UNCLE REMUS.

A Visit to Joel Chandler Harris in His Georgia Home and a Chat With Him About Himself and His Works

How the Famous Story Teller Looks, Acts and Talks—His Beautiful Home and His Garden of Roses—His Literary Methods—He Tells How the "Uncle Remus" and "Brer Rabbit" Stories Were Written—Where "Uncle Remus" Came From and Why He Will Tell No More Stories—Mr. Harris Furnishes a Brer Tarrypin Story for Our Child Readers—He Talks of His Book Loves and Says Something About the Bible and His Religion—His Present Literary Work and His New Book, Which Will Be Published This Month.

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Special Correspondence of the News.

WASHINGTON, D. C. December 17, 1896.

UNCLE REMUS, is one of the saints of "The Holiday Season." He is almost as much a part of our children as Santa Claus, and I cannot give a better Christmas letter than the story of my visit to him at his home in Atlanta, Georgia, a few days ago.

Joel Chandler Harris, for that you know is the real name of the writer of the "Uncle Remus" stories, is even more delightful than his books. He is not a handsome man, but his manners are so gentle and his talk so simple and wholesome, that you fall in love with him at once. His hair is of a fiery red. After you know him it seems to turn to gold. His homely features, which I venture would stop the traditional clock, become transfigured by his healthy, happy soul shining out through them when he talks, and makes him almost beautiful. I wish you could hear "Uncle Remus" laugh. He is, you know, short and rather fat, and when anything amuses him his round form shakes like a bowl of jelly, and his "Ha! Ha! Ha!" rings forth in as clear tones as those of the boy to whom the "Brer Rabbit" and "Tar Baby" story was told for the first time. He is, however, painfully modest. He is always depreciating himself, and during my chat he told me he could not realize why people thought so much of his stories. He is especially backward in the presence of women. He is more bashful now at forty-five than he was as a boy, and I doubt whether he knows any woman very intimately except his wife. He is, you know, a newspaper man as well as an author. He is connected with the Atlanta Constitution, and for years he did his editorial work at the office of the paper. Now he does it all at home. Since he became famous the female curiosity seekers from the north, in passing through Atlanta, have attempted to call and visit him. When they entered his room his tongue seemed to cling to the roof of his mouth and at last, to get rid of them, he transferred his work to his home. He never goes into society; seldom attends the theater, and his delight is in his work and in his home.

WHERE "UNCLE REMUS" LIVES.

The house of "Uncle Remus" is an ideal one. It is a rambling Queen Ann cottage, containing about one rooms, all of which are on one floor. Below this there is a basement and above it an attic, and about it runs a vine-covered porch big enough to hold "Brer Rabbit" and all his friends, should they happen to call. It is in one of the prettiest suburbs of Atlanta, and still it has a big enough yard to make it a sort of a country estate, as well as a city home. It contains more than five acres of land and its surroundings are those of a farm. We walked back through the fields before we entered the house to look at the donkies which the young Harris children ride, and to pat the two beautiful yellow Jersey cows, which are among Mr. Harris' pets. There is a big chicken yard just back of the house, and a lot of brother and sister chickens were running to and fro as we looked through the netting. "Uncle Remus" took an almost childish delight in showing me his possessions. He pointed out his big strawberry bed, where he raises the most luscious fruit, and told me how his asparagus was ready for the table at the first of the season. We walked among his flowers and spent some time in admiring his roses, which, though it is now almost winter, are still blooming. He has, I venture, more than one hundred rose bushes, and he told me that he had in his garden sixty-seven different varieties. He said he would have a thousand if he were rich enough, and as I saw him handle the fine flowers I could see that he loved them.

We sat a moment on the porch and then entered the wide hall, which runs through the house and into which the living rooms open. At the back is the parlor, and on the left the sitting room and work shop. There is nothing of the machinery of a newspaper editor or literary man to be seen. "Uncle Remus," uses but few books in his work. A pencil and a few strips of blank printing paper are all that are needed to make the "Uncle Remus" stories.

Mr. Harris handles these, and with his short stub pencil touches the hearts and tickles the sides of millions. He does his writing with his family about him, and his best stories have been written with a baby at his elbow.

HOW "UNCLE REMUS" WAS WRITTEN.

Mr. Harris is fond of children. He has been told thousands of times how fond the children are of him, but when I told him that my boy Jack knew his "Uncle Remus" stories by heart, and that my little girl was in love with "Brer Rabbit" and "Brer Fox" he seemed pleased, and I said: "It must be a great pleasure to write for children."

