

WEST INDIAN FOLK-TALES



Lucille Iremonger

Preface

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I have retold some of the best-known and most loved of these stories, translating them from the dialect in which I first heard them from my *nana*, and often stripping them of layers of Grimm's Fairy Tales and Walt Disney until their true form was laid bare.

I owe grateful thanks to Professor Philip Sherlock, Vice-Principal of the University College of the West Indies, and to Mr A. J. Newman, Principal of Mico Training College, Jamaica, for help in my researches by the loan of versions of Anansi stories in their possession, and I have read with interest the odd stories recorded in the original dialect by Una Wilson, Louise Bennett, Dorothy Clarke, and others in the West Indies.

LUCILLE IREMONGER

CHEYNE ROW, CHELSEA

April 1956

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Brer Anansi had no idea that anyone had seen him

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ANANSI STORIES

*Tales from West Indian Folk-lore
retold for English Children*

by

✓ LUCILLE IREMONGER

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How the Spider People came to live in Webs

ONCE UPON a time Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey and Brer Anansi were all friends.

Now that was very odd, for Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey had very little in common with Brer Anansi. Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey were much larger than Brer Anansi; they were fond of work, which he was not; and they did not steal, which he did. However, at first these things did not seem to matter.

Now, Brer Tiger and his friend Brer Monkey had three fields. In one of them they grew yams, in the next potatoes, and in the last corn.

When the yams were ready to be dug up Brer Monkey and Brer Tiger were very surprised to find that some one had got there before them and stolen their crop. The same thing happened when the potatoes were ready. But when it was time for the corn to be cut Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey set a trap for the thief. One night they kept watch together in a tree.

The moon came out, and in the bright light they could clearly see some one cutting the corn. Without saying a word they crept down from their tree.

Brer Anansi had no idea that anyone had seen him. He went on cutting the corn. Then suddenly he looked up and saw Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey creeping up on him. Then he began to run as fast as he could go, and Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey ran after him.

Brer Anansi ran until he felt that he could run no more. Then, just as he felt that he was going to die for lack of breath, he caught sight of a little grain of corn lying on the ground.

"Oh, grain, hide me! Hide me!" he cried out to it in despair.

Brer Anansi was a bit of a magician, and he made himself very small, so small that he could get right inside a grain of corn. The grain of corn opened wide, and he slid inside it at once—just as Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey were gaining fast on him.

He was just in time, and Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey went rushing past.

After a little while a speckled hen came by. She saw the grain of corn lying on the ground, looked at it with her head on one side, pecked at it, and swallowed it whole.

So Brer Anansi was in the corn, and the corn was in the hen.

A little later the hen went down to a pool to drink.

There was an alligator in the pool, and the alligator rose to the surface and saw the hen and snapped her up. Down his throat she went, and so Brer Anansi was in the corn, and the corn was in the hen, and the hen was in the alligator, and the alligator was in the pool.

And there they would all be now if Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey had not thought of asking their drum where Brer Anansi had got to.

Now, this drum was a magic drum, and would answer any questions which its masters put to it. So Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey brought their drum out from its hiding-place and put it on the ground and beat a tattoo on it, and Brer Tiger asked it, "Oh, Drum, where is Brer Anansi?"

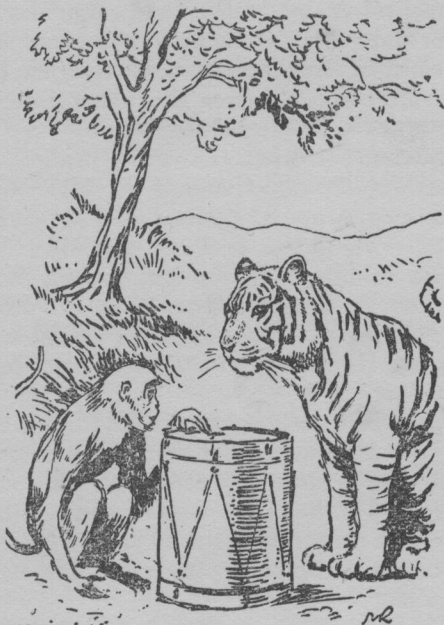
And the drum replied:

"In the grain,
in the hen,
in the alligator,
in the pool!"

