# Read Harper: Selected Readings of Frances E. W. Harper




#Harper200 Commemorative Booklet

The Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk
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This booklet was produced for educational purposes to be used with the #Harper200 Readathon, one of mulitple educational programs to commemorate the 200th birth date of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in 2025 by the Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk at The Pennsylvania State University.

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The back cover of this booklet is an image of an original broadside of "Dandelions" (1895) offered to attendees by the UArizona School of Art Letterpress Lab in the Spring of 2025. It was first printed in *Atlanta Offerings: Poems by George S. Ferguson Co*. in Philadelphia in 1895. Created by Karen Zimmermann and Jacqueline Barrios, the poem's design represents an exchange of expertise and processes to enable a ceaseless dispersal of her words, for our time. The image of the letterpress is used with permission.

The production of this booklet was directed by Dr. Jacqueline Barrios and Dr. Denise Burgher, and designed and coordinated by Lauren Cooper.

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## #Harper 200 Nationwide Read-a-thon

The #Harper 200 Nationwide Read-a-thon invites twenty-first century readers to engage with the work of Frances E. W. Harper in honor of her 200th birthday. We invite individuals, classes, and organizations to join a collective convened by Penn State University's Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk over a year of reading in community.

We hope individuals or any group of readers—students in classes, members of reading groups or book clubs, friends and family—to use our resources to create their own reading adventure. Participants on their own can curate texts, select durations, design programming to fit their own needs.

Hosted on our website [https://coloredconventions.org/news/read-harper-200/], the project features a suggested reading calendar of digitized texts, from lectures to short stories, from the groundbreaking novel *Iola Leroy: Shadows Uplifted* (1892) to her celebrated poems. All sections are accompanied by a curated video series produced by Harper experts.

We present this commemorative booklet of selected readings from our digital collection that accompanied a pilot three-hour reading marathon hosted in April, 2025 in Tucson, Arizona, in collaboration with the University of Arizona and the African-American Museum of Southern Arizona. We compile it here as a resource to you as you bring others to connect to our celebration of Harper. Join us as we dive into a treasure trove of writing by this fearless advocate for Civil Rights, who was the most beloved Black poet and the most prolific Black novelist of her time.

#Harper 200 Nationwide Read-a-thon Organizers,
Dr. Jacqueline Jean Barrios & Dr. Denise Burgher

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## About Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper lived an extraordinary life as a creative artist, activist, and public intellectual. She was the most prolific African American writer who stood among the most distinguished orators of the nineteenth century. Born on September 24, 1825, much of Harper's early life, however, remains a mystery due to the death of her parents by the time she was three years old. Harper's grandmother had purchased her mother's freedom; thereby ensuring that Frances Ellen was indeed "free from birth," although she would grow up in Maryland where slavery still was widely practiced. She was raised by her uncle William J. Watkins and aunt Henrietta Russell Watkins in Baltimore within a tight-knit community of enterprising free Black people. Counted among the city's population were progressive political leaders, skilled craftspeople, and highly educated African Americans. Until about the age of fourteen, Frances Ellen attended the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, where she studied under her uncle's strict supervision a curriculum of Christian theology, classical literature, and elocution. Such training prepared her well to become the kind of reformer her uncle envisioned, "one whose tongue should sting like a thousand scorpions, and whose pen should manufacture words of fire."

As a young woman, Frances Ellen Watkins would indeed speak eloquently with a conviction of truth, often performing her poetry to bring attention to the causes of freedom. Watkins' first known publication, *Forest Leaves* (c. 1840s), is evidence of the burgeoning talents she possessed. It was likely written and self-published while she spent time working as a seamstress and teaching full time to support herself. By the early 1850s, Watkins had left Baltimore under the threat of the Fugitive Slave Law which exposed even freeborn Black people to kidnapping and enslavement.

Soon after leaving Maryland, she found work again teaching near Columbus, Ohio and later Little York (or York), Pennsylvania. Then, in 1854, she would make another bold decision to become an anti-slavery lecturer traveling throughout the northeast. She spent time living and working in Philadelphia with William Still and his family where she often encountered fugitives aided by the Underground Railroad. Still was the lead conductor of this intricate network of escape routes leading to freedom. Frances used the fugitives' stories as rich material for her abolitionist lectures and writing. She continued to publish her poetry and short fiction in widely-circulating abolitionist newspapers, Black periodicals, and religious publications like *The Liberator*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, *Anglo-African Magazine*, and *The Christian Recorder*. In 1859, Watkins penned one of the first short stories by an African American author, "Two Offers," which features a strong-willed female protagonist contemplating her future (as a precursor to much of Watkins' later works). Like her characterizations, it was her voice that also propelled Watkins' reputation as a popular orator drawing large, diverse audiences as it was reported in newspapers across the country.

Married in 1860 to Fenton Harper while living in Ohio but soon became a widow in 1864, Frances Harper's unconventional domestic life ended abruptly. Not content to be simply a farmer's wife, she had remained active attending political conventions, publishing poetry, and delivering speeches throughout her marriage. When she became a single mother raising her daughter Mary (born 1862), Harper moved back to Philadelphia after the death of her husband but she continued working on the lecture circuit traveling once again across the nation throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction. This period also marked the most productive phase of her writing career with the publication of an epic poem *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), poetry

collections (*Poems* in 1871 and *Sketches of Southern Life* in 1872), and serialized novels *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876–77), and *Trials and Triumphs* (1888–1889). Scholars are working to recover even more of Harper's periodical literature, essays, and correspondences "lost" in archival collections.

Frances Watkins' activism was boundless, converging the intersectionality of racism and sexism experienced by African American women in particular. She participated in colored conventions in Ohio, New York, and Delaware, where she took part in the deliberations among her male peers and her dignified oratory was duly recorded. She was the most prominent African American woman leading the suffrage movement. In 1866, Harper spoke at the National Woman's Rights Convention in New York where she delivered her speech "We Are All Bound Up Together" calling on a unified coalition with white feminists to fight for gender and racial equality. She was also an outspoken temperance advocate. Concerned about the mental health and wellness of Black families and communities extending beyond slavery, Harper's anti-drink reform literature removed the stigma of racial deviance and immorality to bring attention to alcoholism as an indiscriminate illness. While there are reviews of Harper's extensive lecture tours, only a few full speeches have been recovered along with other materials (letters, photographs, and poems) scattered in archival collections. Fragments of her serialized novels and slim volumes of poetry is evidence of her steady progression to becoming a novelist with a broader vision as when *Iola Leroy* appeared in 1892, the now canonical work crowning Harper as a foremother in the African American literary tradition.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Harper had become an iconic race woman inspiring generations of Black fem-

inists like Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams. Harper's leadership in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) as an elder stateswoman motivated Williams to conceptualize the work of Black women intellectuals as "educators of public opinion." At the World's Congress of Representative Women, organized at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Harper's speaking about "Women's Political Future" was a clarion call for younger feminists internationally. Losing her daughter Mary in 1908, however, would bring Harper's storied life to a tragic end. She died the following year on February 22, 1911 and, as she had vowed years before, Frances Harper was buried in a free land where her legacy as a passionate freedom fighter charted the path for a rising generation of civil rights leaders into the modern era.

