

ARTICLE VIII.

MRS. STOWE AND HER UNCLE TOM.¹

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You do well to celebrate this anniversary to-night, at the end of the full century from the birth, in yonder Connecticut village, of Harriet Beecher who was to check with her feminine finger that great car of Juggernaut which sixty years ago was moving on, pushed by the withered hands of dying statesmen and ambitious traitors, to crush a whole race of men under slavery; and to ruin, as it had already disgraced, the republic of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson. The car halted when "Uncle Tom's Cabin" blocked the road for a while; then moved on to the capture of fugitive slaves, the invasion of Kansas, the attempted murder of Charles Sumner, and a reopening of the piratical slave-trade at Charleston and Mobile. But the little woman down by Bowdoin College, writing sketches and funny stories for the magazines and Sunday-school libraries, and sending her great antislavery novel, by weekly instalments, to a newspaper of limited circulation at Washington, all through the year 1851, when Daniel Webster was howling forth denunciations of God's Higher Law, and tearing away poor laborers from their hired toil in Boston, to be flogged and sold at the South,—this unknown wife of a theologian lecturing to forty students in a small Maine college proved to have a force that was denied to Webster and his emissaries and supporters at Boston, Washington, Rich-

¹ An Address given at Faneull Hall, Boston, on the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

mond, New York, and in the churches of commerce throughout the land. And when this unworthy representative of the Puritans, his ancestors, was crouching before the slave-masters in the spring of 1852, beseeching their votes for President, Mrs. Stowe's timely romance was speeding, on the wings of the printing-press, over America and Europe, converting millions to the faith of Jefferson, of Garrison, of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Garibaldi, Abraham Lincoln, and JOHN BROWN! "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was the miracle of literature in 1852-53; no book had ever sold so fast, in so many languages, as Mrs. Stowe's weekly contribution to Dr. Bailey's *National Era*, when it took the shape of bound volumes here in Boston, crossed over to London and Paris, and was circulated in French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Russian, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Polish, and the minor dialects of the Slavonic and Scandinavian languages. Then, mounting the stage in a hundred cities, it has continued for more than half a century to be a crowd-drawing melodrama, which holds its place still amid the myriads of tragedies and comedies that have been written since this thrilling drama unleashed its dogs and set its ice-bound Ohio River in the pathway of Eliza, the escaping slave-woman.

What was the secret of this instantaneous and persistent success of a story that was not told with the matchless art which adorns the great poems and dramas of other nations and times? Not its literary but its moral force; its presentation of the might of weakness, the beauty of self-devotion, the patient example of the lowly Christian virtues; in which the African race, colonized in America, so far excels its proud enslavers, the Anglo-Norman planters and traders of the United States. Pathos and the long-unfelt sting of conscience gave the book its hold on the American supporters of a system for

which they had not felt themselves hitherto responsible. In Europe it brought out the startling contrast of great iniquities, practised and endured in a country supposed to be the "land of the free and the home of the brave"; and thronged as such by hundreds of thousands of the laborious poor of Europe. The masses there had not read Bryant's apostrophe to his "mother of a mighty race," but they had seen examples of its literal truth,— even more truth than poetry,—

"There's freedom at thy gates and rest
For Earth's down-trodden and opprest,
A shelter for the hunted head,
For the starved laborer toll and bread:
Power, at thy bounds,
Stops and calls back his baffled hounds."

Such had been the renown of our country in Europe. But now the expectant populace read, in the pages of Mrs. Stowe, that, for one hapless race of men, there was in this land of the free no "shelter for the hunted head"; that

"Power, at our middle bounds,
But urges on its hireling hounds";

that the government of five-and-twenty democratic millions paid a double fee to any wretched pettifogger or smug jurisconsult who would entrap and remand a Boston carpenter to his alleged master in Virginia; that dogs were used to chase men and women instead of boars and wolves. No wonder the book was read in Europe. But why so eagerly welcomed in America, where it disclosed our national sin and shame? Because the conscience of the people, though drugged to sleep by the morphine of trade and politics, was far from dead, and had been rudely shocked by the arrogance of slaveholders, and the over-obsequious servility of Northern senators, governors, and judges, — to say nothing of our parsons and college pro-

fessors. "It is no excuse for presumptuous ignorance," said Burke of our English insulters in 1776, "that it is guided by insolent passion." These caustic terms exactly describe the language of Carolina and Virginia toward the North, in the period of Fillmore and Pierce; and the yeomanry and middle class of New England, New York, and Ohio writhed under it. Here was a work of fiction which told the truth about the worst side of negro slavery, — not the "old Kentucky Home" and "dear colored Mammy" side, with its banjoes and melodies, but the infamous side, from which fugitives escaped by thousands each year. Mrs. Stowe had touched a chord that vibrated in a million hearts.

