

Stolen Fire

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

“Dey done got hit all wrong!”

Mammy hooked across the room to where the children were quietly playing, then knitted her brows and tenderly caressed the bosom of the Colonel’s shirt with her iron.

“Brer Bailey hain’t got no call ter ’low dat niggers is ’v’luted fum Afiker monkeys, fur dey ’v’hites back inter monkeys, sho’ mun

“What did you say, Mammy?” asked Fred, who had been playing in the fire, holding his stick aloft, and eagerly scanning the shining face for a possible story.

“Tell me and Fred a tale,” lisped Margie, outlining her toe upon the spotless kitchen floor with the end of her charred stick.

“If yo’ chillens don’ quit playin’ in de fire, I lay I gwine mek Miss Margret whup yo’ bofe when she come fum up-town—see if I don’t!” and Mammy rolled her eyes ferociously behind her brass specs, at which the children laughed and teased the more.

“What about monkeys, Mammy? Go on!” said Fred.

“Back into monkeys!” echoed Margie. “Go on!”

But Mammy deliberately tested an iron, as the children waited anxiously, then she lifted the expectant Margie upon one end of her board.

“Now, honey, mek yo’ han’s min’ dey own business, or dey’ll git burnt,” said Mammy; “an’ Fred, you set right still dar on dat ar cheer!”

“Well, long time ergo de debil he kim up ter de yeth, he did, an’ went courtin’ er gal.”

“What’s courtin’?” asked Fred.

“Talkin’ putty, lack yo’ Paw talk ter yo’ Maw ’fore dey was married,” said Mammy. “An’ de gal was er mighty fine gal, wid long straight hair an’ blue eyes, an’ she could sing—laws er mussy! how dat gal could sing!”

“Well, de debil ain’t heared no singin’ sence he was drapped in de bad place, an’ dey guy ’im de keys, an’ he was dat hongry fur singin’, he mek dat gal sing all de time, an’ he stan’ by de pianny, he did, an’ hide de foot dat got de hoof on hit. Yo’ know by dis time, he done los’ he tail, an’ w’ar er tall stovepipe, ’case he hatter keep up wid whi’ folks.”

“How did he lose his tail?” asked both of the children at once.

“Mammy cain’t tell yo’ now ’bout dat, but he done los’ hit. Anyway, he mek dat gal sing all day ter ’im, an’ de gal she was peart an’ lackly, an’ she sing twel her throat done plum dry, an’ de debil he see hit were gittin’ dark, an’ he say hit were time fur him ter go home. He was ’feared ’case hit were so late, an’ he herry, an’ herry, clop-flop, clop-flop—de man’s foot an’ de hoof foot keep him back, fur de hoof foot mek two steps ter de man’s one, an’ when he git home, he find dat his fire were done plum out.

“Hit were er mighty sorry time fur de debil, ’case dar hain’t nobody gwine give him none nor len’ him none, an’ he cain’t steal hit hisse’f, on account er de hoof foot.”

“Why didn’t he buy some matches in town?” asked Fred.

“Didn’t hab no matches den, honey, an’ folkes hatter tote coals kivered wid ashes, fur miles an’ miles, if dey let de fire go out.”

“ ‘Count of the hoof foot,’ repeated Margie, coming back to the story.

“ ‘Count er de hoof foot,” said Mammy, “so de debil castes ‘roun’ who he gwine git fur ter steal hit fur him.

“Fust he went ter de b’ar, an’ stan’ er long way off, ’case anybody kin beat de debil when his fire done out, an’ he say: ‘Please, Mister B’ar, won’t yo’ fetch me er coal fur ter light my pipe?’ But de b’ar he growl, ‘My hair’s too thick, an’ de fire’s too hot, an’ de road’s too long, an’ I ’feared I git het up, an’ die.’

“Kimmin’ back, he meet wid de rabbit, wid his mouf full er green, an’ de debil he say:

‘Hello, Mister Rabbit! won’t yo’ fetch me er coal fur ter light my pipe?’ De rabbit he look meek an’ sad, an’ he ’low, ‘I sorry, Mister Debil, but my baby chile’s done got er awful cramp, an’ I gwine fur ter mek him some catnip tea. Good-day, Mister Debil!’ an’ he lope right on, an’ de debil mek er mark whar de rabbit cross his path, an’ spit in hit.

“Den he kim an’ knock at de tarrypin’s door, but de tarrypin don’t put more’n his nose outside, an’ de debil he ’low, ‘Please Mister Tarry-pin, won’t yo’ fetch me er coal fur ter light my pipe?’

