FOLK-LORE
(DOWN-IN-DORSET)

SINCE men like Dr. J. W. Powell, Director of the Smithsonian, Dr. Stewart Culin of the University of Penna., Drs. Henry Wood and Hurd of the Johns Hopkins, as well as Harvard, Yale and Princeton men, have stated that folk-lore is a rich field for scientific research — for the study of comparative myths, usages, prognostications and related mental phenomena of primitive peoples, there is a newly awakened interest in "Bre'r Fox" and "Bre'r Rabbit" in the South; and since the American Folk-Lore Society, of which Dr. Culin is now president, has extended the privileges of active membership to all state residents who were formerly associates only, those who live where they come in touch with the real folk-lore element, throughout the whole country, are seeking to be zealous gleaners in this field because it is a recognized distinction to read a paper before this scholarly body.

The old notion that these similar or identical tales, legends, spells and divinations owe their origin to a common source far back in the dawn of the world is not held by any of these university men who are scientists in their scholarship.

They hold to the idea of "the psychic unity of mankind"—the unity of mind. That man in all ages and in all countries developed the same mental conceptions concerning those things which environed him.

Folk-lore has, perhaps, brought more proof towards this conclusion than archaeology, and is often the sole interpreter of the unearthed picture-writing.

While the story teller wishes to conserve all things beautiful, quaint or imaginative even in the heart of ignorance—a sort of protec-

tion given art for art's sake—the scientific spirit in literature seeks rather to record and to annotate, to rescue from oblivion and trace to their source all those survivals of immature thought and conception in which, as folk-lore, the ruder and sturdier sons of the soil have preserved that vital spark of the classic fable which we term the touch of nature that makes truth perennial; and though there has arisen no Joel Chandler Harris with the literary art to touch and kindle the wealth of crude material embodied in the folk-lore of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, yet to the enthusiasts of the new cult within her borders it promises important results.

But under the influence of Mr. Preacher and Mr. Teacher the old songs and the animal tales, the superstitions, signs, omens and tokens that used to terrify and delight the youngsters in our grand-father's kitchens are dying out with the turbaned mammys and decrepid uncles; and it is fast becoming a matter of exceptional diplomacy to induce even these to talk freely about the occultism from which they are evolving.

However, with tact and finesse, those who have an aptitude for gathering folk-lore are getting at many curious bit of primitive fancy.

Down in Dorset the manner of putting "spells" on people, for instance, is peculiar to that section, and the alienation of affection is the sole cause or possible plea for such an extreme measure of retributive justice as that known as "plantin' bottles fur 'em."

The "spell" is put in a bottle and buried where the rival is sure to step on it, and is almost entirely a feminine form of malice which has its extenuation in "all's fair in love and war."

While there is in the folk-lore of this section no deification of nature there is the universal tendency to attribute man's astuteness to animals and a belief that they were given more than human perception in compensation for the lack of speech.

Roosters, dogs, birds and "hopper toads" are special prognosticators of coming events and figure extensively in the weather signs. Many a prediction is verified by them when the "almanick" is to the contrary.

The signs of death are many and infallible and the power to converse with "sperrits" is claimed by not a few seers.

You are constantly warned against throwing away loose hair, for the birds will weave it into their nests and your head will ache all the nesting season. A widely current belief in pots of gold and the possibility of "lightin' " on one at any stroke lessens the labor of all unusual digging.

There is some one known locally as Blackbeard, a Chesapeake pirate, who came ashore in times past and hid his ill gotton booty. You have to draw a large circle within which to dig for this treasure as all sorts of headless creatures come clear up to the line of taboo, and would come beyond it if they dared.

It is thought to be dreadful luck to carry a spade through a house and through whichever door you enter by that same you must depart under dire penalty of the fates. There are no exceptions whatever to the holders of this belief among the real folk element, be they white or colored, but no man—or woman—can trace its genesis.

The Tar Baby story is materially the same as that told by Harris' Uncle Remus, though one variant was reported to the Society, from down in Dorset, which the president of the Baltimore branch, Dr. Henry Wood, Professor of Romance Languages in Johns Hopkins University, pronounced a find of exceptional interest. Dr. Wood is also much interested in the fact that there are no local songs and that of all sins song singing is the most unthinkable. The religious epic they know wherein "Sattan" is the arch foe and fallen man the mighty struggler and conquerer; but the lyric and the tender ballad, the husking songs and the plantation "rounds" which catch the ear so euphoniously in the magazines are purely sanctum poetry so far as having their counterpart in the repertoire of the Southern Maryland folk-lore element. This, too, is owing to Mr. Preacher's lamentable misconception of duty in adding an eleventh "thou shalt not" to the decalogue, that outweighs in stress all emphasis put upon the ten delivered by Moses. There is one peculiar chant which is undoubtedly a survival of a purely barbaric hymn raised to the deity of their African forefathers. It is handed down from generation to generation; and in listening to the rising and falling of its weird rythm one's imagination pictures some solemn religious rite in the forest primeval where the progenitors of these people chanted it as a battle hymn or as a mystic incantation to the sun god.

