Louis

Interview with "Uncle" Louis

—David Holt, Mobile

PSYCHOLOGY OF A RUNAWAY SLAVE

Of course you know that we always called the older colored men "Uncle" and the older colored women "Aunt." It was proper manners.

Old "Uncle" Louis was the oldest slave on the plantation, "Uncle" Toby having died. Louis was a "Guinea nigger." His ancestors had been brought from the Guinea coast of Africa. He had the characteristic marks of his tribe, being short, strong and very black, with heavy neck, thick lips, flat nose and eyes like those of a hog. He had great knowledge of wild plants, claimed to understand the language of birds and beasts. He prided himself on his powers as a hunter and also claimed intimate friendship with ghosts and spooks. Being what was known as a "yard servant," he had picked up much of the talk of his white masters and spoke his own version of their language.

Old Louis was what was called a "runaway nigger." He would run away in the latter part of the summer once in every two or three years and come back in time to help dig sweet potatoes. I was out in the sweet potato patch one morning when he returned. The doctor was there, also. When Louis walked up he simply said, "Hello, Louis; are you well?"

"Yes sir, Marster."

"Well, take that basket and go to picking up potatoes." Not a word was said about his running away. After the hands had knocked off work and Louis was sitting in front of his cabin, I went to him for an interview.

"Uncle Louis, what makes you run away? You don't get whipped or abused in any way."

The old slave scratched his grizzled head, puffed at his clay pipe and pondered the subject for some time before he replied:

"Marse Davie, I does cause de woods seems to call me. When de fall insec's is singin' in de grass an' the 'simmons is gettin' soft an' de leaves is beginnin' to turn, I jes natcherly has ter go. De wild sloes, de red haws an' de crab apples is ripe. De walnuts an de hickory nuts an de beach mast drappin' an de blue smoke comes over de woods, an de woods birds an de yard birds goes souf wid de cranes an ducks an wil' geese an de blackbirds an de crows goes in droves—it seem lack all dat is jes callin' me."

"Where do you go?" I asked.

"Lorsy, Marse Davie, I never goes off de plantation. I always go to de woods back o' de past'er. Ole Master knows whar I is an so does Henry. Don't you know dat holler dat come down on de lef' han' side of de branch—de fus holler you comes to, not more dan two hundred yards in de woods?" I knew it well.

"Don't you 'member a big green oak tree growin' on de right han' side of de holler bout a hunder yard up de path?"

"Well, sir, dat tree is my home. I done toted some poles an some sedge gress up dar an made me a bed—but you can't see it from de groun'. When I gets up dar I can see all 'roun'. I seen you an Marse Joe de las' time you go fishin'. I lays dar all day and listen to de birds and critters talkin'. A chicadee tole me you was comin' long befo' I seen you. Den a jay bird caught a sight of you an he tole me. Can't nobody come along widout de birds tellin' me. Dey pays no min' to a horse or a dog but when dey spies a man dey speaks. I done tame' a squi'l so he comes see me ever'day.

"De birds and critters sho is good comp'ny. I done made frens wid up all but de owl and de hawk. Dey is jes natchally bad an de other critters hates 'em. A ole red-breast' hawk come an lit in a daid pine tree. I seen him so plain til I knowed what he was thinkin' about. He was jes mad clean down in his craw and was cussin' ever'thin'. A little pewee bird seen him an begin to fuss. A crow fly over and hear de pewee, den fly down close an take a good look at mister hawk den he fly up and start callin' de other crows. In a little while a whole drove of crows is flyin' 'roun dat pine tree. Den de jay birds come an dey is callin' for a fight, but de ole hawk never move. Den de mocking birds come an dey sair right in and starts pecking at de hawk until he dove into de woods and gets away, an all de birds begin to talkin' 'bout bugs an things."

The old man was wound up for an interminable talk on his favorite theme, the talk of critters, and to change the subject I asked: "Uncle Louis, ain't you afraid of ghosts?"

"Lor', chile, I ain't feared of no ghos' or spook, as I's seed lots of both. All a ghos' do is jes show hise'f. You never hear of one doin' nothin' to nobody. Dey is sociable an wants to be near livin' people. When folks gets scared it hurts de ha'nt's feelin's an dey goes somewhere else. Dey has all de feelin's dey had when dey was livin'. You wouldn't stay by wid folks dat's fear'd of you an want to run away from where you is.

"Las' night, when I was up in my nes', an my fire had died out, all 'sept one little chunk, an de moon was shinin' like day, I lay down, I did, an I take a li'l nap o' sleep. Den I wakes up sudden an looks 'roun ag'in. Well, sir, de norf side of de hill was covered wid ghoses an spooks; dey was layin' down, standin' up and leanin' agin trees, but mos'ly dey was jes sittin' on de groun', all lookin' at me hard as dey could, widout battin' an eye.

"De neares' one to me was a little white ooman. She war sittin' flat on de groun', holdin' a baby in her lap. She look mighty pitiful an I say 'please Missis, can I ho'p you an yo' baby? I'd be 'bleeged if you tell me.' Her lips move but I couldn't hear no sound. Den I lay me down an drap off to sleep agin. When I wakes up de ghosses is all dere an de little white ooman look lak she want to say somethin', but can't, an I say, 'I ain' nothin' but a poor runaway nigger, but my Marster is a mighty kin' man, he'll sholy he'p you; but she didn't say nothin' an I goes back to sleep. De next time I wakes up de sun was risin' an I jes lays dere an watches de ghosses an spooks get thin, an fade away like a fog."

The old Negro was sitting in the twilight, talking in a low, impressive monotone, in a language we both understood but which I find difficulty in transcribing after all these years that intervene. A screech owl was "miseryflying" in the family grave yard back of the quarters, a fitting abligato to the narrative. Though creepy sensations crawled up my spine, I still had my doubts.

"Uncle Louis, do you really believe you saw all that, and didn't dream it while you were curled up in your nest?" I asked.

The old man seemed aggrieved at my doubts as he replied:

"It ain't no beleevin' about it. I knows what I knows an I sees what I sees. De ghos' is what lives when de body is done wore out, but it don't die."

"It's all imagination," I said, in defense of reason and nature, as I understood these things.

"I wants to ax you what does de imaginin'. It's your ghos' that does the imagin' so you can see other ghosses an spooks."

In recognition of Louis' knowledge and powers of reasoning my brother William wrote a diploma in Latin and presented it to him. After that he was called "Doctor" Louis.

I recall that it was about that time that I read a book on psychology but later discovered that there were those on the plantation who had a better working knowledge of the subject than was taught in the book.

Bibliography: Old Plantation Days, an unpublished work by the Venerable David Elred Holt, late Archdeacon of the Sacramento Diocese (Protestant Episcopal) of California, and a native of Buffalo Plantation, near Natchez, Mississippi.