So Brer Tiger and Brer Monkey drained the water out of the pool, and at the very bottom they found the alligator.

Then they cut open the alligator, and inside him they found the speckled hen.

Then they cut open the speckled hen, and inside her they found the little grain of corn.



"Oh, Drum, where is Brer Anansi?"

And then they cut open the little grain of corn, and inside it they found—Brer Anansi!

But Brer Anansi was far too quick for Brer Monkey and Brer Tiger. He ran away as fast as he could go, with them close upon his heels. As he rushed past a banana-tree he tore off one of the thin, strong threads that grow along the leaves. Then he raced up the trunk of an orange-tree and tied one end of this thread round one of its branches.

Then Brer Anansi ran down again as fast as he could go.

Down to the ground he went, and up again—up the trunk of a mango-tree this time—and tied the other end of the thread round one of its branches. So then he had a light, strong bridge, made of thread, running from the orange-tree to the mango-tree.

Brer Anansi sat at one end of the bridge and waited.

Brer Tiger walked up to the orange-tree and sniffed at it. He caught sight of Brer Anansi in the tree. He climbed up into the tree after him. At once Brer Anansi ran across his new bridge and over to the mango-tree.

He sat down at the other end of the bridge and waited.

Then Brer Monkey came panting up. When he saw Brer Anansi in the mango-tree he climbed up into the tree at once.

There was nothing for it now, and Brer Anansi ran quickly to the middle of his bridge, and sat there, caught between his two foes. Neither Brer Tiger nor Brer Monkey dared trust their weight to that slender thread so far above the ground, and so they could not touch little Brer Anansi. He was quite safe.

On the other hand, Brer Anansi could not get down from his bridge. He had to sit there in the middle of his bridge of thread for as long as Brer Tiger chose to sit at one end of it and Brer Monkey at the other. And he had nothing at all to eat. And there he might have stayed and starved to death if he had not discovered how to spin a web and catch himself butterflies to eat.

And that is how Anansi the spider-god came to live in a web and learned to eat butterflies for his dinner.

*Jack Mandory,
the story is ended.*

How Brer Tiger came to walk on Four Legs

ONCE UPON a time Brer Anansi and Brer Tiger were both courting Miss Quashiba. At times it seemed that she liked Brer Tiger better, and at others it seemed that it was Brer Anansi she preferred.

Brer Anansi was determined to have Miss Quashiba for his wife. He thought and he thought of ways to get the better of Brer Tiger.

One night Brer Anansi said, "Miss Quashiba, I hear you are seeing a lot of that fellow Brer Tiger."

"That is true, Brer Anansi," Miss Quashiba replied.

"He is not fit company for you!" Brer Anansi said.

"How can that be?" Miss Quashiba asked. "Everybody thinks Brer Tiger is a fine fellow. He is so big and so strong!"

Brer Anansi did not like that at all. "Fine fellow!" he scoffed. "Why, he is only my father's old riding-horse!"

"Your father's old riding-horse!" Miss Quashiba was very surprised. "Are you sure, Brer Anansi?"

"Yes," replied Brer Anansi. "I used to ride him myself when I was little. I am sure, and I can prove it to you!"

Miss Quashiba did not like the thought of being married to an old riding-horse. She told Brer Bull and Brer Goat and Brer Sheep what Brer Anansi had said about Brer Tiger, and they told Brer Snake and Brer Rat.

"Let us go and tell Brer Tiger," Brer Rat said, "and hear what *he* has to say about that!"

