Sapphira & The Slave Girl

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By

WILLA CATHER

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About Author:



Wilella Sibert Cather (1873 – 1947) is an eminent author from the United States. She is perhaps best known for her depictions of U.S. life in novels such as O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop.

Other Books of Willa Cather:

- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)
- *Pioneers!* (1913)
- *My Ántonia* (1918)
- *One of Ours* (1923)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)
- *The Song of the Lark* (1915)
- *The Professor's House* (1925)
- *The Troll Garden and Selected Stories* (1905)

- *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920)
- *Not Under Forty* (1936)

In this story I have called several of the characters by Frederick County surnames, but in no case have I used the name of a person whom I ever knew or saw. My father and mother, when they came home from Winchester or Capon Springs, often talked about acquaintances whom they had met. The names of those unknown persons sometimes had a lively fascination for me, merely as names: Mr. Haymaker, Mr. Bywaters, Mr. Householder, Mr. Tidball, Miss Snap. For some reason I found the name of Mr. Pertleball especially delightful, though I never saw the man who bore it, and to this day I don't know how to spell it.

Willa Cather

PART 1 - SAPPHIRA AND HER HOUSEHOLD

Chapter 1

The Breakfast Table, 1856.

Henry Colbert, the miller, always breakfasted with his wife—beyond that he appeared irregularly at the family table. At noon, the dinner hour, he was often detained down at the mill. His place was set for him; he might come, or he might send one of the mill-hands to bring him a tray from the kitchen. The Mistress was served promptly. She never questioned as to his whereabouts.

On this morning in March 1856, he walked into the dining-room at eight o'clock,—came up from the mill, where he had been stirring about for two hours or more. He wished his wife good-morning, expressed the hope that she had slept well, and took his seat in the high-backed armchair opposite her. His breakfast was brought in by an old, white-haired coloured man in a striped cotton coat. The Mistress drew the coffee from a silver coffee urn which stood on four curved legs. The china was of good quality (as were all the Mistress's things); surprisingly good to find on the table of a country miller in the Virginia backwoods. Neither the miller nor his wife was native here: they had come from a much richer county, east of the Blue Ridge. They were a strange couple to be found on Back Creek, though they had lived here now for more than thirty years.

The miller was a solid, powerful figure of a man, in whom height and weight agreed. His thick black hair was still damp from the washing he had given his face and head before he came up to the house; it stood up straight and bushy because he had run his fingers through it. His face was full, square, and distinctly florid; a

heavy coat of tan made it a reddish brown, like an old port. He was clean-shaven,—unusual in a man of his age and station. His excuse was that a miller's beard got powdered with flour-dust, and when the sweat ran down his face this flour got wet and left him with a beard full of dough. His countenance bespoke a man of upright character, straightforward and determined. It was only his eyes that were puzzling; dark and grave, set far back under a square, heavy brow. Those eyes, reflective, almost dreamy, seemed out of keeping with the simple vigour of his face. The long lashes would have been a charm in a woman.

Colbert drove his mill hard, gave it his life, indeed. He was noted for fair dealing, and was trusted in a community to which he had come a stranger. Trusted, but scarcely liked. The people of Back Creek and Timber Ridge and Hayfield never forgot that he was not one of themselves. He was silent and uncommunicative (a trait they didn't like), and his lack of a Southern accent amounted almost to a foreign accent. His grandfather had come over from Flanders. Henry was born in Loudoun County and had grown up in a neighbourhood of English settlers. He spoke the language as they did, spoke it clearly and decidedly. This was not, on Back Creek, a friendly way of talking.

His wife also spoke differently from the Back Creek people; but they admitted that a woman and an heiress had a right to. Her mother had come out from England—a fact she never forgot. How these two came to be living at the Mill Farm is a long story—too long for a breakfast-table story.

The miller drank his first cup of coffee in silence. The old black man stood behind the Mistress's chair.

"You may go, Washington," she said presently. While she drew another cup of coffee from the urn with her very plump white hands, she addressed her husband: "Major Grimwood stopped by yesterday, on his way to Romney. You should have come up to see him."

"I couldn't leave the mill just then. I had customers who had come a long way with their grain," he replied gravely.

"If you had a foreman, as everyone else has, you would have time to be civil to important visitors."

