Uncle Remus, his songs and his sayings

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PREFACE AND DEDICATION TO THE NEW EDITION

To Arthur Barbette Frost:

DEAR FROST:

I am expected to supply a preface for this new edition of my first book—to advance from behind the curtain, as it were, and make a fresh bow to the public that has dealt with Uncle Remus in so gentle and generous a fashion. For this event the lights are to be rekindled, and I am expected to respond in some formal way to an encore that marks the fifteenth anniversary of the book. There have been other editions—how many I do not remember—but this is to be an entirely new one, except as to the matter: new type, new pictures, and new binding.

But, as frequently happens on such occasions, I am at a loss for a word. I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children—some young and fresh, and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart—and not an unfriendly face among them. And out of the confusion, and while I am trying hard to speak the right word, I seem to hear a voice lifted above the rest, saying "You have made some of us happy." And so I feel my heart fluttering and my lips trembling, and I have to how silently and him away, and hurry back into the obscurity that fits me best.

Phantoms! Children of dreams! True, my dear Frost; but if you could see the thousands of letters that have come to me from far and near, and all fresh from the hearts and hands of children, and from men and women who have not forgotten how to be children, you would not wonder at the dream. And such a dream can do no harm. Insubstantial though it may be, I would not at this hour exchange it for all the fame won by my mightier brethren of the pen—whom I most humbly salute.

Measured by the material developments that have compressed years of experience into the space of a day, thus increasing the possibilities of life, if not its beauty, fifteen years constitute the old age of a book. Such a survival might almost be said to be due to a tiny sluice of green sap under the gray bark. where it lies in the matter of this book, or what its

source if, indeed, it be really there—is more of a mystery to my middle age than it was to my prime.

But it would be no mystery at all if this new edition were to be more popular than the old one. Do you know why? Because you have taken it under your hand and made it yours. Because you have breathed the breath of life into these amiable brethren of wood and field. Because, by a stroke here and a touch there, you have conveyed into their quaint antics the illumination of your own inimitable humor, which is as true to our sun and soil as it is to the spirit and essence of the matter set forth.

The book was mine, but now you have made it yours, both sap and pith. Take it, therefore, my dear Frost, and believe me, faithfully yours,

Joel Chandler Harris

INTRODUCTION

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 morest. 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 I'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.

J. C. H.

LEGENDS OF THE OLD PLANTATION

I. UNCLE REMUS INITIATES THE LITTLE BOY

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