AT THE HOME OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A stately old Southern mansion of pale, yellow brick, with a broad piazza and hospitably large halls and rooms, standing upon one of the high hills of Anacostia, just over the river from Washington, and commanding a beautiful view of the Potomac, and the surrounding hills, and the city, with its innumerable trees and spires, the dome of the Capitol, the gilded dome of the new Congressional Library, and the white shaft of the Washington Monument, piercing the blue sky. The grounds are extensive and filled with fine trees, conspicuous among which are some grand oaks and many cedars, from which the place takes its name—Cedar Hill. Years ago it was the property of a Southern rebel. Mr. Douglass used to relate how often he had looked at it admiringly in passing and wished that he might one day own it. But no possibility of such a thing then presented itself, for the owner was extremely bitter in his feelings against colored people, and he and other members of his family had declared that no Negro should ever own a foot of their land. But at last "the whirligig of Time brought about its revenges"; the owner became impoverished and was obliged to sell the property which fell into the hands of the Freedmen's Bureau, and then Mr. Douglass's long-cherished desire was gratified, and he became the purchaser. I am told that when the daughters of the former owner heard that the place had actually become the property of a Negro, once a slave, they were so enraged that they went there, before Mr. Douglass had taken possession, and "vented the venom of their spleen" by tearing down some pipes and otherwise damaging the house.

Very dearly did Mr. Douglass love this beautiful old place. Every tree and shrub and blade of grass was precious to him. And how his heart must have swelled with a noble pride, never expressed in words that he—the poor, neglected slave boy, of Talbot county, Maryland, not so many miles away—after untold struggles and hardships, after triumphing over obstacles which would have utterly discouraged a less determined soul, had at last acquired not only sufficient wealth to purchase so lovely a home, but also the character and culture which made him its chief adornment, and drew to it many of the noblest and most distinguishd men and women of our land and of other lands. Rarely, I think, has so great a triumph as this been granted to any man. Hundreds have risen from poverty and obscurity to fame and position and wealth, especially in this country; their names crowd upon us—Lincoln, Grant and Garfield, and many others—but not one of them had the obstacles to surmount that this man had; not one of them had the chains of the slave, the insuperable bar of color, to prevent him from attaining the highest degree of culture, the loftiest position to which he might aspire. That Mr. Douglass should have accomplished what he did seems little less than a miracle.

How keenly one misses him here! As I sit in his study, and look from the window upon his beloved trees, I seem to see that grand form coming up the path, as of yore. I see the lion-like head, with its wealth of silvery hair, the firm mouth, the keen yet kind eyes. Surely, he will stand beside me in a moment, and I shall feel the cordial grasp of his hand, and receive the warm welcome which he always gave to his friends. Every part of this place is penetrated by his presence, but especially this room, in which so much of his time was spent; where he wrote those speeches which are not only marvellous in their eloquence but more marvellous still in their pure and elegant English, coming from the brain of an entirely self-educated man. His bookcases are filled with the works of the best ancient and modern writers, models which he studied unweariedly, and which helped to enrich a naturally gifted mind and great heart. The Bible, Shakespeare, Burns, were his favorites. His knowledge of the Bible was wonderful, and Shakespeare was his familiar friend, from whom he never wearied of quoting his favorite passages, among which the special favorite was Cardinal Wolsey's Lament; and these passages he would recite with unsual dramatic power. Had he studied for the stage, there is no doubt that he would have made an eminent actor. In his library there is, as one would naturally suppose, a very large and valuable collection of works relating to the anti-slavery movement, histories of slavery and the slave-trade, biographies of prominent abolitionists, of fugitive slaves, etc.

One of the most treasured of his books was an old copy of the Columbian Orator, which he had purchased when a boy, for fifty cents, earned by blacking botts. "I was led to buy this book," he says, in his Life, "by hearing some little boys say that they were going to learn some pieces in it to recite at an exhibition. This volume was indeed a rich treasure, and for a time every opportunity afforded me was spent in diligently perusing it. Among much other interesting matter, that which I read again and again with unflagging interest, was a dialouge between a master and his slave. The mighty power and heartsearching directness of truth, penetrating the heart of a slaveholder, and compelling him to yield up his earthly interests to the claims of justice, were finely illustrated in this dialogue. In this old book were extracts from speeches by Lord Chatham, Pitt, Fox, Sheridan, and other famous orators. Mr Douglass says: "The reading of these speeches added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many thoughts which had often flashed through my mind and died away for want of words in which to give them utterance. From the speeches of Sheridan I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man."

On these study walls hang the pictures of some of those men who fought with Mr. Douglass the great anti-slavery battle. Carrison, the Uncompromising, is here, and Charles Sumner, in the full glory of his splendid youth, and Wendell Phillips,—a little pen-and-ink sketch, very beautiful, and evidently taken when he was quite young. Yet in those refined and aristocratic features, in that rare sweetness of expression, lies the promise of the great strength of character, the utter abnegation of self which distinguished the "silver-tongued" orator and philanthropist. Never have I looked upon that face or heard that wonderful voice without recalling what Aurora Leigh says of Romney,

"A godlike nature his: the gods look down,
Incurious of themselves."