"Indeed, it is," replied Mr. Harris. "I enjoyed the writing of the "Uncle Remus" stories. It was not hard work, and I believe I got as much fun out of their conversation as the children seemed to get from hearing them read. I could see how the children liked them, but it has always been a wonder to me that grown-up people read them with interest. In fact, today I rather question the veracity or the sanity of the man who tells me he is fond of "Uncle Remus."

"BRER RABBIT'S" FIRST APPEARANCE.

"When did you tell your first 'Uncle Remus' story, Mr. Harris?" I asked.

"It was in 1878," was the reply; "just about eighteen years ago. I was writing for the Atlanta Constitution. I had begun my newspaper work, you know, as a boy of twelve, when I left home to learn to set type for a rich planter, who was publishing a little paper on his own near our country town in Georgia. I had risen from the typesetting case to the editorial desk, and had had some experience in connection with the newspapers of Savannah and other places, and now I was employed upon the Constitution writing editorials, little stories and such other matter as seemed interesting to me. I wrote the first 'Uncle Remus' sketch for the Sunday paper, and handed it to the printers, not deeming it of special value. It was published, and was copied into other papers. My friends spoke to me about it, and I was urged to write more. Among the papers which copied the article was the New York Evening Post. This surprised me, as the Post, you know, is a very sedate paper, and it seems to keep as far as possible from the frivolous. Well, I wrote more of the sketches. They were also quoted, and within a short time 'Uncle Remus' and his tales became a regular feature of my work.

HIS FIRST BOOK.

"When were the 'Uncle Remus' stories first published in book form?"

"It was in 1880. The Appletons then published the book entitled 'Uncle Remus, his songs and his sayings.' The book was well reviewed by the press, and the 'Saturday Review of Literature' gave it a page. This started it well in America. The Boston papers followed with good reviews, and I was surprised to see that it was everywhere fairly well spoken of."

"You must have been delighted," said I.

"I was," replied "Uncle Remus." "And I was a little scared, too. The surprise was so great that I did not know what to make of it."

"How did the book sell?"

"It had quite a large circulation," replied Mr. Harris. "I wrote, you know, several more along the same lines, and they all have a steady sale, both in England and the United States."

ORIGIN OF "UNCLE REMUS."

"Where did 'Uncle Remus' come from, Mr. Harris?" said I.

"He was born, I think, at my home in Putnam county, Ga," was the reply.

"But Mr. Harris, tell me, did he ever really exist in the flesh, or is he simply the creation of your fancy?"

"Both," replied Mr. Harris. "The 'Uncle Remus' of my stories is a composite at three or four old negroes, whom I knew as a boy. I have combined them and perhaps have added something to them. But the 'Uncle Remus' of fiction is chiefly made up from them."

"I suppose he really exists as an individuality in your mind," said I.

"Yes, indeed," replied Mr. Harris. "I can see him before my eyes as plainly as I see you. I know him. I can hear him talk, and his voice rings in my ears as I write."

THEY ARE GENUINE NEGRO TALES.

"But, Mr. Harris, are the stories those which are really told on the plantations by the darkies, or are they made up of whole cloth?"

"They are in most cases the stories of plantations," replied Mr. Harris. "They are the folk-lore of the negro. I suppose many of them have come down through the ages from Africa. I am told that some of them are almost the same as the stories of the folk-lore of India."

"Why is it, Mr. Harris, "that Brer Rabbit' is generally the hero of these tales? Why do the negroes pick him out as the most intelligent and cunning of the animals?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "The fact is, the rabbit has a low, rather than a high, degree of animal intelligence. The hero of many of the folk lore stories of the orientals is the hyena, which, you know, is the meanest of beasts."

"UNCLE REMUS" DEAD.

"But you have not written any 'Uncle Remus' stories for some years, Mr. Harris."

"No, I am done writing them. 'Uncle Remus' has finished his story telling. He has posed before the public for more than fifteen years, and it is time now that he stepped down and out. You may say, in short, that 'Uncle Remus' is dead."

NEW BOOKS BY JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

"But you do not intend to stop writing, Mr. Harris?"

