NOTES ON NEGRO FOLK-LORE AND WITCHCRAFT IN THE SOUTH.

I HAVE no doubt that in the Southern States have existed many unprinted negro animal myths, similar to those contained in the collection of Mr. Joel Chandler Harris. That the latter were current among the negroes of the South, and were by them related to the children of both races even as late as several years after the war, I know from personal experience. Some of Uncle Remus's tales, when I first read them, were already as familiar to me as the commonest nursery stories. Some of them, on the other hand, were changed almost beyond recognition, clearly showing that with difference of locality may be found a corresponding difference in what must originally have been the same myth.

Take, for instance, the tar-baby story, from which Uncle Remus, who was a middle Georgia negro, eliminates all that is frightful, retaining only the humorous. According to his version, the cunning fox once moulded a baby out of tar, and placed it at the roadside as a snare to catch his clever enemy, the rabbit. As the readers of the book will remember, Mr. Rabbit in due time appears on the road, and, seeing the tar-baby, bids it good-morning. Surprised and annoyed that the little black baby should not respond to his greeting, he comes nearer, somewhat angrily repeating his words, and finally, when it is perfectly clear that the little imp intends to "keep on sayin' nothin'," to quote the story-teller, he flies into a rage, and strikes it, as a just return for its ill manners. But woe to Mr. Rabbit! His fist is caught in the tar, and his wrath only serves to injure him; for a second blow quickly imprisons his other fist, and a couple of desperate kicks deprive him of the use of both feet. Then the happy fox skips forth from cover, and rolls over on the grass, and laughs, shouting to the rabbit that he looks sort o' stuck up this morning.

The distance from middle to southern Georgia is not great, but, as told by the negroes inhabiting the latter region, the story above outlined is widely different. As I heard it in one of the southernmost counties of the State, the tar-baby was by no means a mere manufactured, lifeless snare, but a living creature whose body, through some mysterious freak of nature, was composed of tar, and whose black lips were ever parted in an ugly grin. This monster tar-baby, which haunted the woods and lonely places about the plantation, was represented as wholly vicious in character, ever bent upon ensnaring little folks into its yielding, though vice-like, embrace. Well, do I remember the dread of encountering the ogre-like creature in some

remote spot, where I should be unable to withstand its fascinations; for it was said to be impossible to pass the tar-baby without striking it, so provoking was its grin and so insulting its behavior generally, — and when you had once struck it, you were lost. I was always on the lookout for it, but, it is needless to say, never encountered it except in dreamland, where again and again was suffered the unspeakable horror of being caught and held stuck fast in its tarry embrace.

Animal-myths of a totally different kind to be found among Georgia negroes are those involving metempsychosis. It is very clear that they have a belief in the old and wide-spread fable of the wandering of spirits or demons in the shape of beasts. I now recall a typical story to the effect that there were once some hunters who were put to shame by a bold and apparently invulnerable deer. Their skill profited them nothing; do what they would, they could not hit that deer. Finally they consulted a sable conjurer who advised them to mould a *silver* bullet, and try their luck with that. They did so, and the experiment succeeded in so far that it put an end to their shame; for at the report of the gun the deer vanished, thus proclaiming itself to be a spirit. This tale is very interesting as suggesting the *Freischutz* of the German folk-lore and other similar myths, as well as the story that the Catholics attempted to bring about the death of Gustavus Adolphus by the employment of the powerful silver bullet.

Before leaving the subject of the animal myth, it may be of interest to add that southern Georgia negroes cherish the mediæval superstition to the effect that cattle go down upon their knees, and lift their heads in prayer at twelve o'clock on Christmas eve.

But the dusky *raconteurs* of the South whom I knew by no means confined themselves to animal myths. Besides ordinary ghost stories in great variety, they had much to say about the Devil. I distinctly recall two stories in which this disreputable person, though not the hero exactly, played the leading rôle. The first may be appropriately entitled "The Bride of the Old Boy," and the second, "The Little Gal and the Devil." In the former a proud and scornful woman who disdained all of her suitors is represented as finally meeting a man whose courting she is unable to resist. So one day the marriage takes place, and after a grand feast the couple drive off in a carriage. They drive all night, and in the morning the woman is terrified to find herself in what is politely termed the Bad Place, while her husband stands revealed in the very person of the Old Boy. If I remember aright, the description of the *inferno* was by no means as full and detailed as I could have wished, but there was some reference to the use of the pitchfork, *et cætera*, in accordance

with the conventional story. Naturally the young bride was unhappy, and sought eagerly escape from her uncomfortable position. Consulting an old witch or conjurer, she was told that she could effect her escape only through a certain charm involving the use of an egg-shell and a bag of rice. Should she put a bag of rice in one ear and an egg-shell in the other, the Devil would be unable to catch her. Vivid was the description of how the Devil chased the woman up hill and down dale through one whole night, until the border line was passed, and the fugitive was safe; but there was no explanation of the mysterious charm, nor any attempt to show how it was possible for a bag of rice, or even for an egg-shell, to be lodged in a human ear.

