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*Think Piece
Ole Massa Learns the True Meaning of Christmas
by Brooks Berndt*

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Once upon a time, there was an especially cruel and evil slave master in the land of Texas who came to learn the true meaning of Christmas. For many years, Ole Massa had been known among the slaves for his cold heart. Even around Christmas time as the hearts of others grew in warmth, Ole Massa's heart shrank into an ice cube.

The custom of most slave masters was to give their slaves three days off to celebrate Christmas, but Ole Massa gave his slaves only half of a day off. Despite his mean and nasty ways, for the slaves, Ole Massa did have one redeeming virtue. He was "clumsy with the brain." The mind was an instrument with which he had little skill.

It was this virtue that a wise slave named Ole John thought about one night as he lay awake listening to a most unpleasant noise. Ole Massa was not a man of great physical stature, but he snored like a six-ton bear in heat. In fact, Ole Massa could be heard all the way down in the slave cabins.

Snuh-huh-ka-ka-ka...Snuh-huh-ka-ka-ka...

Well, on this night, Ole John had had enough. He turned to his wife Ole Ginny and said, "That's it. I'm paying Ole Massa a visit in twinkle land."

Back at the plantation house, Ole Massa's snores continued to reverberate throughout the night. Then, as if carried by the wind, a haunting, ghostly voice called out, "O Great Massa, this is the voice of Christmas past speaking to you..."

"Snuh-huh-voice-of-chris-mas-past-what-ya-want-ka-ka-ka," mumbled Ole Massa in his sleep.

"O Great Massa, I want to take you on a journey through time," said the voice.

"Journey-ka-ka-ka?" snored Ole Massa.

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"We will begin with Christmas time many, many years ago when you were a wee lad," said the voice.

"Remember how you played with the other kids and how much you wanted to be friends with the two big bullies in your school?" asked the tender voice.

"Yeah–yeah–ole–Dicky–and–ole–Karly," snorted Ole Massa.

"They weren't always kind to you, were they?" asked the voice full of sympathy.

"No–no–but–they're–my–buddies–now," snorted Ole Massa.

"Your buddies used to be rough on you, huh? They always told you what to do, and you had to do it," said the voice with great gentleness.

"Yes–yes," snorted Ole Massa, irritated by the memory.

"Do your buddies still tell you what to do?" inquired the voice softly.

"Yes–yes," snorted a disgruntled Ole Massa.

"Why don't you tell them to stop?" asked the voice.

"Course–I–can–tell–them–snuh–I'm–the–real–boss–around–here," declared Ole Massa.

The next day Ole Massa got into a big fight with Ole Dicky and Ole Karly. Ole Dicky and Ole Karly helped run Ole Massa's plantation. Ole Massa got so upset he told them he no longer needed them and kicked them off his property.

Soon after they left, the whole plantation started to run amuck. By himself, Ole Massa did not know how to control the slaves. One day all the slaves said they were struck by a serious disease called "bendacitis." They could no longer bend over to pick cotton because this terrible, possibly deadly, virus had made their joints stiff as dry wood. Ole Massa threatened to whip and starve the bendacitis out of the slaves, but the slaves said that bendacitis only got worse when he did that. It might even be the cause.

Ole Massa's brain was especially taxed by this new situation. Moreover, he had trouble thinking when he got angry. Mental work plus a rise in temperature gave him a severe headache. Claiming to have bendacitis of the head, he stormed off to his house.

That night Ole Massa was again visited by a Christmas ghost.

"O Great Massa, the ghost of Christmas present has come to visit you," said the voice.

"Snuh–huh–christmas–who?" asked Ole Massa.

"I am the ghost of Christmas present. I have come to tell you that bendacitis is a terrible, possibly deadly, disease," said the voice.

"To–hell–with–bendacitis–snuh–huh–ka–ka–ka," snorted Ole Massa.

"O Great Massa, you have forgotten that bendacitis was one of the ten plagues of Egypt," said the voice.

"This–ain't–Egyptia–snuh–huh–ka–ka–ka," snorted Ole Massa.

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"O Great Massa, do you not know that Texas is Spanish for Egypt?" asked the voice.

"What–snuh–don't–tell–me–God–speaks–Spanish," snorted Ole Massa.

"God speaks in every language to all people. Therefore, you must listen to me, Great Massa. In order to save your cotton and your slaves, you must protect yourself from the great flood that is to follow this plague. God will cure the plague of bendacitis, if you make a large boat with room for all your slaves and all your cotton," said the voice.

"Forget–the–slaves–snuh–huh–ka–ka–ka–let–em–drown," snorted Ole Massa.

"Without your slaves, you won't be able to unload all of your cotton and start a new plantation after the flood. After the flood, you will be the only master who still has his slaves and cotton. You'll be the cotton king," pronounced the voice.

