

FOLK SONGS OF THE SEA ISLAND NEGROES.

BY CHARLOTTE FORTEN GRIMKE.

WHILE teaching on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, during the last months of the War, I became deeply interested in the songs of the freedmen; and in looking over a small collection of these songs, made during the few leisure moments of a very busy life, I find some which I think may be of interest to the readers of THE INDEPENDENT. In these days when the folklore of other nations, and in some parts of our own country, is attracting so much attention, a field so fertile as that afforded by the Southern Negroes ought not to be overlooked.

But after all, it is only an imperfect impression of these songs that one can convey in an article; since in this the flavor of environment must be wanting. I well remember the circumstances under which I heard for the first time some of these singular songs. We had just arrived in the South. Entirely new scenes and new faces surrounded us; and there was just enough of danger—for the rebels were still occupying some of the islands—to give a pleasing excitement to the situation. We were rowing across the Beaufort River, from Beaufort to St. Helena Island, our place of destination, through the splendors of a Southern sunset. The crimson and gold of the sky were reflected, as in a mirror, in the smooth, clear waters below. And as we glided along, the rich tones of the Negro boatmen broke upon the evening stillness, sweet, strange and solemn:

"Jesus make de blind to see,
Jesus make de cripple walk,
Jesus make de deaf to hear:
Walk in, kind Jesus,
No man can hender me.

Chorus: "No man can hender me;
Oh, no man can hender me;
Walk in, kind Jesus,
No man can hender me."

Then the fine, dark forms braced themselves for renewed effort, and the boat danced upon the waves as their voices broke forth into one of the grandest and most jubilant of their songs:

"ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL.

"Mr. Fuller settin' on de Tree ob Life
Fur to hear de ven Jordan roll.
Oh, roll, Jordan! roll, Jordan! roll, Jordan, roll!

Chorus: "Oh, roll, Jordan! roll, oh, roll, Jordan, roll!
My soul arise in de heab'n, Lord,
Fur to hear de ven Jordan roll.

"Little chil'en, learn to fear de Lord,
And let your days be long.
Oh, roll, Jordan! roll, Jordan! roll, Jordan, roll!

Chorus: "Oh, mairch, de angel, mairch! oh, mairch, de angel,
mairch!
My soul arise in de heab'n, Lord,
Fur to hear de ven Jordan roll."

The "Mr. Fuller" referred to was their former minister, to whom they were much attached; hence the exalted position assigned to him. He was a Southern man, but loyal to the Union. "Hear de" means simply "hear," the "de" being often used by them in this manner.

The next day we went to our schoolhouse, the Baptist church building, beautifully situated in a grove of five oaks, whose branches were heavily draped with the somber gray hanging moss, which grows most luxuriantly in this region. There we found a hundred children awaiting us, whose eager faces and shining eyes gave us a warm welcome. They were of every hue, from palest yellow to deepest black, the latter predominating. They were delighted to sing for us, and sang in low, plaintive tones, with a peculiar, swaying motion of the body which made their singing all the more effective:

"My sister, you want to git religion,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley;
My brudder, you want to git religion,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley.

Chorus: "Go down in de Lonesome Valley,
Go down in de Lonesome Valley, my Lord,
Go down in de Lonesome Va-a-lley .
To meet my Jesus dere!
Oh, feed on milk and honey,
Oh, feed on milk and honey, my Lord,
Oh, feed on milk and hu-u-ney
To meet my Jesus dere!

"Oh, John he brought a letter,
Oh, John he brought a letter, my Lord,
Oh, Mary and Marta read 'em,
Oh, meet my Jesus dere!

Chorus: "Go down in de Lonesome Valley," etc.

They repeated their songs several times, and kept perfect time with their hands and feet. The elder people signalized their entrance into this "Lonesome Valley," in which they dwelt while "under conviction," by wearing faces so exceedingly doleful that they were really comical; and the women and girls wore a bandage about the head during this time.

We were amused one day at hearing Amaretta, a bright, interesting little creature of six years, singing with great zest as she crossed our yard:

"What make old Satan foller me so?
Satan got nuttin' 't all fur to do wid me.

Chorus: "Tiddy Rossa, hole your light,
Brudder Tony, hole your light,
All de member, hole bright light
On Canaan's shore!"

