

Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. "Slavery in New England." By Miss Sedgewick. *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 34, 1853, pp. 417-24.

## SLAVERY IN NEW ENGLAND.

BY MISS SEDGEWICK.

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Before the American Revolution, slavery extended throughout the United States. In New England it was on a very limited scale. There were household slaves in Boston, who drove the coaches, cooked the dinners, and shared the luxuries of rich houses; and a few were distributed among the most wealthy of the rural population. They were not numerous enough to make the condition a great evil or embarrassment, but quite enough to show its incompatibility with the demonstration of the truth, on which our declaration of Independence is based, that "all men are born equal," and have "an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The slaves in Massachusetts were treated with almost parental kindness. They were incorporated into the family, and each puritan household being a sort of religious structure, the relative duties of master and servant were clearly defined. No doubt the severest and longest task fell to the slave, but in the household of the farmer or artisan, the master and the mistress shared it, and when it was finished, the white and the black, like the feudal chief and his household servant, sat down to the same table, and shared the same viands. No doubt there were hard masters and cruel mistresses, and so there are cruel fathers and exacting mothers: unrestrained power is not a fit human trust. We know an old man, who, fifty years ago, when strict domestic discipline was a cardinal virtue, and "spare the rod and spoil the child" was written on the lintel, was in the unvarying habit, "after prayers" on a Monday morning, of setting his children, boys and girls, nine in number, in a row, and beginning with the eldest, a lad of eighteen, he inflicted an hebdomadal prospective chastisement down the whole line, to the little urchin of three years. And the tradition goes, that the possible transgressions of the week were never underrated—that these were supererogatory stripes for possible sins, or chance misdemeanors!

But this was a picturesque exception from the prevailing mildness of the parental government, and so were the cruelties exercised upon her slaves by a certain Madame A---, who lived in Sheffield, a border-town in the western part of Massachusetts, exceptional from the general course of patriarchal government. This Madame A---- belonged to the provincial gentry, and did not live long enough for the democratic wave to rise to her high-water mark. Her husband, as was, and is, not uncommon in New England, combined the duties of the soldier and the magistrate, and honourably discharged both. He won laurels in "the French war," (the war waged in the Northern British provinces), and wore them meekly. The plan of Providence to prevent monstrous discrepancies, by mating the tall with the short, the fat with the lean, the sour with the

sweet, &c., was illustrated by General A---- and his help-meet. He was the gentlest, most benign of men;

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she, a shrew untameable. He was an 'Allworthy,' or 'my Uncle Toby.' He had pity, tolerance, and forgiveness for every human error. There was no such word as error in Madame A----'s vocabulary. Every departure from her rule of rectitude was criminal. She was the type of punishment. Her justice was without scales as well as blind, so that she never weighed ignorance against error, nor temptation against sin. He was the kindest of masters to his slaves; she, the most despotic of mistresses. Happily for the servile household, those were the days of the fixed supremacy of man. No question of the equality of the sexes had impaired woman's contentment, or provoked man's fear or ridicule. The current of his authority had run undisturbed since first the river Pison flowed out of Eden. No "woman's rights' conventions" had dared to doubt the primitive law and curse, "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee:" so that, as we intimated, the servants of Madame A----, suffering under her despotism, had always a right of appeal to a higher tribunal. Whatever petty tyrannies the magnanimous General might quietly submit to in his own person, he never acquiesced in oppression of his people. Among them was a remarkable woman of unmixed African race. Her name was Elizabeth Freeman, transmuted to "Betty," and afterwards contracted by lisping lips from Mammy Bet, to Mum-Bett, by which name she was best known.

It has since been luminously translated in a French notice, into *Chut Babet*.

