

LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

The Captain's Story

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

BY ELLEN GRUBER GARVEY 

In 1882, what was possibly Harriet Beecher Stowe's last story appeared in the weekly *Our Continent*. "The Captain's Story," set in Florida, hinges on a ghost story told by a slave-trade-abetting skipper and finds Stowe revisiting the violences of slavery in ways she had not done since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or her other abolitionist works. Stowe grapples with the morality of the North's willingness to reconcile with the South and asks what kind of change was possible after the Civil War. The story's answer is pessimistic.

Ghost stories were popular in the Christmas issues of magazines, like the one where "The Captain's Story" appeared. The skipper professes his ghost story to prove that Florida has abundant history and culture, and he reveals that both are grounded in slavery. Slavery haunts both the story's 1867 setting and its 1882 publication moment.

Stowe's relationship to Florida was complex. Arriving in 1867, like the story's Union veterans, Stowe bought a house with an orange grove on the St. Johns River and wintered there for seventeen years. At first she used her persuasive skills to attract Northern White Protestants to move to Florida to outweigh and outvote White former enslavers (Hedrick 340–42; Foster 11–17). Her popular travel articles from 1867 into the 1870s touted the state's pleasures. *Palmetto Leaves*, her best-selling 1873 collection of some of these pieces, is full of chummy advice on how to travel south and where to buy land. It encouraged Florida's first tourist boom (Foster 8–9, 17). Like other popular writing of the time about the South, Stowe's collection drew on tropes of plantation fiction. Stowe returned to earlier domestic themes of difficulties with hired servants, in this case African American freed people, making comedy of their desire to tend their own cows rather than to iron their employers' clothes. These articles were hazy about Florida's history of slavery.

Stowe continued to write about Florida through the 1870s but grew less sanguine about changing state politics by attracting like-minded Whites to Florida. She was irritated that tourists made her own home a stop on their tours. Stowe's 1879 *Atlantic Monthly*

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essay, "Our Florida Plantation," incorporates discouraging information. It jumps back to 1867 to offer her experiences with two Northern veterans, one of them modeled on her son Frederick, whom she helped set up at the Laurel Grove plantation on the St. Johns River once owned by a slave trader (Thulesius 31–33). Although in this account Florida is still welcoming and picturesque, these Union veteran captains are finally defeated at cotton farming by a crop-destroying worm.

The Atlantic Monthly, like most Northern magazines of the 1870s and 1880s, romanticized Southern plantations and touted North-South reconciliation, as Nina Silber, David Blight, and others have noted. One common trope of plantation fiction of the period featured a tired Northerner who, like the two Union captains in both "Our Florida Plantation" and "The Captain's Story," goes south to rest and learns to appreciate the relaxed White Southern way of life. Such stories typically cast Black people as picturesque comic characters. As Stowe's friend the White abolitionist and orator Anna E. Dickinson wrote in 1888, "The fashion of the day has been, and is, to talk of the love feast that is spread between old foes, till at last we of the North and they of the South are doing what our forefathers did thirty years ago—grasping hands across the prostrate body of the negro" and embracing as "men and brethren'. . . those whom elsewhere and under other conditions we would denounce as robbers and murderers" (see also Silber 157).

More than "Our Florida Plantation," the 1882 "Captain's Story" is sharply at odds with Stowe's earlier Florida material. It disembowels the tropes of plantation fiction that Stowe had flirted with in her touristic writing. It implies that the North has abandoned Black people in favor of tainted compromise. By 1882, a sizable school and church building for Blacks and Whites that Stowe had raised money to construct had burned down. Although she insisted that it was not arson and raised more money to replace it, Florida no longer seemed a paradise of roses and oranges.

