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THE ANTISLAVERY IMPULSE

At a time when the male-dominant mainstream culture of the United States was intolerant of women who commented on political issues, many women wrote and spoke out against slavery. No woman was more important in this struggle than Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made the nation feel "what an accursed thing slavery is." Some readers believed the novel moved the nation closer to civil war—a view apparently shared by Abraham Lincoln, who remarked on meeting Stowe, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."

Uncle Tom's Cabin may not have "caused" the Civil War. But by 1852, when the book was published, the nation was enveloped in an atmosphere of sectional suspicion and hatred. The Compromise of 1850, an effort to cobble North and South together, was unraveling because Northerners resisted the Fugitive Slave Law. In 1854 bitter fighting between proslavery and antislavery forces broke out in "Bleeding Kansas." In 1856 Preston Brooks, a representative from South Carolina, brutally beat Charles Sumner, an antislavery senator from Massachusetts, as he sat at his desk in the Senate chamber. For Northerners, the episode was a symbol of Southern bestiality. For Southerners, Brooks was a hero.

As these events inflamed sectional feelings, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* engaged readers to an extraordinary degree. It was so sensational and moving a tale about life under slavery that it became a testament of Northern abolitionists and compelled readers who had never given slavery much thought to feel responsible for its horrors. In the South, which instantly denounced the novel, it was actually dangerous to possess a copy. Sales were so great that Stowe's Boston publisher could not find enough paper to meet the demand. Thousands of Americans attended stage versions. No other novel in history has matched the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which brought the author international acclaim and made her a much sought-after lecturer.

In the excerpt below, Stowe shows us two of the most famous figures in all of American literature: "Uncle" Tom, whose Kentucky master has sold him "down the river" to New Orleans for financial reasons;

and Simon Legree, owner of a cotton plantation in the frontier regions of interior Louisiana, who has just bought Tom. In characters and scenes such as these, Stowe could depict plantation slavery in the raw, enabling her to explore, among other things, the nature of slave labor, slave living conditions, slave culture, plantation discipline and control, and the significance of religion to both masters and slaves.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in Connecticut in 1811. The daughter of Lyman Beecher, a famous Calvinist minister, she went to Cincinnati in 1832 with her father, who became president of Lane Theological Seminary. She married a Lane professor in 1836, started to write magazine stories, and after moving to Maine in 1850, where her husband taught and preached, began work on a novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel was based on what she learned of the South while living in Ohio, just across the river from the slave plantations of Kentucky, and from her brother who had worked in New Orleans. She continued to write for the next twenty years, producing a steady stream of novels, stories, and articles about slavery and life in old New England. She died in Hartford in 1896.

Questions to Consider. What is Simon Legree's purpose in treating Tom the way he does at the beginning of the excerpt? How does Legree view the economics of slaveholding? What are the multiple purposes, in the novel, of slave singing? How does Legree use his two black labor bosses, Sambo and Quimbo, to control both the plantation and each other? Why does Stowe include the section on picking cotton? What effect does the final scene have on you? Other slaves in the novel escape northward to freedom. Why doesn't Tom?

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

On the lower part of a small, mean boat, on the Red River, Tom sat,—chains on his wrists, chains on his feet, and a weight heavier than chains lay on his heart. All had faded from his sky,—moon and star; all had passed by him, as the trees and banks were now passing, to return no more. . . .

Mr. Simon Legree, Tom's master, had purchased slaves at one place and another, in New Orleans, to the number of eight, and driven them, handcuffed, in couples of two and two, down to the good steamer Pirate, which lay at the levee, ready for a trip up the Red River.

Having got them fairly on board, and the boat being off, he came round, with that air of efficiency which ever characterized him, to take a review of them. Stopping opposite to Tom, who had been attired for sale in his best broadcloth suit, with well-starched linen and shining boots, he briefly expressed himself as follows:—

"Stand up."

Tom stood up.

"Take off that stock!" and, as Tom, encumbered by his fetters, proceeded to do it, he assisted him, by pulling it, with no gentle hand, from his neck, and putting it in his pocket.

Legree now turned to Tom's trunk, which, previous to this, he had been ransacking, and, taking from it a pair of old pantaloons and a dilapidated coat, which Tom had been wont to put on about his stable-work, he said, liberating Tom's hands from the handcuffs, and pointing to a recess in among the boxes,—

"You go there, and put these on."

