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On Appalachian Stories

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My intention, in this essay, is to speak about a unique area of the English language, the telling of stories. The well told story is, in the humble opinion of this writer is the highest art form that a language can produce, whether or not it is just told, with no other reasons for it than the telling of a riping good yarn or told in order to make us think. I do not propose to talk about all types of stories but I intend to discourse upon a certain type of tale. This is not to say that stories are unique to this type any other. The telling of stories is one of the oldest (if not the oldest) art forms known. As Tolkien would put it, "To ask what is the origin of stories (however qualified) is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind." *1

There are fine examples of this art form in every language. The "Jack tales", the Mukashi Bannashi tales of Japan, the Bada Yaga Tales of Russia, the Aesope Fables of Greece, and the Tales of Arabian Nights are just a few of the infinite number of variations of this art form.

Many of these legends are somewhat related to one another, but then for that matter so are languages. In fact this writer had the experience of hearing the same tale told by an Arab, with only slight variations from one that was related to him in his childhood. The interesting point was that I was told, in both cases, that the story was of local origin; which would have been almost impossible.

This legend involved a bet made about courage. The wager was that one person would stick an object into a grave at night. This was done. The object caught on the clothing of the one who had assailed the grave causing death

from shock to the person who did this. In the case of the Arabian story the person was a man, the object was a sword, and the clothing caught was his robe. In the American tale the person was a black woman, the object was a hoe, and the clothing caught was her skirt. Lafcadio Hearn also related a similar story from Japan. Students of folk-lore might be inclined to say that many variants of this and other tales have all been derived from a basic version.

What was the motive behind the telling of stories? Perhaps Professor Tolkien best answered this in his own motive for writing a story. He says "The prime motive was the desire of a tale - teller to try his hand at a... story that would hold the attention..., amuse..., delight..., and at times... excite or deeply move..." *2 Thus with my apology finished, allow me to tell a story or two.

My family's American roots lie in the mountains of northern Georgia. These mountains are the southern tip of the great chain of highlands known as the Appalachians. This region, until about 150 years ago, was isolated from much of the United States. Consequently, a sub - culture dialect developed called "mountainese".

This word is most often associated with the type English spoken in the region; which retains many words and expressions from Elizabethan English and a number of very incorrect grammar constructions. The use of the word yonder, for example, to mean over there or the expression "clean through" to denote complete movement through an object by another object are hold-overs from the English of Shakespeare's time. Some examples of the poor grammar are the use of double negatives, such as "not never" or the mispronunciation of words, nouns in particular, the word potato, for example, would be pronounced "tater". This dialect, however, developed a rich collection of stories, anecdotes, jokes, and outright lies.

My maternal grandfather and my father, and are masters of the tale. The two stories related here belong to the ones they told in my hearing. I will attempt to tell them in the tradition they passed on to me. I will always remember the long summer afternoons spent under the Georgia pines, sitting on some cast-off old ladder backed chair or empty nail keg, while my

grandfather would regale us with one story after another. The stories, for the most part, had a basis in the truth, however, my grandfather had little restraint in embroidering upon this truth just to make it more amusing. And why should anyone say anything critical about my grandfather rather letting go in his telling of stories? After all why should they not be told racier and better than the mediocre events that really happen.

My father, on the other hand, did not necessarily tell stories to entertain or amuse. He was a Southern Baptist minister who used stories in his sermons to illustrate a point of Christian doctrine or dogma. This is not to say that his stories were not humorous nor amusing; only that they had a some what higher reason. This reason being to edify his hearers.

My grandfather said that in the late nineteen-twenties that the roads in and around Townes County were little more than glorified trails. However, in spite of this, some of the better-off citizens had some kind of automobile.

This is a tale about two of those citizens. Call "God's wrath in a pond". (The misspelling and poor grammar are intentional in order to try to create my grandfather's style.)

You see hit'as like this, it ad been raining heavy all day, in fact the mountains and valleys had been storm swept severely for the last couples o days. The storms was so bad that some folks reckoned that the Good Lord might be gona to flood the earth again.

