

'Liza

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

“Dar wa’n’t no tickler pusson nowhar ’n ’Liza’s Maw, Bithie,” said Mammy, as she drew the basket of wool within reach and took up her cards.

“Dan wa’n’t no ’tickler pusson ’n Bithie, slave time ner free; but de way dat ’Liza git ’way wid her one time were er caution.

“’Liza hain’t nebber been seed but oncet sence, nuther, an’ den hit were only fur er minute, an’ she didn’ speak ter nobody, ner gib out nuffin, but des look plum mizerbul an’ po’ly. Mus’ be mighty ole now, if she’s libin’, which I ’specs she am, fur Unc’ ’Jah say dat bein’ de way dat ’Liza git ter be by her own sinnin’, dey cain’t ebber die, much es dey wantem, an’ I knows dat wharebber ’Liza am, dat she shore wanter die,” added Mammy, mysteriously, as the long soft roll grew under her manipulation.

There was a chorus of questions from the quilters who bent over the frame, but Mammy freed the roil and laid fresh wool between her cards before she spoke again.

“A-a-h, lawsy! — dis ole worl’ hain’t no better ’n hit uster was, but I don’ spec’ de Lord gwine let hit gil no wusser—he des gwine min’ his own bus’ness, an’ let hit clean hitself lack mos’ t’ings in natur’ does!”

“Tell us about ’Liza, Mammy!” came in chorus from the quilt.

“Well well—arter while,” said Mammy. “Wait twel de chillen git ter bed, fur de tale er what ’Liza do, hain’t fitten fur de years er chillen, es powerful knowin’ es dey is,” and Mammy sighed again, then worked in silence, wrapped in deepest contemplation.

So the quilters told their own tales, merry and bright at first, but as the evening wore away they were ghostly and more mysterious, until the last row of shells in the frame were being rolled—then the quilt was taken out, and cider and gingerbread was set upon the table.

Fresh wood was piled upon the smouldening back log, as the quilters drew up to the fire with laden hands, and Mammy, waking from her reverie, laid aside her cards and smoothed her apron down, preparatory. There was always a great deal of ceremony about Mammy’s preparations, for her art was not hackneyed by frequent repetition, and this was the story she told to the quilters

Bithie was the only child of Marse Dick’s ’Riah, and Bithie’s ’Liza, a seventh daughter, was born with a veil, besides coming at a time when Bithie had long ceased to look on any more children; so when they brought her to Unc’ Caspar, who was a hoodoo and was given to prophesying, Unc’ Caspar took her in his arms and looked long and earnestly into her face.

Now most babies, even from the day of their birth, would have been awed by the eye of Unc’ Caspar, for children can see the truth easier than grown people; but as young as ’Liza was, she caught his long white beard in her fists and crowed. Then Unc’ Caspar laid her down and shook his head ominously at such early disrespect. Some were bold enough to assert that he put a curse upon ’Liza, then and there; but certain it is that Bithie took a chill while he spoke, for, instead of giving the baby his blessing, Unc’ Caspar was fretting over the tweaking of his beard.

“Dis chile,” he said, pointing with his long finger at the new moon shining through the clearing, “am born fur powerful good er powerful ebil—but I seed *dis* fru de trees, an’ I’s feared uv her—I’s feared!”

Bithie was Ole Miss’s seamstress, and the seventh daughter was made much of at the “Big House,” but Bithie was troubled about Unc’ Caspar’s curse upon her child, and at night she lay

awake thinking about it—though 'Liza throve and grew strong, in spite of Bithie's misgivings and Unc' Caspar's curse, and was as likely a little pickaninny as Ole Marse ever owned, and as Ole Miss told Bithie, when she had sobbed out her tale of woe.

"But she got the beatenest temper, Ole Miss," moaned Bithie, "an' I cain't git de upper han' uv hem, whup her hard's ebber I kin, twel I'se plum wome out. Nebber seed sech er muel uv er nigger, an', little es she am, she see t'ings dat I hain't see, in de light an' in de dark, an' she hollers out an' talk ter 'em, an' hit mek my blood fa'r rin cole—hit do, Ole Miss!"

"Hush! that's all stuff and nonsense, Bithie!" said Ole Miss; "but never mind the temper, it will all come might by-and-by."

But it did not come might, according to Bithie's standard; and when 'Liza was about a year old Bithie could stand it no longer, so she consulted old Maumer, who dealy in charms and cungers, about the taking away of Unc' Caspar's curse, for 'Liza had had a fit and frothed at the mouth. Every one, even Ole Miss, said that it was 'Liza teeth; but Bithie knew better, and on her knees she swore to barter to Maumer everything of value that she possessed if Maumer would but work upon the curse.

