Set in the American South, this story’s main elements such as the hairy ogre-like creature that tries to chop down a tree while his victim is in the tree, the ogre’s fear of dogs, and the use of conjure, have African roots (Bascom, 1992)

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see *The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature* edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


Everybody thought that when Wiley’s pappy died he’d never cross Jordan because the Hairy Man would be there waiting for him. That must have been the way it happened, because they never found him after he fell off the ferry boat at Holly’s where the river is quicker than anywhere else. They looked for him a long way down river and in the still pools between the sand-banks, but they never found pappy. And they heard a big man laughing across the river, and everybody said, “That’s the Hairy Man.” So they stopped looking.

“Wiley,” his mammy told him, “the Hairy Man’s done got yo’ pappy and he’s go’ get you ‘f you don’t look out.”

“Yes’m,” he said, “I’ll look out. I’ll take my hound-dogs ev’rywhere I go. The Hairy Man can’t stand no hound-dog.”

Wiley knew that because his mammy had told him. She knew because she was from the swamps by the Tombigbee [River] and knew conjure. They don’t know conjure on the Alabama [River] like they do on the Tombigbee.

One day Wiley took his axe and went down in the swamp to cut some poles for a hen-roost and his hounds went with him. But they took out after a shoat [pig] and ran it so far off Wiley couldn’t even hear them yelp.

“Well,” he said, “I hope the Hairy Man ain’t nowhere round here now.”

He picked up his axe to start cutting poles, but he looked up and there came the Hairy Man through the trees grinning. He was sure ugly and his grin didn’t help much. He was hairy all over. His eyes burned like fire and spit drooled all over his big teeth.

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Wiley, but the Hairy Man kept coming and grinning, so Wiley threw down his axe and climbed up a big bay tree. He saw the Hairy Man didn’t have feet like a man but like a cow, and Wiley never had seen a cow up a bay tree.

“What for you done climb up there?” the Hairy Man asked Wiley when he got to the bottom of the tree.

Wiley climbed nearly to the top of the tree and looked down. Then he climbed plumb to the top.

“How come you climbin’ trees?” the Hairy Man said.

“My mammy done tole me to stay way from you. What you got in that big croaker-sack?”

“I ain’t got nothing yet.”

“Gwan ‘way from here,” said Wiley, hoping the tree would grow some more.

“Ha” said the Hairy Man and picked up Wiley’s axe. He swung it stout and the chips flew. Wiley grabbed the tree close, rubbed his belly on it and hollered, “Fly, chips, fly, back in yo’ same old place.”

The chips flew and the Hairy Man cussed and damned. Then he swung the axe and Wiley knew he’d have to holler fast. They went to it tooth and toe-nail then, Wiley hollering and the Hairy Man chopping. He hollered till he was hoarse and he saw the Hairy Man was gaining on him.

“I’ll come down part t’way,” he said, “ ‘f you’ll make this bay tree twicet as big around.”

“I ain’t studyin’ you,” said the Hairy Man, swinging the axe.

“I bet you cain’t,” said Wiley.

“I ain’t go’ try,” said the Hairy Man.

Then they went to it again, Wiley hollering and the Hairy Man chopping. Wiley had about yelled himself out when he heard his hound-dogs yelping way off.

“Hyeaaah, dog,” he hollered. “Fly, chips, fly, back in yo’ same old place.”

“You ain’t got no dogs. I sent that shoat to draw ’em off.”

“Hyeaaah, dog,” hollered Wiley, and they both heard the hound-dogs yelping and coming jam-up. The Hairy Man looked worried.

“Come on down,” he said, “and I’ll teach you conjure.”

“I can learn all the conjure I wants from my mammy.”

The Hairy Man cussed some more, but he threw the axe down and balled the jack off through the swamp.

When Wiley got home he told his mammy that the Hairy Man had most got him, but his dogs ran him off.

“Did he have his sack?”

“Yas’m.”

“Nex’ time he come after you, don’t you climb no bay tree.”

“I ain’t,” said Wiley. “They ain’t big enough around.”

“Don’t climb no kind o’ tree. Jes stay on the ground and say, ‘Hello, Hairy Man’ You hear me, Wiley?”

“No’m”

“He ain’t go’ hurt you, chile. You can put the Hairy Man in the dirt when I tell you how to do him.”

“I puts him in the dirt and he puts me in that croaker-sack. I ain’t puttin’ no Hairy Man in the dirt.”

“You jes do like I say. You say, ‘Hello, Hairy Man.’ He says, ‘Hello, Wiley.’ You say, ‘Hairy Man, I done heard you ‘bout the best conjureman ‘round here.’ ‘I reckon I am.’ You say, ‘I bet you cain’t turn yo’self into no gee-raff.’ You keep tellin’ him he cain’t and he will. Then you say, ‘I bet you can’t turn yo’self into no alligator.’ And he will. Then you say, ‘Anybody can turn theyselves into somep’n big as a man, but I bet you cain’t turn yo’self into no possum.’ Then he will, and you grab him and throw him in the sack.”

“It don’t sound jes right somehow,” said Wiley, “but I will.” So he tied up his dogs so they wouldn’t scare away the Hairy Man and went down the swamp again. He hadn’t been there long when he looked up and there came the Hairy Man grinning through the trees, hairy all over and his big teeth showing more than ever. He knew Wiley came off without his hound-dogs.
Wiley nearly climbed a tree when he saw the croaker-sack, but he didn’t.

