

William Wells Brown

(1815-1884)

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historical fact that this most famous of American statesmen held slaves, but that their story is part of the national drama as well. Citing the selective nature of the Founding Father's ardor for individual freedom, Brown notes:

The same man, speaking of the probability that the slaves might some day attempt to gain their liberties by a revolution, said:

"I tremble for my country, when I recollect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep for ever. The Almighty has no attribute that can take sides with us in such a struggle."

But, sad to say, Jefferson is not the only American statesman who has spoken high-sounding words in favour of freedom, and then left his own children to die slaves.

For further emphasis, a passage from the Declaration of Independence[†] appears on the book's title page. (In the first American edition of the book, retitled *Clotel; A Tale of the Southern States* [1864], a senator stands in for the president. The original version of the novel was not published in the United States until 1969.)

Like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, *Clotel* belies its claim to be an imaginative work. In several places in the novel the author admonishes "This, reader, is no fiction," and the story is stocked with autobiographical elements and touched by the events of current history, including Nat Turner's rebellion, the colonization debate, and the increasing international isolation of the United States on the practice of slavery. Indeed, one wonders why Wells was drawn to fiction, rather than the more overtly political essays and pamphlets. He may have been influenced by the enormous popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852; or perhaps the newer form freed Brown's fictional characters from the specificity of a single time and place, using his "unvarnished narrative of one doomed by the laws of the Southern States" to tell "not only its own story of grief, but speak of a thousand wrongs and woes beside, which never see the light."

William Wells Brown was the author of more than sixteen volumes, including the first drama written by an African-American, *The Escape or a Leap for Freedom* (1858); *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863); a very early work of black history, *The Negro in the American Rebellion, His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867); *The Rising Son: or the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (1874); and *My Southern Home* (1880). He died in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in 1884.

Antislavery lecturer, novelist, playwright, and author, William Wells Brown was one of the most prominent African-American men of his day. He was born in Lexington, Kentucky, the son of a slave mother and a slaveholder. A few years later, the household moved to Missouri and William was hired out to an innkeeper and later a river trader. After several attempts, William escaped on New Year's Day 1834 and fled to Canada, aided along the way by a Quaker, Wells Brown, he took the man's name as his own. His account of his escape, the *Narrative of William W. Brown, Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*, was published in Boston by the Anti-Slavery Society in 1847, followed the next year by his song-poems *The Anti-Slavery Harp*. In 1849 Brown was invited to the Paris Peace Congress by Victor Hugo, and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, he remained in England for five years. While in Europe, Brown met such notable figures as Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, and he published *Three Years in Europe* (1852) and the earliest version of his novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853). (*Clotel* is considered the first novel written by an African-American author, though Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*,[†] printed in 1859, is the first such work originally published in the United States.)

Partly autobiographical, partly fictitious, and partly allegorical, *Clotel* tells the episodic and melodramatic story of three generations of African-American women, the mistress of Thomas Jefferson and her descendants. While several themes run through the novel—the hypocrisy of a Christianity that perverts its teaching to its own ends; the complicity of all of society in the brutal social compact between slaves and masters; and the "prejudice [that] followed the coloured man into every place that he might enter," even in the free North—it takes as its central theme the corrupting influence of slavery on the family, demonstrated by the lustful tendencies of slaveholders and the practice of selling one's own children.

By using Thomas Jefferson as the slaveholding figure whose presence is ever felt behind the novel, Brown does not merely acknowledge the

from *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*

"Society does not frown upon the man who sits with his mulatto child upon his knee, whilst its mother stands a slave behind his chair."

CHAPTER I THE NEGRO SALE

"Why stand she near the auction stand,
That girl so young and fair?
What brings her to this dismal place,
Why stand she weeping there?"

WITH THE GROWING POPULATION OF SLAVES IN THE SOUTHERN States of America, there is a fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slaveowners, and their mothers slaves. Society does not frown upon the man who sits with his mulatto child upon his knee, whilst its mother stands a slave behind his chair. The late Henry Clay, some years ago, predicted that the abolition of Negro slavery would be brought about by the amalgamation of the races. John Randolph, a distinguished slaveholder of Virginia, and a prominent statesman, said in a speech in the legislature of his native state, that "the blood of the first American statesmen runs through the veins of the slave of the South." In all the cities and towns of the slave states, the real Negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population. This fact is, of itself, the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America.