This woman,\* who was said by a competent judge to have "no superiors and few equals," was the property, "the chattel" of General A----. She had a sister in servitude with her, a sickly timid creature, over whom she watched as the lioness does over her cubs. On one occasion, when Madame A was making the patrol of her kitchen, she discovered a wheaten cake, made by Lizzy the sister, for herself, from the scrapings of the great oaken bowl in which the family batch had been kneaded. Enraged at the "thief," as she branded her, she seized a large iron shovel red hot from clearing the oven, and raised it over the terrified girl. Bet interposed her brawny arm, and took the blow. It cut quite across the arm to the bone, "but," she would say afterwards in concluding the story of the frightful scar she earned to her grave, "Madam never again laid her hand on Lizzy. I had a bad arm all winter, but Madam had the worst of it. I never covered the wound, and when people said to me, before Madam,—' Why, Betty! what ails your arm?' I only answered—' ask missis!" Which was the slave and which was the real mistress?

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She had another characteristic story of the days of her servitude; and she retained so vivid an impression of its circumstances, that when she related them in her old age, the blood of her hearers would curdle in their veins.

"It was in May," she would say, "just at the time of the apple blossoms; I was wetting the bleaching linen, when a smallish girl came in to the gate, and up the lane, and straight to me, and said, without raising her eyes, 'where is your master? I must speak with him.' I told her that my master was absent, that he would come home before night. 'Then I must stay,' she said, 'for I must speak with him.' I set down my watering pot, and told her to come with me into the house. I saw it was no common case. *Gals* in trouble were often coming to master." ('Girls in trouble,' is a definite rustic phrase, indicating but one species of trouble). "But," she continued, "I never saw one look like this. The blood seemed to have stopped in her veins; her face and neck were all in blotches of red and white. She had bitten her lip through; her voice was hoarse and husky, and her eyelids seemed to settle down as if she could never raise them again. I showed her into a bedroom next the kitchen, and shut the door, hoping Madam would not mistrust it, for she never overlooked anybody's wrongdoing but her own, and she had a partic'lar hatred of gals that had met with a misfortin; she could not abide them. She saw me bring the gal in—it was just her luck—she always saw everything. I heard her coming and I threw open the bedroom door; for seeing I could no way hide the poor child—she was not over fifteen—I determined to stand by her. When Madam had got half across the kitchen, in full sight of the child, she turned to me, and her eyes flashing like a cat's in the dark, she asked me, 'what that baggage wanted?' 'To speak to master.' 'What does she want to say to your master?' 'I don't know, ma'am.' 'I know,' she said—and there was no foul thing she didn't call the child; and when she had got to the end of her bad words, she ordered her to walk out of the house. Then the gal raised her eyes for the first time; she had not seemed to hear a word before. She did not speak—she did not sigh—nor sob—nor groan—but a sharp sound seemed to come right out of her heart; it was heart-breaking to hear it.

"' Sit still, child,' I said. At that Madam's temper rose like a thunder-storm. She said the house was hers, and again ordered the gal out of it. 'Sit still, child,' says I again. 'She shall go,' says madam. 'No, missis, she shan't,' says I. 'If the gal has a complaint to make, she has a right to see the judge; that's lawful, and stands to reason beside.' Madam knew when I set my foot down, I kept it down; so after blazing out, she walked away."

One should have known this remarkable woman, the native majesty of her deportment, the intelligence of her indomitable, irresistible will, to understand the calmness of the stranger-girl under her protection, and her sure victory over her hurricane of a mistress.

"When dinner-time came," she continued, "I offered the child

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a part of mine; I had no right to take madam's food and give it to her, and I didn't; but, poor little creature, she could no more eat than if she were a dead corpse; she tried when I begged her, but she could not. Master came home at evening." (It might have been noticed of Mum-Bett, that, to the end of her life, when referring to the days of her servitude, she spoke of General A---- as "my master," and tenderly, "my old master!" but

always of her mistress as "Madam.") "I got speech of master as he was getting off his horse. I told him that there was a poor afflicted gal—a child, one might call her—had been waiting all day to speak to him. He bid me bring her in, after supper. I knew Madam would berate her to master, but that did not signify with him. When he sent word he was ready, I took a lighted candle in each hand, and told the child to follow me. She did not seem frightened; she was just as she was in the morning, 'cept that the red blotches had gone, and she was all one dreadful waxy white.