“De tarrypin he draw in his door er little more, an’ ’low, ‘Yo’ knows I’d ’bleege yo’, Mister Debil, but I goes so slow ’count er de mis’ry in de heart, dat de spark ’ud be out ’fore I could fetch hit! Good-day, Mister Debil!’

“De debil he ’low he must git dat fire somers, ’case dey was er needin’ uv hit down dar, an’ he ’pear ter meet up wid de fox, unbeknownst, an’ he ’low ter be mighty cute, an’ he say, ‘Good- evenin’, Mister Fox!’ an’ walk ’long side er him, lack dey was thick es peas in er pod, but Mister Fox he keep er poppin’ uv his tail. Bime-by, Mister Debil he ’low, ‘I got two fine segars in my yes’ pocket—tek er smoke, Mister Fox?’

“But de fox he see de debil ain’ got no light, an’ he ’low, ‘I sorry ter lose such good comp’ny es yo’ is, but I gwine tek tea wid Misser Dominick Rooster. Good-evenin’, Mister Debil!’

“So de debil he were hard up now, ’case dey keep er hollerin’ fur fire down dar, so he ups an’ goes ter de ole blue jay; de jay don’ eben tek he head fum unner his wing. ‘Go ’way, an’ lemme ’lone,’ say de jay—‘I done been totin’ wood fur yo’ all dis Friday long, an’ I’s e tired an’ I’s e sleepy,’ say de jay.

“ ‘Better kim down fum dar er I’ll roas’ yo!’ say de debil, gittin’ mad.

“ ‘Hain’t got no fire,’ laugh de jay, an’ he go back ter sleep ergin.

“Den de debil he go ter his nigger, de crow, an’ he ’low, ‘Go git me er coal er fire dis minute, ’fore I w’ar yo des plum out!’

“De crow he git mighty sassy, ’case he know de debil cain’t do nuffin’ lessen he got er fire, an’ he say: ‘I done toted corn fur yo’, Mister Debil, twel I’s e got my wing des plum full er bird-shot; I cain’t fetch yo’ no fire!’

“Den de debil he ’low he ’bout ter gib hit up, twel he spy er worfless town nigger, er chawin’ an’ er spittin’ at er chip in de moonshine, an’ de debil he know he ain’ got no call ter be keerful here, an’ he up an’ ’low, ‘Say, boy! you want ter mek some money?’

“De town nigger plum keen, he don’ keer how he git de money, so he git hit, an’ de debil he say: ‘Go git me er coal er fire—quick now—an’ I’ll gib yo’ er dollar!’

“Well, de town nigger he light out an’ ax two er three folks, but dey ain’ got no fire ter spar’, an’ he go ’long twel he kim ter er po’ widder ’oman, er blowin’ on one po’ little coal er fire ter mek er bed fur ter cook her hoe-cake, an’ de nigger he ’low—‘Lady, I’s e hongry!’

“An’ she say: ‘I ’ain’t cook supper yit—wait er while, an’ I’ll gib yo’ er hoe-cake.’ Den de nigger he move up closter, an’ tell de ’oman how good she is, an’ he stretch out his han’s lack ter warm ’em, den all uv er suddent he retch an’ snatch dat coal, an’ go skootin’ wid hit ter de debil.”

Mammy paused to lay the last piece in the basket, but the children were too eager to wait.

“What did the devil do with him?” asked Fred.

“Skootin’ to de devil,” repeated Margie.

“Well,” said Mammy, “de debil gib him de dollar in two halves so’s de nigger could’ chink ’em; an’ de nigger went ’long, chinkin’ ’em, laughin’ at how smart he were ter steal de coal fum de po’ widder ’oman, an’ it nebber cost him nuffin—when his lef’ arm itch him, an’ he feel dat hit were sproutin’ hair, an’ he fin’ dat he were sproutin’ hair all ober, an’ he git skeered an’ run, but de hair keep er sproutin’ an er sproutin’, an’ he keep er changin’, an er changin’ so bimeby he des couldn’t talk, an’, bress goodness, honey! ’fore dat nigger git half-way home, he was er walkin’ half on his han’s an’ half on his feet, an’ wa’n’t nuffin but er plum Afika monkey!”

Both blue eyes and brown were wide and shining. “What did they do with him?” asked Fred. “Go on! go on!” urged Margie. “Dar kim yo’ Maw, chillen! dar she kim!” cried Mammy, clapping her hands—“Run, go see what she fotch yo’!”