Well a couple a good old boys, who probably didn't care much about the wrath of God no how or if in they did they figured that there wern't much they could do about it, spent the rainy days a gettin roarin drunk. From their point of view there wern't any chance of getting any work done on the farm nohow and cause they most never got any time-off they might as well enjoy it.

Well, hit so happened that one of these fellows, namea Docketoma Plott, had a late Model-T Ford. So, he and the other fellow, I think he's Red Guss Soisb, got a notion that they'd go around the back o Bald Mountain to a bootlegger's they knowed in Raburn Country. An seeing how the weather had let up and they were out of liquor; they hopped in to that Model-T and took off.

The car swung round the barn yard and leaped forth unto the open country. They sped recklessly down the rain soaked roads at a pace that would skret a divel. There was curves so sharp that if you hitem fast enough you' ed meet yorself goin the opposite way. I'd swear that the Model-T went around many o them on only two wheels. Well, as they hurled down the road any fear o possable consequences seemed furgot. But the consequeces was a waiting just over the top of a small hill.

You see, down at the bottom of the hill was a small stream, not much wider than a car is long. There was this here foot log crossin this branch right next to a ford were vehicles crossed. Cause of the heavy rains a large bunch o sticks, leaves, and mud had piled up under the log. This pile-up had created a damin of stream, caushin floodin to the fields on the sides, Over the hill popped at motorized chariot and downit plunged with the volocity o a thunderbolt. Suddenly ahead both men saw what appeared, in the light o the full moon, to be a large body o water. Docketoma hit the brakes and shouted "Hold thyself, hold thyself. "

Red Guss stood up and grabed the top of the windshild as the car skidded from side to side in the mud. The car struck the water with a horrendous splash and mired up, causing Red Guss to fly out over the top o the hood.

"Millpond, oh Lord hit's a millpond, hit's a millpond," he yelled at the top o/his voice while flying through the air; his arms and legs a whipping like a wind mill.

And you knou what, he most drowned in ankle deep water while threshing bout trying to swim.

"Ho, Red git up afore yaa kill yourself this ain't no millpond," shouted Docketoma.

It is needless to say that they was, by now, both cold sober, an might add that both'em stayed on total abstinence thereafter.

This next one is one of my fathers most memorable tales. I do not remem - ber the sermons nor the occasions when my father used this story, however, he told it several different times. He had a college education, therefore, he used the correct forms of speech; with the exception of direct quotes from the characters in a story. The title of this tale is "That which grew."

There was a certain farmer living in the mountains of north Georgia. He had in his car a wife, his mother, and two children. Now the ten year old son was the eldest. The daughter was a child of six.

The father did his best to be upright and set a good example for his family. However, the son early on in life developed a wicked and cruel nature. The grandmother's dotting ways toward the daughter did not help the situation. The boy, in his jealousy and cruelty, often harassed the little girl. It happened that for the Christmas celebration the grandmother had made the girl a lovely doll. For the boy she made a pair of woolen socks. It happened that after the space of several days the doll disappeared. But when questioned about this matter the boy denied any knowledge of the disappearance.

The year, doing what the year does, brought the arrival of Spring. The earth began to turn green. The little girl, much to her surprise, found growing on the ground, near the barn, the shape of her doll. She ran to the house and informed her parents and grandmother of what she had seen. They gathered at the barn. The shape was dug-up; it was the doll. This strange thing had happened because the grandmother had stuffed the doll with the family's extra wheat seeds.

The father called the son to join them. The son seeing the doll quickly turned and ran into the forest. Because of his shame he stayed in the woods all that day. That evening he returned home. His father was sitting on the porch, waiting.

"Got caught didn't cha yor wickedness done growed up to get you," he said with a smile. Yes, he had gotten caught as we all will in our bad deeds. These two stories are only a small sample of the rich collection of stories that exist among the people of the Appalachians. Stories that are dying out, I fear because of the advent of modern entertainment. This is sad. Modern entertainment can not provide the beauty to a story the imagination combined with the spoken word can.

*1 J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1970) p.17.

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*2 J.R.R.Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.) p.6.

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