

CAROLINE W. HEALEY DALL

A Sketch from Maryland Life

Author, reformer, and Transcendentalist Caroline W. Healey Dall (1822–1912) taught school, lectured, and wrote to make her living, particularly after her undependable husband accepted a position in India as a Unitarian missionary in 1855, leaving her behind in Boston with two children to support. Published in *The Liberty Bell*, Dall’s “Sketch” builds a tragic story around an abolitionist hymnbook and the disaster it brings its black owner.

TEN YEARS ago, a colored man, with an honest, straightforward countenance and long dark hair thinly striped with grey, walked irresolutely back and forth before the window of a bookseller’s shop, in the city of Philadelphia. Now he paused for a moment to gaze wistfully at some richly bound Bibles, just within the glass, now he waited without the half-open door, and finally, as if any certainty were better than suspense, he entered. For several years this faithful Christian had laid aside all he could spare from his scanty earnings, on what is called the “Eastern Shore” of Maryland, in the hope of procuring for himself and his children a copy of the Word of God.

I know not by what strange Providence it happened, but this colored man knew how to read, and as he stood, on that clear, sunny morning, by the bookseller’s side, and turned over the leaves of that long desired volume, feeling that it cost more than he could spare, his heart ached and the tear sprang to his always pensive eye. “Come,” said the bookseller, coaxingly, “you shall have it five cents lower, and I will throw in this hymn-book.” Sherry took the hymn-book, and turned over its leaves. He caught the first lines of well-remembered hymns, and a glimpse of some short stories that his curly-headed boys would climb his knee to hear. One or two pictures decorated the book, and the innocent man, looking on a coarse cut of a slave, holding out his hand for the iron, and another of the overseer, with his cow-skin at his side, little thought that these plain representations of fact, would be termed “libelous and insurrectionary”

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by the government under which he lived. He forgot that he was in a *free*, and bound for a *slave*, state; he thought only of his Bible and his songs, and trusting to God to forgive his extravagance, he emptied his pockets and went away. The happy little faces that clustered about him on his return, banished all anxious thoughts of his improvidence. The hymn-book came to be cherished like the Bible. Often had he hummed his baby to sleep by the joyous carol of "Canaan, happy Canaan," while the mournful strains of "Come, ye disconsolate," had checked full many a Sunday frolic of the older boys. At night it was carefully laid upon the shelf, but all day it nestled in the otherwise empty pocket of Sherry Williams, and full two years had now gone by without his ever missing the money it had cost. He was by trade a mason, and on another bright and gorgeous morning, with a far lighter heart than that with which he had waited the bookseller's decree, Sherry threw his hod over his shoulder, and taking his trowel in his hand, started for a neighboring farm-house, where his services were wanted. He threw his jacket over the settle, and climbed up the spacious chimney of the old kitchen. While he was proceeding with his repairs, he heard the full, sweet voice of Dinah, the cook, singing what he called "spiritual songs," below, and his work speeding all the lighter for this accompaniment, he was soon down again. To his surprise his favorite book was gone; but Dinah, who had spied a corner of it peeping from his pocket, soon came to relieve his suspense,—to beg him to stay to dinner, and read her some of the pretty hymns, which she had not the learning to spell out. "Yes," said Sherry, "if you will sing me one of those sweet songs that made my heart dance while I was up in the chimney, I will read you all I know." Dinah promised; while Sherry ate, she sang, and when they had finished, he opened his dear book. While they were both busied over its pages, a son of the master of the house, a pining country lawyer, on the "Shore," came lounging in. I am glad I do not know his name. He may have come of honest blood, and I would not give it an ignoble fame. He was longing for a client and found it in his native state. Poor Maryland, thou hast much to answer for. Standing on the brink of the free states, thou hast not been able wholly to check the flood of light which hath invaded thy border; nevertheless, thou hast turned thy back on its glory, and chosen the rather to gaze

