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UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

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New York, September, 1952

INCLE TOM'S CABIN

BY HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

With sixteen full-page illustrations including reproductions from previous editions together with introductory remarks and captions by Langston Hughes

She told the story, and the whole world wept At wrongs and cruelties it had not known But for this fearless woman's voice alone.

From the sonnet, Harriet Beecher Stowe,

by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

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UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

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INTRODUCTION

The first publisher of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so fearful of not making his money back from the book that he wanted Harriet Beecher Stowe to share half the expenses of publication, offering in return to give her half the income, if any. The author's husband, however, insisted on what he felt to be a more businesslike arrangement, a ten per cent royalty to his wife. Mrs. Stowe, happy to have her book published at all, since another publisher had unequivocally turned it down as being unlikely to sell, simply sighed, "I hope it will make enough so I may have a silk dress."

Two days after its publication in Boston on March 20, 1852, the entire first edition of 5000 copies had been exhausted. Four months after publication of \$10,000.

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be book's appearance, George L.

m's Cabin opened in Troy and hall town, moving on to New he National Theatre. At one e performing it simultaneously ree shows a day, so great were presented by various companies a's most popular play, each season while the book, translated into every the Bengali, became the world's sec-

ond best seller, outranked only by the Bible.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most cussed and discussed book of its time. Tolstoy termed it a great work of literature "flowing from love of God and man." George Sand was so moved by it that she voluntarily offered to write the introduction to its first French edition. Longfellow, Dickens, Macaulay, Heine praised it. But others damned it as vicious propaganda, bad art, cheap melodrama, and factually a tissue of lies. The truth of the matter is that Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 was not merely a book. It was a flash, as

Frederick Douglass put it, to "light a million camp fires in front of the embattled hosts of slavery." It was an appeal to the conscience of all free men to look upon bondage as a crime. It was a call to action as timely as a newly printed handbill or a newspaper head line. During the Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln met Harrier Beecher Stowe at the White House he said, "So this is the little lady who started this big war." No doubt he smiled, but Lincoln knew that thousands of men who had voted for him had read Uncle Tom's Cabin, and many a Union soldier must have remembered it as he marched, for the book was a moral battle cry.

But in addition Uncle Tom's Cabin also happened to be a good story, exciting in incident, sharp in characterization, and threaded with humor. That is why it still lives. No reader ever forgets Simon Legree, Little Eva, Miss Ophelia, Eliza, or Uncle Tom. And Topsy, who in cartoons and theatre later became a caricature, is in the book not only funny but human. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had six children, created out of mother love her Eva, her Topsy, Eliza's baby, Harry, and the other unforgettable children in her book. And perhaps because her father, Lyman Beecher, was a Congregational minister and she had grown up on the Bible, her novel, as Carl Sandburg has described it, became in essence the story of a gentle black Christ who turned the other cheek, Uncle Tom, with Golgotha a place south of the Ohio River, a whipping post instead of the Cross, and a plantation as the background of the passion and the death. Once when asked how her book came into being, Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "God wrote it."

The book began in 1851 in a series of sketches in a paper called The National Era. With a baby to nurse, other children to attend, and a house to manage, Mrs. Stowe wrote by sheer determination. Her husband was Professor of Natural and Revealed Religion at neighbors looked askance upon a woman who aspired to any sort of career outside the home, who took sides in national controversies, Harriet Beecher Stowe had grown up in Cincinnati where she had seen slavery at first hand just across the river in Kentucky. She had forbidden in some parts of the South. She had once aided a Negro sides.

When she was almost forty she wrote a friend, "I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak. The Carthaginian women in the last peril of their state cut off their hair for bow-strings to give the defenders of their country, and such peril and shame as now hangs over this country is worse than Roman slavery. I hope every woman who can write will not be silent." So she began to write Uncle Tom's Cabin.

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When the book appeared in England Queen Victoria wrote Mrs. Stowe a note of gratitude, and in London an overflow meeting of 5000 persons greeted the author at Exeter Hall on her first trip abroad. But our American Ambassador, James Buchanan, frowned upon such anti-slavery demonstrations and did not consider Mrs. Stowe's appearance at the London meeting in the best interests of our country. At home Northern papers such as the New York Journal of Commerce and Southern papers like the Alabama Planter denounced the book. A free Negro in Maryland received ten years in prison for possessing it. A book dealer in Mobile was hounded from the city for selling it. When Mrs. Stowe and her husband returned to Brunswick, Maine, from Europe, they found hundreds of scurrilous and even obscene letters attacking both the book and its author. And one day Mrs. Stowe opened a package that came in the mails, and a black human ear tumbled out.

In 1853 Mrs. Stowe published A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin documenting and giving sources for the material relating to the horrors of slavery in her book. But readers around the world and throughout the years have not needed this "Key" to understand her book, nor to be moved by it to laughter and to tears. The love and warmth and humanity that went into its writing keep it alive a century later from Bombay to Boston.

LANGSTON HUGHES