And this leads me to speak of what no biographer of anti-slavery men and women can avoid, — the rivalry among descendants of the antislavery leaders for the portion of glory that should go to each person. Forgetting that, in the grand result of

"A nation saved, a race delivered,"

there was glory enough for all, the sons of Garrison, of Birney, etc., and the partisans of Phillips, Sumner, Chase, Charles Robinson, and others, seek to enhance the fame of their special favorite by disparaging others who were in other parts of the field, or at another time, and had perhaps quite another sort of work to do. This is needless, and it is petty and wrong also. The relative position of each person will be shown by Time, that great discloser of perspective as well as of secrets. Fortunately there is no chance of Mrs. Stowe's true place being misunderstood. She came into the field as a dramatist; she made her characterization, and contented herself with that. She did not pause to contradict and controvert other laborers; had no special party to uphold or trip up; did not argue with reasoning, either good or bad, in favor of this policy or the

other ; but told her story and went her way to illuminate by pleasing fiction some other phase of the wide web of civilization, and kept on good terms with all the rest of mankind.

In disgusting contrast with this conduct of hers has been the effort of descendants and partisans, of this leader of anti-slavery forces and that one, to belittle the work and asperse the character of other leaders. Books are written, and magazine papers hired and printed, to set up one figure or another as the great cause of the overthrow of negro slavery in America. No one man, woman, or million of men and women could or did cast down that sullen Moloch of Calhoun's adoration and Webster's palsied fear,— that

"Burning idol all of blackest hue,"

to which incense was burned in the churches, and tribute paid in the law courts and legislatures of our Republic, in the days before John Brown, Mrs. Stowe, and Abraham Lincoln. The true leader in the long contest was the Lord of heaven and earth, whose patience with evil allowed the curse of tyranny and race prejudice to run its course, and arrogantly defy both divine and human justice, amid the avaricious children of bargain and sale, the timid or corrupt seekers of political power, and the hypocrites in churches that had forgotten their Bible, or only used it as a shield and excuse for the sum of all villainies. Such was the era which we, the older among us, remember only too well. It was this abyss of shames and of cowardice from which arose the bold outcry of Garrison, the prophetic denunciations of Theodore Parker, the eloquent invective of Phillips, the dramatic appeal of Harriet Beecher, the set resolve and logical demonstration of Abraham Lincoln, and the steady march of the undaunted soul of John Brown,—that soldier in the army of the Lord, at whom deserters, descendants,

and sutlers are now flinging mud. Such persons have done this for such heroes ever since Heroism began its march, followed by its dark shadows, Hypocrisy, Cowardice, and Greed. It is hardly possible to paint in too strong colors the degradation of that period, darkened by the dishonor of Webster, and the insolence of the framers of the Fugitive Slave Bill, which aroused in the heart of this pitying woman of Connecticut the power to change the current of public opinion. Valiantly she wrote, and nobly did the heart of the people respond to that touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin.

As I read this romance of Southern life, sixty years after it was written and received the approval of the world, its intrinsic power still makes the original impression of 1851; but there is room for literary criticism, of which we were then rather impatient. It was fiercely attacked, as well as warmly applauded; but it needed then no apology, and still less now is one needed. Explanation may be given, not of its effectiveness,—for that was self-evident,—but of its exceptional, and in a slight degree its partial, view of the grand evil and shame of negro slavery. There is nothing in its darkest pictures which was not implied in that anathema of Virginia's curse which her most sensitive and philanthropic son, Jefferson, sent forth from Paris, though written at Monticello in 1782, near the close of our first Revolution. The Emancipation war, in which Lincoln was as indispensable in restoring our Republic as Washington in founding it, was our second Revolution. Jefferson said,—in passages as well known as any of his writings except the immortal Declaration:—

“The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most bolsterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. And with what execra-

tions should that statesman be loaded who, permitting one-half of the citizens to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies! With the morals of the people their industry is also destroyed; of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labor. I tremble for my country (Virginia) when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever. The Almighty has no attribute that can take sides with us in such a contest."

