

NOT TO SUCCUMB TO FEARS

Continued from the August 6 newsletter.

On Wednesday, November 18, 1835, Harriet Martineau was hurried through the angry crowd into the meeting of Boston abolitionists, led by Unitarian women. Harriet Martineau, an eminent English Unitarian opponent of slavery, was making an extensive trip through America to seek ways to reconcile American practice with its democratic ideals. She talked forthrightly with cordial Southern slaveholders, but in Boston, where slavery was illegal, she faced hostility and threats of bodily harm. Fear was palpable and widespread in Boston that to raise the question of anti-slavery would threaten to breakup the beloved Union.

“The ladies assembled in two drawing-rooms,” Harriet later recorded, “thrown into one by the folding-doors being opened. The total number was a hundred and thirty. The president sat at a small table by the folding-doors, and before her was a large Bible, paper, pens, and ink, and the secretary’s papers. There were only three gentlemen in the house, its inhabitant, the gentleman who escorted us, and a clergyman who had dined with us. They remained in the hall, keeping the front door fastened, and the back way clear for our retreat, if retreat should be necessary. But the number of hooters in the streets at no time exceeded thirty, and they treated us with nothing worse than a few yells.”

“A lady who sat next [to] me amused me by inquiring, with kindness, whether it revolted my feelings to meet thus in assembly with people of colour. She was as much surprised as pleased with my English deficiency of all feeling on the subject.”

During the meeting Harriet received a scribbled note asking her to speak to the gathering. Harriet was surprised by her hesitancy. “The case was as clear as daylight to my conscience,” she recalled. “I had long before published against slavery, and had always declared my conviction that this was a question of humanity, not of country or race; a moral, not a merely political question; a general affair, and not one of city, state, party, or nation. Having thus declared on the safe side of the Atlantic, I was bound to act up to my declaration on the unsafe side.” Yet an array of unpleasant consequences crowded her mind. “I foresaw that almost every house in Boston, except those of the abolitionists, would be shut against me; that my relation to the country would be completely changed, as I should be suddenly transformed from being a guest and an observer to being considered a missionary or a spy; and results even more serious than this might reasonably be anticipated.”

The English visitor did speak to the meeting eloquently and simply of her abolitionist convictions. As she predicted, many doors were thereafter closed against her, she daily met hostility in Boston, and threats and diatribes of condemnation followed her home and for years to come. Yet the negative consequences were “the means of teaching me more of the temper and affairs of the times than I could have known by any other means,” and helped her bond with Boston abolitionists in “substantial, profitable, and delightful friendship.” More, by not succumbing to her fears, she remained true to herself and her deepest convictions.

Ref: Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), vol. 2, pp. 162-164.