

## LYDIA MARIA CHILD

*Lydia Maria Child* (1802–1880), who wrote short fiction as an outspoken champion of Native American rights, African American emancipation, and women's suffrage, was born in Medford, Massachusetts, into a family she later described as "hardworking people, who had had small opportunity for culture." Her father owned a bakery, which was run as a family business. He sent his most promising son, Convers, to Harvard; but he distrusted his twelve-year-old daughter Lydia's "increasing fondness for books," so he insisted that she live with a married sister in the backwoods of Maine. Child became a schoolteacher and moved back to Massachusetts in 1822, the year Convers became a Unitarian minister. At his home she met Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and other leading intellectuals of that period, and participated in their discussions about politics and literature.

Child wrote her first novel, *Hobomok* (1824), as a response to proslavery forces in Georgia who proposed to take over the prosperous farms of the Cherokees. In this novel Child created a fictional heroine who rebelled against her Puritan father by marrying two men he considered unacceptable: the first a Native American and the second an Episcopalian. Child's radical attempts to suggest that intermarriage and assimilation were preferable alternatives to racial and religious bigotry outraged the critics in the *North American Review* in 1824 and 1825, who thought her book "revolting . . . to every feeling of delicacy in man or woman." Yet her novel sold so well that publishers were eager to print her work. Until 1830 Child continued to teach school for her livelihood, but she also turned out a stream of novels, short fiction, biographies, histories, and domestic science books aimed primarily at the women's market. She also founded and edited the first successful children's magazine in America, *Juvenile Miscellany*. Her two-volume *History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Nations* (1835) was read by pioneering feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. This work as well as Child's remarkable volume *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), which advocated immediate emancipation and argued the case for racial equality and integration, lost her the support of a large popular audience.

In Child's prolific outpourings of sketches and stories written for periodicals and annual gift books in the 1820s and 1830s, she tirelessly championed the cause of civil rights. As the critic Carolyn L. Karcher noted, "Child's contribution to the genre of Indian fiction was to sever it from its origins in the Puritan narratives of captivity and Indian war that justified white conquest, and to turn it instead into a medium for dramatizing the wrongs committed against the Indian." An advocate for the abolitionist cause, Child wrote short fiction that broke new ground. In stories such as "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (*The Liberty Bell*, 1843), she attempted to make her readers sympathetic to the plight of black women slaves. In 1860 she published a pamphlet of her letters in

defense of John Brown, who was executed after his raid on Harpers Ferry. The pamphlet sold three hundred thousand copies. Until her death, Child played a key role in the most important reform movements of her time, and her writing has inspired generations of American women.

## Slavery's Pleasant Homes A Faithful Sketch

*Thy treasures of gold  
Are dim with the blood of the hearts thou hast sold;  
Thy home may be lovely, but round it I hear  
The crack of the whip, and the footsteps of fear.*

When Frederic Dalcho brought his young bride from New-Orleans to her Georgian home, there were great demonstrations of joy among the slaves of the establishment, — dancing, shouting, clapping of hands, and eager invocations of blessing on the heads of "massa and missis"; for well they knew that he who manifested most zeal was likely to get the largest coin, or the brightest handkerchief.

The bride had been nurtured in seclusion, almost as deep as that of the oriental harem. She was a pretty little waxen plaything, as fragile and as delicate as the white *Petunia* blossom. She brought with her two slaves. Mars, a stalwart mulatto, of good figure, but a cunning and disagreeable expression of countenance. Rosa, a young girl, elegantly formed, and beautiful as a dark velvet carnation. The blush, so easily excited, shone through the transparent brown of her smooth cheek, like claret through a bottle in the sunshine. It was a beautiful contrast to see her beside her mistress, like a glittering star in attendance upon the pale and almost vanishing moonsickle. They had grown up from infancy together; for the mother of Rosa was foster-mother of Marion; and soon as the little white lady could speak, she learned to call Rosa *her* slave. As they grew older, the wealthy planter's daughter took pride in her servant's beauty, and loved to decorate her with jewels. "You shall wear my golden ornaments whenever you ask for them," said she; "they contrast so well with the soft, brown satin of your neck and arms. I will wear pearls and amethysts; but gold needs the dark complexion to show its richness. Besides, you are a handsome creature, Rosa, and gold is none too good for you."

