

# The "OBERLIN LYNCHING" of 1840

BY CHARLES G. FINNEY

Among other curious circumstances that occurred, with which editors at the time made a great show of opposition, but which finally reacted and resulted in our favor, I will relate the following: A young man from Kentucky, I think, came here to study; and while on probation, and before he was known to any considerable extent here, he laid a plan to seduce one of our young ladies. She was a very estimable, modest girl. The young man had, I believe, been a writing master, and could use his pen in a masterly manner. He wrote this young lady a letter, in which he drew a very vile picture with his pen; and couched the letter in such language, and gave it such shape, that it was calculated to produce the very worst effect upon her. He requested that she should reply to A.B.--I do not recollect the direction that she was requested to give to the letter. She was of course very much shocked, and gave this letter to the lady principal of the institution; and this lady showed it to her husband, who was one of the members of the faculty. Soon after, he wrote another letter of the same character, with as loathsome a picture as could well be drawn--I mean loathsome to a pure mind; and shaped altogether in such a manner as to lay before her the strongest temptation to bad conduct, and urged her again to reply and direct as he had before requested. This letter immediately passed into the hands of the lady principal, and through her hands into the hands of the faculty. Of course this aroused the attention of the faculty, and they were on the look out.

We had a very trustworthy young man at that time as our postmaster. After these two letters had been received the subject was laid before the postmaster, and of his own accord he undertook to ascertain from whom those letters came. I think he kept the letters that had been received by her, that he might compare them with the handwriting of anything of the kind that should come through his hands again. Soon a letter directed to this young lady came into the post office. He saw that it was the same handwriting, and opened the letter, and found it to be another of those abominable epistles. That aroused to the utmost his indignation. I believe without consulting any one he replied to the letter himself, as if he was the young lady to whom it had been addressed. He recognized the two former letters, and so shaped his answer that he wrote again. The postmaster thus opened a correspondence with him. It soon resulted in an appointment to meet at a certain place in the village, at a certain hour of the night, and then to go and spend the night

together; the vile young man supposing that his correspondence was with the young lady herself, whereas she was entirely ignorant of what was transpiring between the postmaster and the young man.

We had here at that time an energetic young man and woman who were under an engagement to marry and who had come here to first complete their education. They were of good reputation and possessed in a high degree the confidence of the community. To this young man the postmaster and the few who were in the secret applied to assist in the detection of the villain who had spread this snare for a worthy young lady. The young man arranged with his affianced to play the part of the young lady to whom the vile letters had been directed, so far as to secure his detection and arrest. She consented to go. In the meantime several of our most estimable young men had been consulted, and one of our youngest professors, and they agreed to go and arrest him and deal with him as wisdom should direct. The time for the appointed meeting arrived. It was a dark night. The hour appointed for the meeting was, I believe, ten o'clock. The arrangement was that they should meet at a certain corner in the village when he should reveal himself by a certain signal and she should take his arm and accompany him to the place he had prepared for their lodging.

The young man boarded at the hotel, and was very little known at the time. He had taken his bed from the room, and carried it a little way out of the village, and spread it under the shelter of a large tree that had been thrown down with a very high root turned up, that cut off the sight of the road and the village altogether. The young man conducted his young lady to within a few rods of where they were to meet. It was very dark, and he secreted himself within hearing, and the young lady went a little forward and waited for the signal of his approach. Soon she heard the signal and returned it. They met. He gave her his arm, and they walked hastily toward the place where he had prepared his bed. The young men who were to arrest him being aware of the whole plot had secreted themselves a little way from where they were to leave the road and turn into the woods. He was armed with a pistol, and had in him the real southern spirit. When they arrived at the point where the young men were secreted, they surrounded him. He undertook to use his pistol, but they seized it, and no one was hurt. After considerable conversation and prayer they concluded to whip him, and appointed one of their number, one of our most amiable young men, to ply the lash. It tried his feelings exceedingly to do it; nevertheless, he put on his back the assigned number of strokes with a rawhide with which they had furnished themselves. They then let him go; he at the time, I believe, acknowledging the justice of the course they had pursued with him.

