

"Uncle Sam's Emancipation: A Sketch" (1845) by Harriet Beecher Stowe

It may be gratifying to those who desire to think well of human nature, to know that the leading incidents of the subjoined sketch are literal matters of fact, occurring in the city of Cincinnati, which have come within the scope of the writer's personal knowledge the incidents have merely been clothed in a dramatic form, to present them more vividly to the reader.

In one of the hotel parlors of our queen city, a young gentleman, apparently in no very easy frame of mind, was pacing up and down the room, looking alternately at his watch and out of the window, as if expecting somebody. At last he rang the bell violently, and a hotel servant soon appeared.

"Has my man Sam come in yet?" he inquired.

The polished yellow gentleman to whom this was addressed, answered with a polite, but somewhat sinister smirk, that nothing had been seen of him since early that morning.

"Lazy dog! A full three hours since I sent him off to B_____ street, and I have seen nothing of him since."

The yellow gentleman remarked with consolatory politeness, that "he hoped Sam had not run away" adding, with an ill-concealed grin, that "them boys was mighty apt to show the clean heel when they come into a free State."

"Oh, no: I'm quite easy as to that," returned the young gentleman; "I'll risk Sam's ever being willing to part from me. I brought him because I was sure of him."

"Don't you be too sure," remarked a gentleman from behind, who had been listening to the conversation. "There are plenty of mischief-making busybodies on the trail of every southern gentleman, to interfere with his family matters, and decoy off his servants."

"Didn't I see Sam talking at the corner with the Quaker Simmons?" said another servant, who meanwhile had entered.

"Talking with Simmons, was he?" remarked the last speaker, with irritation; "that rascal Simmons does nothing else, I believe, but tote away gentlemen's servants. Well, if Simmons has got him, you may as well be quiet; you'll not see your fellow again in a hurry."

"And who the deuce is this Simmons?" said our young gentleman, who, though evidently of a good natured mould, was now beginning to wax wroth; "and what business has he to interfere with other people's affairs?"

"You had better have asked those questions a few days ago, and then you would have kept a closer eye on your fellow; a meddlesome, canting, Quaker rascal, that all these black hounds run to, to be helped into Canada, and nobody knows where all."

The young gentleman jerked out his watch with increasing energy, and then walking fiercely up to the coloured waiter, who was setting the dinner table with an air of provoking satisfaction, he thundered at him, "You rascal, you understand this matter; I see it in your eyes."

Our gentleman of colour bowed, and with an air of mischievous intelligence, protested that he never interfered with other gentlemen's matters, while sundry of his brethren in office looked unutterable things out of the corners of their eyes.

"There is some cursed plot hatched up among you," said the young man. "You have talked Sam into it; I know he never would have thought of leaving me unless he was put up to it. Tell me now," he resumed, "have you heard Sam say anything about it? Come, be reasonable," he added, in a milder tone, "you shall find your account in it."

Thus adjured, the waiter protested he would be happy to give the gentleman any satisfaction in his power. The fact was, Sam had been pretty full of notions lately, and had been to see Simmons, and in short, he should not wonder if he never saw any more of him.

And as hour after hour passed, the whole day, the whole night, and no Sam was forthcoming, the truth of the surmise became increasingly evident.

Our young hero, Mr. Alfred B, was a good deal provoked, and strange as the fact may seem, a good deal grieved too, for he really loved the fellow. "Loved him!" says some scornful zealot; "a slaveholder love his slave!" Yes, brother; why not? A warm-hearted man will love his dog, his

horse, even to grieving bitterly for their loss, and why not credit the fact that such a one may love the human creature whom custom has placed on the same level. The fact was, Alfred B did love this young man; he had been appropriated to him in childhood; and Alfred had always redressed his grievances, fought his battles, got him out of scrapes, and purchased for him, with liberal hand, indulgences to which his comrades were strangers. He had taken pride to dress him smartly, and as for hardship and want, they had never come near him.

"The poor, silly, ungrateful puppy!" soliloquized he, "what can he do with himself? Confound that Quaker, and all his meddlesome tribe. Been at him with their bloody-bone stories, I suppose. Sam knows better, the scamp. Hallo, there," he called to one of the waiters, " where does this Simpkins - Simon - Simmons, or what d'ye call him, live?"

"His shop is No. 5, on G. street."

"Well, I'll go at him, and see what business he has with my affairs."

The Quaker was sitting at the door of his shop, with a round, rosy, good-humoured face, so expressive of placidity and satisfaction, that it was difficult to approach in ireful feeling.

"Is your name Simmons?" demanded Alfred, in a voice whose natural urbanity was somewhat sharpened by vexation.

"Yes, friend; what dost thou wish?"

"I wish to inquire whether you have seen anything of my coloured fellow, Sam; a man of twenty-five, or thereabouts, lodging at the Pearl Street House?"

"I rather suspect that I have," said the Quaker, in a quiet, meditative tone, as if thinking the matter over with himself.

"And is it true, sir, that you, have encouraged and assisted him in his efforts to get out of my service?"

"Such, truly, is the fact, my friend."

Losing patience at this provoking equanimity, our young friend poured forth his sentiments with no inconsiderable energy, and in terms not the most select or pacific, all which our Quaker received with that placid, full-orbed tranquillity of countenance, which seemed to say, "Pray, sir, relieve your mind; don't be particular, scold as hard as you like." The singularity of this expression struck the young man, and as his wrath became gradually spent, he could hardly help laughing at the tranquillity of his opponent, and he gradually changed his tone for one of expostulation. "What motive could induce you, sir, thus to incommode a stranger, and one who never injured you at all?"

"I am sorry thou art incommoded," rejoined the Quaker. "Thy servant, as thee calls him, came to me, and I helped him, as I would any other poor fellow in distress."