Her coachman, Mars, was of the same opinion: but the little petted coquette tossed her graceful head at him, and paid small heed to his flattering words. Not so with George, the handsome quadroon brother of Frederic Dalcho, and his favorite slave; but the master and mistress were too much absorbed with their own honeymoon, to observe them. Low talks among the rose-bushes, and stolen meetings by moonlight, passed unnoticed, save by the evil eyes of Mars. Thus it passed on for months. The young

slaves had uttered the marriage vow to each other, in the silent presence of the stars.

It chanced, one day, that Rosa was summoned to the parlor to attend her mistress, while George stood respectfully, hat in hand, waiting for a note, which his master was writing. She wore about her neck a small heart and cross of gold, which her lover had given her the night before. He smiled archly, as he glanced at it, and the answer from her large, dark eyes was full of joyful tenderness. Unfortunately, the master looked up at that moment, and at once comprehended the significance of that beaming expression. He saw that it spoke whole volumes of mutual, happy love; and it kindled in him an unholy fire. He had never before realized that the girl was so very handsome. He watched her, as she pursued her work, until she felt uneasy beneath his look. From time to time, he glanced at his young wife. She, too, was certainly very lovely; but the rich, mantling beauty of the slave had the charm of novelty. The next day, he gave her a gay dress; and when he met her among the garden shrubbery, he turned her glossy ringlets over his finger, and called her a pretty darling. Poor Rosa hastened away, filled with terror. She wanted to tell her mistress all this, and claim her protection; but she dared not. As for George, he was of a proud and fiery nature, and she dreaded the storm it would raise in his breast. Her sleeping apartment adjoined that of her mistress, and she was now called to bring water to her master at a much later hour than had been usual with him. One night, no answer was given to the summons. Rosa was not in her room. When questioned in the morning, she stammered out an incoherent excuse, and burst into tears. She was ordered, somewhat sternly, to be very careful not to be again absent when called for.

Marion took an early opportunity to plead her favorite's cause. "I have suspected, for some time," said she, "that George and Rosa are courting; and for my part, I should like very well to have them married." Her husband made no reply, but abruptly left the room. His conduct towards George became singularly capricious and severe. Rosa wept much in secret, and became shy as a startled fawn. Her mistress supposed it was because Mr. Dalcho objected to her marriage, and suspected nothing more. She tried to remonstrate with him, and learn the nature of his objections; but he answered sharply, and left her in tears.

One night, Marion was awakened by the closing of the door, and found that Frederic was absent. She heard voices in Rosa's apartment, and the painful truth flashed upon her. Poor young wife, what a bitter hour was that!

In the morning, Rosa came to dress her, as usual, but she avoided looking in her face, and kept her eyes fixed on the ground. As she *knelt* to tie the satin shoe, Marion spoke angrily of her awkwardness, and gave her a blow. It was the first time she had ever struck her; for they really loved each other. The beautiful slave looked up with an expression of surprise, which was answered by a strange, wild stare. Rosa fell at her feet, and sobbed

out, "Oh, mistress, I am not to blame. Indeed, indeed, I am very wretched." Marion's fierce glance melted into tears. "Poor child," said she, "I ought not to have struck you; but, oh, Rosa, I am wretched, too." The foster-sisters embraced each other, and wept long and bitterly; but neither sought any further to learn the other's secrets.

At breakfast, George was in attendance, but he would not look at Rosa, though she watched for a glance with anxious love. When she found an opportunity to see him alone, he was sullen, and rejected her proffered kiss. "Rosa, where were you last night?" said he, hastily. The poor girl blushed deeply, and strove to take his hand; but he flung her from him, with so much force that she reeled against the wall. "Oh, George," said she, with bitter anguish, "what *can* I do? I am his *slave*." The justice of her plea, and the pathos of her tones, softened his heart. He placed her head on his shoulder, and said more kindly, "Keep out of his way, dear Rosa; keep out of his way."

Rosa made strong efforts to follow this injunction; and dearly did she rue it. George was sent away from the house, to work on the plantation, and they were forbidden to see each other, under penalty of severe punishment. His rival, Mars, watched them, and gave information of every attempt to transgress this cruel edict. But love was more omnipotent than fear of punishment, and the lovers did sometimes catch a stolen interview. The recurrence of this disobedience exasperated their master beyond endurance. He swore he would overcome her obstinacy, or kill her; and one severe flogging succeeded another, till the tenderly-nurtured slave fainted under the cruel infliction, which was rendered doubly dangerous by the delicate state of her health. Maternal pains came on prematurely, and she died a few hours after.