"We went to the study. Master was sitting in his high-backed chair, before his desk. Master could not scare her, he looked so pitiful. I sets down the candles, walked back to the wall, and stood there; I knew master had no objections,—master and I understood one another. 'Come hither,' says master. The gal walked up to the desk. 'What is your name?'—'Tamor Graham.'—'Take off your bonnet, Tamor.' She took it off. Her hair was brown—a pretty brown, and curly, but all a tangle. Master looked at her." When Mum-Bett got to the point of her story, (every word, as she often repeated it, is "cut in" my memory), the tears started from her eyes, and she quietly wiped them away with the back of her hand. She was not given to tears. They were not her demonstration. "If ever there was a pitiful look," she continued, "it was that look of master's. I can see it yet. 'Now hold up your hand, Tamor,' he said, 'and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God!' She did. 'Sit down now, child,' he said, and drew a chair himself. She kind of fell into the chair, and clasped her hands tight together."

We cannot, and it is not needful for our purpose that we should, go into the particulars of the wretched girl's story. It was steeped in horrors; in homely rustic life, a repetition of the crime of the Cenci tragedy. The girl had knit her soul to her task, and she went unflinching through it.

"Once," said Mum-Bett, "my master stopped her, and said, 'Do you know, child, that if your father is committed, and convicted, on your oath, he must die for the crime?' 'Yes, sir, I know it!' 'You say he has pursued you again and again; why did you not complain before?' 'I escaped, sir,—and for my mother's sake—and my little brother's—poor boy!' and then she burst out like a child, and cried, and cried, and wrung her hands."

After the examination, General A---- gave the girl into Mum-Bett's hands, with orders that every thing should be done for her security and comfort. The father was apprehended—his child was confronted with him. "He was an awful-looking man,"

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Mum-Bett said, "He had short grey hair, but not close cropped, and when I led Tamor in, it rose, and every hair stood stiff and upright on his head. I've seen awful sights in my day, but nothing near to that."

Much corroborative testimony was obtained. There was then no court for capital trials in Berkshire, the county of General A----'s residence. The culprit was transferred to Hampshire to be tried. While Tamor remained at the General's she received a message,

requesting her to come to a sequestered lane at twilight, to meet her mother. Nothing suspecting, she went, and was seized and carried off, by two men, agents of her father, who hoped to escape by abducting the witness. A posse of militia was called out, and she was found in durance, in a hut in the depth of a wood. The mother and child did meet once, and but once. They locked their arms around each other. The mother shrieked—the girl was silent—livid, and when they were parted, more dead than alive.

The father was condemned. The daughter, at her earnest instance, was sent off to a distant province where it was understood she died not long after.

Mum-Bett's character was composed of few but strong elements. Action was the law of her nature, and conscious of superiority to all around her, she felt servitude intolerable. It was not the work—work was play to her. Her power of execution was marvellous. Nor was it awe of her kind master, or fear of her despotic mistress, but it was the galling of the harness, the irresistible longing for liberty. I have heard her say, with an emphatic shake of the head peculiar to her: "Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's *airth* a free woman—I would."

It was soon after the close of the revolutionary war, that she chanced at the village "meeting house," in Sheffield, to hear the Declaration of Independence read. She went the next day to the office of Mr. Theodore Sedgewick, then in the beginning of his honourable political and legal career. "Sir," said she, "I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, "all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I am not a dumb *critter*; won't the law give me my freedom?" I can imagine her upright form, as she stood dilating with her fresh hope based on the declaration of an intrinsic, inalienable right. Such a resolve as hers is like God's messengers—wind, snow, and hail—irresistible.

Her application was made to one who had generosity as well as intelligence to meet it. Mr. Sedgewick immediately instituted a suit in behalf of the extraordinary plaintiff; a decree was obtained in her favour. It was the first practical construction in Massachusetts of the declaration which had been to the black race a constitutional abstraction, and on this decision was based the freedom of the few slaves remaining in Massachusetts.

