

Aunt Dice: The Story of a Faithful Slave



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THERE are large possibilities to men of advantages. Material help is a needful stepping-stone to greater things. A cultured faith in a higher life aids much toward the upbuilding of true worth and character. But to the unlearned, whose rude surroundings hold no uplifting element, to whom all books are forever sealed their lettering unmeaning hieroglyphics what is the inspiration to be faithful, to live uprightly? What is the stimulus to noble living and well-doing in the kitchens of the ignorant? Of such a one I write; nay, more than this: born a slave, she called nothing on earth her own. Untutored, save in the monotonous drudgery of work, she found only one help in her way the simple story of the cross, sung in many a southern kitchen; the cross that uplifts wherever its blessed shadow falls. Of her simple, rugged life no poem need be woven, though other lives of lesser merit have found a way into prose or rhyme; but from oft-repeated tales, the picked-up relics of her deeds and sayings, the story of her life may at least prove her memory wholesome. Neither can be told of her any great achievement or heroic action, for she had read no Psalm of Life, no Book of Golden Deeds; but only one of humble plodding in the way of duty the only duty she saw plainly before her, that of faithfulness. The neighboring slave owners of South Afton were curious when it was learned that William Macy had purchased the negress Dice. Men of standing these were, in a well-to-do neighborhood; of plethoric purses, of broad acres, and crowded negro quarters; men who understood as well the requisites of negro barter, the buying and selling prices, as they were familiar with the good points of their best horses. So the surprise was great when a generous sum was paid for the negress by the owner of Riverside, known to be a wise and cautious dealer, who for once overlooked the fact of her thirty-four

years, her delicate frame, her deficiency in bone, muscle, and flesh. It was talked of at the river mills, the cotton gin, and the stillhouse among the hills, where men grouped on Saturday afternoons to discuss the latest Whig news, the prices of negroes and cotton, or the relative value of their own prime whiskies or peach brandies. But the question was settled at last by a quiet answer: I bought her to raise my children. Perhaps the wise owner looked farther than bone or muscle in the purchase of one to whom he could trust his children. Hired to him for two years previous, he had found her trustworthiness alone sufficient to uphold him in the sum paid for her. It was in the winter of eighteen hundred and thirty-four (for she came in with the century) that Aunt Dice, with her two children, was removed from a thinly-settled district twenty miles distant, and installed as chief cook and general superintendent at Riverside plantation. Beyond her kinship to Uncle Amos, the most trusty and best beloved of the slaves at Riverside, little was known of her or hers, save that her mother was an excellent servanta pioneer negress of Middle Tennessee, brought from Virginia to the old Nashville Fort, in the perilous days of Indian warfare. Her one other recommendation was that she was reared in the house, an important element in the purchase or sale of a negress: a raw field hand occupied no enviable position beside the superior house girl; though in her case this did not greatly add to her value, as, orphaned in early infancy, she was brought up amid surroundings so rude and uncouth that the wonder was that her thirty-four years had found her true and worthy.

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