ALICE TURNER CURTIS

THE STORY OF COTTON

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by

Alice Turner Curtis

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PLEASE NOTE

These books were written about 100 years ago and show the way people talked, thought, and acted back then. They tell the story of how resources like cotton, lumber, leather, and gold were developed—a process that depended on the hard work of many people. Sometimes the work was done by those who made the profits, and other times it was done by people who were not free, including enslaved individuals.

We know that some parts of these stories include ideas that we now understand to be hurtful and unfair. Our aim in republishing these books is not to support those old views but to share our history so we can all learn from it. By looking at the past, including its mistakes, we hope to learn important lessons that will help us create a kinder and fairer future.

We invite you to read these stories with an awareness of their time and to think about how far we have come—and how much work there is still to do.

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Harriet Roosevelt Richards

CHAPTER I

A TRIP TO THE PLANTATION

PHILIP PIEDMONT was very busy sharpening his pocket-knife in the little workshop near the stable when he heard his father calling, "Philip! Philip, don't you want to go out to the plantation with me this morning?"

Philip ran out into the driveway, and saw his father already seated in the light wagon and holding the reins over a big bay horse. "Yes, indeed, father," he replied; "I always want to go out to the plantation, especially Saturdays. Isn't Helen going?" and he looked toward the house for his younger sister, who was always ready for a drive with her father and brother.

"Waiting for Helen," called Mr. Piedmont, and at the same moment Helen appeared at the piazza door, tying on her big sun-hat. Her mother was beside her, and cautioned the little girl not to play in the sun too long; for the April sun is hot in South Carolina.

"Aunt Cassie will look after Helen," Mr. Piedmont assured his wife," and we'll be home by sunset," and the little party

started merrily off for Mr. Piedmont's cotton plantation, which was situated about five miles from Columbia, South Carolina.

It was the very first of April, a clear, sunny day, and as they drove by the big cotton-mills on the outskirts of the town and heard the whirr of the machinery, Phil announced, "I am going to have a cotton-mill of my own, some day."

"Well, I am going to live on father's plantation when I grow up," declared Helen. "I think it is much nicer to watch cotton grow than to see it made into yarn and cloth."

"Well, I know there's lots of fun on a plantation—there's possums to be caught for one thing," said Phil thoughtfully.

"Yes, and the mocking-birds," said Helen. "Why, they sing so much sweeter out there; and there are so many more of them. Why don't we live at the plantation, father?"

"Chiefly on your account and Phil's," answered her father smilingly. "It is much better for you to go to school in Columbia than to run about on the plantation."

It was not long before they came in sight of the plantation buildings—a square white house with verandas, where Aunt Cassie kept house for Mr. Piedmont's overseer, and a short way off a long row of sheds where the cotton was stored, ginned and baled and made ready for market.

"There's Aunt Cassie now!" Helen exclaimed, as they turned in the driveway. A large black woman in a cotton dress, and a white turban on her head, stood smiling on the steps. She made a low curtsy as her visitors stepped from the wagon.

"I'm right glad to see yer, honey," she said as Helen called out, "Aunt Cassie, I can stay all day."

Mr. Piedmont and Philip left the little girl on the porch

steps and drove down into the field, where they saw the overseer, Mr. Smith, directing the laborers.

"Good morning, sir," said Mr. Smith, coming up to the wagon. "You see we are getting a good start. I have thirty acres all ready for the seed besides this field we are planting."

There were three colored men at work very near where they had stopped. Philip noticed that the man ahead chopped a hole with a hoe, on the top of the raised bed of earth, at intervals of about twelve inches; the man right behind him dropped eight or ten cottonseeds in each hole, and the third negro followed him and carefully covered the seed.

"How much seed does it take to plant an acre, Mr. Smith?" questioned Philip.

"About three or four pecks," replied Mr. Smith; "with this weather the seed ought to be up in ten days from now. I think everything looks well for a good crop."

Philip was ten years old and had made many visits to the plantation, but had never felt so much interested in the planting of cotton, and he listened eagerly to all Mr. Smith had to tell his father about the condition of the ground.

"We ought to begin hoeing by the first of May," decided Mr. Piedmont, looking approvingly along the straight lines of furrows on each side of the cotton beds.

"Yes, sir, the first blossoms will be out early in June, and by that time the plants ought to be fifteen inches high. We will be able to begin picking in August this year, I think."

