

# Old Cinder Cat

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

Solon and Juno had quarrelled. Now a quarrel was not an unusual occurrence in the Quarters, but Solon and Juno had been exemplars of conjugal felicity for nearly eighteen years, and had been held up to their dusky world as patterns to be zealously copied.

This unpleasantness, however, had been brewing for a long time; but hitherto, if one had lost temper, the other had always prudently remembered that they were in the fierce light that beats upon all paragons, and wisely refrained from adding to the flame. But at last there was a culmination behind closed doors, and when Solon and Juno arose at daylight neither had yielded a single point.

The most mortifying part of the whole proceeding to Solon was the fact that he had just “experienced religion,” and this disgraceful thing coming close upon the second week was certainly a most painful “falling from grace,” and he groaned in spirit lest the news should be noised abroad.

Juno, however, had no such qualms of conscience, for, though she went to “meeting” persistently, her service was of the even, regular variety, and as she was never known to shout, and had never “come under conviction,” ’Zorter Blalock, newly come into that fold, took her under especial consideration, and prayed nightly for “dem needer hot, needer cole, les’ dey be spit outen de mouf, O Lord!”

Juno raised no question as to the genuineness of Solon’s religion; but she had her own grievance against him; for in her old age Juno had grown jealous; and at last, from much dwelling upon some recent occurrences simultaneous with Solon’s profession, Juno had become suspicious.

Twice of late Solon had asked for a pass to the adjoining plantation; the last time she knew he had to swim the creek, for the water was up, there was no one at the ferry that time of night, and he couldn’t have taken a mule without waking John, who was most unobliging in such matters. Then, more positive proof than anything else, Solon’s head was very wet when he came in, along towards day, and he was very surly when questioned about it.

“Gittin’ ’ligion go mighty hard wid you, Solon,” said Juno. “Hit keep you outen you’ bed when hones’ folks is all ersleep. You does lack you tryin’ ter lay er ghos’, ’steader gittin’ peace.”

Juno, typical of her race, and particularly of her sex, though possessing no occult gifts of her own, was very superstitious, and, goaded by her suspicions, resolved to make use of the simple means within her reach; so, begging some coffee-grounds of Aunt Susan, the cook at the Big House, she “turned the three cups of her fortune,” for she felt that something was going wrong.

The first and second cups were barren of information, they represented youth, and the grounds did not even “wash.” But the third—ah! she knew it—Solon was deep in mischief, for this was the way it read:

That spot represented herself. There was a cross by it; that represented trouble—no, it did not mean death. That clear space represented water—the cross pointed that way, towards the north. Bowen’s plantation was north: that was where Solon went. Across the

water was another cross—trouble again. Beyond the cross was an eagle—that meant luck; but between the cross and the eagle, close to the cross—in fact, an arm of the cross pointed right to it—was a (Juno rubbed her eyes and looked again, then she pulled her brass specs, which she seldom used, down upon her nose and took the cup to the window)—was a woman!

Her hand trembled a little with indecision, then, forgetful of the borrowed cup, she threw it into the grove. So the quarrel had come about without a happy solution of the difficulty, for Solon sullenly but persistently declared his innocence of offence, while Juno as persistently put the question.

Next morning saw the beginning of a series of omens and disasters, showing that some dark power was at work, for, without cause or warning, Juno's skillet cracked right in two on the fire before the hoe-cake was done; Solon's rooster stood in the doorway and crowed three times before he could shoo him away; and a chimney-swallow got into the cabin and beat its wings bloody against the wall in its efforts to get out.

A very thoughtful, silent pair joined the hands in the field that morning, for everything seemed to be going wrong. Juno got a "mizry in her side" long before noon, and just as the most unsatisfactory day that they had ever spent together was closing, a "cotton-mouth" bit Solon on the heel. Juno ran to kill a chicken to apply to the wound to draw out the poison, for she had more faith in the warm chicken than in Ole Marse's whiskey, which was plentifully supplied. She did not want to see Solon die with, as she said, "a lie in de mouf"; and, hoping to avert evil, she killed the very rooster that had crowed so inauspiciously early in the morning, thus opening upon her head the vials of Solon's wrath when he had recovered from his fright.

