

Document 4.2 Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (1861, 1865)

Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut of Camden, South Carolina, was the wife of James Chesnut, Jr., a prominent state politician and a U.S. Senator between 1858 and 1860. The Chesnuts were close friends of Jefferson Davis and counted numerous other Confederate politicians and generals as their friends and acquaintances. James Chesnut defended slavery, was the first Southerner to withdraw from the Senate after Lincoln's election in 1860, and served as a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army.

March 13, 1861

Read Uncle Tom's Cabin again. These negro women have a chance here that women have nowhere else. They can redeem themselves – the "improvers" can. They can marry decently, and nothing is remembered against these colored ladies. It is not a nice topic, but Mrs. Stowe revels in it. How delightfully Pharisaic a feeling it must be to rise superior and fancy we are so degraded as to defend and like to live with such degraded creatures around us – such men as Legree and his women.

The best way to take negroes to your heart is to get as far away from them as possible. As far as I can see, Southern women do all that missionaries could do to prevent and alleviate evils. The social evil has not been suppressed in old England or in New England, in London or in Boston. People in those places expect more virtue from a plantation African than they can insure in practise among themselves with all their own high moral surroundings – light, education, training, and support. Lady Mary Montagu says, "Only men and women at last." "Male and female, created he them," says the Bible. There are cruel, graceful, beautiful mothers of angelic Evas North as well as South, I dare say. The Northern men and women who came here were always hardest, for they expected an African to work and behave as a white man. We do not.

I have often thought from observation truly that perfect beauty hardens the heart, and as to grace, what so graceful as a cat, a tigress, or a panther. Much love, admiration, worship hardens an idol's heart. It becomes utterly callous and selfish. It expects to receive all and to give nothing. It even likes the excitement of seeing people suffer. I speak now of what I have watched with horror and amazement.

Topsys I have known, but none that were beaten or ill-used. Evas are mostly in the heaven of Mrs. Stowe's imagination. People can't love things dirty, ugly, and repulsive, simply because they ought to do so, but they can be good to them at a distance; that's easy. You see, I can not rise very high; I can only judge by what I see.

May 4th, 1865

J. H. Boykin was at home at the time to look after his own interests, and he, with John de Saussure, has saved the cotton on their estates, with the mules and farming utensils and plenty of cotton as capital to begin on again. The negroes would be a good riddance. A hired man would be a good deal cheaper than a man whose father and mother, wife and twelve children have to be fed, clothed, housed, and nursed, their taxes paid, and their doctor's bills, all for his half-done, slovenly, lazy work. For years we have thought negroes a nuisance that did not pay. They pretend exuberant loyalty to us now. Only one man of Mr. Chesnut's left the plantation with the Yankees.

May 21st, 1865

The negroes have flocked to the Yankee squad which has recently come, but they were snubbed, the rampant freedmen. "Stay where you are," say the Yanks. "We have nothing for you." And they sadly "peruse" their way. Now that they have picked up that word "peruse," they use it in season and out. When we met Mrs. Preston's William we asked, "Where are you going?" "Perusing my way to Columbia," he answered.

When the Yanks said they had no rations for idle negroes, John Walker answered mildly, "This is not at all what we expected." The colored women, dressed in their gaudiest array, carried bouquets to the Yankees, making the day a jubilee. But in this house there is not the slightest change. Every negro has known for months that he or she was

free, but I do not see one particle of change in their manner. They are, perhaps, more circumspect, polite, and quiet, but that is all. Otherwise all goes on in antebellum statu quo. Every day I expect to miss some familiar face, but so far have been disappointed.

June 27th, 1865

My sister-in-law in tears of rage and despair, her servants all gone to "a big meeting at Mulberry," though she had made every appeal against their going. "Send them adrift," some one said, "they do not obey you, or serve you; they only live on you." It would break her heart to part with one of them. But that sort of thing will soon right itself. They will go off to better themselves – we have only to cease paying wages – and that is easy, for we have no money.

July 26th, 1865

I am reading French with Johnny – anything to keep him quiet. We gave a dinner to his company, the small remnant of them, at Mulberry house. About twenty idle negroes, trained servants, came without leave or license and assisted. So there was no expense. They gave their time and labor for a good day's feeding. I think they love to be at the old place.

Source: Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Wife of James Chesnut, Jr., United States Senator from South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward an Aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 142–143, 387, 394, 402, 403.