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## **Mightier than the Sword**

Cincinnati, OH  
November 15, 1832

Dearest Brother,

Here we are at last in Cincinnati. Five weeks on our sojourn into the wilderness. Our first stop was New York City. Thence we traveled by steamship to Philadelphia. Disembarking there, the luggage and effects of all nine of us were piled into a stagecoach, and then the adventure into the West began in earnest. Passing through Pennsylvania, our spirits were high. We sang hymns and threw religious tracts out the coach window, startling the rude swains we encountered along the way. It might have been wicked to some, but we were peppering the landscape with moral influence.

Beyond Harrisburg the steep roads slowed us down, but gave us the chance to view the beauty of the mountainous Appalachians. I had never seen a real mountain before. Oh, my – they were breathtaking, covered with trees and soaring in the autumn sky. What they must look like in the fullness of summer. At a town called Wheeling in Virginia we crossed the Ohio River, and followed it on muddy, rutted roads that slung us to and fro.

Bruised and battered but with songs in our hearts we reached Cincinnati yesterday, muddy and tired but all in good spirits. Our hymns of praise were for more than mere deliverance from the journey. Much to our surprise, Cincinnati, the Queen City of the West is an impressive metropolis of some 30,000 bustling citizens. It has impressive homes, stately public buildings and fine schools and churches. I am most favorably impressed. I am sure that Father's taking the appointment was a very fortunate thing.

Your loving Sister

Porkopolis, Ohio  
April 7, 1833

Dearest Brother,

Well just when I thought I had experienced all I could stand of the pigs roaming freely up and down the muddy streets of this benighted city – baby brother James actually rode some distance on the back of a large, bristly, filthy hog the other day – Uncle invited sister Catherine and me to join the Semi-Colon Club. This is a wonderful literary society that meets every Monday night at 7:30. The meetings are often at Uncle’s house or at the abodes of other men and women of breeding. All of us, both men and women, contribute papers to be read aloud—always by the men of course! – It’s most jolly. The subject matter can be almost anything. My earliest efforts were in high satirical vein. And while these offerings were well received, I find that my topics have become increasingly serious and I work harder at writing my pieces. I am flattered that the Semi-Colons, women and men alike, receive my work with approbation.

After the reading, there is a lively discussion about the work just read. Then there is dancing, sandwiches and coffee, and at Uncle’s at least, a fine brand of Madeira. The evening ends with a Virginia reel danced in quite lively fashion by the reader of the evening’s paper and one of the girls.

The Semi-Colons, as we call each other, are a varied but marvelous group, the brightest lights of the City. There is a brilliant lawyer, a man who is almost arrogant, but not quite. Salmon P. Chase is his name. Some in Cincinnati call him the “attorney-general for runaway Negroes.” Salmon P. is dead set against slavery and everything about it. He is most outspoken and I fear, too ambitious for his own good. Nevertheless, I believe he will go far. There is the distinguished doctor, Dr. Daniel Drake, renowned throughout the West; a Professor at the

Seminary and my friend, his lovely young wife Eliza, as well as many others, many transplants like us from New England.

The Semi-Colon Club has helped me overcome my shyness, and I find myself developing as a writer. Can you believe I recently sold a piece to the Western Monthly for \$50? That would be a year's tuition at Harvard for one of the boys. It is a tenth of my annual stipend at the school.

Washington, Kentucky  
August 14, 1833

Dearest Sister Catherine,

Well, dearest one, what I have seen down here gives the lie to the pro-slave editorials in that miserable excuse of a newspaper, the Cincinnati Journal. Would that our city had a more enlightened newspaper. Is that ever to be? I fear that the life of the City will never achieve its full potential without a good newspaper.

