

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Scott
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Harte
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Hesse
Hale James Hastings Cooke
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**The Sable Cloud A Southern Tale
With Northern Comments (1861)**

Nehemiah Adams

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"I did not err, there does a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night"

MILTON'S COMUS

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CHAPTER I.

DEATH AND BURIAL OF A SLAVE'S INFANT.

"The small and great are there, and the servant is free from his master."

A Southern gentleman, who was visiting in New York, sent me, with his reply to my inquiries for the welfare of his family at home, the following letter which he had just received from one of his married daughters in the South.

The reader will be so kind as to take the assurance which the writer hereby gives him, that the letter was received under the circumstances now stated, and that it is not a fiction. Certain names and the date only are, for obvious reasons, omitted.

THE LETTER.

MY DEAR FATHER, —

You have so recently heard from and about those of us left here, and that in a so much more satisfactory way than through letters, that it scarcely seems worth while to write just yet. But Mary left Kate's poor little baby in such a pitiable state, that I think it will be a relief to all to hear that its sufferings are ended. It died about ten o'clock the night that she left us, very quietly and without a struggle, and at sunset on Friday we laid it in its last resting-place. My husband and I went out in the morning to select the spot for its burial, and finding the state of affairs in the cemetery, we chose a portion of ground and will have it inclosed with a railing. They have been very careless in the management of the ground, and have allowed persons to inclose and bury in any shape or way they chose, so that the whole is cut up in a way that makes it difficult to find a place where two or three graves could be put near each other. We did find one at last, however, about the size of the Hazel Wood

lots; and we will inclose it at once, so that when another, either from our own family or those of the other branches, wants a resting-place, there shall not be the same trouble. Poor old Timmy lies there; but it is in a part of the grounds where, the sexton tells us, the water rises within three feet of the surface; so, of course, we did not go there for this little grave. His own family selected his burial-place, and probably did not think of this.

Kate takes her loss very patiently, though she says that she had no idea how much she would grieve after the child. It had been sick so long that she said she wanted to have it go; but I knew when she said it that she did not know what the parting would be. It is not the parting alone, but it is the horror of the grave,—the tender child alone in the far off gloomy burial-ground, the heavy earth piled on the tender little breast, the helplessness that looked to you for protection which you could not give, and the emptiness of the home to which you return when the child is gone. He who made a mother's heart and they who have borne it, alone can tell the unutterable pain of all this. The little child is so carefully and tenderly watched over and cherished while it is with you,—and then to leave it alone in the dread grave where the winds and the rain beat upon it! I know they do not feel it, but since mine has been there, I have never felt sheltered from the storms when they come. The rain seems to fall on my bare heart. I have said more than I meant to have said on this subject, and have left myself little heart to write of anything else. Tell Mammy that it is a great disappointment to me that her name is not to have a place in my household. I was always so pleased with the idea that my Susan and little Cygnet should grow up together as the others had done; but it seems best that it should not be so, or it would not have been denied. Tell Mary that Chloe staid that night with Kate, and has been kind to her. All are well at her house.

* * * * *

Of the persons named in this letter,

KATE is a slave-mother, belonging to the lady who writes the letter.

CYGNET was Kate's babe.

MAMMY is a common appellation for a slave-nurse. The Mammy to whom the message in the letter is sent was nursery-maid when the writer of the letter and several brothers and sisters were young; and, more than this, she was maid to their mother in early years. She is still in this gentleman's family. Her name is Cygnet; Kate's babe was named for her.

MARY is the lady's married sister.

CHLOE is Mary's servant.

The incidental character of this letter and the way in which it came to me, gave it a special charm. Some recent traveller, describing his sensations at Heidelberg Castle, speaks of a German song which he heard, at the moment, from a female at some distance and out of sight. This letter, like that song, derives much of its effect from the unconsciousness of the author that it would reach a stranger.