This chorus is repeated over and over again, and usually includes the names of all their relations and friends. "Tiddy" is their word for "sister." This was one of their most spirited shouting tunes. Another was:

"De tallest tree in Paradise
De Christian call de Tree ob Life;
An' I hope dat trumpet blow me home
To my New Jerusalem.

Chorus: "Blow, Gabriel, trumpet, blow louder, louder,
An' I hope dat trumpet blow me home
To my New Jerusalem!"

"Paul and Silas, jail-bound,
Sing God's praise both night and day,
An' I hope dat trumpet blow me home
To my New Jerusalem!"

Chorus: "Blow, Gabriel," etc.

We first heard this sung by an old blind man named Maurice, in the "Praise House," an unused cotton house in which the people held their "praise meetings" during the week, and had their "shouts." The chorus has a glad, triumphal sound, and in singing it the voice of old Maurice rang out in wonderfully clear, trumpet-like tones. The surroundings, too, impressed us very much. The large, gloomy room, with its blackened walls, the wild, whirling dance of the shouters; the crowd of dark, eager faces; the figure of the old blind man, whose excitement could hardly be controlled, and whose attitude and gestures while singing were very fine, and over all, the red glare of the burning pine knot, which shed a circle of light around it, but only seemed to deepen and darken the shadows in the other parts of the room; these all formed a wild, strange scene, not soon to be forgotten.

Their shouts were very peculiar. First they had their praise meeting, which consisted of singing, praying and preaching; after which they shook hands with each other very solemnly. Then came the shout. They formed a ring and moved around in a kind of shuffling dance, singing all the time. Four or five stood apart, also singing very energetically and clapping their hands, stamping their feet, and rocking themselves to and fro. These were the musicians, to whose performance the shouters kept time. We could not determine whether these shouts had a religious character or not; but as they always followed their religious meetings it is probable that they were the barbarous expression of religion, handed down to them from their African ancestors, and destined to pass away under the influence of Christian teachings. While witnessing the dances and listening to the songs of the Dahomeyans at the Exposition in Chicago, I was struck with their general resemblance to the shouting and singing of the Sea Island Negroes. (One of their most peculiar songs was:

"O GRAVEYARD.

"I wonder where my mudder gone
Sing, O graveyard!
Graveyard ought to know me;
Ring, Jerusalem!
Grass grow in de graveyard;
Sing, O graveyard!
Graveyard ought to know me,
Ring, Jerusalem!"

They improvised many more words as they sang. Unmeaning as most of them were, the effect was very strange and mournful. It is impossible to give any idea of the deep pathos of the refrain:

"Sing, O graveyard!"

Another pathetic song was "Jehovyah Hallelujah":

"De foxes hab holes,
An' de birdies hab nes',
But de Son ob Man he hab not where
To lay de weary head.

Chorus:—"Jehovyah, Hallelujah! De Lord he will purvide!
Jehovyah, Hallelujah! De Lord he will purvide!"

They repeat the words many times. "De foxes hab holes," and the succeeding lines are sung in sad and touching tones; and then the chorus, "Jehovyah, Hallelujah," swells forth triumphantly, in glad contrast.

One very queer song begins thus:

"Ole elder, ole elder, where hab you been
When de Gospel been a-flourishin'
All over dis world?
I have somethin' fur to tell you
Fum de secret of my heart,—
Marry King Jesus
An' no more to part."

Another begins:

"My mudder's gone to glory and I want to git dere too,
Till dis warfare's over, hallelujah.

Chorus:—"Hallelujah, hallelujah,
Till dis warfare's over, hallelujah!"

This was one of their most spirited, shouting tunes. As usual, they improvised many more words. We liked very much one song which the boatmen were very fond of singing as they rowed across the river. How often, on lovely moonlight nights, we heard their voices ring it out cheerily:

"Oh, Jordan stream is a good ole stream,
An' I ain't but one more river to cross;
An' I want some vallant soldier
To help me bear de cross [to help bear me across].

Chorus: "Praise, believer, praise God.
I praise my God until I die.
Praise, believer, praise God.
I praise my God until I die.

"Oh, I look to de eas' an' I look to de wes'
An' I ain't but one more river to cross, etc.

"Oh I hop on my right, an' I catch on my lef';
An' I ain't but one more river to cross, etc.

Chorus: "Praise, believer," etc.

We tried in vain to discover the meaning of the first line of the last stanza, and finally concluded that it must refer to some gymnastic performance, which perhaps accompanied the song when sung in a "shout."

