaveholders, and they can afford to pay you more than you now get for catching fugitive Slaves. Be true to the Slaves, and we hope they will pay you well for your services. Be false to them, and we hope they will kill you.

Lawyers of the South! You can, if you will, exert a potent influence for good, in this matter. If, in the true spirit of law as a science, you shall see a man in the most crushed of human beings; and, recognizing his right to obtain justice by such means as may be in his power, you shall take the side of the oppressed, in this controversy, and teach them to trample on their tyrants, and vindicate their manhood—if you do this, and then aid in establishing new institutions, based upon liberty, equality, and right, you will have the satisfaction of doing your part towards bringing into life a great, free, and happy people, where now all is crime, tyranny, degradation, and death. If, on the contrary, you shall take the side of the Slaveholders, and continue to be—as, professionally, under Slave institutions, you must forever be—the degraded, pettifogging pimps, hirelings, and tools of a few soulless robbers of their species—denying continually the authority of justice, and the rights of humanity—if you shall do this, we need not attempt to tell you what your true rank will be in the scale of lawyers, statesmen, patriots, or men.

Merchants of the South! We hope you will deliberately consider this matter, and make up your minds whether the Slaves have the right to take the property of their masters. In compensation for the injuries they have suffered. If you decide that they have that right, we hope you will act accordingly, and will

false and unjust as it would be to call the taking of life, in just war, murder.

It is only those who have a false and superstitious reverence for the authority of governments, and have contracted the habit of thinking that the most tyrannical and iniquitous laws have the power to make that right which is naturally wrong, or that wrong which is naturally right, who will have any doubt as to the right of the Slaves (and those who would assist them) to make war, to all possible extent, upon the property of the Slaveholders and their abettors.

We are unwilling to take the responsibility of advising any general insurrection, or any taking of life, until we of the North go down to take part in it, in such numbers as to insure a certain and easy victory. We therefore advise that, for the present, operations be confined to the seizure of property, and the chastisement of individual Slaveholders, and their accomplices; and that these things be done only so far as they can be done, without too great danger to the actors.

We specially advise the flogging of individual Slaveholders. This is a case where the medical principle, that like cures like, will certainly succeed. Give the Slaveholders, then, a taste of their own whips. Spare their lives, but not their backs. The arrogance they have acquired by the use of the lash upon others, will be soon taken out of them, when the same scourge shall be applied to themselves. A band of ten or twenty determined negroes, well armed, having their rendezvous in the forests, coming out upon the plantations by day or night, seizing individual Slaveholders, *stripping them*, and flogging them soundly, in the presence of their own Slaves, would soon abolish Slavery over a large district.

These bands could also do a good work by kidnapping individual Slaveholders, taking them into the forest, and holding them as hostages for the good behavior of the whites remaining on the plantations, compelling them also to execute deeds of emancipation, and conveyances of their property, to their

slaves. These contracts could probably never afterward be successfully disallowed on the ground of duress (especially after new governments, favorable to liberty, should be established) inasmuch as such contracts would be nothing more than justice; and men may rightfully be coerced to do justice. Such contracts would be intrinsically as valid as the treaties by which conquered nations make satisfaction for the injustice which caused the war.

The more bold and resolute Slaves should be encouraged to form themselves into bands, build forts in the forests, and there collect arms, stores, horses, every thing that will enable them to sustain themselves, and carry on their warfare upon the Slaveholders.

Another important measure, on the part of the Slaves, will be to disarm their masters, so far as that is practicable, by seizing and concealing their weapons whenever opportunity offers. They should also kill all slave-hunting dogs, and the owners too, if that should prove necessary.

Whenever the Slaves on a plantation are not powerful or courageous enough to resist, they should be encouraged to desert, in a body, temporarily, especially at harvest time, so as to cause the crops to perish for want of hands to gather them.

Many other ways will suggest themselves to you, and to the Slaves, by which the Slaveholders can be annoyed and injured, without causing any general outbreak, or shedding of blood.

Our plan then is—

1. To make war (openly or secretly as circumstances may dictate) upon the property of the Slaveholders and their abettors—not for its destruction, if that can easily be avoided, but to convert it to the use of the Slaves. If it cannot be thus converted, then we advise its destruction. Teach the Slaves to burn their masters' buildings, to kill their cattle and horses, to conceal or destroy farming utensils, to abandon labor in seed time and harvest, and let crops perish. *Make Slavery unprofitable*, in this way, if it can be done in no other.

2. To make Slaveholders objects of derision and contempt, by flogging them, whenever they shall be guilty of flogging their slaves.

3. To risk no general insurrection, until we of the North go to your assistance, or you are sure of success without our aid.

4. To cultivate the friendship and confidence of the Slaves; to consult with them as to their rights and interests, and the means of promoting them; to show your interest in their welfare, and your readiness to assist them. Let them know that they have your sympathy, and it will give them courage, self-respect, and ambition, and make men of them; infinitely better men to live by, as neighbors and friends, than the indolent, arrogant, selfish, heartless, domineering robbers and tyrants, who now keep both yourselves and the Slaves in subjection, and look with contempt upon all who live by honest labor.

5. To change your political institutions soon as possible. And in the meantime give never a vote to a Slaveholder; pay no taxes to their government, if you can either resist or evade them; as witnesses and jurors, give no testimony, and no verdicts, in support of any Slaveholding claims; perform no military, patrol, or police service; mob Slaveholding courts, gaols, and sheriffs; do nothing, in short, for sustaining Slavery, but every thing you safely and rightfully can, publicly and privately, for its overthrow.

While rascals of the South! Willing tools of the Slaveholders! You, who drive Slaves to their labor, hunt them with dogs, and flog them for pay, without asking any questions! We have a word specially for you. You are one of the main pillars of the Slave system. You stand ready to do all that vile and inhuman work, which must be done by somebody, but which the more decent Slaveholders themselves will not do. Yet we have heard *one* good report even of you. It is, that you have no such prejudices against color, nor against liberty, as that you would not as willingly earn money by helping a Slave to Canada, as by catching a fugitive and returning him to his master. If you are thus in-