"Jut you done los' you' head-piece sho', you fool! Hain't I done gib up all I got ter git dat dominicker, an' hain't got but one, an here you go an' split him up fur er snake-bite lack any common chick'n! I lay I larn you ole 'oman, if I hatter frail you ever' day 'twix' now an' Chris'mus!"

"An' I lay, if you does, I'll up an' tell 'em in de meetin' how you done git dat rooster, Solon!"

Then, to the amazement of both, the story of the quarrel got out; the faintest whisper of the midnight was exploited, as it were, upon the house-tops; wagging heads were turned and loosened tongues clattered; and at night Juno quilted in silence, and Solon sought his religious counsellors without comfort.

So the days passed, and Juno could see that Solon was perfectly miserable; but he kept his own counsel, and, despite his vehement protestations, the visits over the creek continued.

Then Solon fell ill of fever and ague. The overseer said that the trouble was malarial, caused by the weekly trips across the bottom, and refused to grant further passes; but it was to Parson Blalock that Solon poured out the burden of his woes.

"I done come ter gib up dat 'ligion. Parson Blalock"; and Solon yawned and shivered in the sunshine, for his chill-time was coming on. "Nebber hab no trouble ner nuffin au me twel I git hit, an' here I gwine chillin' ever' udder day lack er po' mizerbul lam' dat done been drapped too soon. Hit done go too hard wid me, Parson Blalock, an' I come ter gib hit up!"

The 'zorter and 'spounder scratched his head thoughtfully, then laid a bar on the anvil—for Parson Blalock was a blacksmith on weekdays.

“Ter my min’, Brer Solon, you cain’t gib hit up. Once in de fol’, you b’long ter de fol’; you cain’t git out; an’ er-doin’ lack you is now, is how ever’ fol’ done git er black sheep in hit!”

“Hit hain’t struck in deep yit, an’ I hain’t got no use fur dat ‘ligion, an’ I want ter let hit go!” moaned Solon.

Parson Blalock had let the iron cool, and, drawing close to Solon, he whispered: “Hit hain’t no ‘ligion dat wukin’ on you, Brer Solon; you’s right; you hain’t neber got ernough fur dat! ‘Cordin’ ter de signs er de times, ter my min’, hit er hoodoo, an’ you better look out fur her, ‘case de hoodoo am er ‘oman!”

Solon smiled in a sickly, hopeless way, for the ague was upon him, and turned away in the direction of his cabin. But Juno was not there. Crouching low before the witch-fire of Maum Ysbel, there had been poured into her ears enough of misery to last through a whole cycle, the price of barter having been a coveted china cup.

There was no light in the cabin, save from the blue and green flames that were now dying out, lighting fitfittily the features of the toothless, weazened negress who knelt before it, for the only opening was barred by a roughhewn hickory log. On the red coals snake fat and lizard skin, mixed with some strange, ill-odored stuff, were merrily bubbling; and the oracle continued:

