**Excerpt from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,  
An American Slave Written by Himself**

**Introduction**

**Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave who became a champion of the abolition movement before the Civil War. His influence was important to Abraham Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Mr. Douglass described an incident that changed his life as follows:**

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.

To use his own words, further, he said, “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take [a mile]. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master–to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,” said he, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.”

These words sank deep into my heart . . . . It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty–to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read, what he most dreaded and I most desired . . . . the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

**Source:**

***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself***

**by Frederick Douglass**

**published by Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut**

**Adaptation of an excerpt from**

**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,  
An American Slave Written by Himself**

**Introduction**

**Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave who became a champion of the abolition movement before the Civil War. His influence was important to Abraham Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Mr. Douglass described an incident that changed his life as follows:**

I was then owned by Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Mrs. Auld very kindly began to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she helped me learn to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once ordered Mrs. Auld not to teach me anymore, telling her, among other things, that it was against the law, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.

To use his own words, he said, “If you give a n----- an inch, he will take [a mile]. A n----- should know nothing but to obey his master–to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n----- in the world."

"Now,” said he, “if you teach that n----- (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him unhappy with his life.”

These words sank deep into my heart . . . . I now understood what had been to me a most confusing problem –understanding what gave the white man power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Though I knew how difficult it would be to learn without a teacher, I set out with high hopes to reach one goal - to learn how to read, no matter how hard it was. The very decided manner with which he spoke to his wife about the evil results of giving me instruction, proved to me that I could count on all those results which he said would come from teaching me to read, those things he most feared and I most desired.

The reasons my master gave for not teaching me to read, only inspired me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the angry opposition of my master, as to the kindly help of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

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