moodily on thine own shadow. A glance sufficed to reveal to the white man the character of the book, and he humbly begged to borrow it of Sherry, who smothering his love for its worn pages, unhesitatingly complied with the request. Sherry, be it understood, was a free man, and after waiting a reasonable number of weeks, he went to the lawyer's office for his book. The pettifogger put him off to an hour which he named. Sherry went again and found himself in the power of the sheriff; his book, indeed, in his pocket, but manacles on his free hands. He was torn from wife and children and carried to Baltimore to be tried; for it is thus, O, Slavery, that thou dost protect thyself! *Fifteen witnesses* testified, upon the trial, that Sherry was honest, pious, industrious and content,—he had never been heard to complain,—was the last man in the world to create an excitement. In short, nothing could be proved against him, but the fact that such a hymn-book was in his possession. Weeping children and a heart-stricken wife surrounded him, but their tears flowed over cheeks of palest bronze, and so made no impression on the heart of a judge far darker and harder. The law had taken hold of him, and it would not retract. The statute under which he was convicted, sentences the colored man who shall be found with an incendiary publication in his possession, to an imprisonment in the penitentiary of not more than twenty nor less than ten years. In consideration of the evidence to character, adduced upon his trial, and in *despite of* the public excitement on the subject, poor Sherry was sentenced to ten. The pettifogger was satisfied, his angry client gained her cause, and the miserable family of the prisoner begged their way back to the "Shore." I have forgotten how many children Williams had, but I am sure it was a round dozen, and the oldest boy was the only one able to help himself. God help him, poor man, as he climbs those prison steps, and feels the little hands fast tugging at his heart! But Sherry knew his duty, and was faithful to what was given him to do. Every one in the building loved him, and when I saw him, six years after his imprisonment, he had *risen*, so said the overseer, to be the head baker of the establishment. In the meantime his friends had not been idle. New England blood had boiled as it listened to his story, and scores of Baltimore merchants signed, once and again, a petition to the Governor in his behalf. The last effort was founded on his exemplary conduct during the six years of his imprisonment, and was presented to a new governor, just

after he had taken his chair, and while his heart, it was thought, would be inclined to mercy. Alas! how far were the petitioners mistaken. He was a little man, and measured all things by a little standard. "Gentlemen," said he, "if I were to take any action in this matter, in the present state of the public mind, a favorite though I am, I should be impeached!" and there the matter ended,—till it was carried to a higher court, and the Governor became defendant.

This happened just before my first arrival in Baltimore, two years ago. I went to see Sherry, whose tall frame had bent, and whose dark hair had whitened all over during those painful six years. He was busy at his oven, his apron was white with flour, and he seemed only intent on serving the hungry men about him,—but, deeply engraven on his fine manly features was a look of unsatisfied anxiety that I shall never forget. Once only during those six years had he heard from his home; for neither he nor his children could write; and that once, by dint of miserly thrift, his oldest son had made the long journey, and brought him welcome tidings of health and peace, about his hearth. His hymn-book, of course, had been taken from him, but his Bible, whose "anti-slavery and revolutionary" principles the government of Maryland is not yet sharp-sighted enough to discern, was his only companion in his cell. As I looked upon the gray-haired man, and saw his lip quiver, as he spoke of his family, my heart throbbled almost to bursting, and I determined that something should be done to relieve him. Once and again my husband had communication with influential persons concerning him, but all who knew anything of the matter, more especially the intimate personal friend of the Governor, declared that all proper means had been tried,—but one resource was left him, calmly to wear out the remaining part of his sentence,—the Governor had determined to pardon no persons convicted on such counts. So I desisted, but often since, when I would have closed my eyes for a night's rest, has the image of that injured man, gray-haired and stooping, come between me and sleep, and the tears have started to my eyes, as I regretted that I did not present that petition in my single woman's strength. There were two things which made Sherry's case seem peculiarly hard. The first was that uniform testimony to his probity and excellence of character, which prevented slaveholders themselves from doubting his account of

the manner in which he obtained the book; and the other was the fact that the statute which made it criminal to hold it, did not become a law till Sherry had had it full two years in his possession, and *he* was as ignorant of the statute itself as he was of any sinister interpretation which the government of Maryland might choose to put upon plain representations of *fact*. But two years of imprisonment remain to him, and doubtless he prays more and more earnestly that life may be spared, till he shall gaze once more upon that precious family circle. Yet, who but the all-wise Father of us all, can tell whether it be best that his prayer should be heard—whether that gaze would not be one of agony? We will not doubt the fidelity of his wife, we will believe that the spoiler has touched none of those whom he, by the grace of God, kept holy; but, at least, he will find her whom he loved bent under the sense of social degradation, the weight of unusual cares, and the pressure of poverty. He will hardly know her sunken eye and anxious brow. The babe who was unconscious of his fate will have grown to the active boy; the girls who clustered about his knee will be wives, perhaps mothers, and God grant that none of that dear circle may have been sold into servitude to pay the poll tax or secure the livelihood of the rest. Yet this and more things might have been in those long ten years. However joyful the return, Sherry will see with pain that the hours when he was needed in his home have passed by, principles are already decided for his children, and if they could not read the language in which their Bible is written, before he went away, they probably never will.

I have written his history without comment, simply as it occurred. It seems to me that an expression of strong indignation would weaken the anti-slavery argument contained in these pages. Let the story burn in your hearts, American freemen, and kindle there the fire of truth. The time shall yet come, when we shall see her torches blazing on all our hills, and her God-lit barks floating even on the bosom of the Chesapeake. A system which to sustain itself among men feeds alike on the heart's blood of slave and freeman, trampling everywhere at the North and South alike on human right and human law, so surely as God is true, contains within itself the seeds of its own death.