**Source:** Sherita L. Johnson, "Introduction," Frances Ellen Watkins Harper at 200 (blog), accessed April 18, 2025, https://coloredconventions.org/harper/introduction/. This essay is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## *We Are All Bound up Together* (May, 1866)

*"We Are All Bound up Together" was delivered to the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention held in New York in May 1866. Among Harper's fellow speakers at the conference were Susan B. Anthony, Frances D. Gage, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.*

*This speech marked the beginning of Harper's prominence in national feminist organizations. Though she would continue to work with many of these women, Harper often experienced frustration caused by racism in general in the country and, in particular, among her feminist colleagues. This speech indicates that she was aware of cultural differences and many of the potential problems. She understood, for example, that many feminists were racists and that many people who urged the empowerment of Black people did not include Black women in their visions.*

*Throughout her Southern tour, Harper spoke on behalf of equal rights for all people. She interpreted equal rights to apply to race, gender, and class. "The Great Problem to Be Solved" was delivered at the Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery on April 14, 1875. Harper's references to history, science, and contemporary events reveal a wide range of reading and interests. In this lecture as in others, Harper emphasizes the responsibilities of both races for creating a society that is more harmonious with what she understands as the intentions of God. Thus, while both of these speeches were delivered in the North, they fairly represent*

*the ideas that Harper espoused in both the South and the North during this era.*

**Source:** From Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Frances Smith Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances S. Foster, Black Women's Studies, literature (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City Univ. of New York, 1990).

I feel I am something of a novice upon this platform. Born of a race whose inheritance has been outraged and wronged, most of my life had been spent in battling against those wrongs. But I did not feel as keenly as others, that I had these rights, in common with other women, which are now demanded. About two years ago, I stood within the shadows of my home. A great sorrow had fallen upon my life. My husband had died suddenly, leaving me a widow, with four children, one my own, and the others stepchildren. I tried to keep my children together. But my husband died in debt; and before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk crocks and wash tubs from my hands. I was a farmer's wife and made butter for the Columbus market; but what could I do, when they had swept all away? They left me one thing and that was a looking glass! Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and sold his bed, and taken away his means of support.

I took my children in my arms, and went out to seek my living. While I was gone; a neighbor to whom I had once lent five dollars, went before a magistrate and swore that he believed I was a non resident, and laid an attachment on my very bed. And I went back to Ohio with my orphan children in my arms, without a single feather bed in this wide world, that was not in the custody of the law. I say, then,

that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law.

We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul. You tried that in the case of the negro. You pressed him down for two centuries; and in so doing you crippled the moral strength and paralyzed the spiritual energies of the white men of the country. When the hands of the black were fettered, white men were deprived of the liberty of speech and the freedom of the press. Society cannot afford to neglect the enlightenment of any class of its members. At the South, the legislation of the country was in behalf of the rich slaveholders, while the poor white man was neglected. What is the consequence today? From that very class of neglected poor white men, comes the man who stands today, with his hand upon the helm of the nation. He fails to catch the watchword of the hour, and throws himself, the incarnation of meanness, across the pathway of the nation.....

This grand and glorious revolution which has commenced, will fail to reach its climax of success, until throughout the length and breadth of the American Republic, the nation shall be so color-blind, as to know no man by the color of his skin or the curl of his hair. It will then have no privileged class, trampling upon and outraging the unprivileged classes, but will be then one great privileged nation, whose privilege will be to produce the loftiest manhood and womanhood that humanity can attain.

I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote

according to their convictions and principles; the bad, as dictated by preju[d]ice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.

You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man's hand against me. Let me go to-morrow morning and take my seat in one of your street cars — I do not know that they will do it in New York, but they will in Philadelphia — and the conductor will put up his hand and stop the car rather than let me ride.

A Lady — They will not do that here.

Mrs. Harper — They do in Philadelphia. Going from Washington to Baltimore this Spring, they put me in the smoking car. Aye, in the capital of the nation, where the black man consecrated himself to the nation's defence, faithful when the white man was faithless, they put me in the smoking car! They did it once; but the next time they tried it, they failed; for I would not go in. I felt the fight in me; but I don't want to have to fight all the time. To-day I am puzzled where to make my home. I would like to make it in Philadelphia, near my own friends and relations. But if I want to ride in the streets of Philadelphia, they send me to ride on the platform with the driver. Have women nothing to do with this? Not long since, a colored woman took her seat in an Eleventh Street car in Philadelphia, and the conductor stopped the car, and told the rest of the passengers to get out, and left the car with her in it alone, when they took it back to the station. One day I took my seat in a car, and the conductor came to me and told me to take another seat. I just screamed "murder." The man said if I was black I

ought to behave myself. I knew that If he was white he was not behaving himself. Are there no wrongs to be righted?

In advocating the cause of the colored man, since the Dred Scott decision, I have sometimes said I thought the nation had touched bottom. But let me tell you there is a depth of infamy lower than that. It is when the nation, standing upon the threshold of a great peril, reached out its hands to a feebler race, and asked that race to help it, and when the peril was over, said, You are good enough for soldiers, but not good enough for citizens. When Judge Taney said that he men of my race had no rights which the white man was bound to respect, he had not seen the bones of the black man bleaching outside of Richmond. He had not seen the thinned ranks and the thickened graves of the Louisiana Second, a regiment which went into battle nine hundred strong, and came out with three hundred. He had not stood at Olustee and seen defeat and disaster crushing down the pride of our banner, until words was brought to Col. Hallowell, "The day is lost; go in and save it;" and black men stood in the gap, beat back the enemy, and saved your army.

We have a woman in our country who has received the name of "Moses," not by lying about it, but by acting out—a woman who has gone down into the Egypt of slavery and brought out hundreds of our people into liberty. The last time I saw that woman, her hands were swollen. That woman who had led one of Montgomery's most successful expeditions, who was brave enough and secretive enough to act as a scout for the American army, had her hands all swollen from a conflict with a brutal conductor, who undertook to eject her from her place. That woman, whose courage and bravery won a recognition from our army and from every black man in the land, is excluded from every thoroughfare of travel. Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is

a normal school, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.

**Source:** Proceedings of the Eleventh National Woman's Rights Convention. (1866: May 10). Pages 46-48. New York, NY: Robert J. Johnston.

