



Mary Armstrong

MARY ARMSTRONG, 91, lives at 3326 Pierce Ave., Houston, Texas. She was born on a farm near St. Louis, Missouri, a slave of William Cleveland. Her father, Sam Adams, belonged to a "nigger trader," who had a farm adjoining the Cleveland place.

"I's Aunt Mary, all right, but you all has to 'scuse me if I don't talk so good, 'cause I's been feelin' poorly for a spell and I ain't so young no more. Law me, when I think back what I used to do, and now it's all I can do to hobble 'round a little. Why, Miss Olivia, my mistress, used to put a glass plumb full of water on my head and then have me waltz 'round the room, and I'd dance so smoothlike, I don't spill nary drap.

"That was in St. Louis, where I's born. You see, my mamma belong to old William Cleveland and old Polly Cleveland, and they was the meanest two white folks what ever lived, 'cause they was allus beatin' on their slaves. I know, 'cause mamma told me, and I hears about it other places, and besides, old Polly, she was a Polly devil if there ever was one, and she whipped my little sister what was only nine months old and jes' a baby to death. She come and took the diaper offen my little sister and whipped till the blood jes' ran—jes' 'cause she cry like all babies do, and it kilt my sister. I never forgot that, but I sot some even with that old Polly devil and it's this-a-way.[Pg 26]

"You see, I's 'bout 10 year old and I belongs to Miss Olivia, what was that old Polly's daughter, and one day old Polly devil comes to where Miss Olivia lives after she marries, and trys to give me a lick out in the yard, and I picks up a rock 'bout as big as half your fist and hits her right in the eye and busted the eyeball, and tells her that's for whippin' my baby sister to death. You could hear her holler for five miles, but Miss Olivia, when I tells her, says, 'Well, I guess mamma has larnt her lesson at last.' But that old Polly was mean like her husban', old Cleveland, till she die, and I hopes they is burnin' in torment now.

"I don't 'member 'bout the start of things so much, 'cept what Miss Olivia and my mamma, her name was Siby, tells me. Course, it's powerful cold in winter times and the farms was lots different from down here. They calls 'em plantations down here but up at St. Louis they was jes' called farms, and that's what they was, 'cause we raises wheat and barley and rye and oats and corn and fruit.

"The houses was builded with brick and heavy wood, too, 'cause it's cold up there, and we has to wear the warm clothes and they's wove on the place, and we works at it in the evenin's.

"Old Cleveland takes a lot of his slaves what was in 'custom' and brings 'em to Texas to sell. You know, he wasn't sposed to do that, 'cause when you's in 'custom', that's 'cause he borrowed money on you, and you's not sposed to leave the place till he paid up. Course, old Cleveland jes' tells the one he owed the money to, you had run off, or squirmed out some way, he was that mean. [Pg 27]

"Mamma says she was in one bunch and me in 'nother. Mamma had been put 'fore this with my papa, Sam Adams, but that makes no diff'rence to Old Cleveland. He's so mean he never would sell the man and woman and chillen to the same one. He'd sell the man here and the woman there and if they's chillen, he'd sell them some place else. Oh, old Satan in torment couldn't be no meaner than what he and Old Polly was to they slaves. He'd chain a nigger up to whip 'em and rub salt and pepper on him, like he said, 'to season him up.' And when he'd sell a slave, he'd grease their mouth all up to make it look like they'd been fed good and was strong and healthy.

"Well mamma say they hadn't no more'n got to Shreveport 'fore some law man cotch old Cleveland and takes 'em all back to St. Louis. Then my little sister's born, the one old Polly devil kilt, and I's 'bout four year old then.

"Miss Olivia takes a likin' to me and, though her papa and mama so mean, she's kind to everyone, and they jes' love her. She marries to Mr. Will Adams what was a fine man, and has 'bout five farms and 500 slaves, and he buys me for her from old Cleveland and pays him \$2,500.00, and gives him George Henry, a nigger, to boot. Lawsy, I's sho' happy to be with Miss Olivia and away from old Cleveland and Old Polly, 'cause they kilt my little sister.

