

# Asmodeus in the Quarters

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

Mammy did not tell this story very often; it was held in reserve as an especial reward. Whether it was of African origin, and by one of those strange coincidences bore a resemblance to the classic, or was a garbled negro version of it, is lost in conjecture; but certain it is, that almost within ear-shot of a dotting but unknowing mother, many a childish ambition has been fired “ter rise wid Satan.”

And this is the way Mammy told it to the little night-gowned cherubs whom she wanted to get to sleep

“Shadrach were de very ol’es’ nigger on de place; he ’lowed he were er hundud an’ fifty, an’ I reckon he were, ’case he back were doubled up twel he wa’n’t no tallerer ’n Charlie dar; he face were es black an’ es wrinkledy es er warnut, he hair were es white es cotton, an’ de long white beard kim ’mos’ ter he knees, dat tu’n in kinder bow-legged when he walk.

“He so ole he hain’t fitten ter work none, but he hab er little couterin’ roun’ ter do ever’ day, lack feedin’ de tuckies, shuckin’ corn, er makin’ nets, er sumpen, ’case he ‘Ole Miss’ ’low dat Satan sho gwine fin’ some debilment fur idle han’s ter do, an’ she plum right.

“Shadrach hab plenty er clo’es, plenty ter eat, plenty er ’baccy ter chaw an’ ter smoke, an’ er good warm cabin; but he am’ happy yit, ’case hit ’pear lack de debil gib us sumpen ter hone fur, no matter what we got. Shadrach des wanter know ever’thing dat happin; but he des es deaf es er pos’, an’ dey hain’t nobody wanter tell him no secrets, ’case if yo’ gotter holler hit all ober de place, hit no secret ertall; so he go erbout putty nigh all de time wid one han’ up ter he year. I reckon hit were mighty painful ter ‘mm, but ever’body oughter mm’ dey own business, specuil if dey cain’t hear good.

“But hit go mighty hard wid Shadrach, ’case he git deefer an’ deefer, an’ cuissomer an’ cuissomer; an’ when he do hear ’em he git ’em so cross-eyed ’mos’ all de time, ’case he hear so bad, dat he git inter er heap er trouble, fur dey ’low dat Shadrach were er power ter talk.

“Hit er mighty bad thing fur ter git inter de fix dat Shadrach done in, ’case hit lack git-tin’ bofe foots inter tar—while you’s er-pullin’ one foot out, de odder gwine sho sink furder in; dey hain’t nuffin but er good strong pull on de outside dat gwine git yo’ shet uv hit.

“Now yo’ knows, honey, dat dar’s some times er de year dat de debil plum loose—done free ter go anywhar er ter do anything, an’ he all de time er-layin’ fur des sech er sof’, mizerbul creetur es Shadrach were.

“Shadrach meet him ’way off unner de trees in de woods-lot, an’ were powerful glad ter see him when he kim; an’ he git outen he skin, an’ len’ he body ter de debil ter go erbout in, two er free times, ’case er lot er de niggers seed Shadrach in some mighty quare places fur er Christiun an’ er shouter. But dat wa’n’t pleasurin’ Shadrach ’bout hearin’ things, fur de debil cain’t gib er man er pa’r er new years, an’ he cain’t eben hope him, lessen he gib up he soul. Hit pester Shadrach mightily, ’case he know he cain’t sarve two marsters, an’ he mighty feared er de fire down dar; but bimeby, ’fore de debil go

back, he git so cuis 'bout hear-in' an' knowin' things dat he done furgit all he larnin' an' he 'ligion, an' he bargains wid de debil fur he soul. Better folks an' whiter folks 'n Shadrach done gone an' done hit, an' er-doin' uv hit yit, 'case de debil he kim ter folks in de ways dey wants him in dey min's, but hit hain't gwine ter pay in do long run; hit gwine ter peter out mighty painful.

"Well, ole Shadrach he done sell he soul ter do debil fur good, an' he mighty lively an peart erbout hit, an' dance all unbeknownst—ole mizerbul Shadrach dance, an' he er-lookin' lack he do!—but hit de debil's dance, an' dar hain't nobody know nuffin 'bout hit but er hoodoo. Er good hoodoo all de time on de lookout fur de debil, an' hit 'pear lack de hoodoo hear de debil gib he promus ter Shadrach, if he sell him he soul, dat he take him wid him ever' night, when he fly ober de roofs an' look down do chiniblies, an' he gwine see ever'thing an' hear ever'thing—an' ole Shadrach des couldn't keep still fur do joy or thinkin' 'bout hit.