## *The Great Problem To Be Solved* (April 14, 1875)

*"The Great Problem to Be Solved" was delivered at the Centennial Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery on April 14, 1875. Harper's references to history, science, and contemporary events reveal a wide range of reading and interests. In this lecture as in others, Harper emphasizes the responsibilities of both races for creating a society that is more harmonious with what she understands as the intentions of God. Thus, while both of these speeches were delivered in the north, they fairly represent the ideas that Harper espoused in both the south and the north during this era.*

**Source:** From Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Frances Smith Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances S. Foster, Black Women's Studies, literature (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City Univ. of New York, 1990).

Ladies and Gentlemen: The great problem to be solved by the American people, if I understand it, is this: Whether or not there is strength enough in democracy, virtue enough in our civilization, and power enough in our religion to have mercy and deal justly with four millions of people but lately translated from the old oligarchy of slavery to the new commonwealth of freedom; and upon the right solution of this question depends in a large measure the future strength, progress and durability of our nation. The most important question before us colored people is not simply what the Democratic party may do against us or the Republican party do for us; but what are we going to do for ourselves? What shall we do toward developing our character, adding our quota to the civilization and strength of the country, diversifying our industry, and practicing those

lordly virtues that conquer success and turn the world's dread laugh into admiring recognition? The white race has yet work to do in making practical the political axiom of equal rights and the Christian idea of human brotherhood; but while I lift mine eyes to the future I would not ungratefully ignore the past. One hundred years ago and Africa was the privileged hunting ground to Europe and America, and the flag of different nations hung a sign of death on the coasts of Congo and Guinea, and for years unbroken silence had hung around the horrors of the African slave trade. Since then Great Britain and other nations have wiped the bloody traffic from their hands and shaken the gory merchandise from their fingers, and the brand of piracy has been placed upon the African slave trade. Less than fifty years ago mob violence belched out its wrath against the men who dared to arraign the slave holder before the bar of conscience and Christendom. Instead of golden showers upon his head, he who garrisoned the front had a halter around his neck. Since, if I may borrow the idea, the nation has caught the old inspiration from his lips and written it in the new organic world. Less than twenty five years ago slavery clasped hands with King Cotton, and said slavery fights and cotton conquers for American slavery. Since then slavery is dead, the colored man has exchanged the fetters on his wrist for the ballot in his hand. Freedom is king, and Cotton a subject.

It may not seem to be a gracious thing to mingle complaint in a season of general rejoicing. It may appear like the ancient Egyptians seating a corpse at their festal board to avenge the Americans for their shortcomings when so much has been accomplished. And yet, with all the victories and triumphs which freedom and justice have won in this country, I do not believe there is another civilized nation under heaven where there are half as many people who have been brutally and shamefully murdered, with or

without impunity, as in this Republic within the last ten years. And who cares? Where is the public opinion that has scorched with red hot indignation the cowardly murderers of Vicksburg and Louisiana? Sheridan lifts up the veil from Southern society, and behind it is the smell of blood and our bones scattered at the grave's mouth; murdered people; a White League with its "covenant of death and agreement with hell." And who cares? What city pauses one hour to drop a pitying tear over these mangled corpses, or has forged against the perpetrator one thunderbolt of furious protest? But let there be a supposed or real invasion of Southern rights by our soldiers, and our great commercial emporium will rally its forces from the old man in his classic shades, to clasp hands with "dead rabbits" and "plug uglies" in protesting against military interference. What we need today in the onward march of humanity is a public sentiment in favor of common justice and simple mercy. We have a civilization which has produced grand and magnificent results, diffused knowledge, overthrown slavery, made constant conquests over nature, and built up a wonderful material property. But two things are wanting in American civilization a keener and deeper, broader and tenderer sense of justice; a sense of humanity, which shall crystallize into the life of the nation the sentiment that justice, simple justice, is the right, not simply of the strong and powerful, but of the weakest and feeblest of all God's children; a deeper and broader humanity, which will teach men to look upon their feeble brethren not as vermin to be crushed out, or beasts of burden to be bridled and bitten, but as the children of the living God; of that God whose may earnestly hope is in perfect wisdom and in perfect love working for the best good of all. Ethnologists may differ about the origin of the human race. Huxley may search for it in protoplasm, and Darwin send for the missing links, but there is one thing of which we may rest assured that we all come from the living God and that He is the common

Father. The nation that has no reverence for man is also lacking in reverence for God and need to be instructed.

As fellow citizens, leaving out all humanitarian views as a mere matter of political economy it is better to have the colored race a living force animated and strengthened by self reliance and self respect, than a stagnant mass, degraded and self condemned. Instead of the North relaxing its efforts to defuse education in the South, it behooves us for our national life to throw into the South all the healthful reconstructing influences we can command.

Our work in this country is grandly constructive. Some races have come into this world and overthrown and destroyed. But if it is glory to destroy, it is happiness to save; and oh, what a noble work there is before our nation! Where is there a young man who would consent to lead an aimless life when there are such glorious opportunities before him? Before our young men is another battle not a battle of flashing swords and clashing steel, but a moral warfare, a battle against ignorance, poverty and low social condition. In physical warfare the keenest swords may be blunted and the loudest batteries hushed; but in the great conflict of moral and spiritual progress your weapons shall be brighter for their service and better for their use. In fighting truly and nobly for others you win the victory for yourselves.

Give power and significance to your life, and in the great work of upbuilding there is room for woman's work and woman's heart. Oh, that our hearts were alive and our vision quickened, to see the grandeur of the work that lies before. We have some culture among us, but I think our culture lacks enthusiasm. We need a deep earnestness and a lofty unselfishness to round out our lives. It is the inner life that develops the outer, and if we are in earnest the pre-

cious things lie all around our feet, and we need not waste our strength in striving after the dim and unattainable. Women, in your golden youth; mother, binding around your heart all the precious ties of life, let no magnificence of culture, or amplitude of fortune, or refinement of sensibilities, repel you from helping the weaker and less favored. If you have ampler gifts, hold them as larger opportunities with which you can benefit others. Oh, it is better to feel that the weaker and feebler our race the closer we will cling to them, than it is to isolate ourselves from them in selfish, or careless unconcern, saying there is a lion without. Inviting you to this work I do not promise you fair sailing and unclouded skies. You may meet with coolness where you expect sympathy; disappointment where you feel sure of success; isolation and loneliness instead of heart support and cooperation. But if your lives are based and built upon these divine certitudes, which are the only enduring strength of humanity, then whatever defeat and discomfiture may overshadow your plans or frustrate your schemes, for a life that is in harmony with God and sympathy for man there is no such word as fail. And in conclusion, permit me to say, let no misfortunes crush you, no hostility of enemies or failure of friends discourage you. Apparent failure may hold in its rough shell the germs of a success that will blossom in time, and bear fruit throughout eternity. What seemed to be a failure around the Cross of Calvary and in the garden has been the grandest recorded success.