“‘Tain’t no use ter try dat cat; hain’t nuffin but Ole Cinder Cat; you’ll fin’ her bloody bones hid out somers. Hain’t nuffin but er hoodoo dat er ridin’ dat cat, des ter ‘do’ you wid Solon; but if yo’ wants ter mek sho’, jes ketch her when she dozin’ in de ashes an’ put her in de tar bar’l dar by you’ do’ wid de head druv in, an’ set fire ter hit. If hit Ole Cinder, you’ll fin’ her, ‘dout eben her tail scotched, er-grinnin’ in de hot ashes when de fire done die out. If dat happin, den you gotter ketch her ergin—an’ she’s gwinter gib you er putty hard run—an’ ‘n’int her hin’ de years wid dis grease; den foller uv her, an’ tek dis bone wid you—whatebber you does, don’ lose dis. If she cross de creek, she gwinter cross by de dry bed, ‘case she hain’t gwinter wet her foots lessen she kin hope hit; an’ she gotter go mighty fur way up fur ter git ober dry, so you mought tek sumpen ter eat wid you. Don’ matter how tired you gus, keep erfoll’in’ de cat, an’ es soon es yo’ git on t’uther side, mek er cross an’ spit in hit, den rub you’ eyes wid dis bone, an’ tu’n roun’ free times. Dat ‘ll mek de hoodoo gib up de Cinder Cat’s skin, an’ right dar es you tu’n you’ll see de pusson dat been mekin’ all dis here trouble ‘twix’ you an’ Solon. You’ll know her when yo’ sees her, but don’ say nuffin ter her but ‘Howdy?’ an’ don’ eat nuffin she gib yo’, ‘case she mout ‘fix’ yo’ lack she do Solon, an’ yo’ cain’t do nuffin yit. Yo’ gotter wait twel de spring, when de sap ‘ll git up.. Don’ yo’ quoil wid Solon ‘twix’ now an’ den; Solon’s er good man; he wouldn’ be no kin ter me if he wa’n’t!—fur he’s des hoodooed an’ hain’t ‘sponsible. But soon’s de sap’s riz you git yo’ er good big piece er green grape-vine an’ lay fur de ‘oman, an’ hit her wid hit unbeknownst; ‘case if she know yo’ arter her, she’ll go er mighty long piece outen her way ter git shet er yo’, fur de grape-vine sho’ brek de charm—hain’t no hoodoo kin mek er stan’ ‘gin yo’ if you hit ‘em wid er grape-vine when de sap’s up; but be mighty sho’ she’s stan’in’ on her own groun’ when yo’ hits her. If yo’ does what I tells you, gal, dat Solon ‘ll come back ter yo’ in er herry, des es meek an’ peaceable es er lam’.”

Be it far from the chronicler of the Scheherazade of the nursery to narrate the marital infelicities of Solon and Juno for the space of nearly a year, but Mammy solemnly declares that the Cinder Cat bore the test of the fiery tar, and sat calmly grinning in the

ashes when the flame had died away; and Juno, remembering the admonition, anointed the ears of the cat with Maum Ysbel's ointment, pleaded illness to the overseer, and, putting the wonderful bone that was to give her superhuman sight into her basket, together with a hoe-cake, she followed Old Cinder Cat.

The cat progressed by many devious ways, giving many an unusual twinge to the rheumatic limbs, for often Juno had to go on hands and knees, scratching and tearing her face as she heard most unholy conversations between the cat and the cold-blooded things that creep and thrive in darkness.

But at last the dry bed of the creek was crossed, and, doing as Maum Ysbel had bidden, Juno met face to face the comeliest of yellow girls coming from milking, with her pail upon her head.

"Howdy?" said Juno.

"Howdy?" rejoined the girl, smiling, as she offered Juno a tin cup of the milk.

The temptation was sore, for the rough hoe-cake, eaten in haste without water, had parched her throat; but, remembering the warning, Juno swallowed hard.

"Much obleeged, lady, but I hain't got time"; and, breathless and bleeding from her scratches, Juno hurried back to report to Maum Ysbel.

But the depth of winter was upon the land; it would be many a day before vegetation would wake; and Juno, with consuming patience, bore the vagaries of Solon until the leaves were born. Twice, in despair, Juno had tapped the grape-vine, and twice the sap had failed to flow, but the last straw was broken in this wise:

There was to be a break-down in the Quarters, to celebrate the breaking of some new ground on the river-side, that had been deadened some two years before, and, in accordance with Ole Marse's custom, the laborers were permitted to invite the negroes upon the adjoining plantation. It was to be a great event, and Juno was preparing for the same with great interest, for even flesh and age could not bare as neat a pair of heels as hers for certain intricate shuffles, when, all of a sudden, Solon declared his intention of not attending. Such a thing had not been known to happen in the whole course of Solon's existence. For two days before the break-down he claimed that he was sick, and took all of Juno's nauseous concoctions without a murmur. Then he besought Juno not to go to the dance. It was devil trickery, he said, and it was very hard on him, as he was trying to keep his religion that he had gotten so painfully, and the devil would be sure to follow her home. He proposed that Juno should remain quietly in the cabin as usual on the night of the break-down, as an example to the weaker "professors," while he thought it might do him good to pay a dutiful visit to his old "daddy" across the river—for Old Marse owned on both sides.

