



***JOEL CHANDLER
HARRIS***

***UNCLE
REMIUS,
HIS SONGS
AND HIS
SAYINGS***

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Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings

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INTRODUCTION

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I am advised by my publishers that this book is to be included in their catalogue of humorous publications, and this friendly warning gives me an opportunity to say that however humorous it may be in effect, its intention is perfectly serious; and, even if it were otherwise, it seems to me that a volume written wholly in dialect must have its solemn, not to say melancholy, features. With respect to the Folk-Lore scenes, my purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect—if, indeed, it can be called a dialect—through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family; and I have endeavored to give to the whole a genuine flavor of the old plantation.

Each legend has its variants, but in every instance I have retained that particular version which seemed to me to be the most characteristic, and have given it without embellishment and without exaggeration.

The dialect, it will be observed, is wholly different from that of the Hon. Pompey Smash and his literary descendants, and different also from the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage, but it is at least phonetically genuine. Nevertheless, if the language of Uncle Remus fails to give vivid hints of the really poetic imagination of the negro; if it fails to embody the quaint and homely humor which was his most prominent characteristic; if it does not suggest a certain picturesque sensitiveness—a

curious exaltation of mind and temperament not to be defined by words—then I have reproduced the form of the dialect merely, and not the essence, and my attempt may be accounted a failure. At any rate, I trust I have been successful in presenting what must be, at least to a large portion of American readers, a new and by no means unattractive phase of negro character—a phase which may be considered a curiously sympathetic supplement to Mrs. Stowe's wonderful defense of slavery as it existed in the South. Mrs. Stowe, let me hasten to say, attacked the possibilities of slavery with all the eloquence of genius; but the same genius painted the portrait of the Southern slave-owner, and defended him.

A number of the plantation legends originally appeared in the columns of a daily newspaper—The Atlanta Constitution and in that shape they attracted the attention of various gentlemen who were kind enough to suggest that they would prove to be valuable contributions to myth-literature. It is but fair to say that ethnological considerations formed no part of the undertaking which has resulted in the publication of this volume. Professor J. W. Powell, of the Smithsonian Institution, who is engaged in an investigation of the mythology of the North American Indians, informs me that some of Uncle Remus's stories appear in a number of different languages, and in various modified forms, among the Indians; and he is of the opinion that they are borrowed by the negroes from the red-men. But this, to say the least, is extremely doubtful, since another investigator (Mr. Herbert H. Smith, author of *Brazil and the Amazons*) has met with some of these stories among tribes of South

American Indians, and one in particular he has traced to India, and as far east as Siam. Mr. Smith has been kind enough to send me the proof-sheets of his chapter on The Myths and Folk-Lore of the Amazonian Indians, in which he reproduces some of the stories which he gathered while exploring the Amazons.

In the first of his series, a tortoise falls from a tree upon the head of a jaguar and kills him; in one of Uncle Remus's stories, the terrapin falls from a shelf in Miss Meadows's house and stuns the fox, so that the latter fails to catch the rabbit. In the next, a jaguar catches a tortoise by the hind-leg as he is disappearing in his hole; but the tortoise convinces him he is holding a root, and so escapes; Uncle Remus tells how the fox endeavored to drown the terrapin, but turned him loose because the terrapin declared his tail to be only a stump-root. Mr. Smith also gives the story of how the tortoise outran the deer, which is identical as to incident with Uncle Remus's story of how Brer Tarrypin outran Brer Rabbit. Then there is the story of how the tortoise pretended that he was stronger than the tapir. He tells the latter he can drag him into the sea, but the tapir retorts that he will pull the tortoise into the forest and kill him besides. The tortoise thereupon gets a vine-stem, ties one end around the body of the tapir, and goes to the sea, where he ties the other end to the tail of a whale. He then goes into the wood, midway between them both, and gives the vine a shake as a signal for the pulling to begin. The struggle between the whale and tapir goes on until each thinks the tortoise is the strongest of animals. Compare this with the story of the terrapin's contest with the bear, in

which Miss Meadows's bed-cord is used instead of a vine-stem. One of the most characteristic of Uncle Remus's stories is that in which the rabbit proves to Miss Meadows and the girls that the fox is his riding-horse. This is almost identical with a story quoted by Mr. Smith, where the jaguar is about to marry the deer's daughter. The cotia—a species of rodent—is also in love with her, and he tells the deer that he can make a riding-horse of the jaguar.

