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Jane Gray Stoshel

[From a photograph in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.]

Crusader and Feminist

Letters of

(Carroll)

Mrs. JANE GREY SWISSHELM

1858-1865

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

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pounds of tobacco, the wives scraped up in the purlieus of European cities and sent over to them, as articles of merchandise. If any one ever doubted that God visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation and shows mercy unto thousands of them that love Him, let him look at this piece of history where the sins of the fathers, pride, extravagance, idleness, drunkenness, debauchery and all manner of unbridled passions, became the inheritance of the children, and far more than counter-balanced all the physical advantages of the highly favored land they were permitted to inhabit, and which converted it almost into a distant waste, while the ignorant people sat on the bubble of their own false pride obstinately blind to the superiority of those who, inheriting the virtues of their self-denying ancestors, had made the desert hills of New England to blossom as the rose.

17TH.—I had written thus far when compelled to stop, before describing the rejoicings of the evening — of the week previous, and, alas! what a close was reserved for that bright day! Ere midnight every city and town in the land was startled by the news of the fearful crimes perpetrated in our midst. Of these crimes and every incident connected with them, the telegraph has informed your readers long before this can reach them, but in no other part of the country perhaps, is it so felt as here. The large proportion of rebel sympathizers believed to be implicated in the conspiracy of which Booth was but the tool, gives to all a feeling of distrust, horror and dread which cannot be realized elsewhere. It is sickening to pass the White House and adjacent Departments so recently all gorgeous with flags and all manner of festive devices blazing with many colored lights, and reverberating with triumphant music, and witness the change to

the sable emblems of woe. It is sadder than these outside changes in other cities, for just behind that draped wall lies the mangled body of our sainted, martyred President, and this visible presence adds greatly to the sorrow and gloom.

Anthony asked the Romans to look at Cæsar's wounds, the "dumb mouths" that should condemn his murderers, and the sight of that broken chamber of thought late so filled with kindly purposes towards his murderers, awakens a feeling which no word-painting can do. Then the presence of the thousands of Freed-people who regarded Abraham Lincoln as their Moses, adds to the impressiveness of the scene. With tears and lamentations they lean their faces against the iron fence around the Presidential Mansion, and groan with a feeling akin to despair lest now, that their friend is gone, they shall be returned to their old masters. Old men and women lament, and pray, and ask in such a hopeless way what their fate is to be — while young men clench their hands and exclaim,

"If the North would just leave *us* to finish this war!"
"They have done enough, just let them leave the rebels to us!" and other expressions of like import which shows the temper of the men who have a Fort Pillow to avenge.¹ One poor black woman stood out on the street quite near our house lamenting that her "good President" should be murdered in his own city, after being down to Richmond where all the danger was supposed to be, and weeping bitterly she stamped her feet and exclaimed:

"My good President! My good President! I would rather have died myself! I would rather have given the babe from my bosom! Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!"

¹ On the Fort Pillow massacre, see John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 6: 479 (New York, 1890).

The mourning for President Lincoln is no mockery of woe, but the impassioned outburst of heartfelt grief; and it is touching to see, on every little negro hut in the suburbs, some respectful testimonial of sorrow. Many deprived themselves of a meal to get a yard or two of black to hang above their poor door or window. Was ever mortal so wept by the poor?

But these particulars you will learn from other sources. What I would say is, that joining in the general sorrow as I do, I do *not* look upon this death as a National calamity any more than I do that of John Brown. Knowing the South as I have long done; after studying their institutions and residing amongst them, I have never ceased to fear the destruction of our Government through the leniency and magnanimity of President Lincoln. — Honest, upright, single-minded and living in a community where crime is the exception, he was utterly unable to realize the total depravity and vindictive barbarism of slaveholders as a class, and I have always feared that his long-suffering with these irreclaimable sinners would prolong the war until the patience of the North would be exhausted and a disgraceful peace be made. I could not understand why God did not give us a leader who understood the nature of Secession and would deal with it accordingly. But I see it all now.

The world at large — the masses of the Northern people — had no more just idea than had Mr. Lincoln of the *animus* of this most fiendish Rebellion, and he was the instrument chosen to show to all the experiment of heaping coals of fire on the head of that enemy. He was the one to test generosity, magnanimity, Christian charity and all that class of virtues to the utmost limit, and we have the result. As Christ was murdered by those He came to save, so has President Lincoln

been sacrificed by the wretches he would have shielded from the just punishment of their crimes.

What other event could have so opened the eyes of the world to the true character of the Southern people? Who now will stand between them and the reward of their two centuries' of crimes against our common humanity, the thought of which makes the blood curdle in one's veins? The leaders of rebellion themselves have placed in the Presidential chair a man who stands pledged to "arrest them, try them, convict them and *hang* them!" and who will not bid him God-speed in this good work! Should he fail to carry out his plan, they will assassinate him, and some one else will be called to fulfill the Lord's purpose of visiting, upon these people, the accumulated sins of many generations of evil-doers. Nations have no hereafter, and National sins must meet their punishment in this life. That they and we, for our complicity in their sins, have only begun to drink that cup of retribution which we must drain to the dregs, is the old conviction forced back upon me after a short season of hope that repentance had brought remission of sins.

