

MARIA WESTON CHAPMAN

Pinda:—A True Tale

Dubbed the “great goddess” by some and “Lady Macbeth” by others, the abolitionist campaigner Maria Weston Chapman (1806–1885) was legendary for her energy. Wife of a Boston businessman and mother of four, she was an active member of the Boston, New England, and American Anti-Slavery societies. For twenty-three years she organized the annual Anti-Slavery Fair, the chief fundraising instrument of the American Anti-Slavery Society, until in 1858 she replaced them with the even more lucrative “Subscription Anniversaries.” From 1836, she was the recording secretary of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. She edited *The Liberty Bell* from 1839 to 1858, and contributed as writer and editor to countless other antislavery periodicals over the years. Her dramatic short story “Pinda,” published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York, succeeds in being both romantic and political.

CHAPTER I.—A SHIP’S CABIN.

One dark night in the year 1836, an unusual stir took place on the deck of the good ship *Eli Whitney*, about to sail from Boston to Savannah. It was occasioned by the appearance of an officer, charged with a writ of *habeas corpus*, in favor of a supposed slave, who was known to have been carried on board by her master.

Slaveholders are accustomed to say that their victims cannot be persuaded to take their freedom, and to bring their own assertion as a proof of the merits of slavery. It was, therefore, an anxious moment for the friends of freedom on shore, while they waited to learn the result of the legal process by which they offered to the poor slave-woman the freedom secured by the laws of Massachusetts to all slaves brought under its jurisdiction by their masters.

Their anxiety was not without cause. Notwithstanding the statement of the officer that she was free; notwithstanding the assurances of her master that she might do as she pleased, she refused to leave the ship. She was evidently both confused and alarmed, as well as undecided, for a few moments; but she finally

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persisted in remaining with her master, and, to the great pain of all the friends of freedom who were aware of the circumstance, she was carried away into slavery.

They felt a double grief; not only for the individual in question, but for the reproach her course could not fail to bring upon their cause. *They* knew, for they had felt and reflected upon this subject, and had seen and known more than the heedless community in which they lived gave them credit for, that there might exist a thousand reasons why this woman should wish to return to Savannah, without supposing her to be in love with slavery. But they knew also that advantage would be taken of the fact by the enemies of the cause, to prove that slaves do not wish to be free.

As they expected, the newspapers of the ensuing day were loud in censure of their "impertinent interference with gentlemen's servants, who were wise enough to prefer slavery with their masters, to trusting themselves with these hare-brained philanthropists."

CHAPTER II.—THE SLAVE HUT.

"Dear wife," said Abraham to Pinda, as they stood by the door of his little hut, in the yellow moonlight of a Savannah evening,—“you must never lose another chance for freedom out of regard to me. Look here!” (digging in a little sand-heap, and turning up his hoarded silver to the rays,) “See what I have saved, besides paying master ten dollars a month. You will want some of this at the North. Master has written to Mr. Mitchell to send you on to wait upon Missis in New Hampshire, because he feels sure of you, since that night on board the *Eli Whitney*. Don't cry, Pinda. If freedom don't part us, slavery will. When you get to the North, take the first chance and be off. Don't cry, Pinda, don't! See how nice I have got your trunk packed; and here is a list I got made of all the things in it; may be they have some law by which you can get the things again, if you are obliged to leave them in master's hands at first. See! here is the key—all safe. He has sold two or three boys lately, and our turn will come sooner or later.”

This consideration helped Pinda to stifle her grief at parting from her husband. He might yet rejoin her; they might yet be

free and happy.—She had no choice but to *go* to the North at the mandate of her master's agent; and she resolved, that night, to *stay* at the North, in the hope that her husband might find opportunity to follow her. When, on board the *Eli Whitney*, the chance for freedom had been presented to her, her mind had been convulsed by conflicting emotions. If she had not returned, her master, she knew, would have deemed it but a proper retribution to leave Abraham in a state of cruel uncertainty respecting her. Now, that part of the case was changed; and though the husband and wife parted in grief, it was grief mingled with hope.

CHAPTER III.—THE ANTI-SLAVERY MEETING.