Having read this letter many times, always with the same emotions as at first, I resolved to try the effect of it upon my friend, A. Freeman North. He is an upright man, much sought after in the settlement of estates, especially where there are fiduciary trusts. Placing the letter in his hands, I asked him, when he should have read it, to put in writing his impressions and reflections. The result will be found in the next chapter. Mrs. North, also, will engage the reader's kind attention.

CHAPTER II.

NORTHERN COMMENTS ON SOUTHERN LIFE.

"As blind men use to bear their noses higher
Than those that have their eyes and sight entire."

HUDIBRAS.

"One woman reads another's character
Without the tedious trouble of decyphering."

BEN JONSON. *New Inn.*

So then, this is a Southern heart which prompts these loving, tender strains. This lady is a slave-holder. It is a slave toward whom this fellow-feeling, this gentleness of pity, these acts of loving-kindness, these yearnings of compassion, these respectful words, and all this care and assiduity, flow forth.

Is she not some singular exception among the people of her country; some abnormal product, an accidental grace, a growth of luxuriant richness in a deadly soil, or, at least, is she not like Jenny Lind among singers? Surely we shall not look upon her like again. It would be difficult to find even here at the North,—the humane North, nay, even among those who have solemnly consecrated themselves as "the friends of the slave," and who "remember them that are in bonds as bound with them,"—a heart more loving and good, affections more natural and pure. I am surprised. This was a slave-babe. Its mother was this lady's slave. I am confused. This contradicts my previous information; it sets at nought my ideas upon a subject which I believed I thoroughly understood.

A little negro slave-babe, it seems, is dead, and its owner and mistress is acting and speaking as Northerners do! Yes, as Northerners do even when their own daughters' babes lie dead!

The letter must be a forgery. No; here it is before me, in the handwriting of the lady, post-marked at the place of her residence. But is it not, after all, a fiction? I can believe almost anything sooner than that I am mistaken in the opinions and feelings which are contradicted by this letter. In the spirit of Hume's argument against the miracles of the Bible, I feel disposed, almost, to urge that it would be a greater miracle that the course of nature at the South in a slave-holder's heart should thus be set aside than that there should not be,

in some way, deception about this letter. But still, here is the letter; and it is written to her father, whom she could not deceive, whom she had no motive, no wish, to delude. Had it been written to a Northerner, I could have surmised that she was attempting to make false impressions about slavery, and its influence on the slave-holder. Why should she tell her father this simple tale, unless real affection for the babe and its mother were impelling her? This tries my faith. It is like an undesigned coincidence in holy writ, which used so to stagger my unbelief. Possibly, however,—for I must maintain my previous convictions if I can,—possibly her father is such as our anti-slavery lecturers and writers declare a slave-holder naturally to be, and his daughter, herself a mother, is seeking to touch his heart and turn him from his cruelties as a slave-holder by showing him, in this indirect, beautiful manner, that slave-mothers have the feelings of human beings. Perhaps I may therefore compromise this matter by allowing, on one hand, that the daughter is all that she appears to be, and claiming, on the other, that the father is all that a slave-holder ought to be to verify our Northern theories. But she herself is a slave-holder, and therefore by our theory she ought to be imbruted. I beg her pardon, and that of her father; but they must consider how hard it is for us at the North to conquer all our prejudices even under the influence of such a demonstration as her letter. I ask one simple question: Is not this slave-babe, (and her mother,) of "the down-trodden," and is not this lady one of the down-treading? And yet she weeps,—not because, as I would have supposed, she had lost one hundred and fifty dollars in the child, but as though she loved it like the sick and dying child of a fellow-creature, of a mother like herself. Now, who at the North ever hears of such a thing in slavery? The old New York Tabernacle could have said, It is not in me;—the modern Boston Music Hall says, It is not in me. None of the antislavery papers, political or religious, say, We have heard the fame thereof with our ears. Our Northern instructors on the subject of slavery, the orators, the Uncle Tom's Cabins, "The Scholar an Agitator," have never taught us to believe this. The South, we are instructed to think, is a Golgotha, a valley of Hinnom; compacts with it are covenants with hell. But here is one holy angel with its music; a ministering spirit; but is she a Lot in Sodom? Abdiel in the revolted principality? a desolate, mourning Rizzpah on that rock which overlooks four millions of slaves and their tortures?

