

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

(Told to the Children)

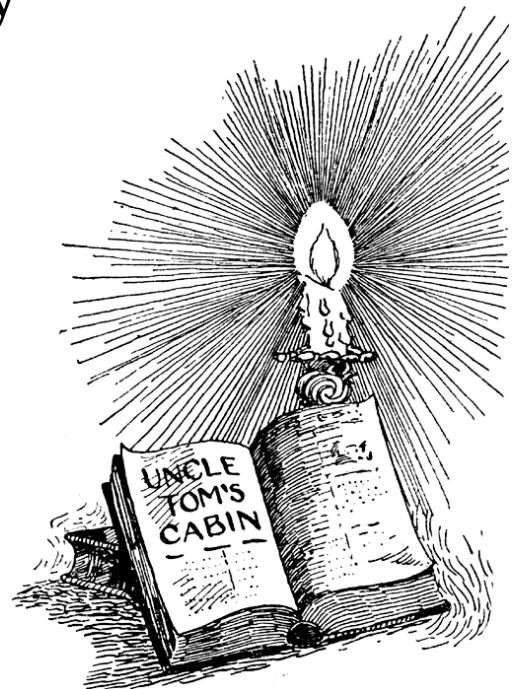
By

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Chapter 15

Topsy



One morning, while Miss Ophelia was busy, as usual, she heard Mr. St. Clare calling her from the foot of the stairs.

'Come down here, cousin. I have something to show you.'

'What is it?' said Miss Ophelia, coming down with her sewing in her hand.

'I have bought something for you. See here,' he said, pulling forward a little negro girl of about eight or nine years old.

She was quite black. Her round, shining eyes glittered like glass beads. Her wooly hair was plaited into little tails which stuck out in all directions. Her clothes were dirty and ragged. Miss Ophelia thought she had never seen such a dreadful little girl in all her life.

"Cousin, what in the world have you brought that thing here for?" she asked, in dismay.

'For you to teach, to be sure, and train in the way she should go,' said Mr. St. Clare, laughing. 'Topsy,' he went on, 'this is your new mistress. See, now, that you behave yourself.'

'Yes, mas'r,' said Topsy gravely, but her eyes had a wicked twinkle in them.

'You're going to be good, Topsy, you understand?' said Mr. St. Clare.

'Oh yes, mas'r' said Topsy again, meekly folding her hands, but with another twinkle in her eyes.

'Now cousin, what is this for? Your house is full of these little plagues as it is. I get up in the morning and find one asleep behind the door; see one black head poking out from under the table; another lying on the mat. They tumble over the kitchen floor, so that a body can't put their

foot down without treading on them. What on earth did you want to bring this one for?'

'For you to teach, didn't I tell you?'

'I don't want her, I'm sure. I have more to do with them now than I want.'

'Well the fact is, cousin,' said Mr. St. Clare, drawing her aside, 'she belonged to some people who were dreadfully cruel and beat her. I couldn't bear to hear her screaming every day, so I bought her. I will give her to you. Do try and make something of her.'

'Well, I'll do what I can,' said Miss Ophelia. 'She is fearfully dirty, and half naked.'

'Well, take her downstairs, and tell some-body to clean her up, and give her some decent clothes.'

Getting Topsy clean was a very long business. But at last it was done.

Then, sitting down before her, Miss Ophelia began to question her.

'How old are you, Topsy?'

'Dunno, missis,' said she, grinning like an ugly little black doll.

'Don't know how old you are! Did nobody ever tell you? Who was your mother?'

'Never had none,' said Topsy, with another grin.

'Never had any mother! What do you mean? Where were you born?'

'Never was born.'

'You mustn't answer me like that, child,' said Miss Ophelia sternly. 'I am not playing with you. Tell me where you were born, and who your father and mother were.'

'Never was born,' said Topsy again very decidedly. 'Never had no father, nor mother, nor nothin!'

Miss Ophelia hardly knew what to make of her. How long have you lived with your master and mistress, then?' she asked.