"Don't be too hopeful, Smith," responded Mr. Piedmont laughingly; "I'll drive back to the stable now and leave the horse. I want to look over the gin a little, and see what repairs are needed."

"What is the 'gin,' father?" questioned Philip. " Of course I know it's a machine that cleans cotton, but I don't really know what it is."

"Wait until we get up to the cotton sheds," answered his father. "Here, Tom!" he called, and a bright-eyed negro boy came running out of the stable and took charge of the team, and Mr. Piedmont and Philip walked across the yard and entered one of the larger sheds.

"This is a cotton-gin," said Mr. Piedmont. Philip laughed.

"I know a cotton-gin when I see one," he answered, "but I reckon I don't know just what it is."

"Well, this is a saw gin," replied his father. "The old kinds were known as roller gins, and those were pretty nearly as old as cotton itself. I suppose the first gin was a flat stone, on which the seed cotton was placed, and a wooden roller, moved by the foot, was employed to press the seed out. But this, you know, takes a steam engine to run it. See these two cylinders," and Mr. Piedmont pointed to the two cylinders of different sizes, mounted in a strong wooden frame; "you see one of these has a number of circular saws fitted into grooves cut in the cylinder. The other is a hollow cylinder mounted with brushes, the tips of whose bristles touch the saw-teeth. Now you have seen the cotton put into the hopper; there it is met by the sharp teeth of the saws, torn from the seed, and carried to a point where the brushes sweep it off into a convenient box. The seeds are too large to pass between the bars through which the saws stand out."

"I believe I could make a little one myself," declared Philip, looking over the machine with more interest than he had ever shown before.

"Well, Eli Whitney, who invented this machine, began making things when he was about your age, my boy," replied Mr. Piedmont encouragingly. "He was only twelve years old when he made a very good violin; but the cotton-gin was the most useful thing he ever made."

"How was the cotton cleaned in old times?" questioned Philip.

"The negroes used to clean it by hand, generally in the evening, after the work of the field was over. To separate one pound of clean cotton from the seed was a day's work for a woman."

While Philip and his father had been talking about the cotton-gin, Helen had followed Aunt Cassie to the kitchen and was sitting in the open doorway enjoying a drink of cool milk and listening to the good-natured colored woman's talk.

"Declar' if don't seem good to have white chillun 'bout the place," she said, breaking some eggs into a china bowl and beginning to beat them vigorously with a long-handled spoon. "I'm jes' gwine to beat you up a little cake for luncheon, missy," she continued smilingly. "Land sakes, seems like ol' times to see a little girl sittin' in my kitchen door. Your ma used to sit there her very own self, missy, when she wan't no bigger'n you be."

"What did my mother used to do when she was about as big as I am?" questioned Helen eagerly.

Aunt Cassie chuckled. "She used to do all sorts of things," she replied, "but she just admired most to sit right in that kitchen door an' hear me tell 'bout the days when there was nigh a hundred men workin' these cotton fields; and when

Sitting In The Open Doorway

your grandma had a dozen of us tendin' to the house. Those were great days, missy!"

Helen finished her milk and set the glass carefully on the table. "I think I'll go out and play under the pine trees, Aunt Cassie," she said. "You can call me when the cake's ready."

"Sho' I will, missy; but keep where you'll hear when I do call."

"Yes, indeed. Why, you can see me, Aunt Cassie, if you step to the door."

Aunt Cassie nodded, and Helen went across the driveway into the shade of a grove of tall pines. She could see the plowed fields and the men at work.

"It isn't nearly so pretty as when the cotton is in blossom," she said aloud, and seated herself on the thick bed of pine spills. Just above her she could hear the musical calls of the birds, and on the further side of the driveway a little peach orchard was in full bloom.

She picked up the big cones of the pine and began setting them about in squares. "This is a house, and this is a garden," she said aloud, and just then heard her name called from the direction of the stable. "Helen! Helen!"

"That's Phil," she exclaimed, and forgetting all about the house and garden, she ran down the driveway.

"Come on, Helen," called her brother. "Tom has a tame 'possum down at his cabin, and he's going to let us see it."

"Tain't 'zackly tame," interrupted the negro boy, "but it's caught, an' I reckon that's about all I kin say," and he smiled good-naturedly.

Tom was several years older than Philip, and had always lived on the plantation. Philip thought the colored boy very

fortunate because he had the whole plantation as a playground; could make himself useful about the stables, go on 'possum hunts with the men, and on fishing excursions to Sweetwater pond.

