

CHAPTER XVII

UNCLE TOM'S NEW MASTER

There had been great grief in the house when Eva died. Now there was not only sorrow, but gloom and fear.

The kind master was dead, and the poor slaves asked themselves in despair what would happen to them now.

They were not long left in doubt. One morning Mrs. St. Clare told them that they were all to be sold. She was going back to her father's house to live, and would not want them any more.

Poor Uncle Tom! The news was a dreadful blow to him. For a few days he had been so happy in the thought of going home. Once more, after all these years, he thought he would see his dear wife and little children. Now, at one stroke, he had lost both his kind master and his hope of freedom.

Instead of going home, he was to be sent farther away than ever from his dear ones. He could not bear it. He tried to say, "Thy will be done", but bitter tears almost choked the words.

He had one hope left. He would ask Miss Ophelia to speak to Mrs. St. Clare for him.

'Mas'r St. Clare promised me my freedom, Miss Feely,' he said. 'He told me that he had begun to take it out for me. And now, perhaps, if you would be good enough to speak about it to missis, she would feel like going on with it. Seeing it was Mas'r St. Clare's wish, she might.'

'I'll speak for you, Tom, and do my best,' said Miss Ophelia. 'I haven't much hope, but I will try.'

So Miss Ophelia asked Mrs. St. Clare to set Tom free.

'Indeed, I shall do no such thing,' she replied. 'Tom is worth more than any of the other slaves. I couldn't afford to lose so much money.'

Besides, what does he want with his freedom? He is a great deal better off as he is.'

'But he does want it very much,' replied Miss Ophelia. 'And his master promised it to him.'

'I dare say he does want it,' replied Mrs. St. Clare. 'They all want it. Just because they are a discontented set, always wanting what they haven't got.'

'But Tom is so good and gentle, and such a splendid worker. If you sell him there is the chance of his getting a bad master.'

'Oh, I have no fear about that. Most masters are good, in spite of all the talk people make about it,' replied Mrs. St. Clare.

'Well', said Miss Ophelia at last, 'I know it was one of the last wishes of your husband that Tom should have his freedom. He promised dear little Eva that he should have it. I think you ought to do it.'

Then Mrs. St. Clare began to cry, and say every one was unkind to her, and Miss Ophelia saw it was no use saying anything more. There was only one other thing she could do. She wrote to Mrs. Shelby, telling her that poor Uncle Tom was going to be sold again. She asked her to send money to buy him back, as soon as possible.

The next day, Uncle Tom and the other slaves belonging to Mr. St. Clare were sent to market to be sold.

As Uncle Tom stood in the market-place, waiting for some one to buy him, he looked anxiously round. In the crowd of faces, he was trying to find one kind, handsome one, like Mr. St. Clare's. But there was none.

Presently a short, broad man, with a coarse, ugly face and dirty hands, came up to Tom. He looked him all over, pulled his mouth open and looked at his teeth, pinched his arms, made him walk and jump, and indeed treated him as he would a horse or cow he had wished to buy.

Tom knew from the way this man looked and spoke, that he must be bad and cruel. He prayed in his heart that this might not be his new master. But it was. His name was Legree. He bought Uncle Tom, several other men slaves, and two women. One of the women was a pretty young girl, who had never been away from her mother before, and who was very much afraid of her new master. The other was an old woman. The two women were chained together. The men, Uncle Tom among them, had heavy chains put on both hands and feet. Then Legree drove them all on to a boat which was going up the river to his plantation.

It was a sad journey. This time there was no pretty Eva, nor kind-hearted Mr. St. Clare, to bring any happiness to the poor slaves.

One of the first things Legree did was to take away all Tom's nice clothes which Mr. St. Clare had given him.

He made him put on his oldest clothes, then he sold all the others to the sailors.

Legree made his slaves unhappy in every way he could think of. Then he would come up to them and say, 'Come, come, I don't allow any sulky looks. Be cheerful, now, or--' and he would crack his whip in a way to make them tremble.

At last the weary journey was over. Legree and his slaves landed. His house was a long way from the river. The men slaves walked, while Legree and the two women drove in a cart.

Mile after mile they trudged along, over the rough road through wild and dreary country, till, hungry, thirsty, and tired, they arrived at the farm, or plantation as it was called.

Legree was not a gentleman like Mr. Shelby or Mr. St. Clare. He was a very rough kind of farmer. On his farm he grew cotton. The cotton had to be gathered and tied into bundles. Then he sold it to people who made it into calico, muslin, and other things, which we need to use and wear. Gathering cotton is very hard work.

The house Legree lived in had once been a very fine one, and had belonged to a rich gentleman. Now, it was old, neglected, and almost in ruins.

The house was bad enough, but the cabins where the slaves lived were far worse. They were roughly built of wood. The wind and the rain came through the chinks between the planks. There were no windows. The floors were nothing but the bare earth. There was no furniture of any kind in them, only heaps of dirty straw to sleep upon.

Uncle Tom felt more unhappy than ever. He had hoped at least to have a little room which he could keep clean and tidy. But this hole he did not even have to himself. He had to share it with five or six others.

Now began the saddest time of Uncle Tom's life. Every morning very early the slaves were driven out into the fields like cattle. All day long they worked hard. The burning sun blazed down upon them, making them hot and tired. Legree and his two chief slaves, called Quimbo and

Sambo, marched about all the time with whips in their hands. At night they drove the slaves back again to their miserable huts.

But before they could rest, they had to grind and cook the corn for their supper. When at last they did go to sleep, they had to lie on the heaps of dirty straw instead of in comfortable beds.