"Poor fellow!" said Alfred, angrily; "that's the story of the whole of you. I tell you there is not a free negro in your city so well off as my Sam is, and always has been, and he'll find it out before long."

"But tell me, friend, thou mayest die as well as another man; thy establishment may fall into debt, as well as another man's; and thy Sam may be sold by the Sheriff for debt, or change hands in dividing the estate, and so, though he was bred easily, and well cared for, he may come to be a field hand, under hard masters, starved, beaten, overworked such things do happen sometimes, do they not?"

"Sometimes, perhaps they do," replied the young man.

"Well, look you, by our laws in Ohio, thy Sam is now a free man; as free as I or thou; he hath a strong back, good hands, good courage, can earn his ten or twelve dollars a month or do better. Now taking all things into account, if thee were in his place, what would thee do would thee go back a slave, or try thy luck as a free man?"

Alfred said nothing in reply to this, only after a while he murmured half to himself, "I thought the fellow had more gratitude, after all my kindness."

"Thee talks of gratitude," said the Quaker, "now how does that account stand? Thou hast fed, and clothed, and protected this man; thou hast not starved, beaten, or abused him that would have been unworthy of thee; thou hast shown him special kindness, and in return he has given thee

faithful service for fifteen or twenty years; all his time, all his strength, all he could do or be, he has given thee, and ye are about even." The young man looked thoughtful, but made no reply.

"Sir," said he at last, "I will take no unfair advantage of you; I wish to get my servant once more; can I do so?"

"Certainly. I will bring him to thy lodgings this evening, if thee wish it. I know thee will do what is fair," said the Quaker.

It were difficult to define the thoughts of the young man, as he returned to his lodgings. Naturally generous and humane, he had never dreamed that he had rendered injustice to the human beings he claimed as his own. Injustice and oppression he had sometimes seen with detestation, in other establishments; but it had been his pride that they were excluded from his own. It had been his pride to think that his indulgence and liberality made a situation of dependence on him preferable even to liberty.

The dark picture of possible reverses which the slave system hangs over the lot of the most favoured slaves, never occurred to him. Accordingly, at six o'clock that evening, a light tap at the door of Mr. B.'s parlor, announced the Quaker, and hanging back behind him, the reluctant Sam, who, with all his newly-acquired love of liberty, felt almost as if he were treating his old master rather shabbily, in deserting him.

"So, Sam," said Alfred, "how is this? They say you want to leave me."

"Yes, master."

"Why, what's the matter, Sam? Haven't I always been good to you; and has not my father always been good to you?"

"Oh yes, master; very good."

"Have you not always had good food, good clothes, and lived easy?"

"Yes, master."

"And nobody has ever abused you?"

"No, master."

"Well, then, why do you wish to leave me?"

"Oh, massa, I want to be a free man."

"Why, Sam, ain't you well enough off now?"

"Oh, massa may die; then nobody knows who get me; some dreadful folks, you know, master, might get me, as they did Jim Sanford, and nobody to take my part. No, master, I rather be free man."

Alfred turned to the window, and thought a few moments, and then said, turning about, "Well, Sam, I believe you are right. I think, on the whole, I'd like best to be a free man myself, and I must not wonder that you do. So, for ought I see, you must go; but then, Sam, there's your wife and child." Sam's countenance fell.

"Never mind, Sam. I will send them up to you."

"Oh, master!"

"I will; but you must remember now, Sam, you have got both yourself and them to take care of, and have no master to look after you; be steady, sober, and industrious, and then if ever you get into distress, send word to me, and I'll help you."

Lest any accuse us of over-colouring our story, we will close it by extracting a passage or two from the letter which the generous young man the next day left in the hands of the Quaker, for his emancipated servant. We can assure our readers that we copy from the original document, which now lies before us:

DEAR SAM I am just on the eve of my departure for Pittsburg; I may not see you again for a long time, possibly never, and I leave this letter with your friends, Messrs. A. and B., for you, and herewith bid you an affectionate farewell. Let me give you some advice, which is, now that you are

a free man, in a free State, be obedient as you were when a slave; perform all the duties that are required of you, and do all you can for your own future welfare and respectability. Let me assure you that I have the same good feeling towards you that you know I always had; and let me tell you further, that if ever you want a friend, call or write to me, and I will be that friend. Should you be sick, and not able to work, and want money to a small amount at different times, write to me, and I will always let you have it. I have not with me at present much money, though I will leave with my agent here, the Messrs. W., five dollars for you; you must give them a receipt for it. On my return from Pittsburg, I will call and see you if I have time; fail not to write to my father, for he made you a good master, and you should always treat him with respect, and cherish his memory so long as you live. Be good, industrious, and honourable, and if unfortunate in your undertakings, never forget that you have a friend in me. Farewell, and believe me your affectionate young master and friend.

ALFRED B .

That dispositions as ingenuous and noble as that of this young man, are commonly to be found either in slave States or free, is more than we dare to assert. But when we see such found, even among those who are born and bred slaveholders, we cannot but feel that there is encouragement for a fair, and mild, and brotherly presentation of truth, and every reason to lament hasty and wholesale denunciations. The great error of controversy is, that it is ever ready to assail persons rather than principles. The slave system, as a system, perhaps concentrates more wrong than any other now existing, and yet those who live under and in it may be, as we see, enlightened, generous, and amenable to reason. If the system alone is attacked, such minds will be the first to perceive its evils, and to turn against it; but if the system be attacked through individuals, self-love, wounded pride, and a thousand natural feelings, will be at once enlisted for its preservation. We therefore subjoin it as the moral of our story, that a man who has had the misfortune to be born and bred a slaveholder, may be enlightened, generous, humane, and capable of the most disinterested regard to the welfare of his slave.