

Edouard Alletz

The Abolition of the Slave Trade

“Can I believe my eyes? What? Is that you,
Naloès? Did this ship conceal you too,
Down in its squalid loins? Did you, poor soul,
Increase the number of its hapless roll?
I heard you in the shadows moan your pains,
And recognized your voice. Now here, in chains,
You see a friend embrace you; but, caressed,
You cannot clutch him to your eager breast!
Christian, by shackled Christians pressed, you are
Dragged by this prison-ship to lands afar!”

So spoke a Christian priest, sailing the sea.
In former days, traveling apostle, he
Had borne his God to Ethiopian clime,
Among a savage people. But, in time,
Seeing how slavery’s unholy deeds
Were casting to the winds the precious seeds
Of the faith he was sowing, much distraught

By all the cruel excess our race had wrought,
He fled that land; yet ever was he haunted,
Stalked by the vision of our sins. Undaunted,
Seeking more victims on the sea, he sits
Astern the slave ship, pondering what befits
Him now, when, lo! a wailing moan he hears,
A muffled groan breaking upon his ears,
Awaking in his mind fears of a most
Horrendous kind... He quits his peaceful post,
Descends into the vessel's belly. There,
What does he see? Captives, piled everywhere,
Languishing in their chains, each with less room
Than, one day, would be theirs laid in the tomb,
And each, with but a dole of meager breath,
Enough to suffer, sigh, and pray for death.
Others, tiring the whip-man's wear-worn lash,
Shedding their blood, spouting from gushing gash,
And groaning that it cannot all be shed
At once! Young Naloès is there. Near-dead,
He it is whom the old priest kindly eyed,
Freed from his chains, and gently led topside,
Above the floating prison. Thereupon,

He sat him down. And so the ship plied on...

Questioned about his sorry fate, "*Mon père,*"

He cries, "you see the African's despair

Before your eyes. Can it be that, much blessed

By heaven's fair gifts, your brethren think it best

To bless him with our agonies' harsh voice?

Ah! How much better were another choice!

If God's boons are to be enjoyed, far better

To revel free, with neither bond nor fetter!

The African is loved by God no less

Than all his other works. You must confess,

He never said: 'Be born to slavery,

My friends!' how comes it, here below, that we

Suffer the yoke of tyrants, while their thrall,

Unknown in heaven, exists there not at all?

We are all equal. You yourself so said,

Sprinkling the holy water on my head,

Baptizing me... Alas! Just as I fell

Into their deadly grasp, Zais, my belle,

She who would be my bride, came to me there—

A vision!—flowers tressed about her hair,

Crown-like, the gentle breeze blowing her wedding-veil,

Billowing in the air, as, limbs a-flail,
Awestruck, in chains, I saw my body go
Plunging into this flowing grave. But oh!
How sweet can be the lies wild dreams explore!
I dreamt I had to your beloved shore
Returned again; that there, my mother dear,
Beneath the weight of many a passing year,
Once more could find in me her strength; that I,
Beneath a flowering palm, in love would lie
With my Zaïs, beauty adored; that we
Would watch the dawn above rise peacefully,
As, in her glance, calm as the sun's first ray,
Glimmered the promise of our wedding-day.
Happy, I roamed the fragrant sands, my eyes
Turned now to her, now to the gleaming skies...
But lo! Next moment, wakened by the roar
Of twisting wind and twirling wave, once more
I lost the glimpse of joyous freedom! When
I opened up my eyes, good God! Again,
These chains, forgotten for an instant! This
Mournful moan from the waters' deep abyss
Beneath my feet! These waves about my head,
Swirling... Tears, tempest, shadows... And this dread

Image of slavery as, from my dream
Of twittering birds, fragrances, sun a gleam
In my fair native sky, crisp air—about, above,
Everywhere—and my lovely's glance of love...
Yes, everything, now fled, as suddenly
I woke, in horror, to reality.