In a less instructed state of mind on this subject, I should once have said, on reading this letter, — This is slavery. Here is a view of life at the South. As a traveller accidentally catches a sight of a family around their table, and domestic life gleams upon him for a moment; as the opening door of a church suffers a few notes of the psalm to reach the ear of one at a distance, this letter, written evidently amidst household duties and cares, discloses, in a touching manner, the domestic relations of Southern families and their servants wherever Christianity prevails. It is one strain of the ordinary music of life in ten thousands of those households, falling accidentally upon our ears, and giving us truthful, artless impressions, such as labored statements and solemn depositions would not so well convey, and which theories, counter-statements, arguments, and invectives never can refute. Our senior pastor would say that the letter is like the Epistles of John, — not a doctrinal exposition, but a breathing forth of the spirit which the evangelical history had inspired. I have come to know more, however, than I did when I could have had such amiable but unenlightened feelings. I have read the "Key to Uncle Tom" and the "Barbarism of Slavery."

Still, I am sorely puzzled. "Kate," she says, "wanted to have it go, it had been sick so long; but I knew, when she said it, she did not know what the parting would be."

"The parting!" Has she read our Northern abstracts and versions of the Dred Scott Decision, and are there, in her view, any rights in a negro which she is bound to respect? Has she not heard that the Supreme Court of the United States has absolved her from all her feelings of humanity? "The parting!" Where has she lived not to know how, according to our lecturers, families are parted at the auction-block in the Southern States without the least compunction? We are constantly told, — has she not heard it? — that the slave at the South is a mere "chattel," and that a slave-child is bought and sold as recklessly as a calf, and that a parting between a slave-mother and her children, sold and separated for life, is an occurrence as familiar as the separation of animals and their young, and no more regarded by slave-holders than divorcements in the barn-yard. This being so, it must follow that when a slave-babe dies, the only sorrow in the hearts of the white owners is such as they feel when a colt is kicked to death or a heifer is choked. This must be so, if all is

true which is meant to be conveyed when we are told so often at the North that the slave is a mere "chattel." Therefore I am puzzled by this lady's tears for the mother of this little black babe. She says of the mother of that poor little negro infant slave, "I knew she did not dream what the parting would be." I repeat it, my theory of slavery, that which I hold in common with all enlightened friends of freedom, requires that this lady should have a debased, imbruted nature, for she owns human beings, has made property of God's image in man. And now I feel creeping over me a dreadful temptation to think that one may hold fellow-creatures in bondage and yet be really humane, gentle, and as good as a Northerner! What fearful changes in politics would come about should our people believe this! It cannot be that our great party of Freedom can ever go to pieces and disappoint the hopes of the world; yet this would be the case, if the feelings stirred by this letter should gain a general acceptance. I cannot gainsay the facts. Here is the letter. May it never see the light; people are much more influenced by such things than by mere logic, and oh, what would befall the nation should our Northern excitement against slavery cease, and should we leave the whole subject to the South and to God! "What if people should come to believe that the Southerners—fifteen or sixteen States of this Union—are as humane, Christian, and conscientious as the North!

Who will resolve my painful doubts? I do crave to know what possible motive this lady could have had in taking so much thought and care about the last resting-place of this poor little black "chattel." You and your husband, dear lady, seem to be as kind and painstaking as though you knew that a fellow-creature of yours was returning, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

One great Northern "friend of the slave" tells us that the slaves at the South are degraded so to the level of brutes, that baptizing them and admitting them to Christian ordinances is about the same as though he should say to his dogs, "I baptize thee, Bose, in," etc. This, he tells us, he repeated many times here, and in England.[1] Nothing but love of truth and just hatred of "the sum of all villainies" could, of course, have made him venture so near the verge of unpardonable blasphemy as to speak thus. Yet your feelings and behavior toward this babe are in direct conflict with his theory. Pray whom am I to believe?