The fact is, there was no law of the land that would take hold of him, and inflict any punishment at all upon him in this case; and these young men, I have no doubt, acting under a sense of duty, took the case in their own hands, and administered what they supposed to be a moderate and merited chastisement. As this school was one in which young men and women were associated together in all their studies, these young men supposed justly that an act of this kind should meet with decided public disapprobation; and thought that this young man should be made an example, to teach young men that if they came here and attempted to seduce any of our young ladies, what they might expect. However, these young men had acted on their own responsibility, without consulting anybody that I know of out of their own circle. But when the father of the young man came to be acquainted with the facts, he was stirred up to irrepressible wrath. He came here in a very blustering and abusive spirit. He learned the facts, and could not justify his son, though he felt himself disgraced by the whipping which his son had received rather than by the crime which he had committed; and therefore instead of thanking us, as was really his duty, for administering this most merited chastisement upon his son, he took great pains to stir up the whole country against us for this deed. The public mind was at that time in a state favorable to seize hold of any such occurrence to put down Oberlin. The papers teemed with opposition to Oberlin, and the wrath of the press was greatly excited at the whipping; though so far as I heard, no words of reprobation fell upon the ears of the criminal, or of any one else, for his crime. A great crime, it was assumed, had been committed in punishing him, but the crime that had most justly demanded this punishment, was left out of view. We, as usual, kept still, and kept about our business.

When the court met at Elyria the Grand Jury found bills of indictment against the young men that had been engaged in this thing. They subpoenaed many persons in Oberlin, to come before them as witnesses, and in this way discovered, I believe, all the young men who had taken part in it save one. The first I knew, however, of this proceeding it came to my ears by my being myself subpoenaed as a witness before the Grand Jury. I went. I observed as I went in that the District Attorney, who was with the Grand Jury, was a person that I knew, and was an avowed skeptic. The foreman of the Jury I had understood to be another; and indeed as I observed the Grand Jury I saw that they were made up very much of leaders of the opposition to Oberlin, and of men who were no less opposed to religion than to Oberlin--that is, there were several of them, if I was not entirely misinformed, who were skeptics. The District Judge, who presided over the court, was also a skeptic, and also one of the side judges. Thus a majority of the court, and I think a majority of the Grand Jury, were skeptics. The same was true of the Sheriff and Deputy Sheriff, I think. At any rate I was informed that it was true of the Deputy Sheriff, who was in attendance upon

the Grand Jury. Of course I found myself surrounded by not altogether a pleasant moral atmosphere.

The foreman of the Grand Jury informed me of the object of my being sent for; and after administering the usual oath told me whom they had indicted, and asked me if I knew of any other persons in Oberlin who had been connected with that affair. I replied that I did know of one, who from his own confession to me as his pastor, I knew had been connected with it. But that he had gone out of the state: not that he had run away or gone away to escape prosecution, but he had gone home to his friends, and so far as I knew he expected to remain at home. The foreman then asked me what his name was. I replied that the young man was a member of the church of which I was pastor, and at the time of the occurrence was a member of my family; that after the occurrence, learning how the people felt here about the mistake that they had made, his conscience troubled him, and that he then confessed to me his connection with the affair--and I then said, "I do not know as I ought to be called upon to testify in this case, and reveal the young man's name." However, I did not refuse to testify; I only made the remark, as nearly as I can recollect, as I have stated it. They did not urge me to give his name; indeed, they said no more, but very politely dismissed me.

I left the room and went immediately to the hotel to get my horse and return home. But while waiting at the hotel for my horse to be brought to the door, I learned from the conversation of those that were there that the Grand Jury had said they "would sit until they had examined every man in Oberlin, if need be, to find out everyone who had had any connection with that affair." I learned that the impression existed in Elyria, and in the minds of the Grand Jury themselves, that the people of Oberlin wished to cover the matter up, and were not willing to have the laws of the land executed. I observed as I rode home that there was a good deal of excitement in the minds of the people; and I made up my mind that I would return in the morning and go in to open court and consult the judges in regard to my duty, and to the law upon that point.