Tom obeyed, and in a few moments returned.

"Take off your boots," said Mr. Legree.

Tom did so.

"There," said the former, throwing him a pair of coarse, stout shoes, such as were common among the slaves, "put these on."

In Tom's hurried exchange, he had not forgotten to transfer his cherished Bible to his pocket. It was well he did so; for Mr. Legree, having refitted Tom's handcuffs, proceeded deliberately to investigate the contents of his pockets. He drew out a silk handkerchief, and put it into his own pocket. Several little trifles, which Tom had treasured, chiefiy because they had amused Eva, he looked upon with a contemptuous grunt, and tossed them over his shoulder into the river.

Tom's Methodist hymn-book, which, in his hurry, he had forgotten, he now held up and turned over.

"Humph! pious, to be sure. So, what 's yer name,—you belong to the church, eh?"

"Yes, Mas'r," said Tom, firmly.

"Well, I 'll soon have *that* out of you. I have none o' yer bawling, praying, singing niggers on my place; so remember. Now, mind yourself," he said, with a stamp and a fierce glance of his gray eye, directed at Tom, "*I'm* your church now! You understand,—you 've got to be as I say."

Something within the silent black man answered *No!* and, as if repeated by an invisible voice, came the words of an old prophetic scroll, as Eva had often read them to him,—"Fear not! for I have redeemed thee. I have called thee by my name. Thou art MINE!"

But Simon Legree heard no voice. That voice is one he never shall hear. He only glared for a moment on the downcast face of Tom, and walked off. He took Tom's trunk, which contained a very neat and abundant wardrobe, to

With much laughing, at the expense of niggers who tried to be gentlemen, the articles very readily were sold to one and another, and the empty trunk finally put up at auction. It was a good joke, they all thought, especially to see how Tom looked after his things, as they were going this way and that; and then the auction of the trunk, that was funnier than all, and occasioned abundant witticisms.

This little affair being over, Simon sauntered up again to his property.

"Now, Tom, I 've relieved you of any extra baggage, you see. Take mighty good care of them clothes. It 'll be long enough 'fore you get more. I go in for making niggers careful; one suit has to do for one year, on my place." . . .

"Now," said he, doubling his great, heavy fist into something resembling a blacksmith's hammer, "d' ye see this fist? Heft it!" he said, bringing it down on Tom's hand. "Look at these yer bones! Well, I tell ye this yer fist has got as hard as iron *knocking down niggers.* I never see the nigger, yet, I could n't bring down with one crack," said he, bringing his fist down so near to the face of Tom that he winked and drew back. "I don't keep none o' yer cussed overseers; I does my own overseeing; and I tell you things *is* seen to. You 's every one on ye got to toe the mark, I tell ye; quick,—straight,—the moment I speak. That 's the way to keep in with me. Ye won't find no soft spot in me, nowhere. So, now, mind yerselves; for I don't show no mercy!"

The women involuntarily drew in their breath, and the whole gang sat with downcast, dejected faces. Meanwhile, Simon turned on his heel, and marched up to the bar of the boat for a dram.

"That 's the way I begin with my niggers," he said, to a gentlemanly man, who had stood by him during his speech. "It 's my system to begin strong,—just let 'em know what to expect." . . .

"You have a fine lot there."

"Real," said Simon. "There 's that Tom, they telled me he was suthin uncommon. I paid a little high for him, 'tendin' him for a driver and a managing chap; only get the notions out that he 's larnt by being treated as niggers never ought to be, he 'll do prime! The yellow woman I got took in in. I raythe think she 's sickly, but I shall put her through for what she 's worth; she may last a year or two. I don't go for savin' niggers. Use up, and buy more, 's my way,—makes you less trouble, and I 'm quite sure it comes cheaper in the end;" and Simon sipped his glass.

"And how long do they generally last?" said the stranger.

"Well, donno; 'cordin' as their constitution is. Stout fellers last six or seven years; trashy ones gets worked up in two or three. I used to, when I fust begun, have considerable trouble fussin' with 'em, and trying to make 'em hold out,—doctorin' on 'em up when they 's sick, and givin' on 'em clothes and blankets, and what not, tryin' to keep 'em all sort o' decent and comfortable. Law, 't was n't no sort o' use; I lost money on 'em, and 't was heaps o' trouble. Now, you see, I just put 'em straight through, sick or well. When one nigger's dead, I buy another; and I find it comes cheaper and easier, every way." . . .