But, what I am seeing! Mary Dutton and I are visiting what seem the most gracious of folks here in Kentucky. Our hosts are most genial, cultured, easygoing people. Indeed no one seems to work at all – except the slaves, who are everywhere. At dinner our host made a small Negro boy perform acrobatic capers, one after another. All the while he made condescending and rude remarks about the child. On Sunday we went to church, and there in a nearby pew sat a beautiful young woman, of delicate golden hair and luminous, light complexion. I soon learned that she was a quadroon, and a slave to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ of a nearby plantation. I can speak no more of what this young woman must endure and what she must do to satisfy her master's demands so that she is not turned out into the fields with her children, or worse. And all this no more than 50 miles from our home in Cincinnati.

Why must one have the power of life and death over another? The power to split up families, to punish and even kill for no good reason and with no fear of retribution? We both

have heard all too many tales of slave families split up, the husband sold one way, the wife another, and who to care for the poor children? This is awful. I hardly know what to think about it, or what to do.

Your loving Sister

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Life went on. Our correspondent married Eliza's husband when Eliza suffered an early death. The family was poor, but they were happy with their band of seven children. The mother was never entirely content in Cincinnati, and when her husband received an appointment to the faculty of Bowdoin College in 1850, she said goodbye without too much reluctance to the Queen City of the West. But let's jump ahead in our story, all the way to 1889.

Boston, Massachusetts  
March 17, 1889

Dear All,

The biography of Mother is just about written. It has dredged up many striking memories. I wonder whether you recall Mother receiving that letter from Aunt Isabella in 1850, full of anger at the Federal troops policing the Boston streets and looking for runaway slaves after enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act. Aunt Isabella writing – "If I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that will make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is."

As I recall it, Momma made us all listen as she read Aunt's letter. She rose to her feet and looked us in the eye, one by one, then said "I will write something, I will – if I live."

New Orleans, Louisiana  
April 15, 1889

Dear Charles,

Thank you for your recollections of Mother, and Isabella's letter. It is sad that Mother is so far failed in her intellect. Who could want to forget that scene in the parlor and Mother's vehement vow to do something to stop slavery? Do you remember what happened in church only a few weeks later? How Mother had the vision of the poor black man beaten to death by two black slaves at the behest of the evil overseer? How the poor man refused to "confess" to whatever his evil tormentor wanted and how, Christ-like, he forgave the villain in the hour of his own death? She said it came to her as if it had blown into her mind like a mighty wind. She came home and wrote down her vision of the brutal murder and read it to all us children. Tears filled our eyes. I confess that I sobbed. Through my tears, I looked at Momma. I am no mentalist, but I know at that moment that Momma knew she had written something very powerful. And so she had.

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And now back in time to . . .

Boston, Massachusetts  
July, 1852

Dearest Madam,

I am glad that we were able to take your splendid book to press so quickly, even before its serialization in Dr. Bailey's National Era was completed. This was a gamble, but the continued monthly installments only seemed to heighten the already feverish expectation for the whole book. Your work has surpassed our wildest dreams. Three steam presses and a phalanx of book binders have been working night and day to meet the never ceasing demand.

Enclosed please find our check, for your first quarter's royalty of 10% of proceeds, made out in your favor in the amount of \$10,000.

Yours respectfully,

John P. Jewett

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Of course the book was Uncle Tom's Cabin. The talented and high spirited author was ex-Cincinnati luminary Harriet Beecher Stowe. Hatty Stowe was the most read writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, selling more copies of Uncle Tom's Cabin than any book other than the Bible itself. Uncle Tom is still in print. Author of more than 20 books, about half of them novels, Hatty is the subject of learned monographs and articles to this day. Uncle Tom himself unfairly entered the lexicon as the misunderstood name of a misunderstood man. While James Baldwin decried the book and its portrait of the long suffering slave, Henry Louis Gates Jr., among others has labored to put this worthy work in its serious social and literary context.

But back in time to our epistolary narrative.

