A mite of a black boy or the "Little Imp"

Stories for children

original manuscript.

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A mite of a black boy - or the "little Imp".

Wonderful Development.

~~One day~~ During the fall of 1861 while the army of General McClellan was encamped along the Potomac, ~~as some~~ my camp occupied a position in front of the Fairfax Seminary - it was named ~~as the Union Stew elsewhere~~ by General E.V. Sumner who had but recently come from San Francisco, "Camp California.

As some soldiers were one day returning ~~to the camp~~ from a visit to Alexandria, a queer little black boy who at first escaped their notice, followed them to the camp. It was near night when he was first ~~discovered~~ seen among the tents and as there was no one present to find, claim or recognize him the discoverers of this peculiar specimen of human humanity did as they would have done with a stray ~~horse or mule~~ kid or lamb for which they had no immediate use, they

~~[illegible]~~ lad after ● [illegible] to ~~the~~ ● his master's. The lad, judging by his size could not have been more than ~~four~~ six years of age.

I have often admired Mrs Stowe's description of "Topsy". ~~[illegible]~~ Abating a few years & substituting boy for girl and ~~the~~ you have a fair portraiture of our mite. Mrs Stowe says: "She ~~the~~ ~~She~~ Topsy was one of the blackest of her race. Her round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth half open with astonishment at the wonders, x x x displayed a white & brilliant set of teeth x x.

The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity & solemnity. She was dressed in a single filthy ragged garment, made of bagging. Altogether there was something odd & goblin-like

about her appearance, — something, as Miss Ophelia afterwards said, "so heathenish," as to inspire that good lady with utter dismay; and turning to St. Clare, she said, "Augustine! what in the world have you brought that thing here for?"

Imagine just such another black specimen — with the brightest eyes, hair curled tight over his round head, the whitest of teeth, a curious undefinable expression of face, so restless as not to keep still even a moment — a single tattered dirty gray garment hanging to his shoulders — with plenty of evidence that he had never been subjected to scissors, comb or brush. And you have a picture of little "Tom," as he turned up in my tent that first night.

"What's your name, my lad?" "Tomie, sah!" "Tomie what?" "Oh, oh, oh, dest Tomie!" "Where's your papa?" "Papa's gone!" "Where's your mamma?" "Oh — mamma, — mamma, the Stap (probably strap or slap) Tomie." ++

Hereupon his mite-ship began to chase a dog that appeared near the open front of the tent, and to clap his hands & scream

with delight as the dog scampered away a few yards & then turned & barked at the youngster, as he ~~[illegible]~~ any day had afraid would have done at a bristling cat. ~~of which he was half afraid~~.

We could find out nothing from the lad & our inquiries afterward in the town were of no avail. The child never cried from homesickness and seemed completely happy provided he was well fed and not punished for his prankes. ~~which were fruits of mischief~~.

I sent for ~~Abraham~~ Henry Johnson our negro cook.

Johnson was one of those black men of the old time. He was very black & shiny. Brought up in a Virginia family of standing, he never ~~forgot his breeding~~ omitted his politeness manners. He had somehow learned to read & write. He used excellent language in conversation, and our messmates always said of him: "Johnson never forgets himself. he is a natural gentleman." He was also a man of strong temper.

"Well, Johnson", I said. "Here's a queer little fellow, take him & see what you can do with him. I will get him a suit of

clothes tomorrow in Alexandria & set on foot some inquiries about him. Meantime wash him up, give him his supper & a place to sleep."

"Yes sir, It shall be done as the General directs. I fear it will require a quantity of soap, sir.!"

Johnson gave a grave smile as he took the little fellow by the hand & led him off.

Indeed it was not an easy job to transform the child. But when I next saw Tom, his hair was cropped close to his pate. He had been "scrubbed & scrubbed" as Johnson said. Then Johnson had wrapped him in a light blanket & was trying in his grave style to reason with the boy & make him stay till his clothes should come. I had kept my promise. I brought the clothing & soon Tommie capered off in great glee, clapping his hands & dancing around in his new gray suit.

The soldiers played with him as with a little monkey. He was afraid of nobody & obeyed nobody except Henry Johnson. He was commonly

called "that little Imp" or by the more kindly simply "Tomlin".

After a week or so, I noticed that he often helped Johnson at the cooking and did for him many little chores such as a small child could do. I believe Johnson never struck him or was cross to him but he soon gained a remarkable ascendency over the lad & persuasively taught him.

Still out of Johnson's sight he was up to all sorts of mischief. He would pull out the tent pins, nobody could tell how, & let your tent sag over, pull the cords when you were taking a siesta & run off shouting. He scorned to pick up anything he saw & tuck it into his jacket, as, your knife, spur, sleeve button, handkerchief & what not? Johnson would lead him back with his plunder & oblige him to make return. He would grin & wink & seemed to have no possible moral sense as he comically obeyed his old friend. + x x

Suddenly we were ordered to march and I lost sight of the queer little lad altogether. He strayed away from us as he had

strayed from his home. We went on to pass through the changing scenes of the four years of terrible war. We had marched backward & forward through Virginia & Maryland - and afterwards traversed ~~over~~ the broad fields of Tennessee Alabama, Georgia & the Carolinas - Then at last peace had come ~~at last~~ - The work of reconstruction for the freedmen had occupied many weary months & years - ~~The~~ Afterwards ~~I~~ ~~we~~ had been dispatched to the Indians of the Southwest and had returned to Washington. This had filled up a period of ~~twelve~~ eleven years.

One day a neatly dressed ~~colored~~ young man of seventeen or eighteen ~~day~~ of ~~some~~ ~~fifteen~~ ~~years~~ accosted me on the street.

"How do you do, General Howard?"

I answered politely, but could not recognize him.

He said: "You don't know me?"

"I said no. What is your name?"

"My name is Thomas M——."

"Don't you remember a little boy at the camp over the river whom you

befriended. Then he related some of the incidents that identified him as the same "Jowett" grown to manhood. He had at this time a good situation and had been able to get a fair education. He was a handsome manly youth full of hope & promise.

I saw him but a few minutes, but long enough to find that the fidelity of Henry Johnson, who in the humblest & within the most untoward of circumstances, had never failed to ~~bear~~ carry himself as a true man & a sincere follower of Christ, had borne its lawful fruit.

"The ~~wisest~~ wise man has said: "Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days. x x. He that observeth the wind, shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." The bands were broken and the bond child ~~has~~ had become an intelligent free man.

There is no evolution like that of souls when taken soon enough and properly nurtured & trained with loving fidelity.