On the 25th of January, 1837, the 6th annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had called together a true-hearted array of the sons and daughters of that ancient Commonwealth. "Not many rich—not many noble" were there, as the world counts riches and nobility; but of the rich in generous sympathy—the noble in their devotedness to freedom, came a goodly multitude. Farmers, traders, and artisans—the fair and the dark—of English and of African descent, men, women and children, they thronged together with one heart and with one mind: the worthiest children of Massachusetts, by this token, that the trumpet-call of freedom came not to them in vain. During one of their *thirteen* sittings on that occasion, a stranger rose to speak. He was gentlemanly and prepossessing in his appearance, and every ear gave him attention. He was announced to the assembly as MR. LOGAN, of Savannah. He added that, though a slaveholder, he was also a Christian; and could he be convinced that slaveholding was condemned by Scripture, he would instantly renounce it; and he cited the case of Onesimus and Philemon, and the laws of Moses. The bible argument *against* slavery, (thanks to the labors of anti-slavery societies, now the only one the New England people will receive,) was fully presented to him. His reply was, "You have said much that is true, and much that is new;—but what is true is not new, and what is new is not true." He proceeded to declare that he still held himself open to conviction, and sincerely hoped that, if he were in the wrong, he might be convinced of it, though

at present he saw no proof of it, either from Scripture or from the nature of slavery. "You call us men-stealers," he said, "as if that could be branded as a sin, which was universally practiced by the Patriarchs."—"Well, Sir!" exclaimed a man of color who had more than once sprung upon his feet as the discussion proceeded; "what said the patriarchs themselves of it? *Indeed I was stolen*,—said the patriarch Joseph:—We *are* verily *guilty* concerning our brother! said the other sons of Jacob." Driven from this ground, the Southerner proceeded to enlarge upon the felicity secured to the slaves by the system. "Our servants are very happy," he said. "One of my own people had the opportunity presented her, last year, of leaving me. We were on board the *Eli Whitney*, down in your harbor here, just about to sail for the dreadful land of slavery; but she would not quit me. They could not get her to do it. There is nothing she so much dreads as an abolitionist. She knows she is far better off as a slave than are your free women at the North. She told the other women on her return, that 'her missis' mother, in New Hampshire did more work in a day, than they were obliged to do in a week.' She saw no charms in your boasted northern liberty."

Great pains were taken by the meeting that the lonely advocate of slavery should have no reason to think himself unkindly or unfairly dealt with, because he was in a minority of one. Men checked themselves in their expressions of detestation for his sentiments, lest he should suppose that they had a disposition to deny him opportunity for the fullest presentation of them.

At the close of the meeting, more than one of the members invited the stranger to share the hospitalities of their homes. They hoped, by their private conversation and kindly reception, to assure him that it was the best good of the South and of the whole country that they sought, in their labors for the abolition of slavery. Their houses were open day and night to the fugitive slave, and they hoped that good might, in this instance, result from opening them to the slaveholder.

"Mamma!" exclaimed a little girl of six years old, who pressed closer to the side of her parents as she heard Mr. Logan accept an invitation to dine with them, "Oh! if you please, mamma, let me dine with Aunt Mary." "It is not convenient to-day, Elizabeth," replied the mother. "But, mamma! I cannot bear to sit down to dinner with a man who sells little children."

CHAPTER IV.—THE MORNING CALL.

If my readers are Bostonians, they cannot have failed to pass through West street, one of the avenues leading from the Common to Washington street. On the left side of it, they will recollect stables and carriage manufactories—on the right, a row of brick dwellings. It was in the drawing-room of one of these houses, that the conversation I am about to relate went on between the mistress of the mansion and a visitor. Both ladies seemed “on hospitable thoughts intent.” “The Logans are Presbyterians, I learn,” said the visitor, “and so I shall ask all our orthodox friends to meet them. I think they will be altogether more likely to be impressed by the arguments and conversation of those of their own denomination.”

“When do you receive them?” rejoined the lady of the house.

“This evening,” was the reply. “I am on my way there now, to invite them.”

Here the conversation was interrupted. “Some one wishes to speak with you a moment.” Apologizing to her friend, the lady descended to the hall. The person in waiting informed her that, as he was crossing the street near the Providence Rail-road, he had observed a woman of color standing in the way, as if doubtful where to go. She had on her head only the turban that constitutes the head-dress of the Southern female slave, and her whole appearance bespoke her condition.

“Are you a slave?” he said. “Yes; my master sent for me to come to him, but I cannot find the way.”

“Do you wish to be free?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me, then;”—and he conducted her to the nearest anti-slavery dwelling, which chanced to be the one where we have seen our two ladies in conversation.

They set food before the travel-worn stranger, and bade her depend on them that no one thing that her case required should be left undone.