Then Maumer brewed a mysterious, greasy compound to rub on 'Liza's gums, and made a necklace of the small twigs of the prickly ash, and, stringing an alligator's tooth with it, she wound it around the child's neck three times.

'Liza had no more fits, but in spite of the charm her temper showed no signs of mending, and Maumer, though she kept all of Billie's treasures, gave up the case in despair.

"I cain't wuk 'gin Unc' Caspar," she acknowledged, "fur he's too strong. Unc' Caspar er powerful hoodoo, but I is, too, an' I wuk an' he wuk, an' de charm ole Maumer wuk des lock ho'ns wid his'n an' stan' dar grinnin' at one nudder. I cain't tek hit off, but es long es I wuks, Unc' Caspar's charm cain't kill her; but you better let dat chile 'lone, Billie, lessen you kin git Unc' Caspar ter call back de cuss."

So Billie stifled her sorrow and tried to believe Ole Miss, and all of her spare time she spent in making dainty clothes for her seventh daughter, out of the things that Ole Miss had given her. The other six might go ragged, half clothed, and dirty, as far as she was concerned, but the child under the curse must be dressed like a "lady."

The day that Ole Miss sent for 'Liza to come to the "Big House" was an event in Billie's cabin, for none of Bithie's children had been so honored before, and 'Liza was now old enough to play with Ole Miss's little ones.

'Liza's round, black face shone with all the polish that hot water and soft-soap could give; her blue-checked pinafore was spotlessly neat, and the tight "wraps" of woolly hair that latticed the little mound head actually bore a scarlet ribbon where they joined.

"Mi, 'Liza, dat you says 'Ma'am' an' 'Yas, Sar' ter dem chillen, if dey is littler 'n you, 'case dey's you' little marsten and mistiss," said Bithie, bridling with importance.

But Bithie's pride was short-lived, for 'Liza proved to be a marplot among the children, and, after less than half an hour of service, she was whisked away to the Quarters by Betty, the second nurse, who "clared ter gracious, dat I'd druthem tame er rattler 'n tame Bithie's 'Liza!"

With the pickaninnies it was the same; bolder with those of her own color, there was always a wail when 'Liza was about, and at last old Maumer boxed her ears and sent her away from the nursery, so, as little as she was, there was nothing left for 'Liza but to go to the field. There she brewed mischief afresh, and the threat and whip of the overseer were as nothing to her, for toads and lizards would leap from her sack when the cotton came to be weighed, and she kept the Quarters always on the alert for some of her uglier pranks. It was even said that the lash of the

overseer upon her back produced no welt, but that she laughed in his face while he sweated, for she was under a charm.

As the time passed, a comelier negro girl than 'Liza would have been hard to find, and Bithie, proud, though mourning, lavished her little all upon her; but her child was nobody's friend, saving perhaps Unc' Caspar's and his son's. To them alone she told her joys and her sorrows, and Bithie looked aghast at the duckling she had hovered.

"Hit wouldn' erbeen so bad," she confided to Maumer, whose charm had long ceased to even "lock horns" with Unc' Caspar's, "if she hadn' er taken might ter dem what sot de cuss— an'— Unc' Caspar des stan' up an' 'nies de tnuf, an' say he nebber sot er cuss, an' ax my ole man fur 'Liza fur his boy, ter probe hit," said Bithie, with a sigh. "Do sumpen, Maumer, fur de lub er Gord—do sumpen, fur I des es lief dat 'Liza 'd mairey wid de debil!"

"Hit were des dem words dat Billie oughter et," said Mammy, moving closer to the fire; "she oughter bit her tongue out 'fore she let dat loose, fur she sot de cuss er-gwine, an' flung de bid ter de debil, an' de debil tuk hit up, an' now hit were hoodoo 'gin debil, an' debil 'gin hoodoo, an' 'Liza were de bone!"

It was about the season, according to the thoughtful, that the devil was loose upon the earth for his yearly recreation, and, what with love affairs of white and black, and "misery charms" in the Quarters, he had enough on the one plantation to have kept him leisurely working for six months; but he was resolved to hasten matters, for there were other pleasures awaiting him.

All this time Unc' Caspar was asking for 'Liza for his boy; sometimes threatening, sometimes pleading; so when the devil came and Unc' Caspar had "gotten out of his skin" more than once to oblige him, the hoodoo made mention of the affair, and told also of the curse which Billie believed that he had set upon 'Liza.

