

## Transcribed Excerpts from "Lynching Black People Because They Are Black" by Frederick Douglass, April 1894

### Increasing Savagery

The presence of eight millions of people in any section of this country constituting an aggrieved class, smarting under terrible wrongs, denied the exercise of the commonest rights of humanity, and regarded by the ruling class in that section as outside of the Government, outside of the law, and outside of society, having nothing in common with the people with whom they live, the sport of mob violence and murder, is not only a disgrace and scandal to that particular section, but a menace to the peace and security of the people of the whole country.

I have waited patiently, but anxiously, to see the end of the epidemic of mob law and persecution now prevailing at the South. But the indications are not hopeful. Great and terrible as have been its ravages in the past, it now seems to be increasing, not only in the number of its victims, but in its frantic rage and savage extravagance. Lawless vengeance is beginning to be visited upon white men as well as black. Our newspapers are daily disfigured by its ghastly horrors. It is no longer local, but national; no longer confined to the South, but has invaded the North. The contagion is spreading, extending, and overleaping geographical lines and State boundaries, and if permitted to go on, it threatens to destroy all respect for law and order, not only in the South, but in all parts of our country, North as well as South. For certain it is that crime allowed to go on unresisted and unarrested will breed crime. When the poison of anarchy is once in the air, like the pestilence that walketh in the darkness, the winds of heaven will take it up and favor its diffusion. Though it may strike down the weak to-day, it will strike down the strong to-morrow.

Not a breeze comes to us now from the late rebellious States that is not tainted and freighted with Negro blood. In its thirst for blood and its rage for vengeance, the mob has blindly, boldly, and defiantly supplanted sheriffs, constables, and police. It has assumed all the functions of civil authority. It laughs at legal processes, courts, and juries, and its red-handed murderers range abroad unchecked and unchallenged by law or by public opinion. Prison walls and iron bars are no protection to the innocent or guilty, if the mob is in pursuit of Negroes accused of crime. Jail-doors are battered down in the presence of unresisting jailers, and the accused, awaiting trial in the courts of law, are dragged out and hanged, shot, stabbed, or burned to death, as the blind and irresponsible mob may elect...

### The "Better Classes" in the South

Such, then, is the state of Southern civilization in its relation to the colored citizens of that section; and though the picture is dark and terrible, I venture to affirm that no man North or South can deny the essential truth of the picture.

Now, it is important to know how this state of affairs is viewed by the better classes of the Southern States. I will tell you; and I venture to say if our hearts were not already hardened by familiarity with such crimes against the Negro, we should be shocked and astonished by the attitude of these so-called better classes of the Southern people and their lawmakers. With a few noble exceptions, the upper classes of the South are in full sympathy with the mob and its deeds. There are few earnest words uttered against the mob or its deeds. Press, platform, and pulpit are either generally silent, or they openly apologize for the mob. The mobocratic murderers are not only permitted to go free, untried and unpunished, but are

lauded and applauded as honorable men and good citizens, the guardians of Southern women. If lynch law is in any case condemned, it is only condemned in one breath, and excused in another.

The great trouble with the Negro in the South is, that all presumptions are against him. A white man has but to blacken his face, and commit a crime to have some Negro lynched in his stead. An abandoned woman has only to start the cry that she has been insulted by a black man, to have him arrested and summarily murdered by the mob. Frightened and tortured by his captors, confused into telling crooked stories about his whereabouts at the time when the alleged crime was committed, and the death penalty is at once inflicted, though his story may be but the incoherency of ignorance or distractions caused by terror.

Now, in confirmation of what I have said of the better classes of the South, I have before me the utterances of some of the best people of that section, and also the testimony of one from the North, a lady, from whom, considering her antecedents, we should have expected a more considerate, just, and humane utterance.

### **Amazing Utterances**

In a late number of the Forum, Bishop Haygood, author of "Our Brother in Black," says that "the most alarming fact is, that execution by lynching has ceased to surprise us. The burning of a human being for any crime, it is thought, is a horror that does not occur outside of the Southern States of the American Union, yet unless assaults by Negroes come to an end, there will most probably be still further displays of vengeance that will shock the world, and men who are just will consider the provocation."

In an open letter addressed to me by Ex-Governor Chamberlain, of South Carolina, and published in the Charleston News and Courier, a letter which I have but lately seen, in reply to an article of mine on the subject, published in the North American Review, the ex-governor says: "Your denunciation of the South on this point is directed exclusively, or nearly so, against the application of lynch law for the punishment of one crime, or one sort of crime. The existence, I suppose, I might say, the prevalence of this crime at the South is undeniable. But I read your [my] article in vain for any special denunciation of the crime itself. As you say, your people are lynched, tortured, and burned for assault on white women. As you value your own good fame and safety as a race, stamp out the infamous crime." He further says, the way to stop lynching is to stamp out the crime.

And now comes the sweet voice of a Northern woman, of Southern principles, in the same tone and the same accusation--the good Miss Frances Willard, of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She says in a letter now before me: "I pity the Southerner. The problem on their hands is immeasurable. The colored race," she says, "multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The safety of woman, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment, so that men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree." Such, then, is the crushing indictment drawn up against the Southern Negroes--drawn up, too, by persons who are perhaps the fairest and most humane of the Negro's accusers. But even they paint him as a moral monster, ferociously invading the sacred rights of women and endangering the homes of the whites.