"Well," says the deer, "if you can make the jaguar carry you, you shall have my daughter." Thereupon the story proceeds pretty much as Uncle Remus tells it of the fox and rabbit. The cotia finally jumps from the jaguar and takes refuge in a hole, where an owl is set to watch him, but he flings sand in the owl's eyes and escapes. In another story given by Mr. Smith, the cotia is very thirsty, and, seeing a man coming with a jar on his head, lies down in the road in front of him, and repeats this until the man puts down his jar to go back after all the dead cotias he has seen. This is almost identical with Uncle Remus's story of how the rabbit robbed the fox of his game. In a story from Upper Egypt, a fox lies down in the road in front of a man who is carrying fowls to market, and finally succeeds in securing them.

This similarity extends to almost every story quoted by Mr. Smith, and some are so nearly identical as to point unmistakably to a common origin; but when and where? when did the negro or the North American Indian ever come in contact with the tribes of South America? Upon this point the author of *Brazil and the Amazons*, who is engaged in making a critical and comparative study of these myth-stories, writes:

"I am not prepared to form a theory about these stories. There can be no doubt that some of them, found among the negroes and the Indians, had a common origin. The most natural solution would be to suppose that they originated in Africa, and were carried to South America by the negro slaves. They are certainly found among the Red Negroes; but, unfortunately for the African theory, it is equally certain that they are told by savage Indians of the Amazons Valley, away up on the Tapajos, Red Negro, and Tapura. These Indians hardly ever see a negro, and their languages are very distinct from the broken Portuguese spoken by the slaves. The form of the stories, as recounted in the Tupi and Mundurucu' languages, seems to show that they were originally formed in those languages or have long been adopted in them.

"It is interesting to find a story from Upper Egypt (that of the fox who pretended to be dead) identical with an Amazonian story, and strongly resembling one found by you among the negroes. Vambagen, the Brazilian historian (now Visconde de Rio Branco), tried to prove a relationship between the ancient Egyptians, or other Turanian stock, and the Tupi Indians. His theory rested on rather a slender basis, yet it must be confessed that he had one or two strong points. Do the resemblances between old and New World stories point to a similar conclusion? It would be hard to say with the material that we now have.

"One thing is certain. The animal stories told by the negroes in our Southern States and in Brazil were brought by them from Africa. Whether they originated there, or with the Arabs, or Egyptians, or with yet more ancient nations,

must still be an open question. Whether the Indians got them from the negroes or from some earlier source is equally uncertain. We have seen enough to know that a very interesting line of investigation has been opened."

Professor Hartt, in his *Amazonian Tortoise Myths*, quotes a story from the *Riverside Magazine* of November, 1868, which will be recognized as a variant of one given by Uncle Remus. I venture to append it here, with some necessary verbal and phonetic alterations, in order to give the reader an idea of the difference between the dialect of the cotton plantations, as used by Uncle Remus, and the lingo in vogue on the rice plantations and Sea Islands of the South Atlantic States:

"One time B'er Deer an' B'er Cooter (Terrapin) was courtin', and de lady did bin lub B'er Deer mo' so dan B'er Cooter. She did bin lub B'er Cooter, but she lub B'er Deer de mostest. So de young lady say to B'er Deer and B'er Cooter bofe dat dey mus' hab a ten-mile race, an de one dat beats, she will go marry him.

"So B'er Cooter say to B'er Deer: 'You has got mo longer legs dan I has, but I will run you. You run ten mile on land, and I will run ten mile on de water!'

"So B'er Cooter went an' git nine er his fam'ly, an' put one at ebery mile-pos', and he hisse'f, what was to run wid B'er Deer, he was right in front of de young lady's do', in de broom-grass.

"Dat mornin' at nine o'clock, B'er Deer he did met B'er Cooter at de fus mile-pos', wey dey was to start fum. So he call: 'Well, B'er Cooter, is you ready? Co long!' As he git on to de nex' mile-pos', he say: 'B'er Cooter!' B'er Cooter say:

'Hullo!' B'er Deer say: 'You dere?' B'er Cooter say: 'Yes, B'er Deer, I dere too.'

"Nex' mile-pos' he jump, B'er Deer say: 'Hullo, B'er Cooter!' B'er Cooter say: 'Hullo, B'er Deer! you dere too?' B'er Deer say: 'Ki! it look like you gwine fer tie me; it look like we gwine fer de gal tie!'

