

Uncle Tom's Cabin

The book that moved me most, in our stay of six months at Ashtabula, was then beginning to move the whole world more than any other book has moved it. I read it as it came out week after week in the old National Era, and I broke my heart over Uncle Tom's Cabin, as every one else did. Yet I cannot say that it was a passion of mine like Don Quixote, or the other books that I had loved intensely. I felt its greatness when I read it first, and as often as I have read it since, I have seen more and more clearly that it was a very great novel. With certain obvious lapses in its art, and with an art that is at its best very simple, and perhaps primitive, the book is still a work of art. I knew this, in a measure then, as I know it now, and yet neither the literary pride I was beginning to have in the perception of such things, nor the powerful appeal it made to my sympathies, sufficed to impassion me of it. I could not say why this was so. Why does the young man's fancy, when it lightly turns to thoughts of love, turn this way and not that? There seems no more reason for one than for the other.

Instead of remaining steeped to the lips in the strong interest of what is still perhaps our chief fiction, I shed my tribute of tears, and went on my way. I did not try to write a story of slaver, as I might very well have done; I did not imitate either the make or the manner of Mrs. Stowe's romance; I kept on at my imitation of Pope's pastorals, which I dare say I thought much finer, and worthier the powers of such a poet as I meant to be. I did this, as I must have felt then, at some personal risk of a supernatural kind, for my studies were apt to be prolonged into the night after the rest of the family had gone to bed, and a certain ghost, which I had every reason to fear, might very well have visited the small room given me to write in. There was a story, which I shrank from verifying, that a former inmate of our house had hung himself in it, but I do not know to this day whether it was true or not. The doubt did not prevent him from dangling at the door-post, in my consciousness, and many a time I shunned the sight of this problematical suicide by keeping my eyes fastened on the book before me. It was a very simple device, but perfectly effective, as I think any one will find who employs it in like circumstances; and I would really like to commend it to growing boys troubled as I was then.

I never heard who the poor soul was, or why he took himself out of the world, if he really did so, or if he ever was in it; but I am sure that my passion for Pope, and my purpose of writing pastorals, must have been powerful indeed to carry me through dangers of that kind. I suspect that the strongest proof of their existence was the gloomy and ruinous look of the house, which was one of the oldest in the village, and the only one that was for rent there. We went into it because we must, and we were to leave it as soon as we could find a better. But before this happened we left Ashtabula, and I parted with one of the few possibilities I have enjoyed of seeing a ghost on his own ground, as it were.

I was not sorry, for I believe I never went in or came out of the place, by day or by night, without a shudder, more or less secret; and at least, now, we should be able to get another house.

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