

Tildy Collins

Interview with Tildy Collins

—*Susie R. O'Brien, Uniontown, Alabama*

In the Negro section of Uniontown, locally known as "Rabbit Yard" (named by the Negroes themselves), lives "Aunt Tildy" Collins, a typical "black mammy" of orthodox type. She is a talkative old soul, running over with slavery tales and greatly beloved by a wide range of acquaintances among both races. Although eighty-four summers have passed over her snow-white head, Aunt Tildy's spirit is unconquered by time and her physical activity is truly remarkable for her age. She does her own housework and cares for her home without assistance. In front of her one-room cabin is a neat garden of vegetables and flowers combined, with morning glories trained carefully over the fence nearly all the way around. There is a saying in the South, that cotton will grow better for a Negro than for any other race, and this might well be extended to include morning glories in Aunt Tildy's case; since none in Uniontown are quite so fine in growth or brilliance of coloring.

Like nearly all old Negroes, Aunt Tildy goes to sleep very readily. She was dozing in a rocker on her small porch, while the scent of wood smoke and the odor of boiling vegetables issued from the cabin. An iron pot, hanging from a crane in the fireplace, sending forth clouds of steam and an appetizing aroma. She clings to old fashioned equipment and disdains a stove for cooking. Her "biled" vegetables or meats in the hanging pot, with baked potatoes and "pone" bread from the oven make up a meal that leaves little to be desired, as many visitors who have shared her repasts well know.

As the gate squeaked, Aunt Tildy awoke with a start and a smile.

"Come in, white folks, I was jes' a-settin' here waitin' for my greens to bile, an' I musta drapped off to sleep. Set down in dat cheer right dar, an' tek off your hat; you sho' is lookin' well, an' I 'se proud to see you.

"Yas, ma'am, I sho' was borned in slavery times, an' I wish to Gawd I could git now what I useter hab den, 'caze dem was good times for de black folks. Dese free niggers don't know what 'tis to be tuk good keer of.

"Co'se I means dat! I was borned on a big plantation near 'bout to Linden, an' my Ole Marster was name Harris, yassum, Dick Harris, an' my Ole Mistis was Miss Mandy. Bofe dey boys fit in de wah, an' I 'members when dey went off wid de sojers, ole Mistis she cry an' hug dem boys an' kiss 'em goodbye, an' dey was gone a long time. I was a leetle gal whenst dey went to de wah, an' I was mos' a grown 'oman when dey come home, an' dey bofe had whiskers. Young Massa Richard he limpin' an' look mighty pale, an' dey say he been wounded an' stay in prison on Mister Johnson's island, summuz up de ribber; but Marse Willis, he look all right, 'cep'in' whiskers. Ole Marster had a big house, an' dat same house standin' dar right now. Us had plenty to eat an' plenty to wear, an' dat's mo'n what some folks got now.

"Ole Marster was good to all he niggers, an' my pappy and mammy bofe belonged to him. Dey was a slave-yard in Uniontown, an' ev'y time a spec'later cum wid a lot of new niggers, Ole Marster he buy four or five niggers, an' dat's how he come to buy my pappy, atter de spec'later brung him an' a whole passel of niggers from North C'lina. My mammy here already 'long to Ole Marster. Her was borned his'n.

"Sometime a no 'count nigger tek an' runned erway; but de oberseer, he put de houn's on he track, an' dey run him up a tree, an' de oberseer fetch him back nex' mawnin', all tuckerd out, an' he' glad to stay home for a spell an' 'have hese'f. Ole Marster had a good oberseer, too. 'Cose he wan't no quality, lak Ole Marster an' Ole Mistis, but he was a good, kin' man an' he didn't hab no trouble on de whole plantation.

"Us alluz had a Chris'mus tree in de quarter, jes' lak de white folks an' dey was presents for ev'ybody—nobody wan't lef' out, big or little. Dere was a meetin' house on de plantation an' Ole Marster had a rule dat all de chilluns had to go to Sunday school soon as dey was big 'nuff, an' dey had to go in clean white clo'se, too. Us chilluns hate to see Sunday come, 'caze Mammy an' Granmammy dey wash us an' near 'bout rub de skin off gittin' us clean for Sunday school, an' dey comb our heads wid a jimcrow. You ain't neber seed a jimcrow? Hit mos' lak a card what you card wool wid. What a card look lak? Humph! Missy, whar you been raise—ain't neber seed a card? Dat jimcrow sho' did hurt, but us hadder stan' hit, an' sometimes atter all dat, Mammy she wrap our kinky hair wid t'read an' twis' so tight us's eyes couldn't hardly shet.

"My Granmammy, her de head cook 'oman at de big house, an' us had to mine her lak us did Mammy. I ho'p Granmammy in de kitchen, atter I got big 'nuff an' she sho' did keep me humpin'. Chilluns had to mine dey olders in dem days. Dey wan't lak dey is now, don't mine nobody, not eben dey Pa.

"When de surrender come, Ole Marster he tole all de niggers dey was free now, an' some was glad an' some was sorry an' welst dey might be sorry, iffen dey knowed what a hard time dey goner had knockin' 'roun' de worl' by deyself; no Ole Marster an' no Ole Mistis ter look atter 'em an' feed 'em when dey sick an' when dey well. Look lak ter me, when de surrender parted de white folks an' de black folks, it hurt 'em bofe. Dey oughter be tergedder, jes' lak de Good Lord 'tended dey be."

Aunt Tildy sighed deeply and, gazing afar off, said: "Iffen Ole Marster was livin' now, I'd be all right an' not hafter worry 'bout nuffin."

In spite of her eighty-four years, Aunt Tildy makes her living as a mid-wife and serves as a "doctor man" in cases of minor ailments; but her practice is so closely interwoven with "conju'in'" that it is difficult to say which is the more important to her. For example: she prescribes wearing matches in the hair or a little salt on the mole of the head for headache. Her sovereign remedy for rheumatism is "'nint de j'int's wid a little kerosene oil an' put some mullen leaves on it." "A good dost of turpentine is good for mos' anything de matter wid you." A coin with a hole in it, usually a dime, tied around the ankle will keep you from getting "pizen." Furthermore, this same treatment warns against the ill effects of getting "conju'ed." "Iffen you gits conju'ed, de dime turn black, an' you kin go to de conju' doctor an' git de conju' took off."

"Is you got to go, Missy? Come back agin. I's allus proud to see you," Aunt Tildy called after me from the edge of the porch.