"W'en he git to de nine-mile pos' he tought he git dere fus, 'cause he mek two jump; so he holler: 'B'er Cooter!' B'er Cooter answer: 'You dere too?' B'er Deer say: 'It look like you gwine tie me.' B'er Cooter say: 'Go long, B'er Deer. I git dere in due season time,' which he does, and wins de race."

The story of the Rabbit and the Fox, as told by the Southern negroes, is artistically dramatic in this: it progresses in an orderly way from a beginning to a well-defined conclusion, and is full of striking episodes that suggest the culmination. It seems to me to be to a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable. At least it is a fable thoroughly characteristic of the negro; and it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness. It would be presumptuous in me to offer an opinion as to the origin of these curious myth-stories; but, if ethnologists should discover that they did not originate with the African, the proof to that effect should be accompanied with a good deal of persuasive eloquence.

Curiously enough, I have found few negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these

legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folklore included in this volume. There is an anecdote about the Irishman and the rabbit which a number of negroes have told to me with great unction, and which is both funny and characteristic, though I will not undertake to say that it has its origin with the blacks. One day an Irishman who had heard people talking about "mares' nests" was going along the big road—it is always the big road in contradistinction to neighborhood paths and by-paths, called in the vernacular "nigh-cuts"—when he came to a pumpkin—patch. The Irishman had never seen any of this fruit before, and he at once concluded that he had discovered a veritable mare's nest. Making the most of his opportunity, he gathered one of the pumpkins in his arms and went on his way. A pumpkin is an exceedingly awkward thing to carry, and the Irishman had not gone far before he made a misstep, and stumbled. The pumpkin fell to the ground, rolled down the hill into a "brush—heap," and, striking against a stump, was broken. The story continues in the dialect: "W'en de punkin roll in de bresh—heap, out jump a rabbit; en soon's de l'shmuns see dat, he take atter de rabbit en holler: 'Kworp, colty! kworp, colty!' but de rabbit, he des flew." The point of this is obvious.

As to the songs, the reader is warned that it will be found difficult to make them conform to the ordinary rules of versification, nor is it intended that they should so conform. They are written, and are intended to be read, solely with reference to the regular and invariable recurrence of the

caesura, as, for instance, the first stanza of the Revival Hymn:

"Oh, whar / shill we go / w'en de great / day comes
Wid de blow / in' er de trumpits / en de bang / in' er de
drums /
How man / y po' sin / ners'll be kotch'd / out late
En fine / no latch ter de gold / en gate /"

In other words, the songs depend for their melody and rhythm upon the musical quality of time, and not upon long or short, accented or unaccented syllables. I am persuaded that this fact led Mr. Sidney Lanier, who is thoroughly familiar with the metrical peculiarities of negro songs, into the exhaustive investigation which has resulted in the publication of his scholarly treatise on *The Science of English Verse*.

The difference between the dialect of the legends and that of the character—sketches, slight as it is, marks the modifications which the speech of the negro has undergone even where education has played in deed, save in the no part reforming it. Indeed, save in the remote country districts, the dialect of the legends has nearly disappeared. I am perfectly well aware that the character sketches are without permanent interest, but they are embodied here for the purpose of presenting a phase of negro character wholly distinct from that which I have endeavored to preserve in the legends. Only in this shape, and with all the local allusions, would it be possible to adequately represent the shrewd observations, the curious retorts, the homely thrusts, the quaint comments, and the humorous philosophy of the race of which Uncle Remus is the type.

If the reader not familiar with plantation life will imagine that the myth—stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes—who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery—and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system; if the reader can imagine all this, he will find little difficulty in appreciating and sympathizing with the air of affectionate superiority which Uncle Remus assumes as he proceeds to unfold the mysteries of plantation lore to a little child who is the product of that practical reconstruction which has been going on to some extent since the war in spite of the politicians. Uncle Remus describes that reconstruction in his Story of the War, and I may as well add here for the benefit of the curious that that story is almost literally true.