"Sho 'nough, do debil were es good es he word, an' do hoodoo fin' do body or Shadrach in he bed, layin' lack he sleepin'; but he were des es cole es def, fur dar wa'n't no bref in de body, 'case do debil done taken de spent out, an' do hoodoo, while he lookin', hear two screech-owls holler an' laugh, den flop an' fly erway. Dey taken de owls' skins, 'case owls got de bigges' eyes an' do bigges years or anything dat b'long ter de dobil, an' kin see in do dark. Do jackass got de longes' years uv all uv 'em, but de debil hain't got no holt on him sence do Lord let him talk ter do man dat try ter make him tromp on or angil, an' I reckon dat why de Lord rid on one uv 'em inter do New Jerusalem.

"Well, do hoodoo he see how things were er-gwine when he hear dem owls, an' he hain't got no call but tor foller uv 'em, 'case if he let do dobil go one single blessed time, he lose dat much uv ho power fur good, so he riz an' foller.

"At fust, do debil des take Shadrach ober niggerdom in do quarters, an' oh! how dat littles' squinchup owl holler an' laugh when he hear Pomp an' Dinah des er-quoilin' an' er-quoilin' in de cabin, an' do y bofe so mighty sanctified an' shout so loud on or Sunday; an when he see Lush—dat he Ole Marse trus' lack he white—des er-stealin' sugar fum do pantry, an' ole Cindy, ernudder sanctified sister, kerhootin' roun' in do snioke-house widout or light, er-huntin' fur or ham, he laugh so loud dat do odder owl hatter shake 'im.

"Hit were en lot or fun ter ole Shadrach, an' he git so full or dem things dat he 'mos' fittin ter bus' wid hit, 'case he cain't toll nobody what he see an' hear, fur he feared or do debil. He hear all do secrets or do croopin' things, an larn whar do snakes an' things hides in do daytime, an' es dey riz in de air, de secrets or de things dat flies in de dark.

"He seed folks er-dancin' an' er-mournin', er-laughin' an' er-cryin', er-cotin' an er-gainblin', or-stealin' an' or-lyin', or-sleepin' do hones' sleep or do Christiun, an' er-groanin' on dey beds or suff'rin'—de people dat he see an' know ever' day—lack dar wa'n't no tops ter de houses, nor walls ten 'em nuther. He hear do debil temp' de weak, an' dey fall, an' de strong, an' dey hain't gib in, an' do debil kim noun' ter 'em ergin do nex' night; an' all day long ole Shadrach des er-laughin' an' orchucklin' an' er-waitin' fur night ter come.

"Hit go on dat way fur er long time, but do hoodoo don' say nuffin; he des foller uv 'em ever' night, an' he putty nigh plum wore out; but he know dat do debil hain't got much longer ter tarry, so he bide he time, fur he gwine fur ter try ter git back ole

Shadmach's soul, 'case or burnin', wand'nin', los' soul is er mighty hard thing ter steady on, an' do hoodoo were en 'zorter, too.

"At do fust, Shadrach were mighty happy an mighty 'umble ter de debil, 'case he hear more 'n anybody dat got two good years kin hoar, an' see ten times es much. But arter while he git manish, an' sot in ter grumblin', an' talk back ter de debil some. He done tired er des seein' niggers; he wanter see what de white folks er-doin'.

"Do debil he toll him he better take keer, dat hit hain't gwine ter be good fur hese'f fur him ter see an' hear dat, an' 'fuse ter rise dat high wid him; but Shadrach keep er-teasin' an' er-teasin', twel one dark night de debil he borry two pa'r er buzzards' wings so's ter fly high (dat all he kin git, 'case de eagle hain't gwine len' his'n), an' dey riz ober do top en de talles' house.

"Hain't no tellin' what Shadrach see dat night, an' arter dat, dar wa'n't no doin' nuffin wid him—he des er-gallop in ter 'struction es fas' es he kin trabble.

"Es ole es Shadrach were, an' es doubled up, de oberseer hatter lay de whup on him two er free times, an' hit make do Ole Marster feel mighty bad; an' all do time de debil des enaggin' uv hit on, an' er-showin' him down de white folks' chimblies ever' night, 'case Shadrach done git too uppish ter wanton know nuffin 'bout niggers.

"But bimeby he retch do eend uv he rope, an' he retch hit so powerful suddent dat hit putty nigh fling him outen he senses.

