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THE SONG OF THE LARK CORA UNASHAMED THE AMERICAN THE PONDER HEART



THE CONSCIENCE OF A TROUBLED LAND: FANNY KEMBLE

By Dan Sanders

In the days of slavery in America, and during the darkest hours of the war fought over it, it took a woman from another continent to give each struggle its perspective. Her name was Fanny Kemble, and she was by turns a star actress, trapped wife, and preeminent writer. Fanny knew well the countless humiliations of slavery, because it could be said that she had been owned by a man herself. In finding her own freedom, she bridged the two great social issues of nineteenth century America -- slavery and women's suffrage.

She was born the same year as Abraham Lincoln, in 1809. Fanny and her mother were far too alike -- each impetuous, hot-tempered and deeply emotional -- to get along much. Her indulgent father, Charles Kemble, was part of a legendary acting family. He also ran one of Britain's leading playhouses, but not very well:

when Fanny was fifteen he was jailed for mounting debts, and sale of the theater seemed certain. Desperate, Charles played his last card. Just as today, it was common then for a stars' child to follow their parents' occupation. So Charles staged a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, casting himself as Mercutio, his wife as Lady Capulet -- and his daughter as Juliet. Fanny had never acted before outside a schoolroom, but the latest Kemble was a major success. The next year Charles and Fanny toured England to wide acclaim.

During her sojourn through England, Fanny was deeply dismayed by the poverty that seemed to be everywhere. A financial recession and an epidemic of cholera had in the meantime put many theaters out of business, and Charles Kemble decided to take the tour to the United States.

Fanny was a huge hit in America, the first great British actress to appear in the young country. She met President Andrew Jackson, and Daniel Webster. Thirteen-year-old Walt Whitman saw her play dozens of times. Harvard boys pawned their watches and overcoats to watch the beautiful, fiery performer from the top balcony. One of her admirers was Pierce Butler. His family was part of Philadelphia aristocracy, but their wealth came from plantations they owned in Georgia – land worked by hundreds of slaves. Pierces' intellect seemed beneath Fannys' to her friends, and the couple seemed less in love than stubbornly obsessed with one another. But Pierce caught Fanny in a weak moment -- her beloved maid had just died, she was a stranger in a strange land, and she felt the pressure of being the Kemble family's savior. The marriage was in trouble almost immediately, despite two daughters in four years.

The bride knew nothing of the source of the Butlers' wealth until after the wedding, and the revelation horrified her. But Fanny's options were almost nonexistent. She had given her father all the money she had made as an actress. In the 1830s a couple's children were the sole property of the husband, so if she left Pierce she wouldn't be allowed to see her two girls. Fanny Kemble was utterly dependent on Pierce Butler -- and slavery -- for her sustenance and motherhood.

Fanny had always preferred writing to acting, so when she accompanied Pierce on a trip to inspect the Butler properties, she fetched along her pen and journal. The journey south was nine grueling days of steamboats, trains and horse-drawn carriages. The Butlers arrived at the plantation, on an island off the Georgia coast, two days after Christmas in 1838. Fanny was stunned at the reception given



A portrait of Fanny by the American artist Thomas Sully, done a year before her catastrophic marriage.

them by the island's slaves. The Butler family was shouted at, bowed to, and touched as if they were gods. The plantation had fallen into decline, and the slaves were relieved to see Pierce: it sparked hopes that they wouldn't be sold and their families scattered to the winds.

A woman from outside the South knew no more about a slave's life in that time than we know about laborers in Asia who make our shoes and toys today. The scope of Fanny Kembles' shock when she saw slavery's true nature was epic, and so was what she wrote.

Cabins consist of one room about twelve feet by fifteen... divided from each other by rough wooden partitions, on which the inhabitants sleep... the gray moss of the forests for mattress, and filthy, pestilential-looking blankets

for covering... while the half-naked children were cowering around two or three smoldering cinders.

Fanny threw herself into the plantations' affairs: she bribed the slave women to clean their babies, begged their overseer to ease his use of the whip, and harangued Pierce Butler to no end about the slaves' treatment. The latter drove the final stake into the marriage. Later he would say indignantly of her, "She held that marriage should be companionship on equal terms."

In those days before the telephone, letter-writing was a prime leisure occupation, and Fanny sent a series of long letters to



*Fanny as Juliet, by an unknown artist.
(National Portrait Gallery)*

a friend, heartbreakingly detailing the slaves' plight. The friend kept the letters and encouraged Fanny to publish them in book form. The *Amistad* case was national news, and slavery was now America's hottest social issue. Fanny refused, however. As happens so often in wrecked marriages, the children had become the field of battle. Pierce had threatened to cut their mother off from contact with them if Fanny put her abolitionist writing into print or returned to the stage. But soon after this Fanny discovered that Pierce was being unfaithful to her, and she fled to England to think things out.