“Hello, Hairy Man,” he said.
“Hello, Wiley.” He took the sack off his shoulder and started opening it up.
“Hairy Man, I done heard you ‘bout the best conjure man round here.”
“I reckon I is.”
“I bet you cain’t turn yo’self into no gee-raff.”
“Shucks, that ain’t no trouble,” said the Hairy Man.
“I bet you cain’t do it.”
So the Hairy Man twisted round and turned himself into a gee-raff.
“I bet you can’t turn yo’self into no alligator,” said Wiley.
The gee-raff twisted around and turned into an alligator, all the time watching Wiley to see he didn’t try to run.
“Anybody can turn theyself into somep’n big as a man,” said Wiley, “but I bet you cain’t turn yo-self into no ‘possum.”
The alligator twisted around and turned into a ‘possum, and Wiley grabbed it and threw it in the sack.
Wiley tied the sack up as tight as he could and then he threw it in the river. He went home through the swamp and he looked up and there came the Hairy Man grinning through the trees.
“I turn myself into the wind and blew out. Wiley, I’m go’ set right here till you get hungry and fall out of that bay tree. You want me to learn you some more conjure.”
Wiley studied a while. He studied about the Hairy Man and he studied about his hound-dogs tied up most a mile away.
“Well,” he said, “you done some pretty smart tricks. But I bet you cain’t make things disappear and go where nobody knows.”
“Huh, that’s what I’m good at. Look at that old bird-nest on the limb. Now look. It’s done gone.”
“How I know it was there in the fus’ place? I bet you cain’t make somep’n I know is there disappear.”
“Ha, ha,” said the Hairy Man. “Look a yo’ shirt.”
Wiley looked down and his shirt was gone, but he didn’t care, because that was just what he wanted the Hairy Man to do.
“That was jes a plain old shirt,” he said. “But this rope I got tied round my breeches been conjured. I bet you cain’t make it disappear.”
“Huh, I can make all the rope in this county disappear.”
“Ha ha ha,” said Wiley.
The Hairy Man looked mad and threw his chest way out. He opened his mouth wide and hollered loud.
“From now on all the rope in this county has done disappeared.”
Wiley reared back holding his breeches with one hand and a tree-limb with the other.
“Hyeeaaah, dog,” he hollered loud enough to be heard more than a mile off.
When Wiley and his dogs got back home his mammy asked him did he put Hairy Man in the sack.
“Yes’m, but he done turned himself into the wind and blew right through that old croaker-sack.”
“That is bad,” said his mammy. “But you done fool him twicet. ‘F you fool him again
he’ll leave you alone. He’ll be mighty hard to fool the third time.”

“We gotta study up a way to fool him, mammy.”

“I’ll study up a way directly,” she said, and sat down by the fire and held her chin between her hands and studied real hard. But Wiley wasn’t studying anything except how to keep the Hairy Man away. He took his hound-dogs out and tied one at the back door and one at the front door. Then he crossed a broom and an axe-handle over the window and built a fire in the fire-place. Feeling a lot safer, he sat down and helped his mammy study. After a little while his mammy said, “Wiley, you go down to the pen and get that little suckin’ pig away from that old sow.”

Wiley went down and snatched the sucking pig through the rails and left the sow grunting and heaving in the pen. He took the pig back to his mammy and she put it in his bed.

“Now, Wiley,” she said, “you go on up to the loft and hide.”

So he did. Before long he heard the wind howling and the trees shaking, and then his dogs started growling. He looked through a knot-hole in the planks and saw the dog at the front door looking down toward the swamps, with his hair standing up and his lips drawn back in a snarl. Then an animal as big as a mule with horns on its head ran out of the swamp past the house. The dog jerked and jumped, but he couldn’t get loose. Then an animal bigger than a great big dog with a long nose and big teeth ran out of the swamp and growled at the cabin. This time the dog broke loose and took after the big animal, who ran back down into the swamp. Wiley looked out another chink at the back end of the loft just in time to see his other dog jerk loose and take out after an animal, which might have been a ‘possum, but wasn’t.

“Law-dee,” said Wiley. “The Hairy Man is coming here sho’.”

He didn’t have long to wait, because soon enough he heard something with feet like a cow scrambling around on the roof. He knew it was the Hairy Man, because he heard him damn and swear when he touched the hot chimney. The Hairy Man jumped off the roof when he found out there was a fire in the fire-place and came up and knocked on the front door as big as you please.

“Mammy,” he hollered, “I done come after yo’ baby.”
“You ain’t go’ get him,” mammy hollered back.

“Give him here or I’ll bite you. I’m blue-gummed and I’ll pizen you sho’.”
“I’m right blue-gummed myself,” mammy sang out.

“Give him here or I’ll set yo’ house on fire with lightnin’.”
“I got plenty of sweet-milk to put it out with.”

“Give him here or I’ll dry up yo’ spring, make yo’ cow go dry and send a million boll-weevils out of the ground to eat up yo’ cotton.”

“Hairy Man, you wouldn’t do all that. That’s mighty mean.”
“I’m a mighty mean man. I ain’t never seen a man as mean as I am.”

“F I give you my baby will you go on way from here and leave everything else alone.”
“I’ll swear that’s jes what I’ll do,” said the Hairy Man, so mammy opened the door and let him in.

“He’s over there in that bed,” she said.

The Hairy Man came in grinning like he was meaner than he said. He walked over to the bed and snatched the covers back.

“Hey,” he hollered, “there ain’t nothin’ in this bed but a old suckin’ pig.”
“I ain’t said what kind of a baby I was givin’ you, and that suckin’ pig sho’ belonged to me ‘fo’ I gave it to you.”
The Hairy Man raged and yelled. He stomped all over the house gnashing his teeth. Then he grabbed up the pig and tore out through the swamp, knocking down trees right and left. The next morning the swamp had a wide path like a cyclone had cut through it, with trees torn loose at the roots and lying on the ground. When the Hairy Man was gone Wiley came down from the loft.

“Is he done gone, mammy?”

“Yes, chile. That old Hairy Man cain’t ever hurt you again. We done fool him three times.”