“Master sent for me to be forwarded here to him, but I cannot find the way. I should not go near him, only he has my trunk with every thing I have. We got snagged going down the river, and I was put on board one vessel and my trunk on board another, which got on first. Master’s house is here,” she said,

showing a soiled scrap of paper, on which was written, though it had become almost illegible, "No. 5 Court street."

"What is your master's name!" exclaimed both ladies, in a breath.

"LOGAN."

Great was the astonishment of the two friends at this wonderful coincidence. "Truth was strange—stranger than fiction." Here than was the "happy slave" of the hero of the Massachusetts annual meeting! Here was she who had refused to take her freedom; the heroine of the Eli Whitney, who had dared slavery that she might not distress the heart of her husband.

Her new friends advised her to go openly to her master, and claim her freedom and her property, face to face. She shook her head. "He could contrive to hinder me in a thousand ways, if I let him know first. No,—I'd better take my clothes and things and go off before he knows—if I knew how to find this place."

"Follow me," said the projector of the Presbyterian tea-party. "I am going there this moment, and shall delight to show you the way."

Forward they went, down Washington street, up Court street; the lady rang at No. 5, and delivered her note of invitation to the servant; Pinda squeezed past, inquiring for "my master"—and so ended this eventful morning.

CHAPTER V. — THE TEA PARTY.

As 7 o'clock that evening drew nigh, the guests began to gather around the pleasant hearth of the "South-end Abolitionist." The Logans, for whom the party had been made, failed not to be of the number.

The talk naturally fell on slavery, and Mr. Logan, however open to conviction he might have kept his mind, confessed himself still unconverted. He dwelt particularly on the unfitness of the slaves for freedom, and on their unwillingness to receive it. Again "my woman" was walked over the course, as at the annual meeting, and the fact of her arrival that morning announced.

"How she ever found me," he said, "I cannot conjecture." The hostess, who labored under no such uncertainty as to the *modus operandi*, looked hard into the fire, the better to conceal her inclination to laugh.

“She could not even procure a carriage,” he continued, “to bring her to me from the railroad. There is much boasting of liberty at the North, but there seems to be little real justice here for her race.” This was too painfully true to excite mirth.

“I think,” he went on, smiling courteously, with a slight and general bow to the company, “that we of the South may defy even such zeal and perseverance, as I admiringly acknowledge in the abolitionists. We can rely on the attachment of our servants. I knew, when I sent to my agent for the one who arrived this morning, how much pleasure it would give her to rejoin us.”

The host, unaware of the developments of the morning, could not enter so fully as the ladies into the exquisite comedy of the scene, but the words, “I sent to my agent,” &c. arrested his attention; and by a mute glance, he took the company to witness that here was a case in which a slave might hereafter require their aid to prove her master’s acknowledged agency in her transportation.

In the relative position of the company to each other, affected as it had been by the events of the morning, a free flow of conversation could hardly be expected. Some, wondering at the constrained manner of others, strove to sustain the conversation upon the scriptural arguments, and the loveliness of liberty—but it was a relief to all when the evening was at an end. To one party, that they might recount to each other the events of the day; to the other, that they might with the help of “our woman,” just arrived, arrange their line of march from No. 5 Court street to New Hampshire, which was to be taken up the ensuing morning.

How many a slip is there between the cup and the lip! “Our woman,” on being summoned by Mr. Logan, to attend upon the night-toilette of her mistress, was ascertained to be in society altogether unbecoming the character of “an attached slave;”—i. e. *among the missing*.

CHAPTER VI. — THE FREE DWELLING.

After a few weeks residence with the friend whose house had first sheltered her, Pinda expressed a desire to be no longer dependent on any one, for what her own exertions might procure. She selected a room in —— street, where she lived as happily

as the separation from her husband would permit. She experienced no difficulty in providing for all her wants by the labor of her hands. It was, to say the least, *as easy*, she found, to wash, iron, brew, bake, sweep or "clean paint," *for a consideration*, as to do all these things without receiving any consideration at all.

She was sometimes annoyed by Mr. Logan, who never failed, when he visited Boston, to alarm her by endeavors to find out her humble apartment, or to send her some threat, from which, in her uncertainty as to the extent of his power, she could not help suffering.

She used, when so annoyed, to pay a visit to "her people," as she always called those who first sheltered her, that she might obtain fresh assurance of the safety of her new position.