“But under what veil do our masters, hated,
Conceal their blackest misdeeds, unabated?
Why must we always fear them, curse them so?
What do they blame us for? What baleful woe
Do they lament, that we have caused them? What
Ills have we wrought? What crimes? Have they aught but
Kindness received from us? Never have we
Refused the gracious hospitality
Of our African hut to travelers who
Bless us therefor. I would recall to you
The case of that brave mortal who, despite
Africa's torrid skies, was sure he might,
Tracing the Niger's enigmatic course,
Find in our deserts where it had its source.
One twilight, as day merged to night, he sat
Beneath my thatch as the rains' pitter-pat

Stronger and stronger grew, seeking a spot
Protected from the storm, but found it not...
My heart was filled with tenderness to see
The white man's lot. 'Sisters,' I cried. 'Let me
Console him; for alone is he, I fear.
Soon will night fall. No mother has he here
To cool his lips with milk, no adored wife
Able to set for him a table rife
With date-trees' fruit to nourish him.' Thus did
I speak. And thereat did I straightway bid
The stranger come into my hut, and there
He lay upon my mat... Tender the care
We rendered him, whereat our efforts were
Repaid: the gold banana-tree's liqueur,
At length, restored his body, weak of limb,
And forthwith comforted and strengthened him.
My sisters, thereupon, quick to rejoice,
Sing to the traveler in their plaintive voice,
Who, midst the tiger's growl and tempest's roar,
Lost in our woods, had no place heretofore
To rest his weary head, no hut where he
Might find himself a refuge, peril-free.

So did our humble roof provide, betimes,

Fair welcome to those come from foreign climes.
Ah! But no more can I such welcome give
The European! No more do I live
In what was once my dwelling. For, now I
Have been consigned, exiled to land and sky
Far from my own. The Black is scarcely worth—
So think our tyrants!—a mere speck of earth,
A grain of sand beneath their feet! Most ample
The tales of dole I proffer! For example,
Some can I offer from my family.
Did one not work his jealous tyranny
Upon my brother's wife of tender years,
Abducting her—vile wretch!—despite her tears?
And, in her agony, was not her child
Condemned no less to live in chains, exiled
As well, hapless as she, and made to pay
For being born? Distressed, she weeps her way
Along, ripped from her land. Her breasts give naught
But a pathetic brew; and she, distraught,
Has but her tears to nourish him, as he
Hangs from that bitter goblet, futilely
Wailing and whining, weeping to be fed.
Our tyrant master, lolling late abed,

Plunged deep in sleep, is wakened by the cries—
Weakened by hunger though they be—and flies
Into a rage... Rises, storms to the quaking
Mother, now much disquieted; and, making
A grave and chilling threat thereat, appalling,
The vicious master menaces her, calling:
'That child has troubled my much-needed rest!
Best you force him to end his bawling, lest
I myself be obliged to find a way,
Better than you, to do so, I dare say!'
Trembling still more, despairing, she would try
To spare her babe a death that one mere cry
Might wreak upon him. Now, with gentle hand
On his innocent lips, there will she stand,
Muffling them shut; now with a kiss she will—
Or so at least she thinks—tenderly still
His weeping cries that die in her caress.
But not for long! An instant, even less!
And once again his sighs, sobs, moans give rise
To the vile slaver's ire. He seizes him
Out of his mother's arms, in wise most grim,
Most dire. Her pains cause her quite to forget
Her chains; and there, before the martinet,

Kneeling and pale, staring, head to one side,
She cocks an ear... Piercing the deadly tide,
An oh-so-feeble cry breaks quietly,
Spatters the surface of the sea, to be
Lost, in a moment, in its bosom deep.
Ah yes! The child, now, will his silence keep,
And evermore, no doubt!... Alas, alack!
I see you shudder as so bleak, so black
A tale of utter horror! But can you,
Unlike them, know what they are like to do?
How comes it that, beneath the same sky, they
And you, *mon père*, first saw the light of day,
And yet, more different could you hardly be?
But for you, I would, most assuredly
Believe that, from the cradle, Europe's air
Turns barbarous all those who breathe it there,
And that it is your country's sun that, lo!
Hardens their hearts to tears of wanton woe."

"Shall a whole world be blamed for one man's crime?"

Replied the old priest. "When a victim's time
Is come to die, let not his last lament
Diffame the name of a whole continent!