## *Iola Leroy* (1892)
## Selections from Ch. 8, Ch. 13, and Ch. 27

*How does one write a "good, strong book" for one's community? What does it mean to "gather materials" for such a "book"? In 1892, Frances E. W. Harper wrote* Iola Leroy, *a novel that documents the stories and feelings of Black families in slavery and freedom. The novel is titled after its protagonist, Iola, a beautiful mixed-race heroine whose identification with her Black family and community dramatizes the novel's rejection of the concept of "racial passing." The novel weaves her story among narratives of others, archiving scenes, conversations, songs and poems that draw from the cultural and political life of her time period. Harper crafted a novel that adapted popular story tropes while lifting up Black cultural infrastructure, addressing a wide range of people to accomplish multiple purposes: to create spaces for mourning and healing from slavery and the violence of the Reconstruction, to illuminate the strength of familial bonds, to build up communal self-love, to advocate for political agency, including suffrage and education, for women of color. Her characters challenged stereotypes, her poems remixed hymns and ballads, her scenes elevated Black speech and community conversations. She showed the secret languages and complex feelings of how a people survives and resists violence, she celebrated the reunification of the Black family.*

### *From Ch. 8*

*In these excerpts, Dr. Gresham, a doctor and a white Northerner falls in love with Iola, and proposes marriage. In a twist of typical marriage plot conventions, Iola not only refuses his suit once, but twice.*

"When Tom was dying," responded the doctor, "I saw that beautiful and refined young lady bend over and kiss him. When she found that he was dead, she just cried as if her heart was breaking. Well, that was a new thing to me. I can eat with colored people, walk, talk, and fight with them, but kissing them is something I don't hanker after."

"And yet you saw Miss Leroy do it?"

"Yes; and that puzzles me. She is one of the most refined and lady-like women I ever saw. I hear she is a refugee, but she does not look like the other refugees who have come to our camp. Her accent is slightly Southern, but her manner is Northern. She is self-respecting without being supercilious; quiet, without being dull. Her voice is low and sweet, yet at times there are tones of such passionate tenderness in it that you would think some great sorrow has darkened and overshadowed her life. Without being the least gloomy, her face at times is pervaded by an air of inexpressible sadness. I sometimes watch her when she is not aware that I am looking at her, and it seems as if a whole volume was depicted on her countenance. When she smiles, there is a longing in her eyes which is never satisfied. I cannot understand how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds. It is a mystery I cannot solve. Can you?"

"I think I can," answered Col. Robinson.

"Will you tell me?" queried the doctor.

"Yes, on one condition."

"What is it?"

“Everlasting silence.”

“I promise,” said the doctor. “The secret between us shall be as deep as the sea.”

“She has not requested secrecy, but at present, for her sake, I do not wish the secret revealed. Miss Leroy was a slave.”

“Oh, no,” said Dr. Gresham, starting to his feet, “it can’t be so! A woman as white as she a slave?”

“Yes, it is so,” continued the Colonel. “In these States the child follows the condition of its mother. This beautiful and accomplished girl was held by one of the worst Rebels in town. Tom told me of it and I issued orders for her release.”

“Well, well! Is that so?” said Dr. Gresham, thoughtfully stroking his beard. “Wonders will never cease. Why, I was just beginning to think seriously of her.”

“What’s to hinder your continuing to think?” asked Col. Robinson.

“What you tell me changes the whole complexion of affairs,” replied the doctor.

***From Ch. 13***

“But, Iola,” said Dr. Gresham, a little impatiently, “what has all this to do with our marriage? Your complexion is as fair as mine. What is to hinder you from sharing my Northern home, from having my mother to be your mother?” The tones of his voice grew tender, as he raised his eyes to Iola’s face and anxiously awaited her reply.

“Dr. Gresham,” said Iola, sadly, “should the story of my life be revealed to your family, would they be willing to ignore all the traditions of my blood, forget all the terrible humiliations through which I have passed? I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment. I have lived in New England. I love the sunshine of her homes and the freedom of her institutions. But New England is not free from racial prejudice, and I would never enter a family where I would be an unwelcome member.”

“Iola, dear, you have nothing to fear in that direction.”

“Doctor,” she said, and a faint flush rose to her cheek, “suppose we should marry, and little children in after years should nestle in our arms, and one of them show unmistakable signs of color, would you be satisfied?”

She looked steadfastly into his eyes, which fell beneath her truth-seeking gaze. His face flushed as if the question had suddenly perplexed him. Iola saw the irresolution on his face, and framed her answer accordingly.

“Ah, I see,” she said, “that you are puzzled. You had not taken into account what might result from such a marriage. I will relieve you from all embarrassment by simply saying I cannot be your wife. When the war is over I intend to search the country for my mother. Doctor, were you to give me a palace-like home, with velvet carpets to hush my tread, and magnificence to surround my way, I should miss her voice amid all other tones, her presence amid every scene. Oh, you do not know how hungry my heart is for my mother! Were I to marry you I would carry an aching heart into your home and dim its brightness. I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother. The hope of finding her has colored all my life since I regained my freedom. It has helped sustain me in the hour of fearful trial.

When I see her I want to have the proud consciousness that I bring her back a heart just as loving, faithful, and devoted as the last hour we parted."
"And is this your final answer?"

"It is. I have pledged my life to that resolve, and I believe time and patience will reward me."

There was a deep shadow of sorrow and disappointment on the face of Dr. Gresham as he rose to leave. For a moment he held her hand as it lay limp in his own. If she wavered in her determination it was only for a moment. No quivering of her lip or paling of her cheek betrayed any struggle of her heart. Her resolve was made, and his words were powerless to swerve her from the purpose of her soul."

***From Ch. 27***

"Iola, I see no use in your persisting that you are colored when your eyes are as blue and complexion as white as mine."

"Doctor, were I your wife, are there not people who would caress me as a white woman who would shrink from me in scorn if they knew I had one drop of negro blood in my veins? When mistaken for a white woman, I should hear things alleged against the race at which my blood would boil. No, Doctor, I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime of my soul."

"Iola, dear, surely you paint the picture too darkly."

"Doctor, I have painted it with my heart's blood. It is easier to outgrow the dishonor of crime than the disabilities of color. You have created in this country an aristocracy of

color wide enough to include the South with its treason and Utah with its abominations, but too narrow to include the best and bravest colored man who bared his breast to the bullets of the enemy during your fratricidal strife. Is not the most arrant Rebel to-day more acceptable to you than the most faithful colored man?"

....

"Doctor," she replied, gently, "I feel that our paths must diverge. My life-work is planned. I intend spending my future among the colored people of the South."

"My dear friend," he replied, anxiously, "I am afraid that you are destined to sad disappointment. When the novelty wears off you will be disillusioned, and, I fear, when the time comes that you can no longer serve them they will forget your services and remember only your failings."