Philip and Helen listened eagerly to Tom's story of the capture of the 'possum, and soon reached a neat little cabin back of the cotton sheds where Tom's parents lived.

"My, it looks like a cat!" exclaimed Helen, as she saw a little animal in a box, the open side covered with wire netting.

"Cats don't have such long ears," said Philip, "nor such a long nose."

The little creature curled itself up in the further corner of the box, and looked so frightened and unhappy that Helen did not take much pleasure in looking at it.

"I think you ought to let it out, Tom," she said, but Tom shook his head.

"My mammy is gwine to roast him," he said; "gwine to bake sweet potatoes and have a fine 'possum dinner."

"I wouldn't eat it," declared Helen. "I do wish you'd let it out, Tom!"

But Tom was not to be persuaded, and Helen left her brother at the cabin and walked back toward the house. As she passed the cotton sheds her father called to her. "Come here, Helen," he said; "here's something you will like to see."

"Oh, father! May I have one?" exclaimed Helen, for her father was holding two little fat black spaniel puppies in his arms.

"Why, yes, you may have them both," answered Mr. Piedmont, "but they will have to live here at the plantation; and when you come out you can have them to play with."

"I do wish we lived here, father," said Helen, as she took one of the puppies in her arms and smoothed its shining head. "I would rather live here than anywhere in the world."

"Well, I think we must persuade your mother to come out and stay through the summer, until after the cotton is gathered. When does school close?"

"The last of May," said Helen, "nearly two months more. Why, father, the puppies will be nearly grown up then."

"No, indeed they won't; but they will be just old enough to be a nuisance," laughed Mr. Piedmont. "But I think I can promise you that by the time the cotton is in blossom we will all be here at the plantation for the summer. And there is Aunt Cassie ringing the bell for luncheon, so we must hurry back to the house."

CHAPTER II

PHIL GOES FISHING

IT was early June when the Piedmonts moved out to the plantation, and now came busy days for Mr. Piedmont and for Philip, too, for the boy was always in the fields, and always found some new thing to interest him.

One morning he found Tom with a very long face.

"What's the trouble, Tom?" he asked, "lost your 'possum?"

"Wus'n that," answered Tom, rolling his eyes solemnly.

"What is it?"

"Weevils," answered Tom.

Phil laughed. "A weevil is a bad thing for cotton, I know, but they needn't make you look quite so sober."

Tom looked at Phil a little scornfully. "I reckon you don' know much 'bout weevils," he replied.

"What do you know about them?" asked Phil.

"I knows they're terrible little, no longer than a quarter of an inch, and they're gray, and Boss Smith kalkilates to have me pick 'em," and Tom walked slowly on toward the field.

"I'll ask father about weevils," resolved Phil. "I don't see how a little bit of a thing like that could do so much harm," and he hurried after his father, who was walking some distance ahead.

"Father, what makes cotton-boll weevils so dangerous?" he asked.

"They eat up the plant," answered Mr. Piedmont. "They are one of the worst enemies to cotton. If we did not keep a close watch on this little pest there would not be a blossom in all this cotton field. It hides away under the rubbish at the surface of the ground, or among weeds and trash at the margin of the fields, where it stays all winter and is ready for the new plants in the spring. A good cotton planter, my boy, has to have his eyes out for all sorts of things."

"Can't you get rid of them?" questioned Philip.

"A good sharp frost in December is the best remedy," responded Mr. Piedmont, "for it will kill all those insects which have not reached the beetle stage. But we can't trust always to frost; as soon as we see signs of the boll-weevil we send out the boys and men to pick them from the plants and destroy them. That's what will keep Tom busy for a while. It doesn't do to let the weevils get ahead of us."

"Is there anything else that hurts a cotton plant?" asked Philip.

"I must show you my book on 'Cotton Insects,'" replied Mr. Piedmont. "I believe it tells of nearly five hundred which hurt the cotton plant more or less. As soon as a young plant comes up it has to begin a fight for its life. There is a caterpillar called a cutworm, which will cut the young plant off at the surface of the ground. It hides in the earth during the

day and does its work at night. And while the plant is young and tender, plant lice gather upon it, and later on all sorts of plant bugs and beetles appear to feed upon it. There are many interesting stories of the way they work."

"Does cotton grow anywhere else than in South Carolina?"