Mum-Bett immediately transferred herself to the service of her

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champion, if service that could be called, which was quite as much rule as service. She was in truth a sort of nurse—*gouvernante* in his house—an anomalous office in our land.

The children under her government regarded it, as the Jews did theirs, as a theocracy; and if a divine right were founded upon such ability and fidelity as hers, there would be no revolutions. Wider abuses make rebels. Soon after the close of the war, there was some resistance to the administration of the newly organised State Government in Massachusetts. Instead of the exemption from taxation which the ignorant had expected, a heavy imposition was necessarily laid upon them, and instead of the licence they had hoped from liberty, they found themselves fenced in by legal restraints. The Jack Cades banded together; dishonest men misled honest ones; the government was embarrassed; the courts were interrupted; and disorder prevailed throughout the western counties. A man named Shay was the leader; the rising has been dignified as Shay's war. There were some skirmishing, and one or two encounters called battles; but with the exception of a few wounds and three or four deaths, it was a bloodless contest—chiefly mischievous for the fright it gave the women, and the licensed forays of the dishonest and idle, who joined the insurgents. Those who had fancied that equality of rights and privileges would make equality of condition; that the mountains and mole-hills of gentle descent, education, and fortune would all sink before the proclamation of a republic, to one level, were grievously disappointed; and the old war was waged that began with the revolt in Heaven, and has been continued down to our day of socialism. The gentlemen were called the "ruffled shirts;" they were made prisoners wherever the insurgents could lay hands upon them; their houses were invaded, and their moveable property unceremoniously seized by those whose might made their right.

Mr. Sedgewick was a member of the state legislature, and absent from his home on duty, at Boston. His family were transferred to a place free from danger or annoyance; all his family, with the exception of the servants, and one young invalid child, Mum-Bett's pet. Leave her castle she would not, and her particular treasure she felt able to defend. She adopted a rather feminine mode of defence. She drew her bars and bolts, hung over the kitchen fire a large kettle of beer, and sounded her trump of defiance, the declaration that she would scald to death the first invader.

The insurgents knew she would keep her word, and on that occasion they preserved their distance.

The fear of personal molestation having subsided, the family returned to their home. They were not, however, secure from levies by the honest insurgents, and thefts by the dishonest. For them all, Mum-Bett had an aristocratic contempt. She did not recognise their "new-made honour," but accoutered and decked as they were in epaulets and ivy boughs, they were, to her, " Nick Bottom the weaver, Robin Starveling the tailor, Tom Snout the tinker," &c.

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The captain of a company, with two or three subalterns, came to Mr. Sedgwick's with the intent to capture Jenny Gray, a beautiful young mare, esteemed too spirited for any hand but the master of the family, and "gentle as a dog in his hand," Mum-Bett would say. So a cowardly serving man obeyed the order to bring Jenny Gray from the

stable, and saddle and bridle her. Mum-Bett stood at the open house-door, keenly observing the procedure. The captain, with much difficulty, for the animal was snorting and restive, mounted; but whether from an instinct of repulsion, or from some magnetic sign from Mum-Bett (I suspect the latter), she reared and plunged, and threw her unskilled rider on the turf behind her. Again the Captain mounted, and again was thrown; the third time he essayed with like default, then having got some hard bruises, he stood off, and hesitated. While he did so, Mum-Bett started out, unbuckled the saddle, threw it one side, and leading Jenny Gray to a gate that opened into a wide field skirting a wooded, unfenced, upland, she slipped off the bridle, clapped Jenny on the side, and whistled her off, and off she went, careering beyond the hope of Captain Smith, the joiner.

Alas! Jenny Gray was not always so fortunate! One dark night she disappeared from the stable, and the last that was seen of her, she was galloping away into the State of New York, bearing one of the Shay leaders from the pursuit of justice.