"We lives in St. Louis, on Chinquapin Hill, and I's housegirl, and when the babies starts to come I nusses 'em and spins thread for clothes on the loom. I spins six cuts of thread a week, but I has plenty of time for myself and that's where I larns to dance so good. Law, I sho' jes' crazy 'bout dancin'. If I's settin' eatin' my victuals and hears a fiddle play, I gets up and dances. [Pg 28]

"Mr. Will and Miss Olivia sho' is good to me, and I never calls Mr. Will 'massa' neither, but when they's company I calls him Mr. Will and 'round the house by ourselves I calls them 'pappy' and 'mammy', 'cause they raises me up from the little girl. I hears old Cleveland done took my mamma to Texas 'gain but I couldn't do nothin', 'cause Miss Olivia wouldn't have much truck with her folks. Once in a while old Polly comes over, but Miss Olivia tells her not to touch me or the others. Old Polly trys to buy me back from Miss Olivia, and if they had they'd kilt me sho'. But Miss Olivia say, 'I'd wade in blood as deep as Hell 'fore I'd let you have Mary.' That's jes' the very words she told 'em.

"Then I hears my papa is sold some place I don't know where. 'Course, I didn't know him so well, jes' what mamma done told me, so that didn't worry me like mamma being took so far away.

"One day Mr. Will say, 'Mary, you want to go to the river and see the boat race?' Law me, I never won't forget that. Where we live it ain't far to the Miss'sippi River and pretty soon here they comes, the Natchez and the Eclipse, with smoke and fire jes' pourin' out of they smokestacks. That old captain on the 'Clipse starts puttin' in bacon meat in the boiler and the grease jes' comes out a-blazin' and it beat the Natchez to pieces.

"I stays with Miss Olivia till '63 when Mr. Will set us all free. I was 'bout 17 year old then or more. I say I goin' find my mamma. Mr. Will fixes me up two papers, one 'bout a yard long and the other some smaller, but both has big, gold seals what he says is the seal of the State of Missouri. He gives me money and buys my fare ticket to Texas and tells me they is still [Pg 29] slave times down here and to put the papers in my bosom but to do whatever the white folks tells me, even if they wants to sell me. But he say, 'Fore you gets off the block, jes' pull out the papers, but jes' hold 'em up to let folks see and don't let 'em out of your hands, and when they sees them they has to let you alone.'

"Miss Olivia cry and carry on and say be careful of myself 'cause it sho' rough in Texas. She give me a big basket what had so much to eat in it I couldn't hardly heft it and 'nother with clothes in it. They puts me in the back end a the boat where the big, old wheel what run the boat was and I goes to New Orleans, and the captain puts me on 'nother boat and I comes to Galveston, and that captain puts me on 'nother boat and I comes up this here Buffalo Bayou to Houston.

"I looks 'round Houston, but not long. It sho' was a dumpy little place then and I gets the stagecoach to Austin. It takes us two days to get there and I thinks my back busted sho' 'nough, it was sich rough ridin'. Then I has trouble sho'. A man asks me where I goin' and says to come 'long and he takes me to a Mr. Charley Crosby. They takes me to the block what they sells slaves on. I gets right up like they tells me, 'cause I 'lects what Mr. Will done told me to do, and they starts biddin' on me. And when they cried off and this Mr. Crosby comes up to get me, I jes' pulled out my papers and helt 'em up high and when he sees 'em, he say, 'Let me see them.' But I says, 'You jes' look at it up here,' and he squints up and say, 'This gal am free and has papers,' and tells me he a legislature man and takes me and lets me stay with his slaves. He is a good man.

"He tells me there's a slave refugee camp in Wharton County but I didn't have no money left, but he pays me some for workin' and when the war's over I starts to hunt mamma 'gain, and finds her in Wharton County near where Wharton is. Law me, talk 'bout cryin' and singin' and cryin' some more, we sure done it. I stays with mamma till I gets married in 1871 to John Armstrong, [Pg 30] and then we all comes to Houston.

"I gets me a job nussin' for Dr. Rellaford and was all through the yellow fever epidemic. I 'lects in '75 people die jes' like sheep with the rots. I's seen folks with the fever jump from their bed with death on 'em and grab other folks. The doctor saved lots of folks, white and black, 'cause he sweat it out of 'em. He mixed up hot water and vinegar and mustard and some else in it.

"But, law me, so much is gone out of my mind, 'cause I's 91 year old now and my mind jes' like my legs, jes' kinda hobble 'round a bit. [Pg 31]