Our Continent (1882–84), the weekly that published "The Captain's Story," edited by Albion

Tourgée, continued to acknowledge the brutalities of slavery and its aftermath.¹ A Union veteran who worked for Reconstruction, Tourgée wrote about his experiences in best-selling novels depicting the assaults and obstacles the freed people faced. He went on to fight Jim Crow as the lawyer representing Homer Plessy, who attacked segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Although Tourgée's magazine published other works that focused on racial oppression—and serialized his own novel *Hot Plowshares* addressing the causes of the Civil War—his magazine announced itself as politically "non-partisan" and hoped to reach White Southern readers ("Independent Journalism"). Perhaps this was why it also published racist stories and cartoons.

"The Captain's Story" depicts murderous, brutal enslavers. Yet its magnolia-festooned illustrations (fig. 1) align with mainstream magazines' interpretations of the South. Arthur Burdett Frost was a prolific book and magazine artist whose illustrations of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus plantation stories had appeared in 1881. In the tale within the story the skipper tells the two Union veterans, a plantation owner known as the general has contracted with a slaver captain to illegally



FIG. 1. An unsigned decorated capital *T*, adorned with what appear to be magnolia blossoms, begins "The Captain's Story." *Our Continent* rarely used decorated capitals. The floral ornamentation suggests that the story offers the "dream of delicious air, blue skies, luxuriant verdure, innumerable singing-birds and a blissful feeling of delightful repose" with which the narrator, Harry, recalls the trip.

bring in captives from Africa to his plantation on the St. Johns River—cheaper than buying them from the upper South. The general quarrels with his brother-in-law, known as the captain, nearby. (The skipper is always referred to as the skipper, and there are four other characters referred to as captains.) An enslaved man from the general's plantation has married a woman on the captain's plantation. The husband believed he had been bought by the captain and had moved to his plantation. The general has the husband brought before him on his veranda with the husband's hands bound. The general cuts his ear off to mark him as his possession, and shoves him. The husband falls off the veranda, breaks his neck, and dies.

Frost's rendering of the scene of the general just before he kills the enslaved husband shows a familiar plantation fiction scene: the neatly dressed general, seated, faces two disheveled Black men with indistinct features (fig. 2). The manacle dangling from one man's wrist is barely discernible. The general, who is about to cut off the shackled man's ear and then push him to his death, looks comical rather



FIG. 2. This illustration by Arthur Burdett Frost offers an almost comical stereotypical interaction between the general and the remonstrating enslaved husband brought before him, with no warning of the murderous violence to follow.

than menacing, and there is no knife in sight. Was it no longer possible even for the illustrator to see the violence of slavery? Was the African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner, who also drew for *Our Continent*, unavailable? Or did Tourgée choose Frost to make the story more palatable?

His brother-in-law responds to the general's actions by alerting the federal government that the general is bringing in slave ships, but a neighbor warns him, and the skipper and the neighbor help hide the illegal activity by drowning the captives. One of the captives fights back and bites the general before being thrown overboard, and his ghost haunts the general's plantation. The two northern army captains presumably continue their trip with the murdering skipper on the same river.

Stowe had sought to change the direction of post-bellum Florida life with her earlier attempts to draw like-minded Whites to Florida and help build shared Black and White institutions. But if Stowe sought to intervene in the current of literature about postwar life in the South, she left no trace in the stream. Her story drew no comment in the press. The disappearance of the story, as I have noted elsewhere, reflects "the shifting reality of race relations in 1882." Nor did the story discourage Florida tourism, which went on to become the state's main industry. In 1883, Stowe published a final short item relinquishing her role in promoting tourism (Introduction). Her husband's health worsened, and her last trip to Florida was in 1884. "The Captain's Story" is rich in contradictions worth further study.

NOTE

1. There is a gap in Tourgée's papers from about 1880 to 1886, covering his *Our Continent* years, including correspondence, as Elliott notes (372–73). Although Stowe's papers lack correspondence with Tourgée, that they knew each other is evidenced in his tribute to her at the 14 June 1882 garden party that Houghton Mifflin tendered for her seventy-first birthday, and he inscribed a copy of his Reconstruction novel *A Fool's Errand* for her on the occasion. That novel was published by their shared publisher, Fords, Howard and Hulbert, which also published *The Christian Union*, where most of the pieces in *Palmetto Leaves* originally appeared.