Washington, DC  
December 3, 1862

Dear Calvin,

Well, we had the drollest time in the White House. We could hardly contain our jollity, but we managed to restrain ourselves the while without self-disgrace. When we got back to the hotel we exploded with the laughter we had to suppress in the presence of "Father Abraham." I'll tell you more when I get back to Brunswick tomorrow. I now have a strong faith in this man and trust that he will indeed emancipate the slaves.

Your loving wife,

Harriet

No one knows what Lincoln and Harriet actually said to each other. Of course, there is the snide story that the dignified, if jocular Lincoln said on meeting Ms. Stowe and shaking her hand, as the giant rail splitter towered above her, "So this is the little lady who made this big war." However there is no record of the actual conversation, which went on for an hour or more. This writer does not choose to believe the condescending words quoted above are those of the sensitive and compassionate writer of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural.

Harriet lived a long life thereafter, dying in 1896, after descending into a most disheartening dementia, described in detail by her neighbor in Hartford Connecticut, Samuel Langhorn Clemens. But like a man she admired mightily, her truth is marching on.

This next part you just won't believe; I swear it is true. If John Diehl can tell us about the exploits of the Celestial Branch of the Literary Club, I can tell you about my own correspondence from this long dead lady Semi-Colon.

One night as I was writing this paper, not knowing how it would end, I couldn't sleep. As I sat in our library, mindlessly following a soccer blog on my iPad, I noticed a blinding light up the hill. A luminous winged figure appeared to be depositing something in our mail box. I was fearful, but warily climbed our driveway and opened the mailbox. There it was, on the mostly unearthly smooth, glowing paper I have ever handled, a letter in shimmering print. I can and will recite it now verbatim, as I remember every word. I would have brought the letter itself tonight, but when I went to retrieve it from my desk earlier this evening it was strangely gone. One of my study's windows was unaccustomedly ajar and the curtain was blowing, on a still night. At any rate, the letter:

The Emyrean  
Outside Time

Dear Mr. Covatta,

I first noticed you when you appeared at my home on Gilbert Avenue, nosing around in that hang dog way you have, a fish out of water among the black school children and the family from Cleveland touring the house. I could sense that you wanted to write something about the recent flare up at the junior literary club, the one that has usurped the Semi-Colon's claim to Monday night.

Oh, I know the Semi-Colon is gone and your Club lives on – good for it. I like to see old things survive and even prosper. I'm not sure how distinguished Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase stacks up against two very mediocre Presidents, but both Chase and Taft were Chief Justices of the Supreme Court. On the literary end, I humbly submit that my Uncle Tom has had as much influence on American life as anything written by one of you Literarians. But I don't want to boast.

I do want to thank you for inviting me into your Club, if only by means of a paper. I know you couldn't invite me in the flesh, for a number of reasons, not even primarily because I

have been dead for 118 years. Perhaps you could encourage the Club to have at least one portrait of Cincinnati's most successful and influential novelist some place in its precincts. Perhaps in the kitchen?

But you are not a very brave boy, Tony, are you? Man or woman, one has to be brave. How hard do you think it was for me, a mere woman to do what I did? I could not even vote. You have never even admitted that you voted in favor of women at your Club all four times. I know you have thought of resigning from the Club but I trust that you won't. I hope that you will not run – nor hide – but stay to do and say what is right. To extend forgiveness to those who don't agree with you, and stand up for once in your life, courteously, gentlemanly, politely with a view to the long road ahead, for what you think in your heart is the only healthy course for the Club to follow. The fullness of time will sort out what is best. For now I share with you only my simple message: Life is change. To refuse to change is death.

I don't have much confidence, though, that you will even relate my message to the Club. Your need for acceptance and your habit of clever equivocation may well prevail. But for taking me along to the Literary Club I give you a present. What I inscribed on the flyleaf of my son Charles' 1889 biography of me; the words of Valiant for Truth in Pilgrim's Progress:

“My Sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage and my courage and skill to him that can get it.”

Her words, mightier than any sword, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

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