[*St. Cloud Democrat, May 4, 1865*]

WASHINGTON, April 25

EDITOR OF THE DEMOCRAT. — Did it ever occur to you that the Devil is a fool? Certainly the Bible might teach us to think so; for in it Righteousness is spoken of as "Wisdom."

The folly of sin never, perhaps, was more strikingly exemplified than in the whole history of this Rebellion, and the climax of that folly is the assassination of President Lincoln. If we admit that the Prince of Darkness inspires his followers with plans and purposes to further the interests of his kingdom, we must regard him as little less than idiotic

when contemplating his achievements in attempting to spread and perpetuate his pet "institution." The means devised to spread the dimensions of slavery over the continent will certainly result in its entire expulsion from the face of the civilized world.—So, according to promise, God is making "the wrath of man to praise Him," while the remainder of wrath he will restrain. In permitting the murder of the President, He allowed "the man who is Thy sword" to hasten his departure to that better land for which his late acts have shown he was rapidly ripening. God has thus removed from this important place one who was totally incapable of understanding, or believing in, the wickedness, the cruelty, and barbarism of the Southern people, or rather of that portion of them who inaugurated and prosecuted this rebellion, in defense of their right to whip women and rob cradles. Without this understanding it was impossible he should mete out to them that punishment which divine justice demands; and his death places one in power who knows them thoroughly and has every disposition to reward them according to their work. I can think of no other blow at Satan's kingdom, which could have been so telling as this, struck by his anointed servant and special emissary. Who would want to serve under a leader so stupid — one who so turns his resources against himself? Yes; let it hereafter be written down and read by all men that — the Devil is a fool.

On the day we received news of the capture of Richmond, Vice-President Johnson appeared on the steps of the War Department and addressed a dense crowd. He repeated what he had said in U. S. Senate at the breaking out of the Rebellion, of those who were then concocting it: "I would arrest them, I would try them, I would convict them, and I would *hang* them."

To those who did not hear him, I could convey no idea of the earnestness with which he uttered those words. There was no rant, no bluster; it was deep, calm, conscientious conviction, and made me shiver; and when he added, "Leniency for the masses — *halts* for the leaders," I thanked God that President Lincoln stood between those sinners and the just reward of their crimes; for, just then, in the hour of victory, I had a fit of relenting. Believing they had surrendered or would surrender, I felt like Uncle Toby for the fly, that there was room enough in the world for them and us, and that they were no longer foes worthy of pursuit.

I had just been talking with an old colored woman standing in front of the War Department beside her bundle of soiled linen, and gesticulating violently, weeping, shouting and thanking God that Richmond was not burned. When I corrected and said "You mean, Aunt, that Richmond is taken," she continued: "Oh, yes! Missis, I tank God for dat, but I tank Him dat dey surrendered an' dat de town isn't burnt. De precious souls am not lost. Dey couldn't 'a' burnt it, Missus, 'out killin' great many people, an' I tank my Jesus dat de precious souls am not lost. I feared dey would burn de town an' many souls 'a' been lost!"

"But, Aunt, they are rebel souls!"

"I knows dat, Ma'am, I knows dat; but hell am too bad for cat or dog. I don't want nobody to go dar, an' I tank my Jesus dat Richmond isn't burned."

"Were you ever a slave, Aunt?"

"Yes'm! yes'm! All my life! All my life! an' lost all my chilen dar — all my chilen dar, got none lef now, an' tank my Jesus Richmond isn't burnt. De precious souls am not lost! I can go home an' wash now!" And taking up her heavy bundle she went weeping and praising God for His

mercy to those enemies of humanity who had robbed her of her life's earnings, her children, and all that makes life dear, and left her thus—old, shrivelled and lame, to toil for the bread she must eat alone.

After this lesson, Mr. Johnson's remarks grated on my ear, and when I met him a few moments after, I insisted that he should reconsider his position. He listened very politely to all I had to say about the folly of taking life when opposition to the Government ceased. I urged that the punishment appropriate to the age was to confiscate their property to pay the debt they had forced upon the nation and that they should be prevented taking part in the Government they have labored to destroy. To my conclusion, "Let there be no hanging! Disfranchise them," he answered, with a sternness which even his kindly smile could not conceal, "Mrs. Swisshelm, a very good way to disfranchise them is to break their necks!"