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The Captain's Story

The year after the close of the late war I went with my friend Charley Knapp on a winter's camping excursion to Florida. We were both ex-army captains, having fought through the four years, and during part of the time served in the same division in Florida.

He had been wounded in the battle of Olustee and barely recovered, and I had somewhat impaired my strength by the labors and exposures of camp-life, so that both of us had been told by a physician that we must take a period of rest and recreation; and, since we had known something of Florida as a scene of labor and danger, we resolved to test its capacities for recreation and enjoyment. And certainly, if one wishes to find a land where the mere fact of existence becomes a sense of enjoyment, I can think of none under the sun that insures this so completely as Florida. Our camping days there recur to me as a dream of delicious air, blue skies, luxuriant verdure, innumerable singing-birds and a blissful feeling of delightful repose that gave an added charm to every beauty.

I had secured in Jacksonville the services of a man who owned a little schooner on the St. John's

River, which he was only too happy to place at our entire disposal for the compensation that we agreed upon. He was a little, wiry, lively body, somewhere about sixty years of age, with a crop of stiff, iron-gray hair and a stubbly beard, a round, compact head, and little, glittering, bead-like eyes—a man who had invested his whole heart and soul in his schooner, and who gauged everything natural or moral by its adaptation to put a little good carrying business into his way.

I had some difficulty at first in reconciling my friend Charley to the man. He seemed inclined to contemplate the little skipper's frank, outspoken selfishness from the moral point of view, while to me it was only an amusing study of human nature. Charley was a Boston boy—an enthusiastic disciple of Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Charles Sumner—and had engaged in the war with all the fervor of a Crusader. His only fault was that he lived too high in the realms of the moral sublime to be exactly fitted to deal with poor, commonplace, everyday mortals on earth. So when he began to remark upon our skipper, I was obliged to take him to task.

"My dear fellow, in getting through this world we must see who and what we have to deal with

and not be disgusted because they *are* what they are. This little man is perfectly *au fait* in all that is necessary in running a schooner for a fishing and camping excursion. He knows the best fishing-grounds, the best bait, the best tackle—he knows every good stopping-place and all the etceteras of camping. He is good-natured and honest, and will do well by us, but he knows no more of fine sentiment or high ideals than your pointer dog does of Longfellow's poems. You are fond of your dog, though he cannot comprehend Evangeline, in the same way, and you can live in charity with our skipper."

This reminder was the more necessary as the little man had quite a fondness for talking and a great fund of incident and story which I was desirous of drawing forth; and if I had not bound over Charley to a course of toleration, we should have missed several good legends, and, among others, the Florida ghost story which I am now about to relate as nearly as possible in the terms in which our little skipper rehearsed it to us as we sat around our camp-fire, in a palmetto hummock, a little above Palatka.

Our camp-fire streamed up, well fed with pitch-pine knots, and illuminated a scene weird and fantastic enough. A few gigantic live-oaks were grouped on one side of the picture, and the heavy hanging drapery of Spanish moss looked, in the firelight, like stalactites banging from the roof of a great cave. The tall palmetto trees rose in graceful pillars around us, and their broad, feathery tops formed a roof of shelter overhead and seemed to render the tents we carried superfluous. Although it was the middle of February, the air was clear and balmy, without even the suggestion of a chill. My friend Charley, stretched out by the fire and reclining with one elbow on a heap of gray moss, surveyed the scene with the satisfaction of a connoisseur.

"The only thing Florida wants is more history and legend and story," said he. "The scenery is unequalled, but it isn't as it is in Europe, where there is some story or legend at every turn."

Our skipper, who had been industriously washing and arranging our supper-dishes now came to

the front. He considered it part of his duty to show that Florida was not wanting in anything under the sun that any country on earth could supply.