Here are John Brown, and Lincoln and Chase, and Birney, and Gerrit Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet, and Cinque—the black hero who, many years ago, broke his own chains and those of his fellow-slaves, when they were being brought in one of the horrible slave-ships from Africa, took command of the vessel, and after many months of suffering and disaster brought it at last safely into a Northern port. Here is also a large crayon of Mr. Douglass, and a life-like portrait of his friend of many years—Elizabeth Cady Stanton. One little pen-and-ink sketch of a woman attracted my attention at once, because of its striking resemblance to the picture of Savonarola. This, Mrs. Douglass tells me, is Sister Amarancy Paine Sarle, a noble-hearted Connecticut woman, in the old anti-slavery days, known as "Saint Indefatigable", on account of her numberless good works, her tireless activity, her inexhaustible sympathy and capacity for self-sacrifice—a Dorcas, a Florence Nightingale, an Elizabeth Fry, all in one. On the mantelpiece is a picture of Ole Bull, whose mother-in-law, Mrs. Thorpe, was one of Mr. Douglass's most valued friends. On the panels of the study door, a loving hand has painted apple blossoms, which were a constant delight to the eyes of the occupant of the room.

In the adjacent parlor hangs an excellent, nearly full-length portrait of Mr. Douglass, painted by a granddaughter of Francis Jackson, of Boston, one of the bravest and most eminent of the early Abolitionists. There is also a fine engraving of that touching picture, "John Brown Led to Execution," in which the old hero stops on his way to the gallows to lay his hand upon the head of a little black boy, whose kneeling mother holds him up, as if imploring the martyr's benediction. On the wall hangs also the last speech of John Brown, printed on silk.

"She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them."

Mr. Douglass loved flowers, and at his place at table, before which always stands his vacant chair, loving hands still place daily a tiny vase of rosebuds, or some other delicate flowers; and in almost every room are bowls and vases of the brilliant nasturtiums, which he liked so much. Lovingly and sadly we look at that vacant chair. How vividly we recall him as he sat there, charming us with his wit or pathos, or stirring our souls with his eloquent denunciations of injustice and wrong. What a genial host he was, how delightfully hospitable to all who were bidden to his home! He was also a man of great dignity, and tolerated no unseemly familiarity. A distinguished senator once called upon him—a man who really respected and admired him, but who was not quite broad-minded enough to forget the accident of color. He began the interview by speaking to Mr. Douglass in a half condescending, half jocose manner. The quiet dignity of Mr. Douglass's speech and look soon changed his tone to one of deference and respect. I remember, too, that at the Chicago Exposition, where I was with him a great deal, and where he received an almost constant ovation whenever he appeared, a stranger would sometimes—although rarely—approach him and familiarly address him as "Fred" Douglass, to be instantly rebuked by his maanner, as he said, "My name is Frederick Douglass, sir."

I have been looking with deep interest over the many letters of sympathy which Mrs. Douglass has received since his death. What tributes they are to his character and ability! What warm affection and admiration they express, coming as they do, from other lands as well as our own land! But none are more touching than those which come from his colored fellow countrymen, especially those in the South, so deeply do they express their love for him, their great sense of bereavement in his loss. Such expressions as this I find from societies of young colored men, "The great sorrow which hangs over you also casts its shadow over us." Over the sea comes a little volume of Sonnets, by Theodore Tilton—a beautiful and most tender tribute to the memory of the friend whom he greatly loved.

To his race his loss seems irreparable; but he will not have lived in vain if they will but cherish his memory, as I believe they will, and strive to emulate in all things his great example.

And now, as I am about to say farewell to this beautiful home, from which his beloved form has gone, but in which the light of his spirit seems still to linger, there come to me some words, written long ago, on visiting the home of another noble lover of humanity, and dear friend of Mr. Douglass. And I think it may not be unfitting to quote them here:

Only the casket left! The jewel gone
Whose noble presence filled these lovely halls,
And made this spot a shrine, where pilgrims came—
Stranger and friend —to bend in reverence
Before the great pure soul that knew no guile:
To listen to the wise and gracious words
That fell from lips whose rare, exquisite smile
Gave tender beauty to the grand, grave face.

Blue are the summer skies, gentle the airs
That soothe with touches soft the weary brow;
And perfect days glide into perfect nights,
Moonlit and calm; but still our aching hearts
Are sad and faint with fear: — for thou art gone.
O friend beloved! with longing, tear-filled eyes
We look up, up to the unclouded blue,
And seek in vain some answering sign from thee.
Look down upon us, guide and cheer us still
From the serene height where thou dwellest now;
Dark is the way without the beacon light
Which long and steadfastly thy hand upheld;
O nerve with courage new the stricken hearts
Whose dearest hopes seem lost in losing thee!