The words are various modern adaptations, simple enough, often unmeaning, and give no intimation of the dramatic effect of the tune. He sings this oftenest when alone and out in an open space. If he begins it indifferently the swelling notes soon rise higher and fuller, and, as if there were some mysterious power in it to facinate the ears of the singer, he keeps it going till he has no voice left, dreading the silence should he leave off.

Another is:

"Sinnerman settin' on de gate o' hell,
De gate flew open an' sinnerman fell."

This as a history of the fall of man is something unique and would not be wanting in completeness of cause and effect, defying in its simplicity of statement all after muddling of the "higher criticism," if it were but added how the "sinnerman" came to be "settin' " there.

The only song not religious that I have heard is an old corn pone song, still remembered by a few:

"Sift de meal an' gi' me de husk,
Bake de bread an' gi' me de crust;
Kill de ox an' gi' me de gristle,
Enough to make de debbil a whistle."

The "Juba," though, is still patted. One is considered to have a fine ear for music who can "pat," clapping his hands and slapping his knees in regular rythm while another "shuffles."

It has recently been suggested to the writer that this takes its name from the river Juba discovered in mid-Africa by Mrs. French Sheldon, and that this is a dance to the river god as the refrain is "juba up and juba down," perhaps meaning the flow of the waters.

This will prove a clever conjecture if substantiated by investigation, and originated with Mrs. Albert L. Richardson, founder of the widely known Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore.

The dog and the rooster are supposed to be special prognosticators of coming events and the 'possum, 'coon and fox figure in their lore as wondrous wise and shrewdly clever at deceiving "folkses." They say, "W'en yo' see a rooster come stan' in de do' an' crow into de house it's a sign o' death, sure; an' wen he crows wif his hade outside a stranger's a-comin'." One woman said:

"I got er rooster dat comes up de paf er crowin', an' comes in de room an' wallups hissef all ober de place, a-crowin' disaway an' dataway; but I aint g'wine t' jump up an' cut his haid off fur dat, ef it *is* de sign o' death, kase he's a-doin' wot he wur made fur. He wur made fur t' gi' us de signs an' tokens o' things an' I kaint kill 'im fur dat like Uncle Josar Wanky up an' done. Dogs, too, deys gibben signs. Ef dare's somebody a-comin' dat yo' aint done seen fur a long time de dog'll be goin' roun' all day wif his yurs turned wrongside out'ards. Ef dare's somebody a-comin' dat yo' wants t' see *mighty* bad, de rooster he'll strut up an down, up an' down de paf, a-crowin'. Bimeby dat air somebody walks in an' yo' says t' yo'sef, Lawd! rooster, he knowed!"

Notwithstanding the fact that churchgoing is the constant social recreation, biblical narrative does not find a ready or an accurate lodgment in the minds that have so long retained those animal stories which may be a remnant of their natural religion. Surely the why and wherefore of Christmas should be easily remembered, with its angels and shepherds and manger; but here are three answers to the query, "What is Christmas for?" which are more encouraging to the folklorist than to Mr. Preacher. Two were young women and one an old man of the ancient regime, and one of the girls, evidently thinking I was propounding some very perplexing conundrum, mused, wrinkled up her forehead and then girked out abruptly, as if an illuminating idea had swept, like a flashlight, across her brain:

"Is it anything like wittles?"

The other said, "I reckon it's fur de chillun';" but to Uncle Israel, a patriarch of wisdom and respectability among his kind, remained the honor of the palm for brilliancy in biblical lore.

"Wot is Chris'mus 'bout?" said he, disdaining the implied ignorance, "It's 'bout de one dat wur put out on de water in de bullrushes, an' de king's darter she done fished 'im out an' riz 'im up."

The peculiarities of language, other than mere illiteracy, included in the folk-lore investigations of Dorset, show "lep" for leaped; "holp" for helped; "climb" and "clomb" for climbed, as in their hymn—

"Zacchaeus climb up the sycamore tree,
Climb up thar his Lord fo' to see."

A "misery" for a pain is not intrinsically bad. A "swad" means many and a "whet" an indefinite but rather long time.

Many of these words are the old English forms of the verbs and their daily use at this date proves that very conservatism on which the folklorist relies for his richest gleanings.

—*Marian V. Dorsey.*