[Footnote 1: See "Sigma's" communications to the *Boston Transcript*,
August, 1857.]

Perhaps now I have hit upon a solution. Some people, Walter Scott is an instance, bury their favorite dogs with all the honors of a decorated sepulture. Rather than believe that your slaves are commonly regarded by you as your fellow-creatures, having rights which you love to consider, or, that you do not mercilessly dispose of them to promote your selfish interests, we, the Northern people, who have had the very best of teachers on the subject of slavery, learnedly theoretical, reasoning from the eternal principles of right, would incline to believe that your interest in the burial of this little slave-babe was merely that which your own child would feel on seeing her kitten carefully buried at the foot of the apple-tree.

One thing, however, suggests a difficulty in feeling our way to this conclusion. I mention it because of the perfect candor which guides the sentiments and feelings of all Northern people in speaking of slavery and slave-holders.

The difficulty is this: Who was "poor old Timmy"? Some old slave in your father's family, I apprehend. You seem sad at finding that his grave is not in the best place. "The water rises within three feet of the surface;" — we infer, from the regret which you seem to feel at this, that you have some care and pity for your old slaves, which extends even to their graves. But we had well nigh borrowed strength to our prejudices from this place of old Timmy's grave, and were saying with ourselves, Thus the slave-holders bury their slaves where the water may overflow them; but you seem to apologize to your father for Timmy's having such a poor place for his remains by saying, "His own" (Timmy's) "family selected his burying-place, and probably did not think of this." Very kind in you, dear madam, to speak so. "The friends of the slave" are greatly obliged to you for such consideration. You say, "His own family selected his burying-place." Do slaves have such a liberty? Can they go and come in their burying-grounds and choose places for the graves of their kindred? This is being full as good to your servants, in this particular, as we are at the North to our domestics. You thought poor old Timmy's

grave was not in a spot sufficiently choice for this little babe's grave, and, it seems, you inclosed a spot, and inaugurated it by the burial of this child, for the last resting-place of other babes, the kindred of this child and of your other servants. This looks as though there were some domestic permanence in some parts of the South among the servants of a household; and as though the birth and death of a child have some other associations with you than those which belong to the breeding and sale of poultry. We are truly glad to think of all this. It is exceedingly pleasant to have a good opinion of people, much more so than to believe evil of them, and to accuse them wrongfully.

In speaking thus to you, I make myself think — and I hope I do not seem self-complacent in saying it, for you must have learned from the tone of my remarks, if from no other source, that self-complacency is not a Northern characteristic, especially in our feelings toward the South—but I make myself think, by this candid admission of what seems good in you, of a venturesome remark by Paul the Apostle to your brother slave-holder Philemon, in that epistle in which he sends back the slave Onesimus,—a very trying epistle to us at the North, though on the whole, many of us keep up our confidence in inspiration notwithstanding this epistle, especially as it is explained to us by some at the North who know most of Southern slavery, our inbred hatred of which, it is insisted by some of our best scholars, should control even our interpretation of the word of God. Paul speaks to this slave-holder, Philemon, of "the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you,"—which we think was exceedingly charitable, considering that it was said to a holder of slaves; and perhaps quite too much so; for the truth is not to be spoken at all times, and especially not of those who hold their fellow-men in bondage. I am often constrained to think that it was an inconsiderate, unwise thing in the Apostle to take this favorable view of that slave-holder; he may, however, have written by permission, not by commandment; that would save his inspiration from reproach; for had he been inspired in writing this epistle, I ask myself, Would he not have foreseen our great Northern conflict with the mightiest injustice upon which the sun ever shone? and would he not have foreseen how much aid and comfort that epistle would give the friends of oppression on this continent? One first