"Mr. Logan tells us," said this family to her, (for they always made it a point of conscience to transmit his messages,) "that he wants you to go back with him, that he may have you nursed up, and taken care of." "Why did not he take care of me when he had the chance?" was the reply.

"He says he wishes very much to see you."

"I have seen as much as I want to *of him*."

When those who had the opportunity of watching the facts here narrated, as they evolved from the arrangement of Providence, hear it said that slaves cannot take care of themselves if made free, they point to PINDA, living in freedom with industrious and provident comfort.

When they hear the ignorant and heartless assertion that slaves do not wish to be free, they point to PINDA, struggling between the claims of freedom and affection.

When they hear it denied that the North is guilty of upholding slavery, they point to the "gentlemanly and religious slaveholder,"—connected by marriage with the farthest North—bringing his slaves into the free New Hampshire homes—taking his place in the assemblies of our northern social and religious life—partaking of every symbol of Christian communion—following his letters of introduction into the first society, and disseminating every where the principles of unrighteousness and slavery: and then they bid the beholder mark the conduct of those who claim to represent the piety and intelligence of the North, towards such a man.

They claim to be ministers of Christ and conservators of morals; yet their "poor dumb mouths" are never opened on this giant iniquity, and silent they are determined to remain, till the mouths of "Garrison and the like" are shut. When we see such men, racked by the pressure of a public sentiment in the process of regeneration, all refusing to do more than to admit that "it might, perhaps, be well for me to *begin to consider* this subject," they point to the *slaveholder's* unrebuked and incessant labors among us, and say, "While we have among us devotedness to slavery like this, and continue to sustain religious teachers who refuse to condemn it, while they unhesitatingly denounce abolitionists, what can be said but that the North is guilty of upholding slavery with the most powerful means she possesses?"

CHAPTER VII.—THE SURPRISE.

A year and seven months from the time of Pinda's arrival in Boston, as the cold November rains began to set in, she sat lonely by her humble hearth in B. street. A melancholy feeling crept over her as she thought of her absent husband, and of the length of time that had elapsed since they parted. She thought of all the dreadful uncertainties of his situation. Had Mr. Logan sold him to the far South? Had he kept him in ignorance of her fate? Had he succeeded in making Abraham believe Pinda dishonest and unworthy? She had every reason to suppose the latter might be the case, as Mr. Logan had spared no pains to create prejudice against her in the minds of her new friends, by declaring that she had robbed Abraham of all his savings before she left Savannah, as well as himself of large sums. Her heart sunk within her as she weighed the probabilities that she might never again behold her husband. She had once procured a letter to be written to him, but how many contingencies might have prevented his receiving it. The mail does not run for slaves, nor, as abolitionists have learned to their cost, for truly freemen either. In this, at least, we are in bonds as bound with them.

Overpowered with painful reflections, she sat nourishing the expiring fire, till it seemed the emblem of her perishing hopes. A knocking at the door aroused her, and as she opened, a man of color stood in the passage, bidding her come to a certain house he mentioned in Battery-march street that evening, and she

would find a letter from her husband. He was alive then—well, perhaps—still confided in her affection and integrity. She could hardly wait for evening, and its first stars saw her on her way to the place of appointment. The same man received her on her arrival, but seemed in no haste to produce the promised letter. He talked vaguely of the many changes and chances of life, and how we ought to be prepared for whatever might take place. What—what has happened? she strove to say; but she could not speak the words. “What would you say,” continued the man, “if the person from whom you expect to receive a letter were not far from here?” Pinda rose—fear, doubt, joy, struggling within her for the mastery. She made a step towards the entrance—her consciousness gave way, and she fell fainting to the floor. The humane man, who had striven in vain to prepare her for the unexpected arrival, raised her up and succeeded in reviving her.

Her husband was called in, and all the various experiences of both recounted. “I am here,” said Abraham. “How I got here you must not tell, for it may bring kind people into difficulty, and close up the way to those who are left behind. Our two little children—it is well they are dead. We have not left them in slavery. 970 dollars I have paid master since he first hired me out 6 years ago, and have paid all my own clothes, food, doctoring, and for all the doctoring that Pinda needed, even to a spoonful of oatmeal, though she was master’s house-slave: and to hear him say that she stole!” “Yes,” interrupted Pinda, “he said that I had robbed you and himself.” Abraham could not suppress an interjection of contempt. “Is not all that I have yours, Pinda, and could it be in better hands?”