'Dunno, missis.'

'Is it a year, or more, or less?'

'Dunno, missis.'

'Have you ever heard anything about God, Topsy?' asked Miss Ophelia next.

Topsy looked puzzled, but kept on grinning.

'Do you know who made you?'

'Nobody as I knows on,' replied Topsy, with a laugh. 'Spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody ever made me.'

'Do you know how to sew?' asked Miss Ophelia, quite shocked.

'No, missis.'

'What can you do? What did you do for your master and mistress?'

'Fetch water, and wash dishes, and clean knives, and wait on folks.'

'Well, now, Topsy, I'm going to show you just how my bed is to be made. I am very particular about my bed. You must learn exactly how to do it.'

'Yes, missis,' said Topsy, with a deep sigh and a face of woeful earnestness.

'Now, Topsy, look here. This is the hem of the sheet. Thus is the right side of the sheet. This is the wrong. Will you remember?'

'Yes, missis,' said Topsy with another sigh.

'Well, now, the under-sheet you must bring over the bolster—so, and tuck it right down under the mattress nice and smooth—so. Do you see?'

'Yes, missis.'

'But the upper sheet,' said Miss Ophelia, 'must be brought down in this way, and tucked under, firm and smooth, at the foot—so, the narrow hem at the foot.'

'Yes, missis,' said Topsy as before. But while Miss Ophelia was bending over the bed she had quickly seized a pair of gloves and a ribbon, which were lying on the dressing-table, and slipped them up her sleeves. When Miss Ophelia looked up again, the naughty little girl was standing with meekly-folded hands as before.

'Now, Topsy, let me see you do this,' said Miss Ophelia, pulling the clothes off again and seating herself.

Topsy, looking very earnest, did it all just as she had been shown. She did it so quickly and well that Miss Ophelia was very pleased. But, alas! as she was finishing, an end of ribbon came dangling out of her sleeve.

'What is this?' said Miss Ophelia, seizing it. 'You naughty, wicked child — you have been stealing this.'

The ribbon was pulled out of Topsy's own sleeve. Yet she did not seem a bit ashamed. She only looked at it with an air of surprise and innocence.

'Why, that's Miss Feely's ribbon, an't it? How could it' a got into my sleeve?'

'Topsy, you naughty girl, don't tell me a lie. You stole that ribbon.'

'Missis, I declare I didn't. Never seed it till dis blessed minnit.'

'Topsy,' said Miss Ophelia, 'don't you know it is wicked to tell lies?'

'I never tells no lies, Miss Feely,' said Topsy. 'It's jist the truth I've been tellin' now. It an't nothin' else.'

'Topsy, I shall have to whip you, if you tell lies so.'

'Laws, missis, if you whip's all day, couldn't say no other way,' said Topsy, beginning to cry. 'I never seed dat ribbon. It must a caught in my sleeve. Miss Feely must'a left it on the bed, and it got caught in the clothes, and so got in my sleeve.'

Miss Ophelia was so angry at such a barefaced lie that she caught Topsy and shook her. 'Don't tell me that again,' she said.

The shake brought the gloves on the floor from the other sleeve.

'There,' said Miss Ophelia, 'will you tell me now you didn't steal the ribbon?'

Topsy now confessed to stealing the gloves. But she still said she had not taken the ribbon.

'Now, Topsy', said Miss Ophelia kindly, 'if you will confess all about it I won't whip you this time.'

So Topsy confessed to having stolen both the ribbon and the gloves. She said she was very, very sorry, and would never do it again.

'Well, now, tell me,' said Miss Ophelia, 'have you taken anything else since you have been in the house? If you confess I won't whip you.'

'Laws, missis, I took Miss Eva's red thing she wears on her neck.'

'You did, you naughty child! Well, what else?'

'I took Rosa's ear-rings—them red ones.'

'Go and bring them to me this minute—both of them.'

'Laws, missis, I can't—they's burnt up.'

'Burnt up? What a story! Go and get them, or I shall whip you.'