To this outline and philosophic description of what human nature makes inevitable, Mrs. Stowe, writing seventy years later, fitted personal illustrations, and thus dramatically created characters. Uncle Tom is one, Topsy is one, the two Sheldons in Kentucky are others. Eliza and George Harris are real characters, so in all their brutality are Legree and the slave-hunters; so are Sam and Chloe, and the minor personages among the whites of the story. Now and then, with her natural inexperience of Southern life, she misconceives the delicate shades of character; and that peculiar contrast to the brutalizing institution, the high-minded and generous planter, refined, courteous, reacting against the degradation around him, and just in the midst of all injustice, is softened by her into the gentle cynicism of St. Clare, the father of Eva. Exaggeration appears here and there, both in Jefferson's description and Mrs. Stowe's portraiture. But exaggeration was needful to make the callous generation of our countrymen see the picture in its vivid reality. We had been bribed and preached and orated into indifference, or shocked into a paltry fear of looking at things as they existed. With Webster and Choate here in Boston proclaiming the wickedness of philanthropy and the unlawfulness of the moral law; with Harvard and Yale suppressing discussion, and Princeton and Andover expounding the Bible in favor of man-stealing, it required setting the picture in high colors to give it a true effect for the eye. Mrs. Stowe had every wish to be just, and in effect

she was just, but it was impossible to treat of the fathomless depravity implied in human slavery, without exposing its terrible possibilities, as well as its habitual mitigations. The case was settled in her favor by the verdict of impartial nations, and it was never practicable, after 1853, for the *New York Herald*, or the *London Times*, or the *Boston Pilot*, or other religious or commercial organs of conscienceless wealth, to persuade the peoples of Europe or the thinkers of either hemisphere, that slavery was anything better than Homer and Franklin and Wesley and Jefferson had described it. The ancient maxim of the church took effect in this political sphere,—*Securus judicat orbis terrarum* (“The round world’s judgment settled the question”).

But to execute, as Mrs. Stowe did, the judgment of the world against the selfish interests, the ignorant prejudice, the pride of opinion, the rancor of theology, the fury of insolent passion, was something very different from flashing conviction into the unconcerned multitude of the world’s people. For that, qualities supplementary to woman’s pity and the perception of genius, and very different therefrom, were now called for, and were forthcoming. The two practical solvers of our slavery problem, and martyrs in the conflict of carnal weapons,—John Brown and Abraham Lincoln,—were coming forward to fulfil the task assigned to each in the decrees of Heaven. Brown, deeply reflecting, guided by prayer and Scripture, illumined by the Quaker’s Inner Light, but without the Quaker’s generous delusion of non-resistance to evil men, had long before reached the conclusion that only force and bloodshed could deal with a wrong so ingrown with our national life as slavery had come to be. Surgery is the remedy for such malignant growths, as the mediæval doctors insisted. *Quos medicamenta non sanant, ferrum sanat; quos ferrum non*

sanat, ignis sanat ("If the disease yieldeth not to medicine, use the knife; if the knife doth not end the plague, finish the cure with cautery"). It required all the agencies of sword and fire to destroy what, a century earlier, might have yielded to ransom and conciliation. Therefore Brown made his Kansas emancipations and his Virginia foray, and preached, from the convict's bar and the martyr's cell, the sincere doctrine of Lincoln, "No man is good enough to govern another without that other's consent." And Lincoln, unwillingly led on by his own infallible logic (yielding to the logic of the situation, created by the Master of the Universe), struck off at one blow the chains of four million men, and died by the murderous hand of that Slavery which had tortured and slain so many thousands of the most unfortunate of mankind, in the course of many brutalizing centuries, which Christianity could but slowly alleviate. It fell to me on two occasions, less than thirty months apart,—the installation of Brackett's heroic bust of Brown, at Medford, in January, 1863, when Lincoln had completed his task of emancipation; and in April, 1865, when his noble life had ended,—to utter in verse the estimate that Time has since confirmed, concerning these American martyrs, in this apostrophe to each:—

BROWN.

Marble nor brass, nor granite from the shore
 Which thy grave fathers trod with Pilgrim feet,
 Thy fame shall never need! the hollow roar
 Of Time's vast ocean shall thy name repeat,
 When we and all our works are buried low
 Under the whelming of his restless tide:
 In generous hearts thy praise shall ever glow
 With theirs that earlier for mankind have died:
 Nay,—who sad Afric's kneeling race shall blame,
 Blending with thine Judea's holiest name?

LINCOLN.

God's purpose high thy course impelled
O'er War's red height and smoldering plain;
When awe, when pity thee withheld,
He gave thy chafing steeds the rein,
Till at thy feet lay Slavery slain.

Then ceased thy task,—another hand
Takes up the burden thou lay'st down:
Sorrowing and glad, the rescued land
Twofold awards thy just renown,—
The victor's and the martyr's crown.

To Mrs. Stowe was allotted a milder doom, as befitted a gentler and less combative spirit. After years of success and honor, worthily won and modestly held, she glided softly down the vale of age, half folded in forgetfulness before her death, in that kindly lowering of the lamp of life, which shuts out the shocks of bereavement and calamity, inseparable from mortality,—until she died, amid her kindred and without an enemy, in the region of her birth, which she had adorned by her genius and her compassionate virtues.