"That is a good idea," said Brer Goat and Brer Sheep and Brer Bull and Brer Snake and Brer Rat. But they were all afraid to tell Brer Tiger what Brer Anansi had said, so they asked Miss Quashiba if she would tell him.

That night Miss Quashiba was very cold when Brer Tiger came to see her.

"What is the matter?" Brer Tiger asked. "What have I done, Miss Quashiba?"

"You have not done anything, Brer Tiger. But Brer Anansi says that you are only his father's old riding-horse!" Miss Quashiba replied.

Brer Tiger was very angry. "That is not true!" he shouted.

"Brer Anansi says that he can prove it," Miss Quashiba said.

"I am going to bring Brer Anansi here," Brer Tiger said, "and then he shall prove it before you if he can!"

"I have told Brer Bull and Brer Sheep and Brer Goat, and they have told Brer Snake and Brer Rat too."

"Go and get them!" Brer Tiger roared. "And Brer Anansi shall prove it before every one if he can!"

And he rushed down the road, roaring as he went.

Brer Anansi heard that Brer Tiger was coming after him. He ran home as fast as he could. He jumped into bed as soon as he got there and pulled the bedclothes over his head. He had locked the door behind him.

Brer Tiger came up to Brer Anansi's house. He rattled at the door. He shook it. He kicked it.

"Brer Anansi!" he called out. "Are you inside?"

"Yes, Brer Tiger," Brer Anansi said in a faint voice.

Then Brer Tiger broke the door down and rushed in.

"So there you are!" he shouted. "How dared you, how *dared* you, how DARED you say what you did?"

"What have I said?" Brer Anansi asked. "You really must not make so much noise, Brer Tiger. Can't you see that I am very ill?"

Brer Tiger stopped shouting for a moment. He looked at Brer Anansi. It was true that Brer Anansi did look very ill, but it was too late for Brer Tiger to stop.

"How dared you tell Miss Quashiba that I was your father's old riding-horse?" he shouted again. "How dared you, how *dared* you, how DARED you?"

"I never said such a thing!" Brer Anansi said. "How could

you think I would, Brer Tiger? Can't you see that I am very poorly?"

"I don't care how ill you are!" Brer Tiger cried. "You are coming along with me to take back that lie. First of all you are going to tell every one that what you said was not true. *Then, after that, I am going to kill you!*"

"Oh, Brer Tiger, I should like to come very much," Brer Anansi pleaded. "I would like to do anything you want me to. But I cannot. I am too weak. I cannot walk."

"You are coming with me, Brer Anansi, let me tell you, even if I have to carry you!" Brer Tiger answered. "You are going to tell every one that what you said was not true. *And after that I am going to kill you!*"

"I will come, Brer Tiger," Brer Anansi groaned at last. "I will come. But you *will* have to carry me if I am to come at all. The only way I can come with you, Brer Tiger, is if you carry me."

"Well, then, up with you!" said Brer Tiger. "Come along, then, be quick with you! I'll carry you if need be. But you will have to tell every one that what you said was not true. *And after that I am going to kill you!*"

"Very well, Brer Tiger—I will tell them," Brer Anansi replied meekly; "but you must put a blanket on your back, so that I can sit on it. If you don't I shall die before I get there."

Brer Tiger took the blanket from Brer Anansi's bed. He made a thick pad of it and put it on his back.

"Well," he said, "now come on, up with you! Get on to my back, and come and tell every one that what you said was not true. *And after that I am going to kill you!*"

Brer Anansi made a great fuss, but at last he climbed on to Brer Tiger's back, and Brer Tiger started off.

Before Brer Tiger reached the door Brer Anansi began to slip down, for, of course, Brer Tiger was walking upright, as he always did in those days.

"Oh, Brer Tiger, Brer Tiger," Brer Anansi called, "I am far too weak to sit here! You will have to give me a piece of rope to hold on to!"

"All right," Brer Tiger said. "Anything you like."