"No, indeed, was the reply. "I shall write, I suppose, as long as I live. I have a book which is of somewhat the same character as the 'Uncle Remus' stories, entitled 'Aaron,' published this fall; and I am now writing a novel entitled 'Aaron and His Wanderings in the Wild Woods.' This is a story for boys. It relates to an old runaway negro, who gets lost in the woods, and who has many adventures with the animals, which talk somewhat as they do in the 'Uncle Remus' stories. There is a little boy in it. The work of writing it is interesting, and I hope that the children will like it. It is not wildly exciting. You know you cannot have very exciting adventures in Georgia. Then I have in press a book of stories, which will be out this next December. This book is entitled 'Sister Jane; Her Friends and Acquaintances.' I suppose it will be ready for the Christmas trade. I am also writing a book entitled 'Stories of Georgia History,' which will, I suppose, be to some extent a school book, as it is for the American book company. You you see that I have plenty to do, in addition to my editorial work on the Atlanta Constitution."

WHY "BRER TARRYPIN" FAILED TO FLY.

Here I asked "Uncle Remus" to write me a little story for the child readers of my newspapers. He thought for a moment, and then taking his pencil he rapidly wrote the following, which I give you verbatim as he penned it:

"Mr. Carpenter has asked me to write some sort of a sentiment—a piece of my mind for the children.

"Well, I remember the story where Brer Tarrypin wanted to learn to fly. He had seen Brer Buzzard sailing in the air and he thought he could sail, too. So he persuaded Brother Buzzard to take him on his back and give him a start. This was done. Brother Buzzard carried Brother Tarrypin to the air and dropped him. He fell, of course, and nearly killed himself. He was very angry with Brother Buzzard, not because he failed to fly, but because Brother Buzzard failed to show him how to light. Says he: 'Flyin' is easy as fallin,' but I don't 'speck I kin larn how to light.'

"If you don't know what this means ask some grown-up person. Before you begin to fly, be sure and learn how to light."

(Signed) "JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS."

HOW "UNCLE REMUS" WRITES.

As I looked over the story of Brer Tarrypin and Brer Buzzard I asked Mr. Harris if he found writing very hard work.

"No," replied 'Uncle Remus.' "I write, you see, about two thousand words as editorial every day. This I have been doing so long that it goes very easily. You take a good subject, put your pen on the paper and the editorial writes itself. This is my work in the day time. My story writing is done at night. I usually begin it after tea when the children have gone to bed. I then pick up the story where I have left off and write away until bed time."

"How much of this do you consider a good evening's work?"

"About one thousand words," replied Mr. Harris. "Such writing is easy for me. I like it, and when I am tired from my other work I take it up and soon feel rested. It is rather amusing work, you know, and does not require much care."

"I should think you would have to revise it over and over again."

"No, on the contrary," was the reply. "I revise very little. I have not the time, and the work is such that it does not require it. It is, I think, work for the day. I don't suppose it will last."

"Is not dialect writing an invention of recent years?"

"Yes," replied the great dialect writer of the south. "It seems so. Walter Scott was among the first of our authors who used it largely. Burns wrote many of his poems in dialect, and Tennyson, you know, wrote much dialect verse. Chaucer was written in the language of his time, and it is curious that in some respects the dialect used then was somewhat the same as that of the plantations today."

"UNCLE REMUS'S" BOOK LOVES.

Mr. Harris has always been fond of the old English classics. The simplicity of his style was largely cultivated through his study of the great English authors during his boyhood. As he talked this of Chaucer and other writers I wondered as to what books had most influenced him, and I asked him to tell me something of his book loves, saying I supposed that he read much.

"I read somewhat," was the reply. "But it is hard for me to say what books have had much effect upon my work. When I began to set type on the plantation I found that my employer had a large library. He kindly allowed me to borrow such books as I wished, and among those which I read first was the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' Its simplicity delighted me, and I read it again and again. I think I could today repeat pages of it. I still read it and enjoy it almost as much as when I first saw it. It is so genuine, you know. Another author whom I especially like is Sir Thomas Browne. It is a strange thing that though this man had a library of perhaps two thousand volumes, embracing the works of modern writers, as well as the English classics, that I in most cases took to the classics."

THE BIBLE AND "UNCLE REMUS'S RELIGION."

"Then another book that I read a good deal" Mr. Harris went on, "is the Bible. It is one of the best books in literature. I like it and I read it more and more."

"What portion do you read most?"

"The New Testament," replied 'Uncle Remus.' "I especially like Paul's Epistles and the Gospels. I am very fond of parts of the Old Testament. They seem to fit into my nature at certain times, and there are hours when a chapter or so of Ecclesiastes seems especially appropriate."

"By the way, Mr. Harris, what is your religion, anyhow?"

"Uncle Remus" thought a moment and then said rather soberly. "That is a difficult question to answer. I hardly know myself. I can only say I believe in all good men and all good women. I should not want to live if I had no faith in my fellow men."

Frank G. Carpenter

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