There was the end of the matter and now I can see how right he was and wrong I was. It is so long since I have lived South that my convictions of the irredeemable depravity of the people have been wearing out; but he has just arrived from the other side of the border and felt the difference between an honorable vanquished foe and a frozen viper; and now, may God strengthen his hand in ridding the world of the reptiles who can only resign the use of their deadly-venomous sting with the functions of their natural lives. The nation can never be safe while these, her implacable and wily foes, are above the grounds.

[*St. Cloud Democrat, May 11, 1865*]

WASHINGTON, May 1st

EDITOR OF THE DEMOCRAT. — Truly "the way of the transgressor is hard!" The miserable actor who thought to make

himself a hero by assassinating his Government in the person of her chief magistrate, has met a fate at which all human instincts shudder—which one involuntarily pronounces eminently just and appropriate, and which yet does not satisfy an outraged people.

It is not enough for the people to know that his few days intervening between his crime and his death were days of physical torture from the bone broken by his leap to the stage; that his accomplices failed to give him the aid he expected, and that thus he must have endured acutest mental torments; hunted like a wolf, hungry and faint; traced to his lair; burned out like a rat; shot like a dog; lingering for hours in agony; dying without a word of repentance or hope of forgiveness; dumped into a Virginia farm wagon, than which no wheeled machine can be more contemptible; tied to the rickety old bed to prevent his being tumbled out by the motion over such roads as could not be conceived any place outside of Virginia; drawn by an old horse-frame, driven by a poor old negro who shuddered with horror at being near him, and who in helping to lift him got his hand smeared with blood and with wide rolling eyes exclaimed: "Gorra, Massa! dat's murderer's blood! Neber come off! Neber come off! — Wouldn't 'a' got dat on me for a fousan' dollars!"—in this manner brought back to the capital of that country which he had plunged into mourning, and then disappearing into oblivion. Even this fate does not satisfy the people, and crowds gathered in hope of being able to seize the carcass and tear and trample it.

The wretch sought immortality in his profession, and as the ruling passion is strong in death, he *acted* to the last. His dying words were part of the play—heard with contempt, repeated with derision. Was ever so poor a paymaster as the leader he followed? It is not true, that old proverb,

"The devil is good to his own." No good master would so reward a devoted servant.

On Saturday, Generals Grant and Meigs arrived at the 6th Street Wharf, walked up to 7th street, took a street car and went to headquarters. A Custom House officer who saw them and told me, said they had no attendants, and remarked that if they had been Second Lieutenants or Assistant Surgeons they would have taken a carriage at least.

I wonder where we are to get that emperor which the *London Times* says will be required to settle matters after this war is over! Sherman has lost all possible chance of getting the place, even if he would have accepted it; and I do believe President Johnson would rather be a tailor than an emperor; while Grant would decline the office for that of tanner. We may live to see him Mayor of Galena, but if we *must* have an emperor, we shall have to look elsewhere.

It is believed here now that the reported intoxication of Vice President Johnson on Inauguration day was the result of an attempt to poison him. — This view of the case explains what otherwise is a great mystery; for President Johnson looks as little like intemperance as any man you could name. He looks like Gov. Miller; and is the Joshua to succeed our Moses called from Mt. Pisgah to the Mount of God. Let no lover of his country fear for her in President Johnson's hands. He is the Jackson the people have been calling for — not seeing that God was testing the rebels with a dispensation of mercy under his predecessor.

Sherman's army and the Army of the Potomac are on their march to Washington, probably to be discharged, but I do hope we will keep enough men in arms to send Maximilian home.

The expenses of the Government on last Friday, the 28th

ult., had been lessened \$100,000 per day, and the retrenchment goes on.

Our citizens have proved to the world that freemen can leave their offices, plows and work shops and become the best soldiers that ever wore a uniform, and it now remains for them to show that they can return to office, plow and shop, and make unequaled civilians — showing that large standing armies are worse than useless. God bless our native land!

P.S. — The investigations going on are likely to prove the truth of what I have said and urged and believed so long, viz: that Presidents Harrison and Taylor were assassinated by the conspirators who have for thirty years been plotting the destruction of our Government that they might build in its place a slaveholding dictatorship; and that poor old Buchanan was poisoned for the same reason at the National [Hotel], but was poison proof.

[*St. Cloud Democrat, May 18, 1865*]

WASHINGTON, May 9th

EDITOR OF THE DEMOCRAT. — Of course you have seen the Proclamation of President Johnson offering \$100,000 for Jeff. Davis, and other sums for other leaders in the Rebellion, against whom he has proof of actual complicity in the assassination of President Lincoln. The fact that President Johnson says there is proof, is sufficient. He is not one to jump at conclusions. That that assassination was planned by the same men who plotted the destruction of the Government, I never for a moment doubted. They murdered Harrison and Taylor, and tried to murder poor old Jimmy Buchanan; for, this plot of secession is of long standing. Had Mr. Lincoln passed through Baltimore in coming here, before his first