The boat moved on,—freighted with its weight of sorrow,—up the red, muddy, turbid current, through the abrupt, tortuous windings of the Red River; and sad eyes gazed wearily on the steep red-clay banks, as they glided by in dreary sameness. At last the boat stopped at a small town, and Legree, with his party, disembarked.

. . . [Now on the road,] the whole company were seeking Legree's plantation, which lay a good distance off. . . .

Simon [astride his big horse] rode on, . . . apparently well pleased, occasionally pulling away at a flask of spirit, which he kept in his pocket.

"I say, *you!*" he said, as he turned back and caught a glance at the dispirited faces behind him. "Strike up a song, boys,—come!"

The men looked at each other, and the *"come"* was repeated, with a smart crack of the whip which the driver carried in his hands. Tom began a Methodist hymn,—

> "Jerusalem, my happy home,
> Name ever dear to me!
> When shall my sorrows have an end,
> Thy joys when shall"—

"Shut up, you black cuss!" roared Legree; "did ye think I wanted any o' yer infernal old Methodism? I say, tune up, now, something real rowdy,—quick!"

One of the other men struck up one of those unmeaning songs, common among the slaves.

> "Mas'r see'd me cotch a coon,
> High boys, high!
> He laughed to split,—d' ye see the moon,
> Ho! ho! ho! boys, ho!
> Ho! yo! hi—e! oh!"

The singer appeared to make up the song to his own pleasure, generally hitting on rhyme, without much attempt at reason; and all the party took up the chorus, at intervals,—

> "Ho! ho! ho! boys, ho!
> High—e—oh! high—e—oh!"

It was sung very boisterously, and with a forced attempt at merriment; but no wail of despair, no words of impassioned prayer, could have had such a depth of woe in them as the wild notes of the chorus. As if the poor, dumb heart, threatened,—prisoned,—took refuge in that inarticulate sanctuary of music, and found there a language in which to breathe its prayer to God! There was a prayer in it, which Simon could not hear. He only heard the boys singing noisily, and well pleased: he was making them "keep up their spirits."

"Ye see what ye 'd get!" said Legree, caressing the dogs with grim satisfaction, and turning to Tom and his companions. "Ye see what ye 'd get, if ye try to run off. These yer dogs has been raised to track niggers; and they 'd jest as soon chaw one on ye up as to eat their supper. So, mind yerself! How now, Sambo!" he said, to a ragged fellow, without any brim to his hat, who was officious in his attentions. "How have things been going?"

"Fust-rate, Mas'r."

"Quimbo," said Legree to another, who was making zealous demonstrations to attract his attention, "ye minded what I telled ye?"

"Guess I did, did n't I?"

These two colored men were the two principal hands on the plantation. Legree had trained them in savageness and brutality as systematically as he had his bull-dogs; and, by long practice in hardness and cruelty, brought their whole nature to about the same range of capacities. It is a common remark, and one that is thought to militate strongly against the character of the race, that the Negro overseer is always more tyrannical and cruel than the white one. This is simply saying that the Negro mind has been more crushed and debased than the white. It is no more true of this race than of every oppressed race, the world over. The slave is always a tyrant, if he can get a chance to be one.

Legree, like some potentates we read of in history, governed his plantation by a sort of resolution of forces. Sambo and Quimbo cordially hated each other; the plantation hands, one and all, cordially hated them; and by playing off one against another, he was pretty sure, through one or the other of the three parties, to get informed of whatever was on foot in the place.

Nobody can live entirely without social intercourse; and Legree encouraged his two black satellites to a kind of coarse familiarity with him,—a familiarity, however, at any moment liable to get one or the other of them into trouble; for, on the slightest provocation, one of them always stood ready, at a nod, to be a minister of his vengeance on the other. . . .