"Yes, Philip. Cotton was one of the valuable plants of the world before South Carolina was ever discovered. Weren't you reading a book about the Hindus last winter?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't think it said anything about cotton," replied Philip.

"Perhaps not, but as far as the history of cotton can be traced, the Hindus were the first people to make use of it. Here comes Tom with some message from the house," he concluded as the negro boy came running down the field.

"Missy Helen can't find the puppies," he said, as soon as he came within hearing. "She was playing with them under the pine trees, and she went after a drink and when she come back the puppies were gone."

"You'll have to go help find them, Philip," said Mr. Piedmont.

"But tell me where else cotton grows besides South Carolina," insisted Philip.

Mr. Piedmont laughed, but he was well pleased with the boy's interest.

"Let me see," he said slowly. "Cotton grows in India, Egypt, China, Japan, Africa, Asia, Italy, and when Columbus landed in the West Indies in 1492 he found the people using its fiber to weave cloth. Now run and help your sister find the puppies."

"I say, Tom," said Philip, as the two boys hurried back toward the house, "anybody has to know a lot to raise cotton."

"I s'pect they do," agreed Tom, "but, let me tell you, you have to know a sight to get a chance to go fishin' these days, too. Seems if I didn't get a day off more'n half the time."

"Can't we go this afternoon?" replied Philip eagerly.

"Can if you'll tell Mister Smith to let me have a breathin' spell from pickin' weevils," said the colored boy hopefully. "I jes' natcherly despise them weevils."

"I'll ask my father," said Philip. "There's Helen now. Where did you leave the puppies, Helen?"

"Right near the driveway, Phil," answered the little girl, "and I wasn't gone two minutes, and Tom looked everywhere for them, didn't you, Tom?"

"I sure did 'cept up in the trees, an' I knowed they wan't there."

"Git right out o' my kitchen," sounded Aunt Cassie's voice. "I 'clare to goodness if one o' them dogs wan't a walkin' right into my oven, an' the other one a-scramblin' roun' in de pantry like he was crazy." And Aunt Cassie appeared at the corner of the house shooing the two fat puppies ahead of her.

"They must have followed me up to the kitchen and hid," exclaimed Helen, running to recapture her pets.

"You ought to name those puppies," declared Philip.

"Why, Phil Piedmont! They were named last April, the very day Mr. Smith gave them to father. Don't you remember? Mr. Smith named them 'Tip' and 'Top' because he said they were tiptop dogs," said Helen.

"I recollect," announced Tom, but Philip said that he had never heard them called anything but puppies.

"Which is Tip?" he questioned.

"The one with the white nose," explained Helen.

Mr. Piedmont gave his consent for Philip and Tom to go fishing. They planned to follow up a small stream which flowed across one end of the plantation, where Tom often caught chub and an occasional trout.

"You can go, too, Helen, if you'll fasten up those puppies so they won't follow us," said Philip. But Helen had other plans. She and her mother were going for a drive that afternoon to see an old woman who had formerly lived at the plantation but who now lived with her grandchildren. They owned a small plantation of their own some two miles from the Piedmont place.

Aunt Juno, as the old negress was called, had formerly been a skilled weaver of cotton cloth in the days when each plantation manufactured its own cloth. Aunt Juno still had her own loom, spinning wheel, and cards, which she had used for many years, and took great delight in telling of the old days, and Mrs. Piedmont wanted Helen to hear Aunt Juno tell of those old times.

"What is a 'weaver,' mother?" questioned Helen, as they drove along the pleasant road shaded by locust trees. "I thought weavers worked in mills."

"So they do, Helen. But years ago, when there were not so many mills, women used to weave a great deal of cloth. Why, that blue and white bedspread on your bed was woven on this very plantation. The cotton grew in our fields, Aunt Juno spun and carded the cotton, and your grandmother wove the spread."

"But how did she get blue cotton?" asked Helen.

"She colored it with indigo," answered her mother. "When you begin to study botany you will learn a great deal about

cotton and about indigo, too, for they are both very interesting plants."

"Tell me about them now, mother," asked Helen, leaning back in the roomy phaeton. "Tell me about cotton. I mean tell me what I will learn about it when I study botany."

"You will learn that it is 'herbaceous, shrubby or arborescent,'" replied Mrs. Piedmont with a little laugh at her small daughter's puzzled look, "and you will also learn something which you can find out for yourself right in the cotton field, that it has a silky fiber which clings closely to the seeds."