truth in the minds of the most eminent "friends of freedom" is this: "Slavery is the sum of all villainies." Other truths follow in their natural order; among them the question of the inspiration of the Bible has a place; but slavery leads some of them to think lightly, and to speak disparagingly, of the Bible, because it comes in conflict with their theories regarding slave-holding, which is certainly not always referred to in Scripture in the tone which we prefer. There was the Apostle James, too, writing about "works" in the same unguarded manner as Paul when speaking of slaves and slave-holders. Pity that he could not have let "works" alone, seeing it was so important for the other Apostles to establish the one idea of justification by faith. He made great trouble for Luther and his companions in their contest with Popery. Luther had to reject his epistle; "*straminea epistola*" he called it,—an epistle of straw,—weak, worthless; and he denied its inspiration, because it conflicted with his doctrine of "faith alone." So much for trying to be candid and just, and for presenting the other side of a subject, or of a man, when the spirit of the age is averse to it, and candor is in danger of being looked upon as a time-serving thing. Neither Paul nor James, however, had felt the tonic, bracing effect of good anti-slavery principles, or they would not have written, the one such a letter to a slave-holder, and the other such a back-oar argument against "faith alone." However, I am disposed to think well of Paul and James, notwithstanding these the great errors of their lives. Indeed I can almost forgive them, when I am reading other things which they said and did. You will please acknowledge, therefore, my dear madam, that in giving you credit for kind feelings toward a poor slave and its mother, we are disposed to be just; yet I beg of you not to think that I abate one jot or tittle of my belief that, in theory, slavery is "the sum of all villainies," "an enormous wrong," "a stupendous injustice."

I have just been reading your letter once more, and the foolish tears pester me so that I can scarce see out of my eyes. I find, dear madam, that you have known a bitter sorrow which so many parents are carrying with them to the grave. Your words make me think so of little graves elsewhere, that I forget for the time that you are a slave-holder. Nor can I hardly believe that your touching words are suggested by the death of a slave's babe, when you speak of "the heavy earth piled on the tender little breast." O my dear la-

dy! has a slave's babe "a tender little breast"? Then you really think so! And you a slave-holder! "Border Ruffianism," perhaps, has not yet reached your heart; and yet I suppose—forgive me if I do you wrong—that slave-holders' hearts generally need only to be removed to the "borders," to manifest all their native "ruffianism." Can you tell me whether there are any mothers in Missouri (near Kansas) who feel toward their slaves who are mothers, as you do? There are so many people from the North in Kansas (near Missouri) who have gone thither to prevent you and your brethren and sisters from owning a fellow-creature there, that I trust their influence will in time extend through all Missouri, and that white mothers in that State will everywhere have such humane feelings toward the blacks as we and you possess.

All that I ask of you now, is, that you give Kate her liberty at once. Oh, do not say, as I fancy you will, There is not a happier being than Kate in all the land of freedom. "Fiat justitia," dear madam, "ruat coelum." I cannot conceive how being "owned" is anything but a curse. Really, we forget the miseries of the Five Points, and of the dens in New York, Boston, Buffalo, and other places at the North, the hordes in the city and State institutions in New York Harbor, Deer Island, Boston, and all such things, in our extreme pity for poor slave-mothers, like Kate, whose children, when they get to be about nine or ten years old, are liable to be sold. Honest Mrs. Striker came to work in our family, not long since, leaving her young child at home in the care of a young woman who watched it for ten cents a day. I said to her, Dear Mrs. Striker, are you not glad that you live in a free state, and not where, when you return like a bird to its nest at night, you may find your little one carried off, you know not where, by some man-stealer, you know not whom?—We honor your kind feelings, madam, but you are not aware, probably, what overflowing love and tender pity there is among us Northerners, toward your slaves and their children. We are disinterested, too; for we nearly forget our own black people here at the North, and more especially in Canada, to care for you and your people. And though hundreds of innocent young people are decoyed into our Northern cities yearly from the country and are made the victims of unhal- lowed passions, yet the thought that some of your young people on those remote, solitary plantations, can be compelled by their mas-