It was late in the evening when the weary occupants of the shanties came flocking home,—men and women, in soiled and tattered garments, surly and uncomfortable, and in no mood to look pleasantly on new-comers. The small village was alive with no inviting sounds; hoarse, gutteral voices contending at the handmills where their morsel of hard corn was yet to be ground into meal, to fit it for the cake that was to constitute their only supper. From the earliest dawn of the day, they had been in the fields, pressed to work under the driving lash of the overseers; for it was now in the very heat and hurry of the season, and no means was left untried to press every one up to the top of their capabilities. "True," says the negligent lounger; "picking cotton is n't hard work," Is n't it? And it is n't much inconvenience, either, to have one drop of water fall on your head; yet the worst torture of the inquisition is produced by drop after drop, drop after drop, falling moment after moment, with monotonous succession, on the same spot; and work, in itself not hard, becomes so, by being pressed, hour after hour, with unvarying, unrelenting

sameness, with not even the consciousness of free-will to take from its tediousness. Tom looked in vain among the gang, as they poured along, for companionable faces. He saw only sullen, scowling, imbruted men, and feeble, discouraged women, or women that were not women,—the strong pushing away the weak,—the gross, unrestricted animal selfishness of human beings, of whom nothing good was expected and desired; and who, treated in every way like brutes, had sunk as nearly to their level as it was possible for human beings to do. To a late hour in the night the sound of the grinding was protracted; for the mills were few in number compared with the grinders, and the weary and feeble ones were driven back by the strong, and came on last in their turn. . . .

Slowly the weary, dispirited creatures wound their way into the room, and, with crouching reluctance, presented their baskets to be weighed.

Legree noted on a slate, on the side of which was pasted a list of names, the amount.

Tom's basket was weighed and approved; and he looked, with an anxious glance, for the success of the woman he had befriended.

Tottering with weakness, she came forward, and delivered her basket. It was of full weight, as Legree well perceived; but, affecting anger, he said,—

"What, you lazy beast! short again! stand aside, you 'll catch it, pretty soon!"

The woman gave a groan of utter despair, and sat down on a board. . . .

"And now," said Legree, "come here, you Tom. You see, I telled ye I did n't buy ye jest for the common work; I mean to promote ye, and make a driver of ye; and to-night ye may jest as well begin to get yer hand in. Now, ye jest take this yer gal and flog her; ye 've seen enough on 't to know how."

"I beg Mas'r's pardon," said Tom; "hopes Mas'r won't set me at that. It 's what I an't used to,—never did,—and can't do, no way possible."

"Ye 'll larn a pretty smart chance of things ye never did know, before I 've done with ye!" said Legree, taking up a cowhide, and striking Tom a heavy blow across the cheek, and following up the infliction by a shower of blows.

"There!" he said, as he stopped to rest; "now will ye tell me ye can't do it?"

"Yes, Mas'r," said Tom, putting up his hand, to wipe the blood that trickled down his face. "I 'm willin' to work night and day, and work while there 's life and breath in me; but this yer thing I can't feel it right to do; and, Mas'r, I *never* shall do it,—*never!*"

Tom had a remarkably smooth, soft voice, and a habitually respectful manner, that had given Legree an idea that he would be cowardly, and easily subdued. When he spoke these last words, a thrill of amazement went through every one; the poor woman clasped her hands, and said, "O Lord!" and every one involuntarily looked at each other, and drew in their breath, as if to prepare for the storm that was about to burst.

Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth,—

"What! ye blasted black beast! tell *me* ye don't think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what 's right? I 'll put a stop to it! Why, what do ye think ye are? May be ye think ye 're a gen-

tleman, master Tom, to be a telling your master what 's right, and what an't! So you pretend it 's wrong to flog the gal!"

"I think so, Mas'r," said Tom; "the poor crittur 's sick and feeble; 't would be downright cruel, and it 's what I never will do, nor begin to. Mas'r, if you mean to kill me, kill me; but, as to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall,—I 'll die first!"

Tom spoke in a mild voice, but with a decision that could not be mistaken. Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely, and his very whiskers seemed to curl with passion; but, like some ferocious beast, that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse to proceed to immediate violence, and broke out into bitter raillery.

"Well, here 's a pious dog, at last, let down among us sinners!—a saint, a gentleman, and no less, to talk to us sinners about our sins! Powerful holy crittur, he must be! Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious,—did n't you never hear, out of yer Bible, 'Servants, obey yer masters'? An't I yer master? Did n't I pay down twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?" he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot; "tell me!"

In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom's soul. He suddenly stretched himself up, and, looking earnestly to heaven, while the tears and blood that flowed down his face mingled, he exclaimed,—

"No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You have n't bought it,—ye can't buy it! It 's been bought and paid for, by one that is able to keep it;—no matter, no matter, you can't harm me!"

"I can't!" said Legree, with a sneer; "we 'll see,—we 'll see! Here, Sambo, Quimbo, give this dog such a breakin' in as he won't get over, this month!"