

# Br er Possum's Dil emma

Traditional African American, retold by Jackie Torrence

Back in the days when the animals could talk, there lived ol' Brer Possum. He was a finefeller. Why, he never liked to see no critters in trouble. He was always helpin' out, a-doin' somethin' for others.

Ever' night, ol' Brer Possum climbed into a persimmon tree, hung by his tail, and slept all night long. And each mornin', he climbed outa the tree and walked down the road to sun 'imself.

One mornin', as he walked, he come to a big hole in the middle of the road. Now, ol' Brer Possum was kind and gentle, but he was also nosy, so he went over to the hole and looked in. All at once, he stepped back, 'cause layin' in the bottom of that hole was ol' Brer Snake with a brick on his back.

Brer Possum said to 'imself, "I best git on outa here, 'cause ol' Brer Snake is mean and evil and lowdown, and if I git to stayin' around 'im, he jist might git to bitin' me."

So Brer Possum went on down the road.

But Brer Snake had seen Brer Possum, and he commenced to callin' for 'im.

"Help me, Brer Possum."

Brer Possum stopped and turned around. He said to 'imself, "That's ol' Brer Snake a-callin' me. What do you reckon he wants?"

Well, ol' Brer Possum was kindhearted, so he went back down the road to the hole, stood at the edge, and looked down at Brer Snake.

"Was that you a-callin' me? What do you want?"

Brer Snake looked up and said, "I've been down here in this hole for a mighty long time with this brick on my back. Won't you help git it offa me?"

Brer Possum thought.

"Now listen here, Brer Snake. I knows you. You's mean and evil and lowdown, and if'n I was to git down in that hole and git to liftin' that brick offa your back, you wouldn't do nothin' but bite me."

Ol' Brer Snake just hissed.

“Maybe not. Maybe not. Maaaaaaaybe not.” Brer Possum said, “I ain’t sure ’bout you at all. I jist don’t know. You’re a-goin’ to have to let me think about it.”

So ol’ Brer Possum thought—he thought high, and he thought low—and jist as he was thinkin’, he looked up into a tree and saw a dead limb a-hangin’ down. He climbed into the tree, broke off the limb, and with that ol’ stick, pushed that brick offa Brer Snake’s back. Then he took off down the road.

Brer Possum thought he was away from ol’ Brer Snake when all at once he heard somethin’.

“Help me, Brer Possum.”

Brer Possum said, “Oh, no, that’s him agin.”

But bein’ so kindhearted, Brer Possum turned around, went back to the hole, and stood at the edge.

“Brer Snake, was that you a-callin’ me? What do you want now?”

Ol’ Brer Snake looked up outa the hole and hissed.

“I’ve been down here for a mighty long time, and I’ve gotten a little weak, and the sides of this ol’ hole are too slick for me to climb. Do you think you can lift me outa here?”

Brer Possum thought.

“Now, you jist wait a minute. If’n I was to git down into that hole and lift you outa there, you wouldn’t do nothin’ but bite me.”

Brer Snake hissed.

“Maybe not. Maybe not. Maaaaaaaybe not.”

Brer Possum said, “I jist don’t know. You’re a-goin’ to have to give me time to think about this.”

So ol’ Brer Possum thought.

And as he thought, he jist happened to look down there in that hole and see that ol’ dead limb. So he pushed the limb underneath ol’ Brer Snake and he lifted ’im outa the hole, way up into the air, and throwed ’im into the high grass.

Brer Possum took off a-runnin’ down the road.

Well, he thought he was away from ol’ Brer Snake when all at once he heard somethin’.

“Help me, Brer Possum.”

Brer Possum thought, “That’s him agin.”

But bein’ so kindhearted, he turned around, went back to the hole, and stood there a-lookin’ for Brer Snake. Brer Snake crawled outa the high grass just as slow as he could, stretched ’imself out across the road, rared up, and looked at ol’ Brer Possum.

Then he hissed. “I’ve been down there in that ol’ hole for a mighty long time, and I’ve gotten a little cold ’cause the sun didn’t shine. Do you think you could put me in your pocket and git me warm?”

Brer Possum said, “Now you listen here, Brer Snake. I knows you. You’s mean and evil and lowdown, and if’n I put you in my pocket you wouldn’t do nothin’ but bite me.”

Brer Snake hissed.

“Maybe not. Maybe not. Maaaaaaaybe not.”

“No, sireee, Brer Snake. I knows you. I jist ain’t a-goin’ to do it.”

But jist as Brer Possum was talkin’ to Brer Snake, he happened to git a real good look at ’im. He was a-layin’ there lookin’ so pitiful, and Brer Possum’s great big heart began to feel sorry for ol’ Brer Snake.

“All right,” said Brer Possum. “You must be cold. So jist this once I’m a-goin’ to put you in my pocket.”

So ol’ Brer Snake coiled up jist as little as he could, and Brer Possum picked ’im up and put ’im in his pocket.

Brer Snake laid quiet and still—so quiet and still that Brer Possum even forgot that he was a-carryin’ ’im around. But all of a sudden, Brer Snake commenced to crawlin’ out, and he turned and faced Brer Possum and hissed.

“I’m a-goin’ to bite you.”

But Brer Possum said, “Now wait a minute. Why are you a-goin’ to bite me? I done took that brick offa your back, I got you outa that hole, and I put you in my pocket to git you warm. Why are you a-goin’ to bite me?”

Brer Snake hissed.

“You knowed I was a snake before you put me in your pocket.”

And when you’re mindin’ your own business and you spot trouble, don’t never trouble trouble ’til trouble troubles you.

### **Reading Check**

The number three often appears in folk literature—three little pigs, three blind mice, three wishes. What happens three times in this tale? What happens the third time to make it different from the first two?

### **First Thoughts**

1. Were you surprised when Brer Snake announced that he was going to bite Brer Possum? Do you think Brer Possum deserved to get bitten? Explain.

### **Shaping Interpretations**

2. Paraphrase (rewrite in your own words) the last sentence of “Brer Possum’s Dilemma.”

3. A fable is a brief story, usually about talking animals, that ends with a moral, or lesson about life. The moral of “Brer Possum’s Dilemma” is in the last sentence. Do you think it is a good lesson for this fable? Do you think it is a good lesson at all? Why or why not?

### **Connecting with the Text**

5. Describe an occasion when it would have been appropriate for you to tell someone this story—or for someone to tell it to you. (Make up an event or situation if you can’t think of a real one you’d like to share.)

### **Extending the Text**

6. What other stories do you know in which a snake is the bad guy? How do you think snakes got their bad reputation?