"I'm, sure," said he, "there are *stories* enough about Florida, if folks only know'd 'em. Florida is the oldest settled state in the Union, and there's allers been something a happenin' here. What with Spanish and French and Injuns, there's stories about everywhere thick as palmetto sprouts. I could tell you a story now, about a place you've sailed right by on this river—a regular old-fashioned ghost story, that would make the hair rise on a feller's head."

"Well, tell us then," said I. "It is exactly what we want to hear. So sit down and go at it."

"Wal, now," he said, sitting down and embracing his knees with his arms, looking like an active grasshopper in a conversational attitude, "this 'ere story is what I am knowing to myself, and I'll tell you all about it, but I shan't tell you no names—cause there's folks now livin' wouldn't like it if it got into the papers, and most everything *does* get into the papers now-a-days.

"There's a p'int on this river, that we sailed by yesterday, where there's a nice, comfortable house that used to be lived in, and now it stands all solitary and goin' to ruin, jest because it's haunted, so that no mortal can stand it to live there."

"Tell us the story of this haunted house," said I, stirring up the fire and throwing on an extra pine knot.

"Wal, ye see, there was the General—I shan't mention no names—but the General was the greatest man in these parts in the old times here. He had a place down on Fort George Island, and he owned a tract of some ten thousand acres on the St. John's—good, prime land—where you could grow the long, staple cotton and sugar cane. Now, the General he was a drivin' kind o' predominatin' man; he wanted to do things on a grand scale. He didn't want any o' yer little, fiddlin' plantations; he wanted to live like a prince, and work seven hundred niggers, and make things spin when he took hold. Wal, you see, them Northern fellers up there in Virginny and the Car'linys and so on wanted to

trade off their spare niggers to Florida, and ask what they was a mind to for 'em, too; so that it made stockin' a plantation come to an awful high figure, and the Ginerol he warn't a-goin' to pay 'em their prices, so he 'greed with a slaver cap'n, and used to get in his hands from Africa. Ye see, the folks there at Washington had agreed to put down the slave trade, and they passed a law makin' on it piracy to bring 'em in, but the old Ginerol he didn't care for that. He knew that there was plenty of places all along the coast where ships could run in and land their cargo and slip off, and nobody be the wiser; and that's what he did; he got in lots of prime niggers right over from Africa, and nobody dared say a word about it.

"But the Ginerol had a quarrel with his brother-in-law, the Captain—your see their places j'ined—and the Captain he was pretty spicity and high-tempered, and when there came up questions between 'em he didn't like the Ginerol's predominatin' ways. The fact was the Ginerol was jest the devil himself to get along with. Now, there was a question between 'em about a nigger of the Ginerol's, that married one o' the Captain's women, and so the Captain he tried to buy him, and thought he had bought him, and the nigger had gone over on to his place to live, when there was some fuss about paying the price, and the Ginerol said the bargain was off; and sent and took the nigger, and they brought him back to the Ginerol. He sat there on his veranda when they brought him up, and the Ginerol asked him 'what he was over there for.'

"Wal, the darkey he said, 'I thought I was the Cap'n's nigger, and not your'n.'

"Wal,' says the Ginerol, 'I'll mark ye, and ye'll know whose nigger you are after this;' and with that he out with his knife and slashed his ear off, and then he give him a shove and told him to go 'long to quarters. Wal, he give him such a hard push, and the fellow's hands were tied so he couldn't save himself, and he fell head first down the veranda steps and broke his neck and killed him; so that was the end o' him."

"By thunder!" said Charley, with a sudden start.

"Wal, now—yis, that are was putty steep doin's," said our skipper; "everybody said so, but nobody

dar'st to do nothin' about it, 'cause they didn't want to tackle the Ginerol. But his brother-in-law he jest writ to Washington about how the Ginerol was bringin' in slave ships, and they started a ship-o'-war to cruise around the Florida coast.

