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The Slave Master and the Devil
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Guest Commentator

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There once was a rich slave master who lived in Texas. He lived in a big white house surrounded by land as far as the eye could see. One day the devil came to visit the master out on his back porch. The devil said, “I know how you can become even richer. Get your sons and grab your guns. Ride over to your neighbor’s house and tell him you’re taking over. Once he’s gone, drill a big hole in the ground, and soon you’ll discover black gold.”

The slave master did as the devil told him, and sure enough black gold came gushing up out of the ground. Realizing that he needed help to take care of all his oil, the slave master took the slaves that were on his neighbor’s land and put them to work drilling and pumping oil.

Well, the slave master and the devil weren’t alone when they had their conversation. A little ways off was a slave picking cotton in the field. Ole John was his name, and he had ears like a hawk. Among the slaves, his job was to listen to what the slave master said on his back porch. John was troubled by what he heard and so he told the other slaves. The slaves were worried. They knew their master wasn’t very smart, but now that he had the devil telling him what to do, they knew their situation would get worse.

Something had to be done. At night under the cover of darkness, they gathered together to discuss what they could do. Soon, they started to rebel. Some sabotaged oil wells. Others slowed down their work. Others ran North to join the Union Army.

One day as the slave master was cursing to himself on his back porch, the devil paid him another visit. Eager for insight, the slave master listened closely as the devil asked, “Do you know how you can have even more control over your slaves and keep them from causing trouble?” The slave master scratched his head and closed his eyes tight to concentrate. Exasperated he said, “I haven’t a clue. What should I do?” The devil leaned forward and in a low voice whispered, “Tell the slaves on your plantation that God loves them more than the slaves on the other plantation. Then, go over to your old neighbor’s plantation and tell them they’re the ones God really loves.”

The Black Commentator – The Slave Master and the Devil

Soon the slave master had all kinds of rumors circulating in the field about which slaves were good and which slaves were evil, which slaves were superior by virtue and which slaves were inferior by depravity. The slaves on the slave master's original plantation got upset and started to fight the slaves on the plantation where the oil had been discovered. Soon all hell broke loose, but the slave master didn't mind. He was still in control.

Well, Ole John had been listening carefully. He knew what was going on. Since his master wasn't very smart, he thought of a plan to trick him. John dressed himself up as the devil and went to pay his master a visit on the back porch. The slave master was so happy to see the devil again; he ran up and gave him a big hug.

"Devil, I owe everything to you. I'd do anything you tell me to do," said the slave master. "Well, I know how much you love power, and there is something you can do to become even more powerful," said Ole John. The slave master's eyes got big when he heard this, and he started jumping for joy. Ole John then leaned forward and said, "I keep the secret key to ultimate power...in my own home. Get your sons and grab your guns. I'll tell you how to get there."

So the slave master got his sons and grabbed his guns just as Ole John said. Then, in front of them all, Ole John announced, "I live way down in the center of the earth. You can only get there by digging, but you can't dig just anywhere. You have to dig where nobody can see you, so nobody but you will be able to get the secret key to ultimate power. Go into your barn and start digging." The slave master and his sons were so excited they started whooping and hollering as they ran toward the barn.

Well, Ole John had told all the slaves what their master had been doing to divide them. They realized they had to join together and use their wits to get rid of their master. Deep in their hearts, they not only believed they could do it, they believed they could create a new world for themselves where no one would be a master or a slave.

When the master and his sons ran into the barn with all their guns, Ole John stood by the door and said, "That's right. I am going to close these doors and make sure nobody sees what you're doing. You need to get all the power just for yourselves." With that, he gave the signal and all the slaves came out of hiding to put locks on each of the barn doors. As they put on the last lock, Ole John cried out to the slave master and his sons, "Keep digging boys! Before you know it, you'll be in hell!"

This story was inspired by the African American folktales collected by Zora Neale Hurston in "Mules and Men." Brooks Berndt is a student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and can be reached at justicia_ahora@hotmail.com.