

## “*This Whole Horrible Transaction*”

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

OCTOBER 23 – NOVEMBER 13, 1837

23. V. Monday ≈ There was in the National Intelligencer this morning an advertisement, signed James H. Birch, and Edward Dyer Auctioneer — headed Sale of Slaves — A sale at public auction at 4 O’Clock this afternoon, of Dorcas Allen, and her two surviving children aged about 7 and 9 years (the other two having been killed by said Dorcas in a fit of insanity as found by the jury who lately acquitted her) — The advertisement further says that the said Slaves were purchased by Birch, on the 22<sup>d</sup> of August last of Rezin Orme, warranted sound in body and in mind — That the terms of sale will be cash, as said Slaves will be sold on account of said Rezin Orme, who refuses to retake the same and repay the purchase money, and who is notified to attend said sale, and if he thinks proper to bid for them or retake them, as he prefers, upon refunding the money paid, and all expenses incurred under the warranty given by him — I asked Mr. Frye, what this advertisement meant — He seemed not to like to speak of it, but said the woman had been sold with her children to be sent to the South, and separated from her husband — that she had killed two of her children, by cutting their throats, and cut her own to kill herself, but in that had failed — That she had been tried at Alexandria, for the murder of her children, and acquitted on the ground of insanity — And that this sale now, was by the purchaser, at the expense of the seller, upon the warranty that she was sound in body and mind — Mr. Frye brought me ten numbers of Niles’s Register, which has been sent to his house while I was absent last Summer, and of which I had obtained another set, supposing that they had been stopped during the recess. I took them to Niles’s Register Office, but he was not there — I called at the Office of the National Intelligencer and saw Mr. Seaton — enquired of him concerning the advertisement of the Sale of Slaves, in the paper of this morning. He answered with reluctance, and told me the same story that I

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had heard from Mr. Frye — adding that there was something very bad about it, but without telling me what it was — It is a case of Conscience with me, whether my duty requires or forbids me to pursue the enquiry in this case — to ascertain all the facts, and to expose them in all their turpitude to the world — The prohibition of the internal Slave-trade is within the Constitutional power of Congress, and in my opinion is among their incumbent duties — I have gone as far upon this article, the abolition of Slavery, as the public opinion of the free portion of the Union will bear — and so far that scarcely a slave holding member of the House dares to vote with me, upon any question — I have as yet been thoroughly sustained in my own State; but one step further, and I hazard my own standing and influence there; my own final overthrow, and the cause of Liberty itself for indefinite time — certainly for more than my remnant of life — Were there in the House one member capable of taking the lead in this cause of universal emancipation, which is moving onward in the world, and in this country, I would withdraw from the contest, which will rage with increasing fury, as it draws to its crisis, but for the management of which my age, infirmities and approaching end totally disqualify *me*. There is no such man in the House ≈

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28. VI. Saturday ≈ There was in the National Intelligencer of this morning an Advertisement again of the Sale of a Woman and two children at 11 O'Clock. I went between 11 and 12 O'Clock to the room — the woman and children, girls of 7 and 9 years of age were there, the woman weeping and wailing most piteously. I enquired of Dyer if they were sold. He said no — That they had been sold last Monday, and bought in by the husband of the woman who was free, and a waiter at Gadsby's — he had bought them in for 475 dollars, but was unable to raise the money, which was the reason why they were to be sold again — They were waiting for the man, who was endeavouring to procure by subscription, upon his own engagement to repay the money, the means of paying for his purchase last Monday — Mr. F. S. Key the District Attorney came in, and appeared to interest himself in favour of the man. I learnt from Dyer, that the woman had been the Slave of a

white woman who had married a man named Davis who lived at Georgetown, and was a Clerk in the War Department — That this white woman had died, and had before her death, promised Dorcas her freedom. That on her death bed, she had made her husband Davis promise her that he would emancipate Dorcas — That he did actually liberate her, but gave her no papers — That she lived twelve or fifteen years at large — married, and had four children — That in the meantime Davis married a second wife, and afterwards died without granting to Dorcas her papers of freedom — That Davis's widow, married a man by the name of Rezin Orme, and that he sold Dorcas and her four children, on the 22<sup>d</sup> of August last for 700 dollars to Birch who is an agent for the negro Slave-traders at Alexandria. That Dorcas and her four children, were on the same day removed to one of the Slave prisons in Alexandria. That in the Night of that day, she killed the two youngest of her children, one a boy four years of age, and the other a girl under twelve months — That she attempted to kill the other two, but was prevented; their screaming having roused some person in the house, who went into the cell where she was confined, and took her surviving children from her — That she was tried at Alexandria for the murder of her two children and was acquitted by the jury on the ground of insanity — These were stated as the facts, and it was said to be doubtful whether Rezin Orme, had any right to sell them at all. Mr. Key made some enquiries about Orme, who it was said had left the District, and was not to be found — and about Mrs. Orme, who he said was under obligations to him; but who Dyer said had shut herself up in her chamber and would be seen by no person on the subject. Mr. Key called me out of the Auction-room to speak in private with me on the subject; he said he thought a subscription might be raised to enable Allen to pay for the purchase of his wife, and children; and I told him I would give fifty dollars towards it — I then called upon judge Cranch at his Office in the City Hall, and enquired of him concerning the trial of this woman at Alexandria. He read to me his Notes at the trial — There were two Indictments against her; one for the murder of each of her children — She was tried only upon one — That of the boy — The evidence of her killing them was complete — The defence was insanity

— Not the slightest evidence of insanity at the time, except the mere fact of her killing the children — There was evidence of her being subject to fits, which sometimes lasted an hour. That she is passionate, and violent, and some times wild in her talk — The jury acquitted her as insane. The prosecutor entered a noli prosequi upon the second indictment — Upon being asked why she had killed her children, she said they were in Heaven — that if they had lived she did not know what would have become of them — That her mistress had been wrong — that her mistress was a methodist; and so she was herself — There was no evidence before the court, of any thing preceding the acts for which she was tried.