"But, Doctor, they need me; and I am sure when I taught among them they were very grateful for my services."

"I think," he replied, "these people are more thankful than grateful."

"I do not think so; and if I did it would not hinder me from doing all in my power to help them. I do not expect all the finest traits of character to spring from the hot-beds of slavery and caste. What matters it if they do forget the singer, so they don't forget the song? No, Doctor, I don't think that I could best serve my race by forsaking them and marrying you."

"Iola," he exclaimed, passionately, "if you love your race, as you call it, work for it, live for it, suffer for it, and, if need be, die for it; but don't marry for it. Your education has unfitted you for social life among them."

“It was,” replied Iola, “through their unrequited toil that I was educated, while they were compelled to live in ignorance. I am indebted to them for the power I have to serve them. I wish other Southern women felt as I do. I think they could do so much to help the colored people at their doors if they would look at their opportunities in the light of the face of Jesus Christ. Nor am I wholly unselfish in allying myself with the colored people. All the rest of my family have done so. My dear grandmother is one of the excellent of the earth, and we all love her too much to ignore our relationship with her. I did not choose my lot in life, and the simplest thing I can do is to accept the situation and do the best I can.”

“And is this your settled purpose?” he asked, sadly.

“It is, Doctor,” she replied, tenderly but firmly. “I see no other. I must serve the race which needs me most.”

## *Iola Leroy* (1892)
## Selections from Ch. 18 and Ch. 20

*In these excerpts, Harper paints the story of family reunification of formerly enslaved families after the Civil War. Robert, Iola's uncle and Iola herself embark on a journey to seek out their mothers.*

### *From Ch. 18*

To bind anew the ties which slavery had broken and gather together the remnants of his scattered family became the earnest purpose of Robert's life. Iola, hopeful that in Robert she had found her mother's brother, was glad to know she was not alone in her search. Having sent out lines of inquiry in different directions, she was led to hope, from some of the replies she had received, that her mother was living somewhere in Georgia.

Hearing that a Methodist conference was to convene in that State, and being acquainted with the bishop of that district, she made arrangements to accompany him thither. She hoped to gather some tidings of her mother through the ministers gathered from different parts of that State.

From her brother she had heard nothing since her father's death. On his way to the conference, the bishop had an engagement to dedicate a church, near the city of C——, in North Carolina. Iola was quite willing to stop there a few days, hoping to hear something of Robert Johnson's mother. Soon after she had seated herself in the cars she was approached by a gentleman, who reached out his hand to her, and greeted her with great cordiality. Iola looked up, and recognized him immediately as one of her last patients at the hospital. It was none other than Robert Johnson.

“I am so glad to meet you,” he said. “I am on my way to C—— in search of my mother. I want to see the person who sold her last, and, if possible, get some clew to the direction in which she went.”

“And I,” said Iola, “am in search of my mother. I am convinced that when we find those for whom we are searching they will prove to be very nearly related. Mamma said, before we were parted, that her brother had a red spot on his temple. If I could see that spot I should rest assured that my mother is your sister.”

“Then,” said Robert, “I can give you that assurance,” and smilingly he lifted his hair from his temple, on which was a large, red spot.

“I am satisfied,” exclaimed Iola, fixing her eyes, beaming with hope and confidence, on Robert. “Oh, I am so glad that I can, without the least hesitation, accept your services to join with me in the further search. What are your plans?” “To stop for awhile in C——,” said Robert, “and gather all the information possible from those who sold and bought my mother. I intend to leave no stone un-turned in searching for her.”

“Oh, I do hope that you will succeed. I expect to stop over there a few days, and I shall be so glad if, before I leave, I hear your search has been crowned with success, or, a least, that you have been put on the right track. Although I was born and raised in the midst of slavery, I had not the least idea of its barbarous selfishness till I was forced to pass through it. But we lived so much alone I had no opportunity to study it, except on our own plantation. My father and mother were very kind to their slaves. But it was slavery, all the same, and I hate it, root and branch.”

Just then the conductor called out the station.

"We stop here," said Robert. "I am going to see Mrs. Johnson, and hunt up some of my old acquaintances. Where do you stop?"

"I don't know," replied Iola. "I expect that friends will be here to meet us. Bishop B——, permit me to introduce you to Mr. Robert Johnson, whom I have every reason to believe is my mother's brother. Like myself, he is engaged in hunting up his lost relatives."

"And I," said Robert, "am very much pleased to know that we are not without favorable clues."

"Bishop," said Iola, "Mr. Johnson wishes to know where I am to stop. He is going on an exploring expedition, and wishes to let me know the result."

"We stop at Mrs. Allston's, 313 New Street," said the bishop. "If I can be of any use to you, I am at your service."

"Thank you," said Robert, lifting his hat, as he left them to pursue his inquiries about his long-lost mother.

***From Ch. 20***

Very soon they reached the church, a neat, commodious, frame building, with a blue ceiling, white walls within and without, and large windows with mahogany-colored facings. It was a sight full of pathetic interest to see that group which gathered from miles around. They had come to break bread with each other, relate their experiences, and tell of their hopes of heaven. In that meeting were remnants of broken families—mothers who had been separated from

their children before the war, husbands who had not met their wives for years. After the bread had been distributed and the handshaking was nearly over, Robert raised the hymn which Iola had sung for him when he was recovering from his wounds, and Iola, with her clear, sweet tones, caught up the words and joined him in the strain. When the hymn was finished a dear old mother rose from her seat. Her voice was quite strong. With still a lingering light and fire in her eye, she said:—

"I rise, bredren an' sisters, to say I'm on my solemn march to glory."

"Amen!" "Glory!" came from a number of voices.

"I'se had my trials an' temptations, my ups an' downs; but I feels I'll soon be in one ob de many mansions. If it hadn't been for dat hope I 'spects I would have broken down long ago. I'se bin through de deep waters, but dey didn't overflow me; I'se bin in de fire, but de smell ob it isn't on my garments. Bredren an' sisters, it war a drefful time when I war tored away from my pore little chillen."

"Dat's so!" exclaimed a chorus of voices. Some of her hearers moaned, others rocked to and fro, as thoughts of similar scenes in their own lives arose before them.

"When my little girl," continued the speaker, "took hole ob my dress an' begged me ter let her go wid me, an' I couldn't do it, it mos' broke my heart. I had a little boy, an' wen my mistus sole me she kep' him. She carried on a boardin' house. Many's the time I hab stole out at night an' seen dat chile an' sleep'd wid him in my arms tell mos' day. Bimeby de people I libed wid got hard up fer money, an' dey sole me one way an' my pore little gal de oder; an' I neber laid my eyes on my pore chillen sence den. But, honeys, let de

wind blow high or low, I 'spects to outwedder de storm an' anchor by'm bye in bright glory. But I'se bin a prayin' fer one thing, an' I beliebs I'll git it; an' dat is dat I may see my chillen 'fore I die. Pray fer me dat I may hole out an' hole on, an' neber make a shipwrack ob faith, an' at las' fine my way from earth to glory."