But though Juno physicked her spouse faithfully, she rebelled against such imposition.

"Um! Ober de ribber you gwine? I lay you' daddy hain't gwine lay eyes on yo' fur dis day two weeks. Gittin' mighty anxious 'bout you' daddy all uv er suddent! I'se gwine ter de bre'k-down. I hain't pestered wid *you'* 'ligion. Hain't nuffin de matter wid Juno's head ner her heels, sho' mun!"

But Juno's heart was not as light as she made it appear, for she had fretted through a whole winter and a late spring, and after a restless night she again invoked the aid of Mauni Ysbel.

"I hain't got nuffin ter pay yo' wid, Maumer, but I'se dat miserbuli hatter come," said Juno with a sigh.

The hag ceased stirring the contents of the little pot, and setting it off on the hearth to cool, she drew her wrinkled face into many more wrinkles, and took an inventory of Juno from head to foot.

“Yas, yo’ is, honey—yas, yo’ is!” and as she grinned, her solitary tooth was visible in her glee. “De coat yo’ got on am powerful ole an’ fady, an’ dat ap’un hain’t no ‘count; yo’ gotter wash hit mighty easy fur ter w’ar hit one mo’ time; but yo’ got you’ moon year-bobs!”

Juno winced, for those big brass ear-rings were the pride of her heart; twice her lobes had been pulled through with the weight of them, but there was always room for another piercing.

The old woman leered and nodded. “Yo’ got you’ moon year-bobs, an’ my Becky’s Sairey been cryin’ uv her eyes out fur ‘em ebber sence she seed ‘em!”

“But, Maumer—” expostulated Juno.

“Don’ yo’ ‘Maumer’ me!” said the old woman, crossly. “What you come here ter me fur if hit hain’t ter fetch dem bobs ter Sairey? Hain’t I seed yo’ in de coals, ’way ‘cross de fiel’, ‘fore yo’ lef’ de cabin, mek up you mm ter fotch dem year-bobs ter Sairey fur what I gwine tole yo’? What I tells yo’ worf er heap ter yo’, but hit nuffin ter me. Solon hain’t my ole man!”

Juno was sick at heart. She had given up the blue-edged china cup to save Solon, but the big moon ear-rings were the wealth of her whole life.

The hoodoo threw a chip at a great toad that was napping in an old shoe beside the hearth, and, shaking the ashes from her pipe, she refilled it from her pocket. “Hain’t nuffin ter ole Ysbel, gal—her day done ober; she don’ claim no man, dead ner libin’! But I done tole yo’ ‘bout dat yaller gal, hain’t I? Yo’ done seed her wid you’ own eyes, hain’t yo’? An’ I done tole yo’ how ter gil shet uv her. Hain’t my keerin’, but if yo’ don’ wanter know no mo’ ‘bout her, yo’ des tote dem moon year-bobs back home wid yo’!”

Slowly the rings were removed from Juno’s ears, and the old woman, with a leer, popped them into her capacious pocket before resuming her professional attitude.

“Urn! urn! wall, de sap be up by ter-night, an’ ter-morrer yo’ play sick an’ cross de ribber, ’case yo’ gotter whup her on her own groun’. Yo’ cain’t tech her on you’ own, no matter what happin, ’case she kin ‘do’ yo’ den, an’ she’s de bestes’ hoodoo in dis kentry, ‘ceptin’ ole Ysbel, fur all dat she’s on’y er gal. Don’ yo’ say nuffin ter-night at de bre’k-down, ner do nuffin, but yo’ gwine ter see sights, if you does what I tells yo’. Mek lack ter Solon dat yo’ hain’t gwine sho’ ’nough dat yo’ ailin’ er sumpen, an’ let him gin out dat he gwine ter see his daddy. Yo’ lay low twel yo’ hears dern fiddles des er-talkin’ in de middle er de night, des ‘fore dey sarve de supper; den yo’ tek you’ foot in you’ han’ an’ gil down dar; but don’ yo’ go in, an’ don’ yo’ do nuffin den, fur hoodoo ’oman hain’t lack odder ’oman, an you cain’t gil eben wid ’em de same way; but wait twel hit bre’k up, den cut you’ grape-vine, an’ den yo’ ’ll run ‘gin sumpen in de dark; hit Ole Cinder Cat. All yo’ hatter do is ter foller uv her, ’case I’s fixed her so’s she gotter sarve yo’; an’ den when yo’ sees what yo’ lookin’ fur, lay de grape-vine on, quick an’ fas’, ’case hain’t nuffln ail Solon but dat yaller hoodoo!”