Accordingly the next morning, although very rainy, and very muddy, it being late in the fall, I got on my horse and rode through the rain and mud to Elyria. I went immediately into the courtroom, and found the court busily engaged in the trial of some cause that had excited a good deal of interest, and hence the courtroom was well filled with spectators. I went to one of the gentlemen of the bar with whom I had some acquaintance, took him a little one side and requested him to ask the court to give me a hearing for a few moments, as I had an important question to lay before them. He very deferentially and appropriately made the communication that I

desired to the court. They immediately suspended business; and the presiding Judge remarked, that Professor Finney who was present had a communication to make to the court, and that business would be suspended for a few moments to hear what he had to say. I then told them what had happened the day before, before the Grand Jury, and the question that I had to present to them was, whether law or equity required me to give that young man's name to the Grand Jury. I then stated what I understood to be the law upon that subject. I said that men have consciences; and people may differ as they please in regard to many other questions, there could be no difference of opinion upon this, that all men and women have consciences, and that often very embarrassing cases of conscience arise in which advice is needed. That in such cases, as they must exist in society and in every community, the public weal demanded that there should be some persons protected by the law from becoming public informers, to whom persons could go for advice. I said that I knew how this had been abused by the Roman Catholics in their confessional, and how the law had been settled in regard to them. But I said that although the law in this country does not recognize the union of church and state, yet it does recognize the pastoral relation; and it ought to protect this relation to the extent of protecting the community, and also the pastor when he has been consulted as pastor in regard to cases of conscience where advice is needed. I enlarged upon this at discretion, and occupied considerable time in stating my views and the reasons for them. Indeed, it might be said that I preached to the court and those that were present.

I felt as if it was a good occasion to represent our sentiments at Oberlin. I told the court the reasons of my returning to Elyria, what I had heard at the public house the day before, and that I was satisfied they entirely misunderstood the Oberlin people. I assured the court that we were a law-abiding people; that we had not as a people approved of the course taken by the young men; and that we did not wish to shield them from the operation of criminal law, but were entirely willing that justice should take its course, and were disposed rather to aid in the administration of justice than to throw obstacles in the way. In short I represented to them Oberlin views and feelings on the subject, and said that we merely desired that the young men should have a fair trial, and an opportunity to spread before the court when they were tried the provocation under which they had acted and the reasons for their conduct. The court did not seem at all weary of listening to what I had to say. The attention was universal, respectful, and I thought solemn. I then said to the judges, "Now if Your Honors are of opinion that it is my duty as a citizen to go and give the Grand Jury the name of that young man, I will do it immediately." I then sat down, and the presiding judge said that they were very much obliged to me for returning and giving an expose of my views and of the whole subject. That the

court entirely accorded with me in opinion, and said that they had had a false impression in regard to the opinions of Oberlin in this matter, and were very happy to be set right on this subject. That my statement had greatly relieved their minds and feelings, and the view that I had presented was one with which they unitedly agreed. He concluded by remarking that it was a question for the Grand Jury, and asked me if I was not willing to go and make the same statement in substance to the Grand Jury in the room below. I said that I should be glad to have an opportunity to do so, and I thought I observed that the court felt that it might do the Grand Jury good.