Having finished her speech, she sat down and wiped away the tears that flowed all the more copiously as she remembered her lost children. When she rose to speak her voice and manner instantly arrested Robert's attention. He found his mind reverting to the scenes of his childhood. As she proceeded his attention became riveted on her. Unbidden tears filled his eyes and great sobs shook his frame. He trembled in every limb. Could it be possible that after years of patient search through churches, papers, and inquiring friends, he had accidentally stumbled on his mother—the mother who, long years ago, had pillowed his head upon her bosom and left her parting kiss upon his lips? How should he reveal himself to her? Might not sudden joy do what years of sorrow had failed to accomplish? Controlling his feelings as best he could, he rose to tell his experience.

## POEMS on **Abolition**

*As journalist Ruth Graham writes, "Poetry in mid-19th-century America was ubiquitous in a way that it just isn't now. It was everywhere in newspapers and magazines, children were learning it in school.... Americans were encountering poetry on a weekly basis, if not a daily basis.... There are so many accounts in newspapers of soldiers [in the Civil War] dying with a poem in their pockets, poems written on a scrap of paper folded up inside a book; so many accounts of songs or poems being sung or read to political leaders at particular moments.... Poetry is actually...shaping events, not just responding or reflecting on them."*

*Harper's poetry shaped her age, and ours.*

*The following selection of poems represents how Harper took part in all the movements of her time. In this first section, on the topic of abolition, you will read searing poems that speak to her centrality in the movement to abolish slavery, that gave expression to the emotional life of the enslaved. These poems express the enduring love of freedom, encapsulated by the magnificent poem "Bury Me in a Free Land," which is now quoted on the walls of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in our nation's capital.*

## *Ethiopia* (1853)

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch
  Her bleeding hands abroad;
Her cry of agony shall reach
  The burning throne of God.
The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,
  His fetters from her soul,
The mighty hand of God shall break,
  And spurn the base control.

Redeemed from dust and freed from chains,
  Her sons shall lift their eyes;
From cloud-capt hills and verdant plains
  Shall shouts of triumph rise.

Upon her dark, despairing brow,
  Shall play a smile of peace;
For God shall bend unto her wo,
  And bid her sorrows cease.

'Neath sheltering vines and stately palms
  Shall laughing children play,
And aged sires with joyous psalms
  Shall gladden every day.

Secure by night, and blest by day,
  Shall pass her happy hours;
Nor human tigers hunt for prey
  Within her peaceful bowers.

Then, Ethiopia! stretch, oh! stretch
  Thy bleeding hands abroad;
Thy cry of agony shall reach
  And find redress from God.

**Source:** From *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Merrihew & Thompson, 1857) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

## *Slave Mother* (1854)

Heard you that shriek? It rose
  So wildly on the air,
It seem'd as if a burden'd heart
  Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
  The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
  That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
  Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
  Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,
  Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kyrtle vainly tries
  His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
  For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
  Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
  May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
  That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
  That o'er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
  Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
  Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
  Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
  Her last and fond embrace.
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
  Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
  Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
  Is breaking in despair.

**Source:** *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (The Library of America, 1993)

## *Bury Me in a Free Land* (1864)

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not sleep if I saw the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast,
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start if I heard the bay
Of bloodhounds seizing their human prey,
And I heard the captive plead in vain
As they bound afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave
Where none can call his brother a slave.

I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

This poem is in the public domain.

## *Free Labor* (1857)

I wear an easy garment,
O'er it no toiling slave
Wept tears of hopeless anguish,
In his passage to the grave.
And from its ample folds
Shall rise no cry to God,
Upon its warp and woof shall be
No stain of tears and blood.
Oh, lightly shall it press my form,
Unladened with a sigh,
I shall not 'mid its rustling hear,
Some sad despairing cry.
This fabric is too light to bear
The weight of bondsmen's tears,
I shall not in its texture trace
The agony of years.
Too light to bear a smother'd sigh,
From some lorn woman's heart,
Whose only wreath of household love
Is rudely torn apart.
Then lightly shall it press my form,
Unburden'd by a sigh;
And from its seams and folds shall rise,
No voice to pierce the sky,
And witness at the throne of God,
In language deep and strong,
That I have nerv'd Oppression's hand,
For deeds of guilt and wrong.

## *Eliza Harris* (1853)

Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,
A woman swept by us, bearing a child;
In her eye was the night of a settled despair,
And her brow was o'ershaded with anguish and care.

She was nearing the river—in reaching the brink,
She heeded no danger, she paused not to think!
For she is a mother—her child is a slave—
And she'll give him his freedom, or find him a grave!

'Twas a vision to haunt us, that innocent face—
So pale in its aspect, so fair in its grace;
As the tramp of the horse and the bay of the hound,
With the fetters that gall, were trailing the ground!

She was nerved by despair, and strengthen'd by woe,
As she leap'd o'er the chasms that yawn'd from below;
Death howl'd in the tempest, and rav'd in the blast,
But she heard not the sound till the danger was past.

Oh! how shall I speak of my proud country's shame?
Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?
How say that her banner in mockery waves—
Her "star-spangled banner"—o'er millions of slaves?

How say that the lawless may torture and chase
A woman whose crime is the hue of her face?
How the depths of forest may echo around
With the shrieks of despair, and the bay of the hound?

With her step on the ice, and her arm on her child,
The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild;
But, aided by Heaven, she gained a free shore,
Where the friends of humanity open'd their door.

So fragile and lovely, so fearfully pale,
Like a lily that bends to the breath of the gale,
Save the heave of her breast, and the sway of her hair,
You'd have thought her a statue of fear and despair.

In agony close to her bosom she press'd
The life of her heart, the child of her breast:—
Oh! love from its tenderness gathering might,
Had strengthen'd her soul for the dangers of flight.

But she's free!—yes, free from the land where the slave
From the hand of oppression must rest in the grave;
Where bondage and torture, where scourges and chains
Have plac'd on our banner indelible stains.

The bloodhounds have miss'd the scent of her way;
The hunter is rifled and foil'd of his prey;
Fierce jargon and cursing, with clanking of chains,
Make sounds of strange discord on Liberty's plains.

With the rapture of love and fullness of bliss,
She plac'd on his brow a mother's fond kiss:—
Oh! poverty, danger and death she can brave,
For the child of her love is no longer a slave!

## *Dying Fugitive* (1859)

Slowly o'er his darkened features,
Stole the warning shades of death;
And we knew the shadowing angel
Waited for his parting breath.

He had started for his freedom;
And his heart beat firm and high--
But before he won the guerdon,
Came the message--he must die.

