

The Wonderful Tar Baby Story

Joel Chandler Harris published a series of folk tales starring Uncle Remus, a fictional old slave in 19th century Southern United States. Here is The Wonderful Tar Baby Story, originally published in 1881:

"Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening.

"He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born--Brer Fox did. One day atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road--lippity-clippity, clippity -lippity--dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Mawnin'!' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - `nice wedder dis mawnin', sezee.

"Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox he lay low.

"How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.

"How you come on, den? Is you deaf?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,' sezee.

"Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is,' says Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'en I;m gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do,' sezee.

"Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'.

"I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open,' sezee.

"Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er

cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

"Howdy, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee. `You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin', sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. `I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse,' sez Brer Fox, sezee."

Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes.

"Did the fox eat the rabbit?" asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

"Dat's all de fur de tale goes," replied the old man. "He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long."

.....

Uncle Remus told how Brer Rabbit got stuck to a doll covered with tar, a trap laid for him by the crafty Fox, but then how Brer Rabbit outsmarted Brer Fox. The "stickfast motif," which is at the heart of that tale, probably has its origin in an Indian Buddhist tale. In India, the Buddhists wanted the story to warn people about becoming attached to desires for worldly goods and pleasures because the more people desired, the harder it would be for them to become enlightened. Desire could entrap all five of their senses. This is the way the Buddhists told the story:

There was in the Himalayas a pleasant place where men and monkeys lived. A hunter, trying to catch the monkeys, would smear their paths with a sticky ointment. Those monkeys that were intelligent and not greedy, when they saw the ointment, would avoid it. But when a foolish, greedy monkey saw it, he would grasp it with his hand and then he would be caught. Thinking that he would release his hands, he would kick, but then his foot would stick fast. So also would the other foot. Then he would bite, and his mouth as well would be held tight. Thus, "caught at five points," he would be taken by the hunter and killed. [W. Norman Brown. "The Tar-Baby Story at Home" in *Scientific Monthly* 15, 1922. 227-233.]