It was turning twelve when Old Cinder Cat rose from the hearth, and, stretching herself, bounded through the doorway. Juno woke with a start.

“Um! Juno better be gwine too. Mighty fine business fur her ter be in, long er hoodoos an’ Ole Cinder, but she sho’ gwine wid ’em dis time, mun

The squeak of the old fiddle under Pompey's fingers, mingled with the even patting, was wafted through the open door. Juno looked at the height of the moon.

"Hit's turned midnight now, an' I'm ergwine."

But she first sought the grape-vine by the spring. The bright moonlight flooded everything as with the light of day, and, carefully cutting the vine between certain joints, according to the formula of Maurn Ysbel, Juno hid it beneath her skirt, and took the little path towards the sounds of midnight gayety.

The barn was radiant with tallow dips that winked and sputtered through the decorations of pine boughs like gorgeous fire-flies. A dance was in progress. The men were ranged in one line, the women in another; at a certain point they met and joined hands. But, arrayed in gorgeous apparel different from the others, a great red paper flower nodding in her hair, her white teeth shining between parted lips, the leader of the dance was the comely yellow girl whom Juno had seen before, and her delighted partner was none other than the prodigal Solon himself. Juno's fingers instinctively sought the grape-vine for another purpose than that indicated by Maurn Ysbel, but, clinching her hands, she withdrew into the outside shadows again, and the Cinder Cat suddenly rubbed against her dress and purred.

Solon danced like one possessed, regardless of time or tune, always keeping his eyes fixed upon the nodding crimson flower; and the yellow girl, with lips drawn tight over the white teeth, watched him with the eyes of possession.

Then, as he sank upon a bench, exhausted, for Solon was none of the youngest, the voice of an elder whispered in his ear: "Better g'long home ter de ole 'oman! We'll hab you up in de chu'ch fur dis!"

The watching eyes in the darkness were burning like coals of fire, but Solon pulled loose from the detaining hand. "What I keer 'bout gwine home ter de ole 'oman? What I keer 'bout bein' fotched up? I 'ain' bothered!"

And, despite his age, in every dance Solon led, with the smiling face and crimson flower beside him. Others changed partners, but Solon's was always the same.

Now the candles had burned out, the few that remained were guttering and flickering, and then there was one last dance, in which a madness seemed to seize Solon, and as he whirled he drew from his pocket a long string of blue glass beads and threw them around the yellow hoodoo's neck. The watching eyes in the darkness glowed with passion, for Solon's gift was Juno's sole remaining ornament, now that the moon ear-rings had been bartered.

"Lemme hol' on ter myse'f tight, O Lord!" she groaned. "Des fur er little while!" And again the Cinder Cat brushed her skirts and purred.

"I gwine foller you in er minit, Cinder! I gwine follow you!"

The silence that was golden lay upon Juno's lips, and it was a repentant Solon who came to her next night, for the Cinder Cat was gone forever from the hearth, the charm was forever broken, and the comely hoodoo knew it.

Shamefacedly and ill at ease, Solon lolled and smoked, but, still preserving her silence, Juno prepared a sumptuous supper for her prodigal.

After they had eaten she threw a crimson paper flower, ragged and dirty, upon his knee, and, drawing her chair close, she lighted her pipe from his, for she knew that her woes were ended.