To make ends meet in her homeland, Fanny wrote verse and travelogues. Then she accepted an offer to act again in 1847, and when Pierce learned of it he divorced her. Fanny hurried back to America to defend herself in the case, and won the right to see her daughters. Again, she wrote and acted to support herself. Her comeback in the States was highly successful, and she lived near Boston, making friends with other literary stars of the day like Hawthorne, Longfellow, Browning, Melville and Thackeray. She did many benefit performances for the poor. Throughout the 1850's, she was urged time and again to consider publishing her splendid writings from her days on the Georgia plantation. But occupied with other writing, and busy at war with her ex-husband to stay in the lives of her girls, she declined.

Late in the decade a massive financial collapse ravaged America. Pierce Butler, never much of a businessman, was wiped out. The plantations' 436 slaves were sold to meet his losses. Fanny's daughters were now in their twenties and unprovided for, so she began to consider other means of income. By the time the

Civil War erupted in 1861, Fanny was preparing the old letters and journals for publication, titling it *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*. A year later, distressed by the war and homesick, Fanny returned to England.

What she found there dismayed her even more. Support for the Confederate side in London was deep. Cotton was the oil of its day, the one substance ruling the world's economy, and many thought that Britain should join with the rebels and gain access to their cotton market. Fanny's book was published there first, in mid-1863, and was instrumental in cooling British sympathies with the Confederacy. Shortly afterwards, it was finally released in the United States -- during some of the war's greatest tumult. Lee's defeat at Gettysburg turned the war's tide. Massive race riots in New York killed hundreds. A young Anglo friend of Fanny's, Robert Gould Shaw, died leading an attack by black Union troops on a key Confederate installation in South Carolina that proved the worth of the African American soldier.

Fanny told American friends that the suffering of the Civil War was so total it needed a Dante or a Milton to convey it. But neither, of course, had breathed for centuries; Fanny would have to do. The war had been so long and bloody many Northerners had all but forgotten the reason for it. More than anything else in those dark days, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* reminded them.

... Many of the sick women were cowering on wooden settles, the poor wretches too ill to rise lay strewed about on the earthen floor without bed, pillow or mattress... I stood in the midst of them, perfectly unable to speak, the

tears pouring from my eyes... Here lay women expecting the agonies of childbirth, others groaning over the pain and disappointment of miscarriages -- here lay some burning with fever, or chilled with cold and aching with rheumatism upon the cold hard ground, in draughts and dampness, dirt, noise and stench -- all absorbed in physical suffering... And this is the hospital of an estate where the owners are supposed to be humane, the overseer efficient and kind, and the negroes well cared for!

The book plucked slavery out of the abstract and drew upon it a human face -- inside millions of Northern sitting-rooms. *Harper's Magazine* called it "The most powerful anti-slavery book yet written." *The Atlantic* chimed in, "A permanent and most valuable chapter in our history... A sadder book the human hand never wrote."

Pierce Butler died two years after the end of the Civil War, and Fanny returned to America, free from his reach at last. She began doing one-woman performances of Shakespeare that were both critical and commercial successes. Fanny's nephew married President Grant's daughter at the White House. Late in life she championed suffrage and racial-equality causes, and published a novel at the age of eighty. When she died in early 1893, countless words were written about her. Fanny Kemble had lived almost the entire century, and fought valiantly in its two great struggles of slavery and suffrage. Henry James, another literary giant of the day and a close friend of Fanny's, wrote when learning of her passing: "I am

conscious of a strange bareness and a kind of evening chill, as it were, in the air, as if some great object that had filled it for long had left an emptiness.” A less celebrated but no less eloquent epitaph was offered by Celia Davis, an ancient woman who had been a slave on the Butler plantation so long ago. She called Fanny “The most beautiful among women. She was fair as a lily. To see her one would imagine one was beholding an angel.”

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Celia Davis met Ms. Kemble while she was a small child – and a slave on the Butler plantation. This photo is from 1915.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- 1.) What are some aspects of Fanny’s early life and marriage that fostered her compassion for the slaves on the Butler plantation?
- 2.) Why did Fanny’s book *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* have such an impact in England and the United States?
- 3.) What were some things Fanny liked about America, and what were some things she disliked? Answer the same question in regards to her homeland of England.

OTHER MAJOR WORKS

Journal of a Residence In America, 1835

A Year of Consolation, 1847

Notes Upon Some of Shakespeare’s Plays, 1882