The other story, "The Little Gal and the Devil," is in outline as follows: The Little Gal once tripped and fell and spilled a pail of milk which she was carrying homeward, and, while weeping over the loss, sees the Devil come skipping along on the top rail of the fence. She at first thinks he is a baboon, for he has a tail as well as a pitchfork, but he at once introduces himself, and proposes to restore the milk to her if in exchange she will give him her soul. After some hesitation the child consents, the milk is magically replaced in the pail, and is then taken to her home. While he awaits her return, in order not to attract attention, the Devil assumes the convenient form of a shoat. In due time the Little Gal reappears, and, gravely remarking that she has promised to give him her soul and intends to keep her promise, draws forth from her pocket the sole of her old shoe, and hurls it at her tempter, whereupon he is seized with unaccountable fright, precipitately takes to his heels, and returns no more.

But these two stories and other similar ones are probably only adaptations, not of true African origin, since the idea of a single personal devil clearly points to Christianity rather than to heathenism. The story of the "Little Gal and the Devil," notwithstanding its humorous climax, remotely suggests the old mediæval legend of Dr. Faustus which Marlowe put into poetry long before "Faust" was written.

Before going on to speak of witchcraft, it may be worth while to mention an old custom among Southern negroes of carrying a rabbit's foot in the pocket, and wearing a string of silver coins about the neck as charms or amulets to produce good luck, since the origin may perhaps be traced to the fetichism, or worship, of guardian spirits dwelling in inanimate objects of their African ancestors.

As to Voodooism, properly so called, I know nothing from personal observation, but do not question its existence in the South. It has been stated that the number of Voodoo professionals among

the negroes of New Orleans was found to be so great in 1886 as to compel the Board of Health to interfere, with a view to their suppression. But it seems doubtful whether its most revolting feature, that of human sacrifice, has ever been ultimated in this country, although the newspapers a year or two ago printed a significant report to the effect that an old negress in the neighborhood of Savannah had cut up a small child, and salted it away in a barrel, no satisfactory explanation as to the motive for the horrid deed being given. It was, by the way, in the same neighborhood that not long since two negroes successively proclaimed themselves the Messiah, and drew after them a large following from the orthodox negro churches.

But the practice of ordinary witchcraft, disconnected with any regular religious ceremonial life like that of the Voodoo, is evidently wide-spread throughout the South. In his thoughtful and interesting book, "The Plantation Negro as a Freeman," Mr. Philip A. Bruce tells us that the Virginia tobacco-plantation negroes, living at a convenient distance from churches, schools, and railroads, are found to have as firm a belief in witchcraft as those savages of the African bush who file their teeth and perforate the cartilage of their noses. Mr. Bruce proceeds to describe communities in rural Virginia, which so far resemble an African tribe as to have a professional trick-doctor, who is a person of far more importance than a preacher, and who indeed follows a more lucrative pursuit. He is often called in where the disease is of an ordinary nature, in preference to the regular practitioner of the neighborhood, and such is the effect of his presence upon the minds of his patients, that the cures effected sometimes seem almost miraculous. But his distinctive avocation is the bringing to bear of counteracting influences against sorcery, or, on the other hand, the casting of spells upon fresh victims. Thus at one time he is sought by negroes who are convinced that they have been bewitched by some other agency, and at another by such as may wish a spell to be cast upon those who have aroused their vindictive feeling. In the latter case the trick-doctor usually operates by transferring an article of a trivial nature either inside or to the immediate vicinity of the cabins of the victims, who recognize the medium of the art at once, from their intimate knowledge of the sort of material always used, and are immediately thrown into a state of the liveliest terror. Let a negro once be convinced that he has been bewitched, and he will sink into deep despondency, his face will become clouded and sad, and his health rapidly decline. On the other hand, when he believes the baleful influence to have been counteracted the progress of his recovery is equally phenomenal.

Mr. Bruce tells us that a neighborhood is sometimes thrown into a state of general turmoil by the mere arrival of a trick-doctor, be-

coming, as it were, a community of personal enemies whose hands begin to strike at each other through the secret medium now offered. There is a notable increase of quarrelling and wrangling, emotions of hatred and revenge appear to be stimulated, and all the negro's evil passions are aroused. Dark threats are heard on all sides, and the whole atmosphere, as it were, alive with anger and terror. There have been occasions when so much agitation has been thus aroused in large communities in southern Virginia, that it has been necessary for the owners of the land to compel the trick-doctor to leave, the agitation tending to disorder labor to a disastrous degree.