Abraham gave evidence, in all his remarks, of sound sense and right feeling. Aware that his own case differed from that of his wife, he being a fugitive, and she protected by the law in the enjoyment of her freedom, he laid his plans for safety with acuteness, and followed them out with steadiness. He keenly realized, though the fair and the wealthy find it difficult to do so, that the freest State of the twenty-six has so much to do with slavery that there is not a foot of ground in all its fair territory where the fugitive may feel secure. Not a hamlet where he can be assured that men will let the outcast dwell with them and bewray not him that wandereth. Both the husband and wife

were perfectly aware of the cares and duties of freedom—of its responsibilities, as well as of its delights. “No,” said Pinda, in reply to one who queried whether slavery were not as easy to be borne as the disadvantages and possible privations of their new condition,—“a crust here, with only cold water, is better than the greatest plenty in slavery. All my youth I have suffered under different mistresses with no enjoyment of my family. Now, Abraham is with me. I will take care of him—he will take care of me. We may suffer with the cold—we may suffer from want, but our last days will be our best days, for we are FREE.”

CHAPTER VIII. —
THE WEEKLY CONTRIBUTION.

Two ways opened to Abraham, either of which would ensure his safety from pursuit. One was the way to Canada—the other to Guiana. While making up his mind respecting them, his thoughts often reverted to the condition of his afflicted people at the South; and he felt, what every human soul *ought* deeply to feel,—“that Freedom itself is not sweet to a man, while a brother is suffering in bondage.” Many a midnight found him in discussion with Pinda upon the “principles and measures of Anti-Slavery Societies.” It was surprising how little difficulty they found in comprehending problems that had puzzled Theological institutions, and whole bodies of clergymen. They saw, as by intuition, how their former master’s northern friends and associates might bring him to understand, if they would, that slavery was an intolerable abomination. It was no riddle to them, “What the North had to do with it.” It was to them as clear as the sun at noon-day, that the Boston man who manufactured “negro-cloths” for the Savannah man, and took his pay in cotton, had precisely the same interest in the continuance of slavery as the latter. It was no marvel to them that the members of Park St. Bowdoin St. Federal St. and Berry St. &c. who perchance held mortgages of *Southern property*, or deeds of Alabama lands, should give their respective ministers to understand that it was disagreeable to them to hear notices read on Sunday of an anti-slavery meeting.

They had had opportunities to know how many a northern

conscience is killed with kindness at the South, and how many a southern conscience strengthened in iniquity by the conduct of professors of religion at the North. It looked as clear as day to them, that the more members there were in a church, the easier the minister's salary was raised:—and they saw that as matters stood, the richest men would be the first to quit a church whose discipline forbade participation in slaveholding.

They saw why it should be as much as a minister's living was worth to be an abolitionist, and what made it so difficult to "work with Mr. Garrison."

That enigma, "immediate emancipation," was not too much for *their* philosophy: that dark saying, "slavery is a sin in all circumstances," looked luminous to their ethics. Anti-Slavery Societies of men and women, helping each other to put a stop to slavery, looked to them as natural as life, and as beautiful as religion. If a man hated slavery, they saw that he would just as surely call "all hands to the work," as he would breathe.

But then they had had those actual illuminations on the subject, before which the fashionable mental difficulties flee away like fog before the sun of a summer morning. Thirty-nine lashes, well laid on, or the severing of the first-born, would soon make a man see, they thought, that all this hanging back sprung out of selfish sympathy with the master, and the want of common human feeling for the slave.

Seeing so clearly and feeling so deeply, as these two did, their inquiry was, "What shall we do?" Poor as they were, they felt rich in the possession of liberty, and they gave their mite to extend it to others, with that effusion of heart, so lovely and so rare, that commands a blessing upon the spot where it is poured out.

"Just the thing for us!" they said; as they saw the "weekly contribution plan," set up in the dwelling they loved so well to visit, as it was so many centuries ago in the dwellings of the Christian Greeks. They entered their names upon the card as subscribers, each of a cent a week; and as they might so soon depart, they paid in advance. The little boxes of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, the savings banks of the cause, have the aperture made too narrow for the reception of any but small coins; and the contributors to the West street box blushed to think, that the first time that the size of a donation rendered it

necessary to raise the cover for its admission, was when Pinda brought her discolored Mexican dollar, (yet encrusted with the sand of its Savannah hiding-place,) to carry on the operations of the Massachusetts Society against slavery.

(1840)