This made the devil look about, and when he had seen 'Liza and Unc' Caspar pressed him for a comment, he cleared his throat and said, cautiously, "We'll see about it."

Just about that time, came the dance of the hoodoos at the dark of the moon, and in the flame of the torches the devil and Unc' Caspar stood disguised, in the doorway of a cabin, and looked on; and as 'Liza led the dance, with her face distorted with ecstatic passion and swaying her body almost to the ground, Unc' Caspar again pressed the devil for a comment; but again the devil cleared his throat, and said, "We'll see."

That night Unc' Caspar dreamed a dream, and in it he saw the world split in half, and his boy Amaziah stood with him on one side and the devil and 'Liza on the other. There was a bottomless pit between, and lo! in the dream, the devil's eyes were fixed upon him, and the flame burned into Unc' Caspar's sockets. Then Unc' Caspar minded him of the graveyard sand that he wore in his pocket, and, catching it up, he threw it into the devil's eyes, so that he was blinded and writhed with pain.

Then Unc' Caspar, in his dream, fixed his gaze on 'Liza, and drew her with his eye; and, swinging her arms round her head three times, she stooped and reaching across the pit, plucked three white hairs from Unc' Caspar's beard; then, catching the long end of the beard with both hands, she swung across to the other side and laid her hand upon his arm. Amaziah looked, then howled three times, and loped away in the form of a yellow dog.

Well, said Mammy, after the dream, Unc' Caspar talked no more of the wedding of 'Liza and Amaziah, but sat and rolled his white beard in his palm and looked at 'Liza.

And Amaziah pressed his own suit, and urged Bithie to let him marry 'Liza; but Billie was afraid to promise on account of Unc' Caspar's curse and afraid not to promise, and grew so thin over thinking about it at night that Ole Miss gave her a tonic of vinegar and rusty nails.

The dark of the moon again was near, and this was the time for shadowy work; so Unc' Caspar sat and plucked his beard, and, forgetful of his duty to his son, dreamed that he had married 'Liza. All through the day he dreamed, while the negroes were in the field, while they harrowed, ploughed, and sowed, for Unc' Caspar was manumitted and his time was his own; and the devil, stirring the green water of the bayou, laughed aloud that Unc' Caspar had changed his mind.

But the passion grew and grew, and one dark night, when the wind in the swamp-willows was still and there was scarce a ripple, even out to the middle of the river, Unc' Caspar took 'Liza down to the bank, and, making a mist to rise, showed 'Liza, through the mist, the treasures of the earth.

Up from the bed of the river rose a great white house, with its massive pillars shadowy but true, and its white curtains swinging outward to the mist.

Then around her form Unc' Caspar wound a cloth of silk and pearls; and on her ankles and wrists golden bands gleamed even through the dark night and the mist; in her ears were the great gold rings of an African princess, and round and round her neck Unc' Caspar wound the beads that shone like stars.

For a moment the hoodoo paused, that 'Liza might look well; then, without breaking the silence, he stood behind the girl, waving for the mystery to disappear, and the great white house slipped into the bed of the river, the cloth of pearl and gold dropped away, the beads that shone like stars faded, and there was only a broken fish-net around 'Liza's shoulders and wisps of river reeds on her wrists. Through the dark came the voice of the hoodoo:

“Ole Caspar rich—ole Caspar free—all dis gwine be yourn if yo' des mairey Caspar.”

But 'Liza shivered under the damp fish-net, and asked Unc' Caspar to give her time.

In the long night she alternately laughed and wept and wrung her hands.

“Which I gwine ter do? Which I gwine ter tek—de ole un er de young un?” she cried.

“Dat,” said Mammy, “were de sperits er good an' ebil stribin' in her, but she nebber eben call de name er de Lord, so she needn' 'spec' no he'p.”

The glitter of the gorgeous thing was still in 'Liza's mind, but through it all would rise the ugly, wrinkled face of Unc' Caspar; but Unc' Caspar was rich—Unc' Caspar had houses and gold. Then out of the dark would leap the form of the young Amaziah, stretching his great, strong arms towards her, even though the veil of the white beard floated between them.

But by daybreak 'Liza had made up her mind, and Billie, pale and ashen, bound a plantain leaf to her own forehead and chanted a death song from her cabin.

All day Ole Miss waited for Bithie, but Billie had forgotten the world. In vain old Maumer anointed her with salves to break the spell of frenzy, still the death chant wailed from the cabin, and Billie would not be comforted.