"But won't I learn interesting things about it in botany?" questioned Helen.

"Yes, indeed, you will. You will learn that some cotton has a yellow lint instead of white, but that is generally a wild variety. And you will find out that covering the cotton fiber is a sort of varnish known as cotton wax. This has to be removed before the fiber can be dyed," replied Mrs. Piedmont, "but I think Aunt Juno can tell you more interesting things about it than I can."

"But Aunt Juno never studied botany," objected Helen.

"She has studied cotton," answered her mother. "She has gathered it in the fields, cleaned it from seeds and dirt, spun it into yarn for stockings, dyed it, and woven cloth of it."

While Helen and her mother were enjoying their drive, Philip and Tom tramped sturdily across the fields toward the brook. They each carried a light bamboo fishing rod which Mr. Smith had loaned them, and Tom had an old tin can filled with worms for bait. The afternoon sun was very hot, and the boys were glad enough to reach the shade of a small

Across The Fields Toward The Brook

grove of oak trees near the stream. They stopped to rest for a few minutes.

"My, this is like working in a cotton field," declared Phil, taking off his broad-brimmed straw hat, and fanning his flushed face.

"No, sah! 'Tain't a bit like it," responded Tom. "Course it's jest as hot, but it's a sight diff'runt. Now, if we wus a-pickin' weeds in a cotton field 'twould be cos' we had to. But gettin' hot goin' fishin' is 'cos we likes to."

"Well, come on," said Phil. "I can see the brook now."

"Tain't no time to catch fish," grumbled the boy. "Ought to start out 'fore sun-up. Then's when they'se lookin' about for breakfus'. 'Bout now they'se crawled into a shady place an' takin' a nap. I'm terribul sleepy myself."

"Well, wade along the edge of that brook and that will wake up the fish and you too," answered Philip.

Keeping well in the shade, the boys followed the stream to where it fell over a bed of rough stones. There was fall enough to make a little cascade and the boys stopped to look at it admiringly.

"This is just the place for fish," declared Philip. "See, the sun hardly gets in here at all; it is shady and cool. I'll bet I can get a good trout here," and he baited his hook carefully and made a skillful throw toward a big rock at the foot of the waterfall.

"I 'spect you will," answered Tom admiringly, "but I'm so powerful sleepy I'm jus' gwine to lie down a minute or two under this tree," and Tom curled himself up comfortably while Phil watched his line eagerly.

He clambered on over the rocks, skirted the waterfall, and found dark, shady pools above it. But he had gone some

distance up the stream before he caught his first fish. It was a fine trout, and the boy wrapped it carefully in wet oak leaves and put it between two large stones. "I'll get it when I come back," he resolved, "and Aunt Cassie can cook it for father's supper," and he went on with hardly a thought of Tom, who was fast asleep under the oak tree.

Mrs. Piedmont and Helen returned from their visit in good season for supper.

"Where's Phil?" exclaimed Helen as her father came up on the shady veranda.

"He went fishing with Tom. About time he was back," answered Mr. Piedmont. "Why, there is Tom now. Tom, where's Philip?" he called.

"Ain't he come home?" responded the negro boy in a surprised tone. "I s'posed he'd cum home. I took a little sleep up the brook a-ways and when I woke up I couldn't see nuthin' of him so I cum along home."

Mr. Piedmont did not feel anxious about Philip, for he did not think the boy would be long absent; but when the hour for supper came and went and the sun began to approach the western horizon he resolved to go after him, and with Tom to lead the way started toward the stream.

CHAPTER III

IN THE COTTON FIELD

JUST as they came in sight of the little waterfall Mr. Piedmont heard a measured "tap, tap," as if someone was hammering.

"What's that noise, Tom?" he asked.

Tom shook his head. "You don't reckon 'twould be spooks, does you, Mister Piedmont?" he said, rolling his eyes toward his companion.

"Spooks! Nonsense, Tom! You know well enough there isn't any such thing," replied Mr. Piedmont.

"Yas, sah," agreed Tom, but he kept very close to Mr. Piedmont's side and peered cautiously ahead through the gathering shadows. "Twas right here I went to sleep, sah!" he said, pointing out the oak tree, "an' Philip, he climb up over those rocks."

The tapping noise grew louder, and as Mr. Piedmont clambered over the rough ground and reached a little level bank he exclaimed in amazement:

"Philip Piedmont!" For there was Phil, standing in water