

**A LETTER ON
"UNCLE
TOM'S CABIN."**

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A letter on "Uncle Tom's cabin." by Sir Arthur Helps

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SIR ARTHUR HELPS

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“UNCLE TOM’S CABIN.”

BY

THE AUTHOR OF “FRIENDS IN COUNCIL,” &c.

[*Sir Arthur Helps*]

CAMBRIDGE:
JOHN BARTLETT,
1852.

LETTER.

LONDON, July 9, 1852.

MY DEAR SIR:

I HAVE to offer you my thanks for sending me a very remarkable book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which followed on the receipt of your letter of the 25th of April last.

The book horrifies and haunts me; and I cannot help writing to you somewhat at large upon it.

You will perhaps be surprised at my saying the book horrifies me; for, from the interest you have taken in the same subjects which I have cared for, you know well what horrors of various kinds about slavery, about the dwellings of the poor, and about various sanitary matters, I must have waded through. Indeed, when I look back upon the man I was when I first left college, how devoted to the most abstract studies, and how fastidious as re-

garded every thing that was physically repulsive, I am sometimes amazed that I should have been able to go through the dense masses of recorded filth, misery, and cruelty which I have had to encounter. I think, if they could have been shown me all at once, like the tale of a life told in some magic glass, I should have shrunk out of the world in horror. But so I suppose it would be, if any one of us were to see in one condensed view the aspect and fortunes (ay, even the prosperous ones) of his future career. Well, I have somehow or other contrived to get through these horrors; but, like many a medical man who does not become inured to the sufferings of his patients, I am still nearly as sensitive as ever; and should, upon Goethe's principle of putting aside unnecessary excitement which tends to disturb real work, have avoided reading the book you sent me, if I had been aware of the nature of its contents. But I am glad I have read it.

Many readers and reviewers will, I have no doubt, at once explain the book to themselves, and make their minds, comparatively speaking, easy upon it, by saying that it contains gross exaggerations, and that it gives no fair account of slavery in America. I am, unfortunately, but too well acquainted with the records of slavery in most parts

of the New World, and under nations differing very much from one another, for me to be able to comfort myself in this way. In truth, unless by some special providence planters were imbued with angelic nature, of which there is at present no evidence before us, I cannot see how the state of things can be much otherwise than as it is described to be in this fearful book, which seems to have set all America again thinking about slavery. I have seen something of what is called "the world," and have a large acquaintance with men in all classes of life, from the highest to the lowest, in this country; and I think I know about *five* persons who might be intrusted with the supreme authority over their fellow-creatures which is given by law to the slaveholder, indiscriminately, in many a slave state.

It has always surprised me that any body should wish to have that power. There is a converse to every thing. Power implies responsibility; and I must say that innumerable cubic feet of collected dollars would scarcely reconcile me to the possession of supreme power over the health, wealth, education, and social duties of several hundred human beings completely committed to my charge. Very few of us are sane enough to be intrusted with such power; and, indeed, in

reference to this, I think it is very important to notice that there are throughout the world, unless your world differs very much from ours, many persons of that dubious sanity, that, although the law cannot interfere with them, they are lamentably unfit to have the management of inanimate property, much more of live property of any kind, infinitely more of intelligent human beings.

^ But if there be no exaggeration, or at least no such exaggeration as would seriously impair the merits of the work, as regards the condition of slaves in America, there is, I am sorry to say, an exaggeration in the statements which are made in the course of the volume, and are not contradicted, respecting the condition of the English laborer.

It is worth while to make some reply to these statements, for it is not the magnitude of an error, so much as the number of people who hold it, which renders it important and dangerous. I have no doubt there are many shrewd people in your country who say, and many shallow people in both countries who echo the saying, that there is very little substantial difference between the condition of the English laborer and that of the American slave. There is, however, even in our poorest districts and in the worst of times, all the

difference that exists between humanity and barbarism; between the dignified suffering of a man oppressed by untoward circumstances and the abject wretchedness of another driven about like a beast;— in short, between manhood and brute-hood.

I wish that such a writer as the authoress of this work could live a little time in the country in England, and really see for herself what these rustic laborers are like. She would find that, under their occasionally stolid appearance, and with their clumsy gait, there is an intelligence, a patience, an aptitude to learn, a capacity for reasonable obedience, and a general gentleness of blood and nature, which would mightily astonish her. She would even find, especially among the women, a grace and sweetness of demeanor which would remind her of the highest breeding. She is evidently perplexed to account to herself for the permission of the existence of slaves, so little do their lives appear to give room for the purposes of humanity: she would have no such doubt whatever in contemplating the life of the British peasant, or the British workman. She would see that his life fulfilled sufficiently the conditions of humanity, to render it a means of attaining to considerable self-culture, of exercising the deepest

self-restraint, of appreciating and working out what is most beautiful in the affections and the duties of a free citizen.

It is a fact easily ascertained by looking at the map, that England is an island, not a very large island, and consequently that we have not an indefinite power of settling our people upon new lands. Let those who have this power see that they use it well, and that their institutions correspond to the greatness of their resources and their felicity in that respect.

^ The writer of the book we are considering must not imagine that it is a general rule for the poor in England to be unconsidered, or uncared for. If she were to study this country well, she would find that, with the self-helpfulness belonging to the Anglo-Saxon race (for we too are Anglo-Saxons), individuals are making exertions in every way to benefit the poor people around them; indeed, that many persons devote the greatest part of their energies to this ever-growing task. Sometimes the poor themselves, encouraged by the example of their wealthier neighbors, form clubs and benefit societies as a resource in case of sickness. Sometimes these wealthier persons, among whom the clergyman of the parish mostly takes a prominent place, combine together to form clothing clubs,