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LEGENDS OF THE OLD PLANTATION

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I. UNCLE REMUS INITIATES THE LITTLE BOY

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One evening recently, the lady whom Uncle Remus calls "Miss Sally" missed her little seven-year-old. Making search for him through the house and through the yard, she heard the sound of voices in the old man's cabin, and, looking through the window, saw the child sitting by Uncle Remus. His head rested against the old man's arm, and he was gazing with an expression of the most intense interest into the rough, weather-beaten face, that beamed so kindly upon him. This is what "Miss Sally" heard:

"Bimeby, one day, atter Brer Fox bin doin' all dat he could fer ter ketch Brer Rabbit, en Brer Rabbit bein doin' all he could fer ter keep 'im fum it, Brer Fox say to hisse'f dat

he'd put up a game on Brer Rabbit, en he ain't mo'n got de wuds out'n his mouf twel Brer Rabbit came a lopin' up de big road, lookin' des ez plump, en ez fat, en ez sassy ez a Moggin hoss in a barley-patch.

"'Hol' on dar, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee.

"'I ain't got time, Brer Fox,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, sorter mendin' his licks.

"'I wanter have some confab wid you, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee.

"'All right, Brer Fox, but you better holler fum whar you stan'. I'm monstus full er fleas dis mawnin',' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"'I seed Brer B'ar yistdiddy, 'sez Brer Fox, sezee, 'en he sorter rake me over de coals kaze you en me ain't make frens en live naberly, en I tole 'im dat I'd see you.'

"Den Brer Rabbit scratch one year wid his off hinefoot sorter jub'usly, en den he ups en sez, sezee:

"'All a settin', Brer Fox. Spose'n you drap roun' ter-morrer en take dinner wid me. We ain't got no great doin's at our house, but I speck de ole 'oman en de chilluns kin sorter scramble roun' en git up sump'n fer ter stay yo' stummick.'

"'I'm 'gree'ble, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee.

"'Den I'll 'pen' on you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"Nex' day, Mr. Rabbit an' Miss Rabbit got up soom, 'fo' day, en raided on a gyarden like Miss Sally's out dar, en got some cabbiges, en some roas'n—years, en some sparrer-grass, en dey fix up a smashin' dinner. Bimeby one er de little Rabbits, playin' out in de back-yard, come runnin' in hollerin', 'Oh, ma! oh, ma! I seed Mr. Fox a comin'!' En den Brer Rabbit he tuck de chilluns by der years en make um set

down, en den him and Miss Rabbit sorter dally roun' waitin' for Brer Fox. En dey keep on waitin' for Brer Fox. En dey keep on waitin', but no Brer Fox ain't come. Atter 'while Brer Rabbit goes to de do', easy like, en peep out, en dar, stickin' fum behime de cornder, wuz de tip-eeen' er Brer Fox tail. Den Brer Rabbit shot de do' en sot down, en put his paws behime his years en begin fer ter sing:

"'De place wharbouts you spill de grease, Right dar you er boun' ter slide, An' whar you fin' a bunch er ha'r, You'll sholy fine de hide.'

"Nex' day, Brer Fox sont word by Mr. Mink, en skuze hisse'f kaze he wuz too sick fer ter come, en he ax Brer Rabbit fer ter come en take dinner wid him, en Brer Rabbit say he wuz 'gree'ble.

"Bimeby, w'en de shadders wuz at der shortes', Brer Rabbit he sorter brush up en sa'nter down ter Brer Fox's house, en w'en he got dar, he hear somebody groanin', en he look in de do' an dar he see Brer Fox settin' up in a rockin'-cheer all wrop up wid flannil, en he look mighty weak. Brer Rabbit look all roun', he did, but he ain't see no dinner. De dish-pan wuz settin' on de table, en close by wuz a kyarvin' knife.

"'Look like you gwineter have chicken fer dinner, Brer Fox,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"'Yes, Brer Rabbit, dey er nice, en fresh, en tender, 'sez Brer Fox, sezee.

"Den Brer Rabbit sorter pull his mustarsh, en say: 'You ain't got no calamus root, is you, Brer Fox? I done got so now dat I can't eat no chicken 'ceppin she's seasoned up wid calamus root.' En wid dat Brer Rabbit lipt out er de do'

and dodge 'mong the bushes, en sot dar watchin' for Brer Fox; en he ain't watch long, nudder, kaze Brer Fox flung off de flannil en crope out er de house en got whar he could cloze in on Brer Rabbit, en bimeby Brer Rabbit holler out: 'Oh, Brer Fox! I'll des put yo' calamus root out yer on dish yer stump. Better come git it while hit's fresh,' and wid dat Brer Rabbit gallop off home. En Brer Fox ain't never kotch 'im yit, en w'at's mo', honey, he ain't gwineter."