"He git manisher an' manishen wid de debil; he done furgit all erbout de bargain, an' who de dobil were, an' 'low he hain't gotten borry no wings nor nuffin ter rise wid, if de debil do. Dat he gwine rise wid he own coat-tails—dat any hoodoo kin, an' he gwine do hit. Po' fool Shadrach!—he done furgit he hain't no hoodoo ner nuffin—nuffin but er po' ole sarvent er de debil, an' hit all fru he power!

"But de debil do he pleasurin' an' hain't say nuffin; so dat night when dey riz, de debil he borry do buzzard's wings ergin fur hese'f; but Shadrach he riz wid he own coat-tails, an' de debil he do mighty 'umble, an' make lack Shadrach doin' all dis here by hese'f. De debil gwine let him git mixed an' tangled up lack en fly in er spider's web, an' Shadrach he sho boun' ter do hit; fur dat night he hear things dat sot him putty nigh plum crazy, 'case he done hear too much at las'; an' do nex' day de debil hatter leabe de quarters an' go back inter de bad place. He taken Shadrach's soul wid him, an' sumpen else dat oughter b'long ter er good man, 'case Shadrach hain't eben passable no mo'.

"Arter de debil go 'way, Shadrach's years taken ter growin', an' dey grows long an' high an' thin, an' hit 'pear lack Shadrach hear ever'-thing at oncet, lack er big roarin' er waters, so's he cain't make out nuffin.

"He cry out, when nobody ain' hearin' nuffin, dat he hear Cindy 'way down in de cottonfiel' er-talkin' ter herself, an' he cain't make out what she say. Den he hear Misser Jones's Sambo, five mile erway, or-yellin' out sumpen, but he cain't make hit out; an' he sot in ter cryin' an er-moanin' wid de pain an' de noises dat 'mos' bustin' he head opin.

"He Ole Marse say he plum crazy, 'case he so mighty ole; but he Ole Miss 'low he need quinine; an' dat quinine des de stuff dat de debil want him ter hab, 'case hit kin work mo' 'fusion in one hour 'n de debil kin in er whole day, an' hit hope de debil mightily, es he couldn' be on de groun' fur ter make Shadrach mo' painful hese'f.

"An' Shadrach git ter be so painful wid do hearin' uv even'thing plum mixed up, dat he taken ter w'arin' big wads er cotton in he years fur ter shet hit out er de years, dat keeps er-growin' longer an' longer, narrerer an narrerer; but de cotton cain't shet hit out, 'case

half uv hit kim fum de inside, an' was de wakin' up uv all dat de debil lef' Shadrach dat b'long ter er good man.

"De hoodoo he see what were er-ailin' Shadnach, an' he mighty sorry fur him; but he cain't go ter Shadrach; Shadrach gotter kim ter him ter git he soul back, an' hit hatter be er mighty good hoodoo ter do hit den, so de hoodoo he sot an' wait.

"Bimeby Shadnach des couldn' stan' hit no longer, an' he des kim er-ninnin' ten do boodoo, all doubled up, wid do long white beard des er-draggin' on do groun', an' he fingers in he years—dem big years dat des er-settin' up on bofe sides he head.

"'Pear lack Shadrach sho gwine plum crazy 'twixt de mizry an' de noises, an' do hoodoo git ter work quick, fur ter pull de debil outen Shadrach, so's Shadrach mought git he soul back.

"Shadrach lay on de flo' er de cabin, des er-rollin' an' er-groanin'. Dey done pour hot lard an' er whole bottle en laud'num in he years widout doin' any good, an' de hoodoo try ter fling de debil out in de name er de jackass, de el'phunt, de owl—ever'thing dat he kin think uv dat got big years; but de debil hain't come outen him yit.

"Den de hoodoo taken him inter de woods an' call de name uv er long-yearred houn' dat passin' by, but hit hain't dat.

"De hoodoo workin' mighty hard, an' he stop an' stedly erwhile, an' den he lead Shadrach, wid de thorns des er-t'arin' uv he beard an' he knees an' he han's, ober inter er thicket er blackberry-bushes, ter gib de debil er good chance ter kim out, 'case he sho arter him.

"He make de passes wid he han's, an' say de charm, an' wait erwhile. De debil he see he chances done plum gone, an' he hatter gib up de soul, 'case de hoodoo got him in er corner, an when he see dat, he des kim er-lopin' outen Shadrach inter de blackberry-bushes, in de shape uv er big jack-rabbit wid great long years.

"Dey say dat ole Shadrach lib ter be er hundud an' fifty year ol'er 'n he were, stone-blin' an' 'mos' stone-deef; but he go 'bout powerful happy twel he die, an' hain't nebber git cuissome 'bout hearin' things no mo', 'case he done heard ernough ter las' him."