In all the slave states, the law says:—"Slaves shall be deemed, sold, bought, taken, reputed, and adjudged in law to be chattels personal in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executor, administrators and assigns, to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever. A slave is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labour. He can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything, but what must belong to his master. The slave is entirely subject to the will of his master, who may correct and punish him, though not with unusual rigour, or see as to maim and mutilate or expose him to the danger of loss of life, or to cause his death. The slave, to remain a slave, must be sensible that there is no appeal from his condition." Where the slave is placed by law entirely under the control of the master who claims him, body and soul, as property, what else could he be?

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pected than the most depraved social condition? The marriage relation, the oldest and most sacred institution given to man by his Creator, is unknown and unrecognised in the slave laws of the United States. Would that we could say, that the moral and religious teaching in the slave states were better than the laws; but, alas! we cannot. A few years since, some slaveholders became a little uneasy in their minds about the rightfulness of permitting slaves to take to themselves husbands and wives, while they still had others living, and applied to their religious teachers for advice; and the following will show how this grave and important subject was treated:—

"Is a servant, whose husband or wife has been sold by his or her master into a distant country, to be permitted to marry again?"

The query was referred to a committee, who made the following report; which, after discussion, was adopted:—

"That in view of the circumstances in which servants in this country are placed, the committee are unanimous in the opinion, that it is better to permit servants thus circumstanced to take another husband or wife."

Such was the answer from a committee of the "Shiloh Baptist Association;" and instead of receiving light, those who asked the question were plunged into deeper darkness!

A similar question was put to the "Savannah River Association," and the answer, as the following will show, did not materially differ from the one we have already given:—

"Whether, in a case of involuntary separation, of such a character as to preclude all prospect of future intercourse, the parties ought to be allowed to marry again."

Answer—

"That such separation among persons situated as our slaves are, is civilly a separation by death; and they believe that, in the sight of God, it would be so viewed. To forbid second marriages in such cases would be to expose the parties, not only to stronger hardships and strong temptation, but to church-censure for acting in obedience to their master, who cannot be expected to acquiesce in a regulation at variance with justice to the slaves, and to the spirit of that command which regulates marriage among Christians. The slaves are not free agents; and

a dissolution by death is not more entirely without their consent, and beyond their control, than by such separation."

Although marriage, as the above indicates, is a matter which the slaveholders do not think is of any importance, or of any binding force with their slaves; yet it would be doing that degraded class an injustice, not to acknowledge that many of them do regard it as a sacred obligation, and show a willingness to obey the commands of God on this subject. Marriage is, indeed, the first and most important institution of human existence—the foundation of all civilisation and culture—the root of church and state. It is the most intimate covenant of heart formed among mankind; and for many reasons the only relation in which they feel the true sentiments of humanity. It gives scope for every human virtue, since each of these is developed from the love and confidence which here predominate. It unites all which ennobles and beautifies life,—sympathy, kindness of will and deed, gratitude, devotion, and every delicate, intimate feeling. As the only asylum for true education, it is the first and last sanctuary of human culture. As husband and wife, through each other become conscious of complete humanity, and every human feeling, and every human virtue; so children, at their first awakening in the fond covenant of love between parents, both of whom are tenderly concerned for the same object, find an image of complete humanity leagued with free love. The spirit of love which prevails between them acts with creative power upon the young mind, and awakens every germ of goodness within it. His invisible and incalculable influence of parental life acts more upon the child than all the efforts of education, whether by means of instruction, precept, or exhortation. If this be a true picture of the vast influence for good of the institution of marriage, what must be the moral degradation of that people to whom marriage is denied? Not content with depriving them of all the higher and holier enjoyments of this relation, by degrading and darkening their souls, the slaveholder denies to his victim even that slight alleviation of his misery, which would result from the marriage relation being protected by law and public opinion. Such is the influence of slavery in the United States, that the ministers of religion, even in the so-called free states, are the mere echoes, instead of the correctors, of public sentiment.

We have thought it advisable to show that the present system of chattel slavery in America undermines the entire social condition of man, so as to prepare the reader for the following narrative of slave life, in that otherwise happy and prosperous country.