Another characteristic song, which has a very sweet and plaintive air, begins:

"Oh, Death he am a little man,
An' he go from door to door;
An' he kill some soul and he wounded some,
An' he lef some soul to pray.

Chorus: "Do, Lord, remember me,
Do, Lord, remember me,
Remember me when de year roll roun',
Do, Lord, remember me!"

Sometimes in singing the hymn before alluded to, "What make ole Satan foller me so?" one of the number would stop in the midst of a shout, and, pointing to one of the dark corners of the Praise House, exclaim, very dramatically: "Shum da!" Instantly there was a profound silence, and everybody started forward, gazing eagerly in that direction. It was some time before we could understand the meaning of this scene; but finally "Shum da!" was translated to us as "See him there!" the personage alluded to being the Evil One, who was supposed to be frequently present on such occasions, "seeking whom he might devour."

Another version of "Blow, Trumpet, Gabriel," is:

"De prettiest ting dat ever I done
Was to serve de Lord when I was young;
So blow your trumpet, Gabriel, blow your trumpet louder,
An' I want dat trumpet to blow me home,
To my new Jerusalem."

"Oh, Satan is a liar, and he conjure, too,
An' if you don't mind, he'll conjure you,
So blow your trumpet, Gabriel, etc.

"Oh, I was lost in de wilderness,
King Jesus han' me de candle down,
So blow your trumpet, Gabriel," etc.

"Wrastlin' Jacob" was one of their favorite shouting tunes, which I think they sang oftener than any other;

"O wrastlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';
I will not let thee go!
O wrastlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';
He will not let me go!

"I hole my brudder wid a tremblin' han';
I would not let him go!
I hole my sister wid a tremblin' han';
I would not let him go!

"O Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb;
He would not let him go!
O Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb;
De Lord will bless my soul!

Chorus: "O wrastlin' Jacob," etc.

"BOW LOW, MARY.

"Bow low, Mary, bow low, Marta;
For Jesus come and lock de door,
And carry de keys away.

"Sail, sail over yonder,
An' view de Promised Lan',
For Jesus come, etc.

"Weep, O Mary, bow low, Marta,
For Jesus come, etc.
Sail, sail my true believer,
Sail, sail over yonder.

"Mary, bow low, Marta bow low,
For Jesus come an' lock de door,
And carry de keys away."

"WALK 'EM EASY.

"Oh, walk 'em easy round de heab'n,
Walk 'em easy round de heab'n,
Walk 'em easy round de heab'n,
Dat all de people may join de ban',
Oh, shout glory till we join dat ban'!
Oh, walk 'em easy," etc.

"OH YES, LORD.

"Oh, must I be liko de foolish mans?
Oh yes, Lord!
Will build de house on de sandy hill,
Oh yes, Lord!
I'll build de house on Zion hill!
Oh yes, Lord!
No wind nor rain blow me down,
Oh yes, Lord."

"THE DRIVER.

"Oh, de ole nigger-driver!
Oh, gwine away!
Fust ting my mammy tell me
Oh, gwine away!

"Tell me 'bout de nigger-driver,
Oh, gwine away!
Nigger-driver, second devil,
Oh, gwine away!

"Best ting for do he driver,
Oh, gwine away!
Knock he down an' spoil he labor,
Oh, gwine away!"

"WE'LL SOON BE FREE.

"We'll soon be free,
We'll soon be free,
We'll soon be free,
When de Lord will call us home.

My brudder, how long,
My brudder, how long,
My brudder, how long
'Fore we done sufferin' here?

"It won't be long [repeat three times]
'Fore de Lord will call us home.
We'll walk de miry road [three times],
Where pleasure never dies.
We'll walk de golden street [three times],
Where pleasure never dies.

"My brudder, how long [three times]
'Fore we done sufferin' here?
We'll soon be free [three times],
When Jesus sets me free.
We'll fight for liberty [three times]
When de Lord will call us home."

This song reveals the character of the Sea Island Negroes. Patient, faithful, bearing uncomplainingly through weary years their hard lot—a particularly hard one, because many of their masters were exceptionally cruel—they never despaired, but, trusting with implicit, childlike faith in God, looked ever hopefully forward to a day of deliverance. Their songs are usually in the minor key, plaintive and sad; but the almost invariably glad choruses are an index to the natural joyousness and hopefulness of their temperament.

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