He must die, when just before him,
Lay the long'd for, precious prize--
And the hopes that lit him onward,
Faded out before his eyes.

For a while a fearful madness,
Rested on his weary brain;
And he thought the hateful tyrant,
Had rebound his galling chain.

Then he raved in bitter anguish--
"Take me where that good man dwells!"
To a name to freedom precious;--
Lingered mid life's shattered cells.

But as sunshine gently stealing,
O'er the storm-cloud's gloomy track--
Through the tempests of his bosom,
Cam the light of reason back.

And without a sigh or murmur
For the home he'd left behind;
Calmly yielded he his spirit,
To the Father of mankind.

Thankful that so near to freedom,
He with eager steps had trod--
E'er his ransomed spirit rested,
On the bosom of his God.

## POEMS on **Suffrage**

*The next poems center on the themes of universal suffrage and education in the Reconstruction era. They especially showcase her artistic innovation with Black speech in poetry, with the invention of the memorable character of Aunt Chloe.*

### *Aunt Chloe* (1872)

I remember, well remember,
That dark and dreadful day,
When they whispered to me, "Chloe,
Your children's sold away!"

It seemed as if a bullet
Had shot me through and through,
And I felt as if my heart-strings
Was breaking right in two.

And I says to cousin Milly,
"There must be some mistake;
Where's Mistus?" "In the great house crying —
Crying like her heart would break.

"And the lawyer's there with Mistus;
Says he's come to 'ministrate,
'Cause when master died he just left
Heap of debt on the estate.

“And I thought ‘twould do you good
To bid your boys good-bye —
To kiss them both and shake their hands,
And have a hearty cry.

“Oh! Chloe, I knows how you feel,
‘Cause I’se been through it all;
I thought my poor old heart would break,
When master sold my Saul.” 1.

Just then I heard the footsteps
Of my children at the door,
And then I rose right up to meet them,
But I fell upon the floor.

And I heard poor Jakey saying,
“Oh, mammy, don’t you cry!”
And I felt my children kiss me
And bid me, both, good-bye.

Then I had a mighty sorrow,
Though I nursed it all alone;
But I wasted to a shadow,
And turned to skin and bone.

But one day dear uncle Jacob
(In heaven he’s now a saint)
Said, “Your poor heart is in the fire,
But child you must not faint.”

Then I said to uncle Jacob,
If I was good like you,
When the heavy trouble dashed me
I'd know just what to do.

Then he said to me, "Poor Chloe,
The way is open wide:"
And he told me of the Saviour,
And the fountain in His side.

Then he said "Just take your burden
To the blessed Master's feet;
I takes all my troubles, Chloe,
Right unto the mercy-seat."

His words waked up my courage,
And I began to pray,
And I felt my heavy burden
Rolling like a stone away.

And a something seemed to tell me,
You will see your boys again —
And that hope was like a poultice
Spread upon a dreadful pain.

And it often seemed to whisper,
Chloe, trust and never fear;
You'll get justice in the kingdom,
If you do not get it here.

## *Aunt Chloe's Politics* (1872)

Of course, I don't know very much
About these politics,
But I think that some who run 'em
Do mighty ugly tricks.
I've seen 'em honey-fugle round,
And talk so awful sweet,
That you'd think them full of kindness,
As an egg is full of meat.
Now I don't believe in looking
Honest people in the face,
And saying when you're doing wrong,
That "I haven't sold my race."
When we want to school our children,
If the money isn't there,
Whether black or white have took it,
The loss we all must share.
And this buying up each other
Is something worse than mean,
Though I thinks a heap of voting,
I go for voting clean.

## *Learning to Read* (1872)

Very soon the Yankee teachers
  Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,—
  It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
  Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge did'nt agree with slavery—
  'Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
  A little from the book.
And put the words together,
  And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
  Who took pot liquor fat
And greased the pages of his book,
  And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen
  The leaves upon his head,
He'd have thought them greasy papers,
  But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,
  Who heard the children spell,
And picked the words right up by heart,
  And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
  The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood right up and helped us,
  Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And I longed to read my Bible,
  For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
  Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
  Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
  I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
  And straight to work I went,
And never stopped till I could read
  The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin
  A place to call my own—
And I felt independent
  As the queen upon her throne.

## *Fifteenth Amendment* (1870)

Beneath the burden of our joy
Tremble, O wires, from East to West!
Fashion with words your tongues of fire,
To tell the nation's high behest.

Outstrip the winds, and leave behind
The murmur of the restless waves;
Nor tarry with your glorious news,
Amid the ocean's coral caves.

Ring out! ring out! your sweetest chimes,
Ye bells, that call to praise;
Let every heart with gladness thrill,
And songs of joyful triumph raise.

Shake off the dust, O rising race!
Crowned as a brother and a man;
Justice to-day asserts her claim,
And from thy brow fades out the ban.

With freedom's chrism upon thy head,
Her precious ensign in thy hand,
Go place thy once despised name
Amid the noblest of the land

A ransomed race! give God the praise,
Who let thee through a crimson sea,
And 'mid the storm of fire and blood,
Turned out the war-cloud's light to thee.

## POEMS on **Community Care & Temperance**

*The next set of poems highlight Harper's advocacy and work of social reform, and her concern with the health of the Black public and communities. They speak to her belief that strong homes are essential for Black families to secure freedom in an age of increasing racial violence.*

### *Signing the Pledge* (1896)

To comfort hearts that sigh and break,
To dry the falling tear,
Wilt thou forego the music sweet
Entrancing now thy ear?

I must return, I firmly said,
The strugglers in that sea
Shall not reach out beseeching hands
In vain for help to me.

I turned to go; but as I turned
The gloomy sea grew bright,
And from my heart there seemed to flow
Ten thousand cords of light.

And sin-wrecked men, with eager hands
Did grasp each golden cord;
And with my heart I drew them on
To see my gracious Lord.

Again I stood beside the gate.
My heart was glad and free;
For with me stood a rescued throng
The Lord had given me.

## *Woman's Work* (1889)

God gave the word, and woman heard,
Unto its depths her heart was stirred,
An ancient foe evil and strong,
Had wrung her heart with cruel wrong.

O'er many homes once fair and bright
Had come a dark and withering blight,
crushed, strong men brought low,
And poverty clasped hands with woe.

And still the curse from strand to strand,
With wreck and ruin strewed the land;
Men learned the tempting cup to crave,
And maddened sank into the grave.

Baptised in prayer, she rose at length,
Strong only in the Master's strength;
With weapons by her heart throbs made,
She organized the grand crusade.

With mission from the hand of God,
Her willing feet then onward trod;
She saw and met the hour's demand,
For God, and home, and native land.

She saw the drunkard's pain and grief,
And reached her hand to bring relief;
The foul fiend saw her work with dread,
As like a sacred fire it spread.