George wandered into the woods, and avoided the sight of his reckless master, who, on his part, seemed willing to avoid an interview. Four days had passed since Rosa's death, and the bereaved one had scarcely tasted food enough to sustain his wretched life. He stood beside the new-made grave, which he himself had dug. "Oh, Father in Heaven!" he exclaimed, "what would I give, if I had not flung her from me! Poor girl, *she* was not to blame." He leaned his head against a tree, and looked mournfully up to the moon struggling through clouds. Cypresses reared their black forms against the sky, and the moss hung from bough to bough, in thick, funereal festoons. But a few months ago, how beautiful and bright was Nature—and now, how inexpressibly gloomy. The injustice of the past, and the hopelessness of the future, came before him with dreary distinctness. "He is my brother," thought he, "we grew up side by side, children of the same father; but I am his *slave*. Handsomer, stronger, and more intelligent than he; yet I am his *slave*. And now he will sell me, because the murdered one will forever come up between us."

He thought of Rosa as he first saw her, so happy, and so beautiful; of all her gushing tenderness; of her agonized farewell, when they last met; of

her graceful form bleeding under the lash, and now lying cold and dead beneath his feet.

He looked toward his master's house. "Shall I escape now and forever?" said he; "or shall I first"—he paused, threw his arms widely upward, gnashed his teeth, and groaned aloud, "God, pity me! He murdered my poor Rosa."

On that night, Marion's sleep was disturbed and fitful. The memory of her foster-sister mingled darkly with all her dreams. Was that a shriek she heard? It was fearfully shrill in the night-silence! Half sleeping and half waking, she called wildly, "Rosa! Rosa!" But a moment after, she remembered that Rosa's light step would never again come at her call. At last a drowsy slave answered the loud summons of her bell. "I left your master reading in the room below," said she; "go and see if he is ill." The girl came back, pallid and frightened. "Oh, mistress, he is dead!" she exclaimed; "there is a dagger through his heart."

Neighbors were hastily summoned, and the slaves secured. Among them was George, who, with a fierce and haggard look, still lingered around Rosa's grave.

The dagger found in Frederic Dalcho's heart was the one he had himself been accustomed to wear. He lay upon the sofa, with an open book beside him, as if he had fallen asleep reading. A desk in the room was broken open, and a sum of money gone. Near it, was dropped a ragged handkerchief, known to belong to Mars. Suspicion hovered between him and George. Both denied the deed. Mars tried hard to fix the guilt on his hated rival, and swore to many falsehoods. But as some of these falsehoods were detected, and the stolen money was found hidden in his bed, the balance turned against him. After the brief, stern trial awarded to slaves, with slaveholders for judges and jurors, Mars was condemned to be hung. George thought of his relentless persecutions, and for a moment triumphed over the cunning enemy, who had so often dogged poor Rosa's steps; but his soul was too generous to retain this feeling.

The fatal hour came. Planters rode miles to witness the execution, and stood glaring at their trembling victim, with the fierceness of tigers. The slaves from miles around were assembled, to take warning by his awful punishment. The rope was adjusted on the strong bough of a tree. Mars shook like a leaf in the wind. The countenance of George was very pale and haggard, and his breast was heaving with tumultuous thoughts. "He is my enemy," said he to himself; "tis an awful thing to die thus. The *theft* I did not commit; but if I take all the blame, they can do no more than hang me."

They led the shivering wretch towards the tree, and were about to fasten the fatal noose. But George rushed forward with a countenance ghastly pale, and exclaimed, "Mars is innocent. I murdered him — for he killed my wife, and hell was in my bosom."

No voice praised him for the generous confession. They kicked and cursed him; and hung up, like a dog or a wolf, a man of nobler soul than any of them all.

The Georgian papers thus announced the deed: "*Fiend-like Murder.* Frederic Dalcho, one of our most wealthy and respected citizens, was robbed and murdered last week, by one of his slaves. The black demon was caught and hung; and hanging was too good for him."

The Northern papers copied this version; merely adding, "These are the black-hearted monsters, which abolition philanthropy would let loose upon our brethren of the South."

Not one was found to tell how the slave's young wife had been torn from him by his own brother, and murdered with slow tortures. Not one recorded the heroism that would not purchase life by another's death, though the victim was his enemy. His very *name* was left unmentioned; he was only Mr. Dalcho's *slave!* [1843]