My own experience in this direction cannot compare in extent with that of Mr. Bruce, the results of whose investigations in Virginia I have just summarized, but I have no reason, therefore, to think that his description is overdrawn. Without either investigation or particular inquiry on the subject, I nevertheless heard from time to time, as I grew up in one of the southern counties of Georgia, enough to make it clear that the practice of witchcraft was to be found there. I was once told by some negro field-hands that a certain old black woman whom I knew had the power of putting "bad mouth" on whomsoever she pleased, and it was therefore the wisest plan not to anger her. They imparted this information in the laughing, careless manner characteristic of the race, but at the same time spoke with a certain awe which showed that they were serious. What is the origin of the expression "bad mouth," or what particular meaning it may have, I do not know, but, generally speaking, to put "bad mouth" on a person is to cast a spell upon or bewitch him.

Only last spring an unusual sensation was created in the negro quarter of my native town in Georgia by the attempt of an old negress of the name of Jaycox to bewitch one Willis Mitchell, a black employee of the cotton warehouse. The negro had several times reported the dark threats of his persecutor to the marshal, and asked for protection, but was only laughed at. Finally he came one morning, and reported a deliberate attempt to bewitch him and his family. So earnest was he and so beseeching that the marshal was persuaded to go with him to his premises, and examine the dreaded article of "conjure" maliciously dropped before his door. Arrived on the ground, he had pointed out to him a large live toad which had a strip of red flannel about twenty inches long securely fastened to its right hind foot. The other end of the strip was fastened to the centre of a light wood splinter about ten inches in length. Knots were tied at intervals along the red strip, and here and there were attached short pieces of white sewing-thread. As if this were not enough, fastened to the knotted strip was a small red flannel bundle in which were found a lot of roots and sewing-needles. When the marshal

went to interview the Jaycox, and stated the complaint against her, she flew into a violent rage, and would give no satisfactory answers, though clearly guilty, and so the investigation came to an end.

This "conjure" concoction was the most elaborate I have ever heard of or seen described. Mr. Charles C. Jones, in his "Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast," gives as those in ordinary use in that region merely a bunch of rusty nails, bits of red flannel, pieces of brier-root tied together with a cotton string, etc., a toad's foot, a snake's tooth, or a rabbit's tail being sometimes added. Mr. Cable describes a small, rude human effigy covered with blood or pierced through the heart by a nail as the common medium in Louisiana. This latter more directly suggests the *modus operandi* of the English witches concerning whom it is said in King James's *Deamonology*: —

"The devil teacheth how to make pictures of wax or clay, that by roasting thereof the persons that they bear the name of may be continually melted or dried away by continual sickness."[1]

It remains but to speak of the Southern negro's belief in spirits and his attitude toward the world which they inhabit, — a world which appears to be all but as real to him as the one in which he himself consciously dwells. Particularly at night does this spirit world seem to draw near to him, and open to him its secrets. To his imagination the shadowy woodlands are full of the arisen dead. Should you walk a lonely way in the moonlight, and see a rabbit run across your path, be careful: that is a spirit. Should you in similar surroundings feel the touch of a warm breath on the back of your neck, be careful: that is a spirit. The soft murmur in the forest trees, when the wind does *not* blow, is the whispering of spirits. Persons born with a caul may see spirits at any or all times. Should you walk in the neighborhood of a swamp, and see a floating light (the *ignis fatuus*, or inflammable gas, commonly called the Jack-o'-lantern), turn your back upon it, and go home as fast as you can. That is a wicked spirit or demon "hot from hell." Woe to you if you attempt an investigation. A horseman once did so, and the terrible Jack-o'-lantern turned upon him in wrath, consuming both him and his horse in its flames.

Finally, you must be careful never to brush against a spirit. The idea in this warning seems to be that the air is full of them, particularly at night. This idea at once suggests the reported belief of the Veddahs of Ceylon (and other savage tribes), who say that the air is peopled with spirits, that they are ever at one's elbow, and there is great danger of jostling them. This in turn suggests the belief of the Arab, who is so convinced that the desert is thickly crowded with unseen spirits that he prays the forgiveness of such as

[1] Book II., chap. v.

may be struck whenever he casts anything through the air, and warningly tells a story of how a merchant once threw a date-stone, struck an invisible spirit in the eye, and killed him.

Here we have from three widely different sources a similar idea of the nearness of the other world, — a similarity clearly pointing to a common origin, which origin must have been the belief held in ancient times that the spiritual world is not separated from the natural by a matter of material distance, but is, as it were, within and above, as the soul is within and above the body. Such an idea, at first true and pure, and afterwards perverted, made gross, materialized, as handed down through the ages, could hardly do otherwise than give birth to the present belief among savages that spirits dwell all about them in the very material atmosphere.

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