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Prelude to the Civil War, 1840-1861

HORACE GREELEY: "SLAVE-CATCHER'S TRIUMPH" (1854)

No editor of a non-abolitionist newspaper opposed slavery more than Horace Greeley. When an escaped slave named Anthony Burns was captured in Boston and ordered to be returned to his owner in the South, Greeley wrote about the event in the New York Tribune on June 3, 1854. He predicted that slavery would eventually lead to war.

The fugitive Burns is delivered into slavery. A man as much entitled to his freedom as any other man on the soil of Massachusetts has been seized in that State by other men, manacled, and consigned to hopeless bondage. . . . Burns was not torn from the soil of freedom and consigned to slavery by any ordinary methods of imprisoning malefactors. He was not taken by a constable or sheriff, or even a whole police force of a great city. All these were insufficient. It took all the police of Boston, three companies of United States troops, one company of cavalry, and an entire battalion of militia, together with several pieces of artillery, to secure the capture of this citizen and remand him to slavery. It is said that this was an experimental case of slave-catching, got up especially for the purpose of showing how readily the North would acquiesce in the Nebraska bill, and succumb to the aggressions of the slave power. We trust the managers of the performance are satisfied. What do they think of the prospect of performing the same feat over again? . . .

It may be that they cannot see that through all this Burns trial the public peace has been slumbering upon the edge of a volcano. If they cannot, perhaps they had better devote themselves to a closer scrutiny of the existing state of the popular pulse.

There has been the most imminent danger of a violent and armed outbreak during this late tragedy. And suppose it had taken place? Who would have quelled it? Who would have restored the public peace when once broken? Burns has been taken away, but let us tell the slave power that nothing has been accomplished by that capture but to deepen the resolution that slaves shall not be taken on the soil of the Free States. Nothing has been accomplished by it but to arouse the Northern mind to a determination to resistance to such scenes in the future. This time men have been unarmed. Another time it may be otherwise. We are but at the beginning of the resistance to the arrogant domination of the slave power. Things are but in the bud, in the gristle. Nothing has been done in this case but to declare against the proceeding. Not an arrangement to rescue the fugitive has been made. Nothing which savored of earnest resistance has been attempted. But it will not be so always. Some such even as a forcible rescue will yet take place, and when that takes place in Massachusetts, the fugitive will not be sent to Canada. He will be held upon her soil, and a note of defiance sounded to let them come and take him who dare.

The future is big with events such as these unless something is done to allay the public excitement produced by the proceedings of the slave power, backed by our rulers. The fugitive slave law, as it now stands, can no longer be enforced without jeopardizing the public tranquillity to an alarming extent. We again call upon Congress to give their earnest and immediate attention to this grave subject. If there can be no repeal of the law at this session, which we think is quite certain, let us at least have the trial by jury. A modification of this sort is absolutely demanded unless the country is to be precipitated upon insurrection, and perchance civil war.

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