Topsy began to cry and groan, and declare that she could not. 'They's burnt up, they is.'

'What did you burn them up for?' asked Miss Ophelia.

"Cause I's wicked, I is. I's mighty wicked, anyhow. I can't help it.'

Just at this minute Eva came into the room wearing her coral necklace.

'Why, Eva, where did you get your necklace?' said Miss Ophelia.

'Get it? Why, I have had it on all day,' answered Eva, rather surprised. 'And what is funny, aunty, I had it on all night too. I forgot to take it off when I went to bed.'

Miss Ophelia looked perfectly astonished. She was more astonished still when, next minute, Rosa, who was one of the housemaids, came in with a basket of clean clothes, wearing her coral ear-rings as usual.

'I'm sure I don't know what to do with such a child,' she said, in despair; 'What in the world made you tell me you took those things, Topsy?'

'Why, missis said I must 'fess. I couldn't think of nothing else to 'fess,' said Topsy, wiping her eyes.

'But of course, I didn't want you to confess things you didn't do,' said Miss Ophelia. 'That is telling a lie just as much as the other.'

'Laws, now, is it?' said Topsy, looking surprised and innocent.

'Poor Topsy,' said Eva, 'why need you steal? You are going to be taken good care of now. I am sure I would rather give you anything of mine than have you steal it.'

Topsy had never been spoken to so kindly and gently in all her life. For a minute she looked as if she were going to cry. The next she was grinning as usual in her ugly way.

What was to be done with Topsy? Miss Ophelia was quite puzzled. She shut her up in a dark room till she could think about it.

'I don't see,' she said to Mr. St. Clare, 'how I am going to manage that child without whipping her.'

'Well, whip her, then.'

'I never heard of bringing up children without it,' said Miss Ophelia.

'Oh, well, do as you think best. Only, I have seen this child beaten with a poker, knocked down with the shovel or tongs, or anything that came handy. So I don't think your beatings will have much effect.'

'What is to be done with her, then?' said Miss Ophelia. 'I never saw such a child as this.'

But Mr. St. Clare could not answer her question. So Miss Ophelia had to go on, as best she could, trying to make Topsy a good girl.

She taught her to read and to sew. Topsy liked reading, and learned her letters like magic. But she could not bear sewing. So she broke her needles or threw them away. She tangled, broke, and dirtied her cotton and hid her reels. Miss Ophelia felt sure all these things could not be accidents. Yet she could never catch Topsy doing them.

In a very few days Topsy had learned how to do Miss Ophelia's room perfectly, for she was very quick and clever. But if Miss Ophelia ever left her to do it by herself there was sure to be dreadful confusion.

Instead of making the bed, she would amuse herself with pulling off the pillow-cases. Then she would butt her woolly head among the pillows, until it was covered with feathers sticking out in all directions. She would climb the bedpost, and hang head downwards from the top; wave the sheets and covers all over the room; dress the bolster up in Miss Ophelia's nightgown and act scenes with it, singing, whistling, and making faces at herself in the looking-glass all the time.

'Topsy,' Miss Ophelia would say, when her patience was at an end, 'what makes you behave so badly?'

'Dunno, missis—I 'spects 'cause I's so wicked.'

'I don't know what I shall do with you, Topsy.'

'Laws, missis, you must whip me. My old missis always did. I an't used to workin' unless I gets whipped.'

So Miss Ophelia tried it. Topsy would scream and groan and implore. But half an hour later she would be sitting among the other little niggers belonging to the house, laughing about it. 'Miss Feely whip!' she would say, 'she can't do it nohow.'

'Law, you niggers,' she would go on, 'does you know you's all sinners? Well, you is; everybody is. White folks is sinners too—Miss Feely says so. But I 'spects niggers is the biggest ones. But ye an't any of ye up to me. I's so awful wicked, there can't nobody do nothin' with me. I 'spects I's the wickedest crittur in the world.' Then she would turn a somersault, and come up bright and smiling, evidently quite pleased with herself.