

All God's Chillen¹ Had Wings

Traditional

Prereading. A folk tale is a story originating in the oral tradition, often one containing fanciful or fantastic elements. This African-American folk tale was collected from a teller named Caesar Grant, of John's Island, South Carolina and published in the early 1900s in a book called *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* and then in 1946 in a book by John Bennet called *Doctor to the Dead: Grotesque Legends of Old Charleston*. Versions of the story can be



found in *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, by Virginia Hamilton and in Julius Lester's *Black Folktales*. This traditional story evolved from similar tales told in West Africa. It is a moving tale, expressing via fantasy what is not fantasy at all—the unconquerable nature of the human spirit, which can soar above and beyond adversity. The story provides an important motif and thematic element in the prize-winning novel by Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*.

Once all Africans could fly like birds, but owing to their many **transgressions**, their wings were taken away. There remained, here and there, in the sea islands² and out-of-the-way places in the low country, some who had been overlooked and had **retained** the power of flight, though they looked like other men.

There was a cruel master³ on one of the sea islands who worked his people till they died. When they died, he bought others to take their places. These also he killed with overwork in the burning summer sun, through the middle hours of the day, although this was against the law.

One day, when all the worn-out Negroes were dead of overwork, he bought, of a broker in the town, a company of native Africans just brought into the country and put them at once to work in the cottonfield.

He drove them hard. They went to work at sunrise and did not stop until dark. They were driven with unsparing harshness all day long, men, women, and children. There was no pause for rest during the unendurable heat of the midsummer noon, though trees were plenty and near. But through the hardest hours, when fair plantations gave their Negroes rest, this man's driver⁴

1. **chillen.** Children, dialectical. 2. **sea islands.** Series of tidal and barrier islands off the Atlantic coast of the United States, belonging to the states of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. 3. **master.** This was the term used to refer to the owner of a plantation; it definitely does not reflect a position deserving of respect 4. **driver.** Person whose job it was to goad enslaved laborers to work harder

pushed the work along without a moment's stop for breath, until all grew weak with heat and thirst.

There was among them one young woman who had lately⁵ borne a child. It was her first; she had not fully recovered from bearing and should not have been sent to the field until her strength had come back. She had her child with her, as the other woman had, astraddle on her hip, or piggyback.

The baby cried. She spoke to quiet it. The driver could not understand her words. She took her breast with her hand and threw it over her shoulder that the child might suck and be content. Then she went back to chopping knot-grass,⁶ but being very weak and sick with the great heat, she stumbled, slipped, and fell.

The driver struck her with his lash⁷ until she rose and staggered on.

She spoke to an old man near her, the oldest man of them all, tall and strong, with a forked beard. He replied, but the driver could not understand what they said. Their talk was strange to him.⁸

She returned to work, but in a little while she fell again. Again the driver lashed he until she

5. **lately.** recently 6. **knot-grass.** A creeping grass with the scientific name *Paspalum distichum* that grows in wet, marshy areas of the southern United States. 7. **lash.** whip 8. **Their talk . . . to him.** They have newly arrived from Africa and are speaking an African language unknown to the driver.



Enslaved Woman and Child, print, date uncertain. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-15385

got to her feet. Again she spoke to the old man. But he said, "Not yet, daughter; not yet." So she went on working, though she was very ill.

Soon she stumbled and fell again. But when the driver came running with his lash to driver her on with her work, she turned to the old man and asked: "Is it time yet, daddy?" He answered, "Yes, daughter. The time has come. Go, and peace be with you!" and stretched out his arms toward her . . . so.

With that she leaped straight up into the air and was gone like a bird, flying over field and wood.

Soon, another man fell. The driver lashed him. He turned to the old man. The old man cried out to him and stretched out his arms as he had done for the other two, and he, like them, leaped up and was gone through the air, flying like a bird over field and wood.

Then the overseer⁹ cried to the driver, and the master cried to them both: "Beat the old devil! He is the doer!"

The overseer and the driver ran at the old man with lashes ready, and the master ran too, with a picket pulled from the fence, to beat the life out of the old man who had made those Negroes fly.

But the old man laughed in their faces and said something loudly to all the Negroes in the field, the new Negroes and the old Negroes.

And as he spoke to them, they all remembered what they had forgotten and recalled the power which once had been theirs. Then all the Negroes, old and new, stood up together. The old man raised his hands, and they all leaped up into the air with a great shout and in a moment were gone, flying, like a flock of crows, over the field, over the fence, and over the top of the wood, and behind them flew the old man.

The men went clapping their hands, and the women went singing, and those who had children gave them their breasts, and the children laughed and sucked as their mothers flew and were not afraid.

The master, the overseer and the driver looked after them as they flew, beyond the wood, beyond the river, miles on miles, until they passed beyond the last rim of the world and disappeared in the sky like a handful of leaves. They were never seen again.

Where they went, I do not know. I never was told. Nor what it was that the old man said . . . that I have forgotten. But as he went over the last fence, he made a sign in the master's face and cried, "Kuli-ba! Kuli-ba!" I don't know what that means.

But if I could only find the old wood sawyer,¹⁰ he could tell you more, for he was there at the time and saw the Africans fly away with their women and children. He is an old, old man, over ninety years of age, and remembers a great many strange things.

9. overseer. Person charged with the management of a plantation and/or its enslaved workers. 10. sawyer. carpenter



Raven, woodcut, late nineteenth century. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-jpd-00845

Vocabulary from the Selection

transgressions: sins retained: kept picket: wooden slat from a fence