"And neglect my business? Yes, Sapphira, I know all about these foremen. That is how it is done back in Loudoun County. The boss tells the foreman, and the foreman tells the head nigger, and the head nigger passes it on. I am the first miller who has ever made a living in these parts."

"A poor one at that, we must own," said his wife with an indulgent chuckle. "And speaking of niggers, Major Grimwood tells me his wife is in need of a handy girl just now. He knows my servants are well trained, and he would like to have one of them."

"He must know you train your servants for your own use. We don't sell our people. You might ring for some more bacon. I seem to feel hungry this morning."

She rang a little clapper bell. Washington brought the bacon and again took his place behind his mistress's large, cumbersome chair. She had been sitting in a muse while he served. Now, without speaking to him, she put out her plump hand in the direction of the door. The old man scuttled off in his flapping slippers.

"Of course we don't sell our people," she agreed mildly. "Certainly we would never OFFER any for sale. But to oblige friends is a different matter. And you've often said you don't want to stand in anybody's way. To live in Winchester, in a mansion like the Grimwoods'—any darky would jump at the chance."

"We have none to spare, except such as Major Grimwood wouldn't want. I will tell him so."

Mrs. Colbert went on in her bland, considerate voice: "There is my Nancy, now. I could spare her quite well to oblige Mrs. Grimwood, and she could hardly find a better place. It would be a fine opportunity for her."

The miller flushed a deep red up to the roots of his thick hair. His eyes seemed to sink farther back under his heavy brow as he looked directly at his wife. His look seemed to say: I see through all

this, see to the bottom. She did not meet his glance. She was gazing thoughtfully at the coffee urn.

Her husband pushed back his plate. "Nancy least of all! Her mother is here, and old Jezebel. Her people have been in your family for four generations. You haven't trained Nancy for Mrs. Grimwood. She stays here."

The icy quality, so effective with her servants, came into Mrs. Colbert's voice as she answered him.

"It's nothing to get flustered about, Henry. As you say, her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother were all Dodderidge niggers. So it seems to me I ought to be allowed to arrange Nancy's future. Her mother would approve. She knows that a proper lady's maid can never be trained out here in this rough country."

The miller's frown darkened. "You can't sell her without my name to the deed of sale, and I will never put it there. You never seemed to understand how, when we first moved up here, your troop of niggers was held against us. This isn't a slave-owning neighbourhood. If you sold a good girl like Nancy off to Winchester, people hereabouts would hold it against you. They would say hard things."

Mrs. Colbert's small mouth twisted. She gave her husband an arch, tolerant smile. "They have talked before, and we've survived. They surely talked when black Till bore a yellow child, after two of your brothers had been hanging round here so much. Some fixed it on Jacob, and some on Guy. Perhaps you have a kind of family feeling about Nancy?"

"You know well enough, Sapphira, it was that painter from Baltimore."

"Perhaps. We got the portraits out of him, anyway, and maybe we got a smart yellow girl into the bargain." Mrs. Colbert laughed discreetly, as if the idea amused and rather pleased her. "Till was within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff. I never hectored her about it."

The miller rose and walked toward the door.

"One moment, Henry." As he turned, she beckoned him back. "You don't really mean you will not allow me to dispose of one of my own servants? You signed when Tom and Jake and Ginny and the others went back."

"Yes, because they were going back among their own kin, and to the country they were born in. But I'll never sign for Nancy."

Mrs. Colbert's pale-blue eyes followed her husband as he went out of the door. Her small mouth twisted mockingly. "Then we must find some other way," she said softly to herself.

Presently she rang for old Washington. When he came she said nothing, being lost in thought, but put her hands on the arms of the square, high-backed chair in which she sat. The old man ran to open two doors. Then he drew his mistress's chair away from the table, picked up a cushion on which her feet had been resting, tucked it under his arm, and gravely wheeled the chair, which proved to be on castors, out of the dining-room, down the long hall, and into Mrs. Colbert's bedchamber.

The Mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk. She could still stand erect to receive visitors: her dresses touched the floor and concealed the deformity of her feet and ankles. She was four years older than her husband—and hated it. This dropsical affliction was all the more cruel in that she had been a very active woman, and had managed the farm as zealously as her husband managed his mill.

