
The Leopard’s Spots was an instant bestseller, when it was published in 1902. The novel would go on to be reprinted every year for the next fifty years. It would also serve as the inspiration for D.W. Griffith’s infamous and incredibly successful film, Birth of A Nation.

"Where’s Flora?" cried Tom looking around in alarm.

"I saw her going toward the spring in the edge of the woods there a minute ago," replied Gaston.

Tom sprang up and began to hop and jump down the path toward the spring with incredible rapidity.

Flora was playing in the branch below the spring and Tom saw the form of a negro man passing over the opposite hill going along the spring path that led in that direction.

"Was you talkin' with that nigger, Flora?" asked Tom holding his hand on his side and trying to recover his breath.

"Yes, I said howdy, when he stopped to get a drink of water, and he give me a whistle," she replied with a pout of her pretty lips and a frown.

Tom seized her by the arm and shook her. "Didn’t I tell you to run every time you seed a nigger unless I was with you!"

"Yes, but he wasn’t hurtin' me and you are!" she cried bursting into tears.

"I've a notion to whip you good for this!" Tom stormed.

"Don’t Tom, she won’t do it any more, will you Flora?" pleaded Gaston taking her in his arms and starting to the house with her. When they reached the house, Tom was still pale and trembling with excitement.

"Lord, there’s so many triflin' niggers loafin' round the county now stealin' and doin' all sorts of devilment, I’m scared to death about that child. She don’t seem any more afraid of ‘em than she is of a cat."

"I don’t believe anybody would hurt Flora, Tom,— she’s such a little angel," said Gaston kissing the tears from the child’s face.

"She is cute--ain't she?" said Tom with pride. "I’ve wished many a time lately I’d gone out West with them Yankee fellers that took such a likin' to me in the war. They told me that a poor white man had a chance out there, and that there wern’t a nigger in twenty miles of their home. But then I lost my leg, how could I go?"

He sat dreaming with open eyes for a moment and continued, looking tenderly at Flora, "But, baby, don’t you dare go nigh er nigger, or let one get nigh you no more 'n you would a rattlesnake!"

"I won't Pappy!" she cried with an incredulous smile at his warning of danger that made Tom’s heart sick. She was all joy and laughter, full of health and bubbling life. She believed with a child’s simple faith that all nature was as innocent as her own heart.

... Two days later about five o’clock in the afternoon as Gaston sat in his office writing a letter to his sweetheart, his face aglow with love and the certainty that she was his, as he read and re-read her last glowing words he was startled by the sudden clang of the court house bell. At first he did not move, only looking up from his paper. Sometimes
mischievous boys rang the bell and ran down the steps before any one could catch them. But the bell continued its swift stroke seeming to grow louder and wilder every moment. He saw a man rush across the square, and then the bell of the Methodist, and then of the Baptist churches joined their clamour to the alarm.

He snapped the lid of his desk, snatched his hat and ran down the steps.

As he reached the street, he heard the long piercing cry of a woman’s voice, high, strenuous, quivering!

"A lost child! A lost child!"

What a cry! He was never so thrilled and awed by a human voice. In it was trembling all the anguish of every mother’s broken heart transmitted through the centuries!

At the court house door an excited group had gathered. A man was standing on the steps gesticulating wildly and telling the crowd all he knew about it. Over the din he caught the name,

"Tom Camp’s Flora!"

He breathed hard, bit his lips, and prayed instinctively.

"Lord have mercy on the poor old man! It will kill him!" A great fear brooded over the hearts of the crowd, and soon the tumult was hushed into an awed silence.

In Gaston’s heart that fear became a horrible certainty from the first. Within a half hour a thousand white people were in the crowd. Gaston stood among them, cool and masterful, organising them in searching parties, and giving to each group the signals to be used.

In a moment the white race had fused into a homogeneous mass of love, sympathy, hate, and revenge. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the banker and the blacksmith, the great and the small, they were all one now. The sorrow of that old one-legged soldier was the sorrow of all, every heart beat with his, and his life was their life, and his child their child.

But at the end of an hour there was not a negro among them! By some subtle instinct they had recognised the secret feelings and fears of the crowd and had disappeared. Had they been beasts of the field the gulf between them would not have been deeper.

When Gaston reached Tom’s house the crowd was divided into the groups agreed upon and a signal gun given to each. If the child was not dead when found two should be fired—if dead, but one.

Just before the sun rose the signal gun pealed its message of life, ONE! TWO! in rapid succession.

Tom sprang to his feet with blazing eyes. One! Two! echoed the guns from another hill, and fainter grew its repeated call from group to group of the searchers.

"There! Glory to God!" He screamed at the top of his voice, the last note of his triumphant shout breaking into sobs. "God be praised! I knew they would find her—she’s not dead, she’s alive! alive! oh! my soul, lift up thy head!"

The tramp of swift feet was heard at the door and Gaston told him with husky stammering voice,

"She’s alive Tom, but unconscious. I’ll have her brought to the house. She was found just where your spring branch runs into the Flat Rock, not five hundred yards from here in those woods. Stay where you are. We will bring her in a minute."

Gaston bounded back to the scene.
Tom paid no attention to his orders to stay at home, but sprang after him jumping and falling and scrambling up again as he followed. Before they knew it he was upon the excited tearful group that stood in a circle around the child's body.

Gaston, who was standing on the opposite side from Tom's approach, saw him and shouted,

"My God, men, stop him! Don't let him see her yet!"

But Tom was too quick for them. He brushed aside the boy who caught at him, as though a feather, crying,

"Stand back!"

The circle of men fell away from the body and in a moment Tom stood over it transfixed with horror.

Flora lay on the ground with her clothes torn to shreds and stained with blood. Her beautiful yellow curls were matted across her forehead in a dark red lump beside a wound where her skull had been crushed. The stone lay at her side, the crimson mark of her life showing on its jagged edges.

With that stone the brute had tried to strike the death blow. She was lying on the edge of the hill with her head up the incline. It was too plain, the terrible crime that had been committed.

The poor father sank beside her body with an inarticulate groan as though some one had crushed his head with an axe. He seemed dazed for a moment, and looking around he shouted hoarsely,

"The doctor boys! The doctor quick! For God's sake, quick! She's not dead yet--we may save her-- help--help!" he sank again to the ground limp and faint from pain and was soon insensible.

Gaston gathered the child tenderly in his arms and carried her to the house. The men hastily made a stretcher and carried Tom behind him.