In all the large towns in the Southern States, there is a class of slaves who are permitted to hire their time of their owners, and for which they pay a price. These are mulatto women, or quadroons, as they are familiarly known, and are distinguished for their fascinating beauty. The handsomest usually pays the highest price for her time. Many of these women are the favorites of persons who furnish them with the means of paying their own-

ers, and not a few are dressed in the most extravagant manner. Reader, when you take into consideration the fact, that amongst the slave population no safeguard is thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave women to be chaste, you will not be surprised when we tell you that immorality and vice pervade the cities of the Southern States in a manner unknown in the cities and towns of the Northern States. Indeed most of the slave women have no higher aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man. And at Negro balls and parties, this class of women usually cut the greatest figure.

At the close of the year—the following advertisement appeared in a newspaper published in Richmond, the capital of the state of Virginia:—
"Notice: Thirty-eight Negroes will be offered for sale on Monday, November 10th, at twelve o'clock, being the entire stock of the late John Graves, Esq. The Negroes are in good condition, some of them very prime; among them are several mechanics, able-bodied field hands, ploughboys, and women with children at the breast, and some of them very prolific in their generating qualities, affording a rare opportunity to any one who wishes to raise a strong and healthy lot of servants for their own use. Also several mulatto girls of rare personal qualities: two of them very superior. Any gentleman or lady wishing to purchase, can take any of the above slaves on trial for a week, for which no charge will be made." Amongst the above slaves to be sold were Currer and her two daughters, Clotel and Althesa; the latter were the girls spoken of in the advertisement as "very superior." Currer was a bright mulatto, and of prepossessing appearance, though then nearly forty years of age. She had hired her time for more than twenty years, during which time she had lived in Richmond. In her younger days Currer had been the housekeeper of a young slaveholder; but of later years had been a laundress or washerwoman, and was considered to be a woman of great taste in getting up linen. The gentleman for whom she had kept house was Thomas Jefferson, by whom she had two daughters. Jefferson being called to Washington to fill a government appointment, Currer was left behind, and thus took herself to the business of washing, by which means she paid her master, Mr. Graves, and supported herself and two children. At the time of the decease of her master, Currer's daughters, Clotel and Althesa, were aged respectively sixteen and fourteen years, and both, like most of their sex in America, were well grown. Currer early resolved to bring her daughters up as ladies, as she termed it, and therefore imposed little or no work upon them. As her daughters grew older, Currer had to pay a stipulated price for them; yet her notoriety as a laundress of the first class enabled her to put an extra price upon her charges, and thus she and her daughters lived in comparative luxury. To bring up Clotel and Althesa to attract attention, and especially at balls and parties, was the great aim of Currer. Although the term "Negro ball" is applied to most of these gatherings, yet a majority of the attendants are often whites. Nearly all the Negro parties in the cities and towns of the

Cite only her daughter.

Southern States are made up of quadroon and mulatto girls, and white men. These are democratic gatherings, where gentlemen, shopkeepers, and their clerks, all appear upon terms of perfect equality. And there is a degree of gentility and decorum in these companies that is not surpassed by similar gatherings of white people in the Slave States. It was at one of these parties that Horatio Green, the son of a wealthy gentleman of Richmond, was first introduced to Clotel. The young man had just returned from college, and was in his twenty-second year. Clotel was sixteen, and was admitted by all to be the most beautiful girl, coloured or white, in the city. So attentive was the young man to the quadroon during the evening that it was noticed by all, and became a matter of general conversation; while Currer appeared delighted beyond measure at her daughter's conquest. From that evening, young Green became the favourite visitor at Currer's house. He soon promised to purchase Clotel, as speedily as it could be effected, and make her mistress of her own dwelling; and Currer looked forward with pride to the time when she should see her daughter emancipated and free. It was a beautiful moonlight night in August, when all who reside in tropical climes are eagerly gasping for a breath of fresh air, that Horatio Green was seated in the small garden behind Currer's cottage, with the object of his affections by his side. And it was here that Horatio drew from his pocket the newspaper, wet from the press, and read the advertisement for the sale of the slaves to which we have alluded; Currer and her two daughters being of the number. At the close of the evening's visit, and as the young man was leaving, he said to the girl, "You shall soon be free and your own mistress."

As might have been expected, the day of sale brought an unusual large number together to compete for the property to be sold. Farmers who make business of raising slaves for the market were there; slave-traders and speculators were also numerous; and in the midst of this throng was one who felt a deeper interest in the result of the sale than any other of the bystanders; this was young Green. True to his promise, he was there with a blank bank check in his pocket, awaiting with impatience to enter the list as bidder for the beautiful slave. The less valuable slaves were first placed upon the auction block, one after another, and sold to the highest bidder. Husbands and wives were separated with a degree of indifference that unknown in any other relation of life, except that of slavery. Brothers and sisters were torn from each other; and mothers saw their children leave them for the last time on this earth.