Chapter 2

At the hour when Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert was leaving the breakfast table in her wheel-chair, a short, stalwart woman in a sunbonnet, wearing a heavy shawl over her freshly ironed calico dress, was crossing the meadows by a little path which led from the highroad to the Mill House. She was a woman of thirty-six or -seven, though she looked older—looked so much like Henry Colbert that it was not hard to guess she was his daughter. The same set of the head, enduring yet determined, the broad, highly coloured face, the fleshy nose, anchored deeply at the nostrils. She had the miller's grave dark eyes, too, set back under a broad forehead.

After crossing the stile at the Mill House, Mrs. Blake took the path leading back to the negro cabins. She must stop to see Aunt Jezebel, the oldest of the Colbert negroes, who had been failing for some time. Mrs. Blake was always called where there was illness. She had skill and experience in nursing; was certainly a better help to the sick than the country doctor, who had never been away to any medical school, but treated his patients from Buchan's Family Medicine book.

On being told that Aunt Jezebel was asleep, Mrs. Blake passed the kitchen (separated from the dwelling by thirty feet or so), and entered the house by the back door which the servants used when they carried hot food from the kitchen to the dining-room in covered metal dishes. As she went down the long carpeted passage toward Mrs. Colbert's bedchamber, she heard her mother's voice in anger—anger with no heat, a cold, sneering contempt.

"Take it down this minute! You know how to do it right. Take it DOWN, I told you! Hairpins do no good. Now you've hurt me, stubborn!"

Then came a smacking sound, three times: the wooden back of a hairbrush striking someone's cheek or arm. Mrs. Blake's firm

mouth shut closer as she knocked. The same voice asked forbiddingly:

"Who is there?"

"It's only Rachel."

As Mrs. Blake opened the door, her mother spoke coolly to a young girl crouching beside her chair: "You may go now. And see that you come back in a better humour."

The girl flitted by Mrs. Blake without a sound, her face averted and her shoulders drawn together.

Mrs. Colbert in her wheel-chair was sitting at a dressing-table before a gilt mirror, a white combing-cloth about her shoulders. This she threw off as her daughter entered.

"Take a chair, Rachel. You're early." She spoke politely, but she evidently meant "too early."

"Yes, I'm earlier than I calculated. I stopped to see old Jezebel, but she was asleep, so I came right on in."

Mrs. Colbert smiled. She was always amused when people behaved in character. Sooner than disturb a sick negro woman, Rachel had come in to disturb her at her dressing hour, when it was understood she did not welcome visits from anyone. How like Rachel!

For all Mrs. Blake could see, her mother's grey-and-chestnut hair was in perfect order; combed up high from the neck and braided in a flat oval on the crown, with wavy wings coming down on either side of her forehead.

"You might get me a fresh cap out of the upper drawer, Rachel. I hate a frowsy head in the morning. Thank you. I can arrange it." She pinned the small frill of ribbon and starched muslin over the flat oval. "Now," she said affably, "you might turn me a little, so that I can see you."

Her chair was carved walnut, with a cane back and down-curved arms: one of the dining-room chairs, made over for her use by Mr. Whitford, the country carpenter and coffin-maker. He had

cushioned it, and set it on a walnut platform with iron castors underneath. Mrs. Blake turned it so that her mother sat in the sunlight and faced the east windows instead of the looking-glass.

"Well, I suppose it is a good thing Jezebel can sleep so much?"

Mrs. Blake shook her head. "Till can't get her to eat anything. She's weaker every day. She'll not last long."

Mrs. Colbert smiled archly at her daughter's solemn face. "She has managed to last a good while: something into ninety years. I shouldn't care to last that long, should you?"

"No," Mrs. Blake admitted.

"Then I don't think we need make long faces. She has been well taken care of in her old age and her last sickness. I mean to go out to see her; perhaps today. Rachel, I have a letter here from Sister Sarah I must read you." Mrs. Colbert took out her glasses from a reticule attached to the arm of her chair. She read the letter from Winchester chiefly to put an end to conversation. She knew her daughter must have heard her correcting Nancy, and therefore would be glum and disapproving. Never having owned any servants herself, Rachel didn't at all know how to deal with them. Rachel had always been difficult,—rebellious toward the fixed ways which satisfied other folk. Mrs. Colbert had been heartily glad to get her married and out of the house at seventeen.