Europe rejects a murderous son: in her
And in the world's expanse, no murderer
Should find a fatherland's bosom-embrace!
At last, the peoples of the human race
Awake, hear Africa's most piteous cries;
And Europe, touched, begins through sisters' eyes
To contemplate her doleful state. You ought
Be solaced by this cross... Your faith has taught
Life's fate of suffering. Our God..." "Enough!"
Replies Naloès. Gentle his rebuff,
But firm. "My tyrants' God is mine no more!
If I served him whom they love and adore
Despite their sins that have wrought me such pain,
Then should I find them too in heaven's domain!...
No! My one hope? To draw my final breath
And, in my exile, die a Black's proud death!
When my land shines beneath a fairer star,
Long buried shall I be, and lying far,
Far away... And my grave's death-bush will spread
Its alien shade above Naloès' head,
And with no loving friend, at his demise,
To lay a hand and, softly, close his eyes:
None but the master, moaning his distress,

Mourning, alas, that he has one slave less!

“O dear land of my birth, O happy shore!

Each passing moment separates us more!

I count with fright the ticking of the clock,

Hear blow the winds with every ‘tic’ and ‘toc’—

Perfidious winds!—each breath too quickly taken.

O heavens! Is it come to this? Forsaken,

Lost, must I languish in despair, and never

More see what once I loved, now and forever?

No more upon my leafy roof shall peep

And chirp of the bengalis rouse my sleep;

No more, filtering through the reeds, shall morn

Come chide my rest; nor shall the ripening corn,

Heavy with seed, sway in the breeze, and make

Its swelling music, singing me awake;

Or my tribe’s ivory-fluted dances—those

Rites of the daylight’s ending, work’s repose,

Danced by the water... Must I lose you too

And even not so much as think of you?

And you, whose image fills each tearful thought,

O mother mine! Alas! What have they wrought?

Far from my side, how will you live? Who will

Nourish you when age lays its harsh and chill
Hand on your years? No more is my net able
To bring the river's riches to your table.
When you would leave your hut to take the air,
In vain you seek my arm: I am not there,
Nor can I brush away the insect pest
Buzzing about to rob you of your rest!"

Nalòès, in the midst of his lamenting,
Is racked by sighs and sobbing unrelenting;
Whereat the old man holds out lovingly
His quivering arms to grasp him fast, as he
Bathes the priest's hoary head in tears... Just so,
As dawn, born in its rose and ruddy glow,
Pierces the veils of morn, dimming each star
In day's first timid light, there, off afar
On the horizon, glinting with sky-sown
Crimsons and golds, a ship appears, full-blown
Her sails, puffed with the south wind... See?
She draws near... White, her French flag brilliantly
Displayed aloft, portends a message come
From him! Louis! ending the martyrdom
Of an inhuman trade! Telling the shore

Of Africa that Europe will no more
Permit the selling of a human being!
That kings in council, though long disagreeing,
Have heard Religion's weighty eloquence
Tip the scales in humanity's defense.
No longer will Africa's sons and daughters
Nourish America with tear-born waters
Shed in their misery. So have they sworn.
The sun that lights the Black man, cradle-born,
Will not shine on his grave, lost on another's
Far distant soil... Naloès and his brothers—
Blessed be the French!—have seen their agony
Come to an end, their shackles' infamy
Destroyed! O joy! O ecstasy! Now, cast
Free from their deadly yoke, they shall, at last,
Bid adieu to the pillage and the pain,
And see the smoking rooftops once again
Of their dear village. Now, together, they
Revel in talking of the happy day,
Dawning anew, as, in each other's arms,
Mingling their tears, they count the joys, the charms
Of their return, confusing everyone
And everything—wife, mother, daughter, son,

This friend and that—in one great rush of sound,
Jumbling the names of every village round...
Our good priest, heaven's minister, will deem
It meet to offer to the Judge Supreme
Our pious homage. Whereupon, we see
Upon the stern—there, where the *fleur-de-lys*
Wafts in the breeze—an altar rise; and then
And there, the priest—O most august of men!—
In this new temple of the sea, will pray
To God, saying what all the rest would say:
“God of the poor downtrodden! God of all
The universe, who, merciful, let fall
The chains of serfdom's victims, last to be
Freed from the bonds of that fell slavery
That hid its face upon this distant land;
Of all your gifts, bestowed by your great hand,
Give them the best: your law. And, better yet,
Your self! Enlighten them, my God, and let
Them do your holy work! Teach them how they
May turn their freedom to your love, your will.
Consoling us for having done them ill!”

He spoke. The sun, now risen from the night,

Lit with a holy beam his brow, paled white;
His prayer, rising in solemn splendor, shone,
Haloed in light, at the Almighty's throne.