I then proceeded to the Grand Jury room. I found them all present as the day before, the Deputy Sheriff and skeptic, standing at the door in attendance upon the Grand Jury, the skeptical Prosecuting Attorney sitting by the table with the foreman of the Grand Jury; and I observed, as I did the day before, that so far as I knew the Grand Jury, there was a very large element of skepticism on religious subjects found among them. I then stated to them in substance what I had stated to the court above, what I had learned the day before of the state of feeling in the neighborhood, and of the Jury itself; and that it was their determination to sit until they had examined every person in Oberlin, if need be, to find out all the persons that had been connected with that transaction. I then stated my views as I had done to the court, and gave them as nearly as I could the same view of the case throughout. I observed the same profound attention and effect in the Grand Jury room that had been produced in the court. When I was through, the foreman after consulting a moment with the District Attorney, replied in substance as the court had done above. He expressed great satisfaction at my returning and giving them my view of the subject, as he agreed with me entirely in the view I had taken of my duty; and he expressed the opinion that the Jury did not think it my duty to give the name of the young man, and that they did not require it. As I left the room, the Deputy Sheriff, who was standing inside and had heard what had been said, followed me out into the hall. He took hold of my arm with very manifest excitement and said: "Mr. Finney, your coming back and saying what you have is worth a thousand dollars."

As I returned to the hotel after my horse, the court above had a recess for dinner. The presiding judge, who was then a stranger to me, introduced himself to me, and said he was very happy to meet me, and expressed regret that they had so entirely misapprehended the views, and feelings, and action of the people of Oberlin. He said: "We have been deceived respecting you there, and now I for one want to become better acquainted with you"; and then added, "When I come out to hold court here again," naming the time, "may I not bring my wife and leave her at your house while I attend court here, that she may become acquainted with you, and that I myself

may become acquainted with some of your people?" I most cordially invited him to come, and assured him that I would bring or send him out every day to attend court, and bring him back to his wife in the evening. A few weeks after that I spent a few days in Cleveland in preaching to the people. This was his residence. I observed him in the congregation, and soon learned that he was very seriously weighing the question of his soul's salvation. I had a protracted conversation with him, and found the state of his mind not only very interesting, but as I thought very hopeful. I urged him to immediately accept the Savior, his skepticism being, to all appearance, entirely gone. He received all I had to say with great tenderness, and renewed his promise to come out with his wife when he next held his court in Elyria. But before that time he was in his grave, so that I saw him no more. Before I left Elyria at the time I have spoken of, I learned that the Grand Jury had adjourned sine die. That after my statement they were entirely satisfied that they had no reason to make any farther inquiry, and having no other business before them they dissolved.

After this there was a most remarkable change in the views and feelings of the leading men in the opposition in the region around about us. The next winter, for example, after this court, one of the side judges, a democrat and as I had understood a skeptic, was a member of the legislature, in which a plot was on foot to try to take away our charter. This judge, who had been present at the time I have spoken of, stood, as we were told, manfully and boldly in defense of Oberlin, and told them that the impressions that had gone abroad in respect to our views and our character as a school, were altogether erroneous. And as I understood, these remarks had a leading influence in diverting the legislature from their purpose.

Thus one event after another occurred that made the community around us better acquainted with us and with our views, until the prejudice was entirely done away. But what effect had the trial of the young men? And especially how did the outrageous comments and denunciations of the press, far and near, have upon our school? Did it keep the young ladies and gentlemen from coming here to school? No indeed! It was found that it had produced an entirely opposite effect. It was found that people reasoned thus. They had been afraid, and much pains had been taken to make them afraid, of trusting their daughters in a school where young ladies and gentlemen recited in the same classes, ate in the same boarding hall, and were in all respects associated as they were here. It was of course regarded as an experiment, and by many as an experiment of a very questionable nature. But the result of all this bluster and opposition, especially in relation to this prosecution and the cause of it, was that people reasoned in this way: Well, if there is such a public sentiment as this at Oberlin, if an attempt to seduce one of those young ladies brings upon the offender that kind of retribution,

there is the very place for our daughters. We can send them there with more safety than anywhere else. If the young men of that college will themselves give a young man such a thorough chastigation who attempts any such thing, such a public sentiment must be favorable to chastity, and to the protection of our daughters when away from home. There was therefore a continual increase of our students, and especially of females, and the relative number of ladies in our college seemed to increase from year to year.

Indeed, in the providence of God almost all the onsets that were made against us through the press, by other methods of attack, resulted in our favor. We kept still, and kept about our own business, and let the smoke and dust clear away in God's own best time.

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