While the letter was being read, Mrs. Blake sat regarding her mother and thought she looked very well for a woman who had been dropsical nearly five years. True, her malady had taken away her colour; she was always pale now, and, in the morning, something puffy under the eyes. But the eyes themselves were clear; a lively greenish blue, with no depth. Her face was pleasant, very attractive to people who were not irked by the slight shade of placid self-esteem. She bore her disablement with courage; seldom referred to it, sat in her crude invalid's chair as if it were a seat of privilege. She could stand on her feet with a good air when visitors came, could walk to the private closet behind her bedroom on the arm of her maid. Her speech, like her handwriting, was more cultivated than was common in this back-country district. Her

daughter sometimes felt a kind of false pleasantness in the voice. Yet, she reflected as she listened to the letter, it was scarcely false—it was the only kind of pleasantness her mother had,—not very warm.

As Mrs. Colbert finished reading, Mrs. Blake said heartily: "That is surely a good letter. Aunt Sarah always writes a good letter."

Mrs. Colbert took off her glasses, glancing at her daughter with a mischievous smile. "You are not put out because she makes fun of your Baptists a little?"

"No. She's a right to. I'd never have joined with the Baptists if I could have got to Winchester to our own Church. But a body likes to have some place to worship. And the Baptists are good people."

"So your father thinks. But then he never did mind to forgather with common people. I suppose that goes with a miller's business."

"Yes, the common folks hereabouts have got to have flour and meal, and there's only one mill for them to come to." Mrs. Blake's voice was rather tart. She wished it hadn't been, when her mother said unexpectedly and quite graciously:

"Well, you've surely been a good friend to them, Rachel."

Mrs. Blake bade her mother good-bye and hurried down the passage. At times she had to speak out for the faith that was in her; faith in the Baptists not so much as a sect (she still read her English Prayer Book every day), but as well-meaning men and women.

Leaving the house by the back way, she saw the laundry door open, and Nancy inside at the ironing-board. She turned from her path and went into the laundry cabin.

"Well, Nancy, how are you getting on?" She habitually spoke to people of Nancy's world with a resolute cheerfulness which she did not always feel.

The yellow girl flashed a delighted smile, showing all her white teeth. "Purty well, mam, purty well. Oh, do set down, Miz' Blake." She pushed a chair with a broken back in front of her ironing-

board. Her eyes brightened with eager affection, though the lids were still red from crying.

"Go on with your ironing, child. I won't hinder you. Is that one of Mother's caps?" pointing to a handful of damp lace which lay on the white sheet.

"Yes'm. This is one of her comp'ny ones. I likes to have 'em nice." She shook out the ball of crumpled lace, blew on it, and began to run a tiny iron about in the gathers. "This is a lil' child's iron. I coaxed it of Miss Sadie Garrett. She didn't use it for nothin', an' it's mighty handy fur the caps."

"Yes, I see it is. You're a good ironer, Nancy."

"Thank you, mam."

Mrs. Blake sat watching Nancy's slender, nimble hands, so flexible that one would say there were no hard bones in them at all: they seemed compressible, like a child's. They were just a shade darker than her face. If her cheeks were pale gold, her hands were what Mrs. Blake called "old gold." She was considering Nancy's case as she sat there (the red marks of the hairbrush were still on the girl's right arm), wondering how much she grieved over the way things were going. Nancy had fallen out of favour with her mistress. Everyone knew it, and no one knew why. Self-respecting negroes never complained of harsh treatment. They made a joke of it, and laughed about it among themselves, as the rough mountain boys did about the lickings they got at school. Nancy had not been trained to humility. Until lately Mrs. Colbert had shown her marked favouritism; gave her pretty clothes to set off her pretty face, and liked to have her in attendance when she had guests or drove abroad.

"Well, child, I must be going," Mrs. Blake said presently. She left the laundry and walked about the negro quarters to look at the multitude of green jonquil spears thrusting up in the beds before the cabins. They would soon be in bloom.

"Easter flowers" was her name for them, but the darkies called them "smoke pipes," because the yellow blossoms were attached to