"Wal, the Ginerol he come to me one night to go to a place on the river and take off a lot o' niggers he'd got hid up there, and carry 'em down to his plantation. It was full moon then, and bright as daylight, and I took aboard six strapping fellows, the last of a lot that he'd jest got in from a slaver. All the rest was safe and sound on his plantation, workin' steady and regular, and if he only got these in, why the thing was done.

"Wal, we had jest the right wind, and we sailed along calm and steady till we got a little past Black Point, and we see a fellow in a skiff making off from the shore, and waving his handkercher at us. Come to look, it was Tom Hyer, and he come aboard all out o' breath. 'Ginerol,' says he, 'there's a government steamer at the bar, and they've sent the long boat with a full crew of fellows to take you, and they're rowing down here jest as fast as they can. They'll be on you in half an hour.'

"Wal, the Ginerol looked like a thunder-cloud, and he swore like thunder; but I says to him, says I, 'Ginerol, there ain't but one thing to do: we's got fifteen feet o' water here, and we must jest tumble the critters overboard—dead men tell no tales.'

"Wal, the Ginerol see there warn't no two ways about it, and we begun and throw'd 'em over, and the shackles on 'em sunk 'em right down like lead. But there was one big fellow—a Mandingo nigger—he made fight, and when the Ginerol come to him he jest snapped at his hand like a tiger, and bit right through the fleshy part till his teeth met.

"Wal, it took two or three good knocks on the critter's head to get him to let go—but we tumbled him in last of all. He was an awful feller that. His eyes they seemed to snap fire, and he looked as if he could have torn us to pieces, like a wild beast—but we got him overboard spite of his strugglin', and I drew a long breath when I see him sink.

"'There,' says I, 'Ginerol, now that's over; now let's get out the fishing-tackle and we'll be catchin' sheepshead.' And so we did. Tom he got into his

skiff and rowed back, and it warn't more than a quarter of an hour before, sure enough, the long boat came around the p'int makin' right straight for us. We took it all quite cool; they come alongside and asked what we was doing, and we told 'em we was fishing, and some of 'em came aboard and seemed mighty curious, and looked all over the schooner, but didn't find nothin'.

"They said they'd just come out for a row up river to see how things looked on the St. John's and enjoy the moonlight, and pretty soon they turned around and began rowin' back again. The General he set his teeth and looked after 'em. 'I bet I know who set 'em on,' says he, 'but he didn't catch us this time. The fellows are safe enough at the bottom of the river; they'll never rise to tell on us, and the garfish and alligators will soon finish what's left of 'em.'

"That's what he said, but I guess he didn't know jest what he was a talkin' about, for from that very night the General's house was haunted so there warn't no peace nor rest in it. That Mandingo fellow was seen all around the place, appearin' now here and now there, and scowling and threatening so that the General's wife and children was scared almost into fits. Why, sometimes the General would feel his hand sting jest as when he was bit,

and wake and find that Mandingo bendin' over him; and then people heard chains rattlin' and scrapin', and groans and sort o' choking, gurgling sounds like people drowning; and the fact was the General give up living there and moved off to his place on Fort George Island. He tried to get the overseer to live there. But the overseer couldn't stand it, and now nobody lives in it and nobody wants to go a-nigh it after dark."

"Good," said my friend Charley, with a deep intonation; "the Lord be praised for that." The skipper looked at him with a curious, inquiring twinkle in his little gray eyes.

"Harry," Charley continued, laying a hand on my shoulder, "I'm getting orthodox. I believe in *hell*—there must, there ought to be a *hell*."

"Oh, of course, we all believe in *hell*," said the little skipper; "everybody does. Oh, yes, I'm orthodox. I belong to the Methodist church."

Charley looked like a full-charged thundercloud, but I laid my hand on his arm. "Don't waste your powder, Charley," I said; "if the Lord can have patience we can, and if He is slow He is sure."

"Amen!" said Charley, with fervor, as we turned in for the night.