On another occasion, when a party of marauders were making their domiciliary visits to the houses of the few gentry in the village, they entered Mr. Sedgwick's, and demanded the key of the cellar. In those days, the distance now traversed in a few hours was a week's journey. The supplies of to-morrow, now sent from New York on the order of to-day, were then laid in semi-annually, and Mr. S.'s cellar was furnished for six months' unstinted hospitality. Mum-Bett led the party, embodying the dignity of the family in her own commanding manner. She adroitly directed their attention first to a store of bottled brown stout. One of the men knocking off the neck of a bottle, took a draught, and pithily expressed his abhorrence of the 'bitter stuff.' 'How should you like what gentlemen like?' she asked in a tone of derision bitterer than the brown stout. 'Is there nothing better here?' they asked. '*Gentlemen* want nothing better,' she answered with contempt, and they, partly disappointed, but more crestfallen, turned back and left untasted, liquor which they would have been as ready as Caliban to swear was 'not earthly,' was 'celestial liquor.' She managed her defensive warfare to the end with equal adroitness. She had secreted the watches and few trinkets of the ladies, and small articles of plate, in a large oaken chest containing her own wardrobe; no contemptible store either. Bett had a regal love of the solid and the splendid wear, and to the last of her long life went on accumulating chintzes and silks.

When, after tramping through the house, they came to Bett's locked chest and demanded the key, she lifted up her hands, and laughed in scorn. "Ah! Sam Cooper," she said, "you and your fellows are no

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better than I thought you. You call me 'wench' and 'nigger,' and you are not above rummaging my chest. You will have to break it open to do it!" Sam Cooper, a quondam broom-pedlar (to whom Bett had pointed out, in their progress, his worthless brooms rotting in the cellar) was the leader of the party. "He turned," she said, "and slunk away like a whipped cur as he was!"

We have marked a few striking points along the course of her life, but its whole course was like a noble river, that makes rich and glad the dwellers on its borders.

She was a guardian to the childhood, a friend to the maturity, a staff to the old age of those she served. More than once, by a courageous assumption of responsibility, by resisting the absurd medical usages of the time, in denying cold water and fresh air to burning fevers, she saved precious lives.

The time came for leaving even the shadow of service, and she retired to a freehold of her own, which she had purchased with her savings. These had been rather freely used by her only child, and her grandchildren, who, like most of their race, were addicted to festive joys.

In the last act of the drama of life, when conscience upheaves the barren or the bloated past, and poor humanity quails, she met death, not as the dreaded tyrant, but as the angel-messenger of God. Some of the "orthodox" pious felt a technical yet sincere concern for her. Even her worth required the passport of "Church Membership." The clergyman of the village visited her with the rigors of the old creed, and presenting the terrors of the law, said, "Are you not afraid to meet your God?" "No, Sir," she replied, calmly and emphatically — "No, Sir. I have tried to do my duty, and I am *not* afraid!" She had passed from the slavery of spiritual conventionalism into the liberty of the children of God.

She lies now in the village burial ground, in the midst of those she loved and blessed; of those who loved and honoured her. The first ray of the sun, that as it rose over the beautiful hills of Berkshire, was welcomed by her vigilant eye, now greets her grave; its last beam falls on the marble inscribed with the following true words:—

"ELIZABETH FREEMAN,  
(known by the name of Mum-Bett),  
died Dec. 28th, 1829.  
Her supposed age was 85 years.

She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years. She could neither read nor write; yet in her own sphere she had no superior nor equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a truth, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial she was the most efficient helper and the tenderest friend. Good mother, farewell!"

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\* Our readers may have seen some account of this woman by Miss Martineau, I believe, in her "Society in America;" but as that account was but partial, and by a stranger, I have thought that one more extended, without exaggeration or colouring, in every particular true, might be acceptable at a time when "Uncle Tom's Cabin" has excited curiosity as to the individual character of the African race. It was said, perhaps truly, by that



distinguished man, Charles Follen, that if you could establish the equality of the slave with the master in a single instance, you had answered the argument for slavery furnished by the inferiority of the African race.