30. V:45. Monday ≈ I called at Dyer's auction room to enquire what had been done with Dorcas Allen and her two children on Saturday. He was not there; but a man in his place told me that Mr. Key and Birch had made some arrangement by which the woman had been taken by her husband, and the two children had been taken away by Birch.

[November 1837]

I. V. Wednesday. Cold Night and Morning, so finger pinching that it robs me of my best writing time ≈ Nathan Allen, the husband of the woman and children sold last week, came this evening with the subscription paper, to pay Birch for them — They are now in the Jail waiting for this money to be raised to have them delivered over to the Husband and father — I subscribed fifty dollars to be paid if the sum be made up to complete the purchase — I enquired of Allen, apparently an active, but very ignorant man how Dorcas came to be the property of Rezin Orme; he said some people thought she was not — She had originally belonged to a woman in Baltimore named Emery, who married Gideon Davis. on her death bed she made Davis promise that he would give Dorcas her freedom, but Davis never did — He married a second wife named \_\_\_\_\_ belonging to Georgetown — Davis himself died without emancipating Dorcas and his widow married Rezin Orme — who sold her and her four children — Dorcas is subject to epileptic fits very violent after which she is sick ten or twelve days. She has been repeatedly sold and turned back on account of these

fits and often turned upon her husband's hands to be maintained and doctored at his charge, because her owners would not incur the expense — The eldest of the surviving girls is 12 years old, and named Maria — the youngest 9. He says he shall easily find a place for Maria, who is a smart child — It is very doubtful whether I have not imprudently engaged myself in this matter, which I must pursue further. The emancipation of the woman and children is not yet secured — I finished the draught of my Speech of 14 October, but was obliged to close the Evening soon after nine.

2. V. Thursday. ≈ I called at Mr. Dyer's auction room to enquire about Dorcas Allen and her children — Dyer had been misinformed that they would be liberated by the giving of a note to a man who would lend Allen the money, which Mr. Key was to endorse. He said the woman and children were *not* at the Jail, and that Mr. Key had gone to Mrs. Orme, in her sick chamber, she having been lately confined; and had frightened her so by threatening her with the Law that it was not expected she would live — He pronounced a panegyric upon Orme, who he said was one of the best and most respectable men in the world — And as to the Slaves, he had a right to sell them — they were his property. I asked him by what authority he had sold them — He said by Mr. Birch's — that he had not asked him for any proof that they were his — he had trusted to his word. I said I understood they were not Orme's property — He said they were his by his wife — I said I had heard they were not his wife's — Well, he said he had heard so too — They were really part of Gideon Davis's Estate. He died insolvent, and they belonged to his creditors, and if he was one of them he would claim them as such — Here then is another danger to which these unhappy beings are subjected — If their freedom from Birch's sale should be purchased, they might still be reclaimed by Davis's creditors.

9. IV. Thursday. The black man Nathan Allen came again, about the contribution to purchase his wife and children, which he finds it very difficult to accomplish. He said General Smith of Georgetown had agreed to endorse the balance of the sum which was to be paid for the redemption of his wife

and children; but the doubt remains whether they will be emancipated — I told Allen to ask Mr. Key to call on me.

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13. III:45. Monday. Nathan and Dorcas Allen were here this morning. He had not yet made up the subscription for the balance between 330 and 475 dollars. General Walter Smith of Georgetown having promised to endorse Allen's note for the former sum, if he could procure the remainder to pay Birch for a Bill of Sale of the woman and the two children — But he said that General Smith had examined at the Registry of Wills, Davis's Will, and that by the Will the woman and children were bequeathed to Davis's wife, and therefore her second husband had an undoubted right to sell them — I told him that whenever the Bill of sale should be ready, I would give the check for 50 dollars which I had promised — He came again twice in the course of the day — once while I was out, and again after I returned — He then told me that Birch had again taken the two children, and put them into the jail, and would carry them away, if the money was not paid — That General Smith now said, if I would pay the fifty dollars, he would undertake with the other subscriptions, to pay the whole sum and take the bill of sale. — He repeated that General Smith was entirely satisfied with the validity of Birch's title, and that he had the right to make the sale — I then gave him the check for 50 dollars in Bills payable in Bills at the Bank of Washington to Walter Smith Esq'r or his order; and told him when the affair should be completed to bring me the Bill of sale that I may see it — I could pursue the question of Birch's title no further, without becoming liable to the imputation of shrinking from my own promise, and prevaricating upon the performance of my engagement. Yet I still doubt the legality of the sale to Birch, and whether the complete emancipation of the woman and children will be effected — I could not take the course of the Law, for Mr. Key told me that if upon a writ of Habeas Corpus Birch's title should be disproved, still as they were slaves they could not be discharged — Such is the condition of things in these shambles of human flesh, that I could not now expose this whole horrible transaction, but at the hazard of my life. Any attempt to set aside this purchase for illegality would be stigmatized as mean and *dishonourable* — Iniquity must have its whole range — I

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therefore made the promise of 50 dollars, for their emancipation, and have now paid it, without even being sure of effecting it — rather than attempt, to bereave the man-robber of his spoils.

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