Amid earth's sorrow, pain and wrong,
God's love could only make her strong;
To strive to succor, and to bless
The children's homes of wretchedness.

On statue books she laid her hand,
To save the children of the land;
Unarmed she would not let them go,
To meet their mocking cruel foe.

Where drink had been a lava tide,
She scattered knowledge far and wide;
Against the hosts of Sin and Shame
Her hands have wrought in Jesus' name.

Fair maidens learned to clasp her hand,
And lead the loyal legion band;
And point a better brighter way
For youthful feet so apt to stray.

Since on that frosty morning air
rose the first Crusader's prayer,
What wond'rous changes have been wrought,
What fruits of tender, loving thought!

The fight may yet be fierce and long,
The foe is old, and base, and strong,
And men for power, pelf and gain,
May hesitate to break his chain.

Although the breastplate that we wear,
Is but a ribbon white and fair,
We know that in the fiercest fight,
Our God is on the side of right.

Firmer and closer may we stand
Against this foe of every land;
We have reached the place where we must take
New courage for the Master's sake.

O may our hearts and hands be strong
To work with God against this wrong,
Until with our white ribbon bound,
The world is belted all around.

## POEMS on **Uplift**

*We close with poems, many from the last years of Harper's life. In them we hear her undiminished hope for her people, and the nation. Perhaps she was looking ahead, 200 years later, calling to us directly at this moment to take heart, and to take hold of each other, and our freedom.*

## *Dandelions* (1900)

Welcome children of the Spring,
  In your garbs of green and gold,
Lifting up your sun-crowned heads
  On the verdant plain and wold.

As a bright and joyous troop
  From the breast of earth ye came
Fair and lovely are your cheeks,
  With sun-kisses all aflame.

In the dusty streets and lanes,
  Where the lowly children play,
There as gentle friends ye smile,
  Making brighter life's highway

Dewdrops and the morning sun,
  Weave your garments fair and bright,
And we welcome you to-day
  As the children of the light.

Children of the earth and sun.
  We are slow to understand
All the richness of the gifts
  Flowing from our Father's hand.

## *Present Age* (1895)

Say not the age is hard and cold-
I think it brave and grand;
When men of diverse sects and creeds
Are clasping hand in hand.

The Parsee from his sacred fires
Beside the Christian kneels;
And clearer light to Islam's eyes
The word of Christ reveals.

The Brahmin from his distant home
Brings thoughts of ancient lore;
The Bhuddist breaking bonds of caste
Divides mankind no more.

The meek-eyed sons of far Cathay
Are welcome round the board;
Not greed, nor malice drives away
These children of our Lord.

And Judah from whose trusted hands
Came oracles divine;
Now sits with those around whose hearts
The light of God doth shine.

Japan unbars her long sealed gates
From islands far away;
Her sons are lifting up their eyes
To greet the coming day.

The Indian child from forests wild
Has learned to read and pray;
The tomahawk and scalping knife
From him have passed away.

From centuries of servile toil
The Negro finds release,
And builds the fanes of prayer and praise
Unto the God of Peace.

England and Russia face to face
With Central Asia meet;
And on the far Pacific coast,
Chinese and natives greet.

Crusaders once with sword and shield
The Holy Land to save;
From Moslem hands did strive to clutch
The dear Redeemer's grave.

A battle greater, grander far
Is for the present age;
A crusade for the rights of man
To brighten history's page.

Where labor faints and bows her head,
And want consorts with crime;
Or men grown faithless sadly say
That evil is the time.

There is the field, the vantage ground
For every earnest heart;
To side with justice, truth and right
And act a noble part.

To save from ignorance and vice
The poorest, humblest child;
To make our age the fairest one
On which the sun has smiled;

To plant the roots of coming years
In mercy, love and truth;
And bid our weary, saddened earth
Again renew her youth.

Oh! earnest hearts! toil on in hope,
'Till darkness shrinks from light;
To fill the earth with peace and joy,
Let youth and age unite:

To stay the floods of sin and shame
That sweep from shore to shore;
And furl the banners stained with blood,
'Till war shall be no more.

Blame not the age, nor think it full
Of evil and unrest;
But say of every other age,
'This one shall be the best.'

The age to brighten every path
By sin and sorrow trod;
For loving hearts to usher in
The commonwealth of God.

## *Songs For the People* (1893-1911)

Let me make the songs for the people,
  Songs for the old and young;
Songs to stir like a battle-cry
  Wherever they are sung.
Not for the clashing of sabres,
  For carnage nor for strife;
But songs to thrill the hearts of men
  With more abundant life.
Let me make the songs for the weary,
  Amid life's fever and fret,
Till hearts shall relax their tension,
  And careworn brows forget.
Let me sing for little children,
  Before their footsteps stray,
Sweet anthems of love and duty,
  To float o'er life's highway.
I would sing for the poor and aged,
  When shadows dim their sight;
Of the bright and restful mansions,
  Where there shall be no night.
Our world, so worn and weary,
  Needs music, pure and strong,
To hush the jangle and discords
  Of sorrow, pain, and wrong.
Music to soothe all its sorrow,
  Till war and crime shall cease;
And the hearts of men grown tender
  Girdle the world with peace.

## *We Are Rising* (1876)

We are rising, as a people,
We are rising, to the light;
For our God has changed the shadows
Of our dark and dreary night.
In the prison house of bondage,
When we bent beneath the rod,
And our hearts were faint and weary,
We first learned to trust in God.

We are marching along, we are marching along,
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.
We are marching along, we are marching along,
We are rising as a people, and we're marching along.

For the sighing of the needy,
God, himself did bare his hand,
And the footsteps of his judgments,
Echoed through the guilty land:
When the rust of many ages,
On our galling fetters lay,
He turned our grief to gladness,
And our darkness into day.

We are marching along, we are marching along,
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.
We are marching along, we are marching along,
We are rising as a people, and we're marching along.

Unto God, be all the glory,
That our eyes behold the sight,
Of a people, peeled and scattered
Rising into freedom's light.
Though the morning seemed to linger,
O'er the hill tops far away
And the night was long and gloomy,
Yet he was our shield and stay.

We are marching along, we are marching along,
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.
We are marching along, we are marching along,
We are rising as a people, and we're marching along.

Help us, Oh! great Deliverer,
To be faithful to thy Word,
Till the nation's former bondmen,
Be the freemen of the Lord.
Teach, Oh, Lord, our hands to battle
'Gainst the hosts of vice, and sin,
And with Jesus, for our Captain,
The victory we shall win.

We are marching along, we are marching along,
The hand that broke our fetters was powerful strong.
We are marching along, we are marching along,
We are rising as a people, and we're marching along.

**#Harper200 Organizing Committee**

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# DANDELIONS



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*Frances E. W. Harper* (1895)



***Arizona Reads Harper, April 18, 2025***