It was late in the day, when the greatest number of persons were thought to be present, that Currer and her daughters were brought forward to the place of sale. Currer was first ordered to ascend the auction stand, which she did with a trembling step. The slave mother was sold to a trader. Thesha, the youngest, and who was scarcely less beautiful than her sister, was sold to the same trader for one thousand dollars. Clotel was the last, and, as expected, commanded a higher price than any that had been offered for

sale that day. The appearance of Clotel on the auction block created a deep sensation amongst the crowd. There she stood, with a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers; her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position. The auctioneer commenced by saying that "Miss Clotel had been reserved for the last, because she was the most valuable. How much, gentlemen? Real Albino, fit for a fancy girl for any one. She enjoys good health, and has a sweet temper. How much do you say?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Only five hundred for such a girl as this? Gentlemen, she is worth a deal more than that sum; you certainly don't know the value of the article you are bidding upon. Here, gentlemen, I hold in my hand a paper certifying that she has a good moral character."

"Seven hundred."

"Ah; gentlemen, that is something like. This paper also states that she is very intelligent."

"Eight hundred."

"She is a devoted Christian, and perfectly trustworthy."

"Nine hundred."

"Nine fifty."

"Ten."

"Eleven."

"Twelve hundred." Here the sale came to a dead stand. The auctioneer stopped, looked around, and began in a rough manner to relate some anecdotes relative to the sale of slaves, which, he said, had come under his own observation. At this juncture the scene was indeed strange. Laughing, joking, swearing, smoking, spitting, and talking kept up a continual hum and noise amongst the crowd; while the slave-girl stood with tears in her eyes, at one time looking towards her mother and sister, and at another towards the young man whom she hoped would become her purchaser.

"The chastity of this girl is pure; she has never been from under her mother's care; she is a virtuous creature."

"Thirteen."

"Fourteen."

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen hundred dollars," cried the auctioneer, and the maiden was struck for that sum. This was a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more. And this, too, in a city thronged with churches, whose tall spires look like so many signals pointing

to heaven, and whose ministers preach that slavery is a God-ordained institution!

What words can tell the inhumanity, the atrocity, and the immorality of that doctrine which, from exalted office, commends such a crime to the favour of enlightened and Christian people? What indignation from all the world is not due to the government and people who put forth all their strength and power to keep in existence such an institution? Nature abhors it; the age repels it; and Christianity need all her meekness to forgive it.

Clotel was sold for fifteen hundred dollars, but her purchaser was Horatio Green. Thus closed a Negro sale, at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder!

"O God! My every heart-string cries,
Dost thou these scenes behold
In this our boasted Christian land,
And must the truth be told?

"Blush, Christian, blush! for e'en the dark,
Untutored heathen see
Thy inconsistency; and, lo!
They scorn thy God, and thee!"

1853

Harriet E. Wilson (1807?-1870)

Harriet Wilson's novel (*Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*), printed in 1859, is considered the first novel published by an African-American in the United States. (William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*[†] appeared six years earlier in London, but was not published in Boston until 1864.) What little is known about its author's life has been gleaned from several letters of support appended to the work, and recent diligent scholarship.

According to Henry Louis Gates, who has pieced together details of the author's life, Harriet E. Adams was probably born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1807 or 1808. She married Thomas Wilson in 1851 in New Hampshire and gave birth to a son, George Mason, in 1852. The boy's father seems to have deserted the family before the child was born, and Wilson gave him up to foster care while she attempted to have her book published to raise funds, appealing directly to her readers in the book's preface: "Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life."

Like other sentimental women's novels of the period, *Our Nig* is full of melodramatic scenes as it recounts the life of its heroine, Alfrado, a young mulatto referred to contemptuously as "Our Nig," abandoned by her impoverished white mother on the doorstep of an extended Northern family. While Mr. Bellmont is "a kind, humane man," Mrs. Bellmont is "self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe," and the novel is full of physical beatings and psychological cruelty, though in several instances Frado asserts herself with surprising boldness. The young girl eventually outlasts her period of servitude and, broken in health, makes various attempts at self-support. At the novel's end, she marries, has a child, and is abandoned before she comes into possession of "a valuable recipe, from which she might herself manufacture a useful article for her maintenance."

As did William Wells Brown in *Clotel*, Wilson displays here an ambiv-