ters to do wrong on pain of being sold, fills us with such unaffected distress that we think but little of voluntary or compulsory debauchery in our own cities; but we think of dissolving the Union to rid ourselves of seeming complicity with such wickedness as we see to be inherent in the relation of master and slave. We at the North should all be wicked if we had such opportunities; we know, therefore, that you must be. Because you will not let us reprove you for it, we cut off our correspondence with your Southern ecclesiastical bodies. But I began to speak of little graves. You will see by my involuntary wandering from them how full our hearts are of your colored people, and how self-forgetful we are in our desires and efforts to do them good. And yet some of your Southern people can find it in their hearts to set at nought these our most sacred Northern antipathies and commiserations!

But I constantly hear some of your words in your letter striking their gentle, sad chimes in my ears. "It is not the parting alone, but the helplessness that looked to you for protection which you could not give;" "the emptiness of the home to which you return when the child is gone."

Now, for such words, I solemnly declare that, in my opinion, you, dear madam, never had a helpless slave look to you for protection which you could give and which you refused; you, surely, never made a slave's home desolate by taking her child from her. No, such words as those which I have just quoted from your letter, are a perfect assurance that neither you nor your kindred, within your knowledge, are guilty of ruthless violations of domestic ties among your colored people. Otherwise, you could not write as you do about "desolate homes" and "the child gone." While I read your letter and think of you, I am reminded of those words: "Is not this he whom they seek to kill?" Why, if the insurgents' pikes were aimed at you and your child, I would almost be willing to rush in and receive them in my own body. Yet I would not be known at the North to have spoken so strongly as this. O my dear madam, if there were only fifty righteous people (counting you) in the South, people who knew what "desolate homes" and "the child gone" mean, I should almost begin to hope that our Southern Gomorrah might be spared.

But I fear that I am trespassing too far away from my sworn fealty to Northern opinions and feelings. I begin to fear that I may be tempted to be recreant to my inborn, inbred notions of liberty, while holding converse with you, for there is something extremely seductive to a Northerner in slavery; it is like the apple and the serpent to the woman; so that whoever goes to the South, or has anything to do with slave-holders, is apt to lose his integrity; there is a Circean influence there for Northern people; thousands of once good, anti-slavery men now lie dead and buried as to their reputations here at the North, in consequence of having to do with the seductive slave-power; they would fill Bonaventura Cemetery, in Savannah; the Spanish moss, swaying on the limbs of its trees, would be, in number, fit signals of their subjection to what you call right views on the subject of slavery.

Though I fear almost to hold converse with you, yet, conscious of my innate love of liberty, I venture to do so. Bunker Hill is within twenty miles of my home. When I go to that sacred memorial of liberty, I strive to fortify my soul afresh against the slave-power. After hearing favorable things said, in Boston, about the South, I can go to Faneuil Hall, and there, the doors being carefully shut, walk enthusiastically about the room, almost shouting, "Sam. Adams!" "James Otis!" "Seventy-Six!" "Shade of Warren!" "No chains on the Bay State!" "Massachusetts in the van!" "Give me liberty or give me death!" I can enjoy the privilege of looking frequently on certain majestic figures in our American Apocalypse, under the present vial,—but I need not name them. I meet in our book-stores with "Lays of Freedom," never sung by such as you. I see in the shop-windows the inspiring faces, in medallion, of those masterpieces of human nature, "the champions of freedom," our chief abolitionists;—and shall I, can I, ever succumb to the slave-power, even though it approach me through the holy, all-subduing charms of woman's influence? No! dear madam, ten thousand times, No! "Slave-power!" to borrow Milton's figure when speaking of Ithuriel and Satan, the word is as the touch of fire to powder, to our brave anti-slavery souls. You have, perhaps, seen a bull stopping in the street, pawing the ground, throwing the dust over him and covering himself with a cloud of it, his nose close to the earth, and a low, bellowing sound issuing from his nostrils. Your heart has died with-