"Yeah–yeah–keep–slaves–good–good–me–cotton–king," snorted Ole Massa with a smile.

"O Great Massa, you have ten days to finish the boat. On the tenth day, it will be Christmas Eve and that night God will send a great flood to destroy all of the plantations in Texas," prophesied the voice.

The next day Ole Massa thanked God for the Christmas ghosts, because the slaves had been miraculously cured of bendacitis and he no longer had a headache.

"Forget Ole Dicky and Ole Karly," said Ole Massa to his wife Ole Laura. "I got a new friend who tells me what to do. This is going to be the best Christmas yet! Before you know it, I'll be the cotton king!"

The slaves went to work building a great big boat in the big river right on the edge of Ole Massa's property. They worked all week and just two days before Christmas they were near completion. That night Ole Massa was visited by another ghost.

"O Great Massa, I am the ghost of Christmas future," said the voice.

"Christmas–future–yeah–yeah–tell–me–my–future," snorted an eager Ole Massa.

"I see you celebrating Christmas on a boat. I see you dancing merrily with your wife. And what's this? I also see two men," said the voice with surprise.

"Two–men?" said Ole Massa.

"Yes, let me look closer. The two men go by names of Ole Dicky and Ole Karly," said the voice.

"Where–did–they–come–from?" asked Ole Massa with anger.

"They've been watching you. They know your plan to become the cotton king. They want to be kings too," explained the voice.

"No–no–snuh–there's–only–one–cotton–king–snuh–I'll–fix–them–snuh–yeah–yeah–snuh–huh–ka–ka–ka," said Ole Massa.

The next day Ole Massa watched over the slaves as they finished building the boat and loaded it up with cotton, food, and drink. Nervously, he looked around for any sign that Ole Dicky and Ole Carly might be

watching him.

"Ole Dicky and Ole Carly think they're going to sneak up on me tonight right when we're about to get on that boat," said Ole Massa to Ole Laura at dinner. "Well, I am going to fix that by sneaking up on them first."

Just hours before the boat was scheduled to set off down the river, Ole Massa took his gun and went to town. There he found Ole Dicky and Ole Carly sitting in the saloon drinking whisky and talking about a certain someone they called "Ole Noah Nothing." Figuring he did not have time for Bible talk, Ole Massa brushed aside the conversation.

"I know you boys are fixin' to get on my boat, but I've come to stop you before you even step a foot toward that river," said Ole Massa gripping his gun tight.

Ole Dicky and Ole Carly laughed. Patting his big belly, Ole Dicky said, "You sure are dumb. You think we're scheming to get on your ship of fools just because you think some great flood is going to wipe us out. Who's been feeding you this nonsense?"

"Nonsense?! You're just trying to find out who my secret source is. If you had a secret friend like me, you'd know what I know, but you won't know what I know because only I know," said Ole Massa with pride.

"You gotta a secret friend?! Why's this friend of yours gotta hide? You sure this secret friend ain't an imaginary friend?" said Ole Carly.

"You boys are just jealous. You wish you knew a ghost...or, uh, someone like that who might tell you the future," said Ole Massa.

"A ghost!" cried Ole Dicky and Ole Carly.

"That's right! A ghost! I know you boys wish you had your own ghost. Just you wait and see. Tomorrow's going to be the best Christmas ever. After this flood wipes everyone out, I'm going to be the cotton king," declared Ole Massa.

"Cotton King!" said Ole Dicky. "And I'm St. Nick!"

"All right Cotton King," said Ole Carly, "how's there going to be a flood when there ain't been a speck of cloud in the sky for a month? Why don't we make a bet? If it starts to rain here tonight, you can lock us in chains on your boat and after the flood we'll work for free. But if it doesn't rain, you'll have to give us all your cotton for free."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Ole Massa with delight. "That ghost was right! He told me you'd be on my boat tonight. I just didn't know you'd be in chains! You got yourself a bet!"

So the men waited outside the saloon to see if it would rain. Slowly, the hours passed one by one without a single drop. When morning came, Ole Massa was red with shame and anger. As they headed for the boat to get the cotton, Ole Massa cursed the entire way, while Ole Dicky and Ole Carly laughed themselves silly declaring themselves to be the new cotton kings.

But when the three got to the river, they found no boat and no cotton...and no slaves.

Down stream, where the river opened into the great blue ocean, there was a giant boat with a Christmas ghost as its captain. By his side was a woman named Ole Ginny. With their arms around each other, the ghost said

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to Ole Ginny, "I think Ole Massa's finally learned the true meaning of Christmas. On Christmas, a king was born, but that king sure wasn't no cotton king."

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