The plantation thrilled with the news of 'Liza's coming marriage to the hoodoo, who was old enough to be her grandfather. The gossips wagged it, and the old men smoked it in their pipes. Even the pickaninnies drew it into their play, and sang, with a newly invented shuffle:

“Lawsy mussy, what 'Liza hab done,
Maired de ole man instid uv he son.”

And Unc' Caspar, leaning on his stick, hastened 'Liza for the wedding, and for bridal trickery bored the pearly shells of the river mussel and strung them on his beard; and every night, to

make 'Liza surer in her mind, he would make the mist to rise and show her the treasures that were to be hers on her wedding-day.

By-and-by, under the spell that Unc' Caspar wrought, Billie ceased from the death song, and, rising from her bed, she stole from Ole Miss's armoire a bolt of sheeny satin to make into a wonderful gown for 'Liza, and Unc' Caspar bored shells again, and Billie sat up all night to border the hem of 'Liza's wedding-dress with them.

These days Unc' Caspar was busy too, for down in the swamp-willows Amaziah lay in a trance, and no one came to help him. He was to lie in the trance until after the wedding, when the hoodoo dance would waken him; and so Unc' Caspar cut down with his charms everything that might come between him and 'Liza.

The new moon, said Mammy, was nearly born, and the devil's time on earth was short. Again he sat by the sluggish water of the bayou and stirred it with a suck, and out of it came the moccasins, the eels, and the toads to do his bidding. He whistled low, and from the trees the bat, the owl, the jaybird, and the crow answered the call of their master; and there, in his heart, the devil envied Unc' Caspar and wanted 'Liza.

In the form of a bat he flew down Unc' Caspar's chimney, and borrowing Unc' Caspar's skin as he slept, he hid the naked body in the hollow of a tree and went back into the hoodoo's cabin to sleep.

When morning came he stood beside 'Liza as she worked, and hastened her for the wedding; and 'Liza, looking at the wrinkled face and white beard, believed that she was looking at Unc' Caspar.

So they set the wedding-night, and Billie's old man, under the spell of the devil in Unc' Caspar's skin, stole four hogs and three sheep from Ole Marse, and made a great barbecue for the wedding-supper.

But 'Liza wept that the time was drawing near, for in her heart she loved Amaziah. Then the devil, in Unc' Caspar's skin, raised a heavier mist and showed her greater treasures than Unc' Caspar had done, until her tears were dried, for 'Liza was part covetous and part hoodoo, said Mammy.

The devil was overstaying his limit by this time, waiting for the wedding. But at last the night came, and there was a gathering from far and near to see the marriage.

Billie nose as in a dream, and dressed 'Liza in the long satin gown, and the tears gleamed like pearls upon it as they fell from her eyes, for Billie was sure that something was wrong.

Outside the voice of the parson was calling to 'Liza, and 'Liza passed through the doorway and stood up with the devil in Unc' Caspar's skin to be married.

The gathered people held their breath, and the parson raised his hat-id and spoke. The devil made as if he would answer, but the skin of Unc' Caspar cried out.

"What's dat?" asked 'Liza, opening her eyes wide.

"Nuffin' but er little bird cryin' in de nes', my darlin'," whispered the devil.

Again the parson spoke, and again the devil made as if to answer him, but the skin of Unc' Caspar stretched and cracked, and all the people heard it.

"What's dat?" cried 'Liza, trembling and taking hold of the devil's arm in her fright.

"Nuffin' but er coon trampin' in de canebrake," whispered the devil.

"Who teks dis 'oman?" said the parson, impatient to go on, for he smelled the barbecue, and knew that the supper was ready, waiting.

“I do,” said the devil, growing bold, as the skin of Unc’ Caspar cried and cracked and burst—and the hoof and the horns came through, and there stood the devil grinning at ’Liza through Unc’ Caspar’s skin, until the lights were thrown down.

Then, said Mammy, all was dark; nobody raised a hand. ’Liza’s screams grew fainter and fainter, and then all was still.

A sleet fell in the Quarters and pelted the people like stones, but ’Liza and the devil were gone, and there was nothing left of the wedding-feast but a pitiful pile of ashes.

A cricket chirruped in the pause; the back log had burned through and the cider jug was empty. The idle quilters, awed to whispers, yawned at last, for the thread was broken—the story was done, and gathering up her rolls, as she put her cards in her basket, Mammy said, “Good-night.”