

No More Trumpets

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

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first edition

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY QUINN & BODEN COMPANY, INC., RAHWAY, N. J.

Typography by Robert Josephy

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TO DR. GEORGE H. SEMKEN

Grateful acknowledgments are hereby made to the publications in which these stories first appeared: the American Mercury, Folk-Say, Harper's Magazine, the New Yorker, Real America, Scribner's Magazine, the Southwest Review, and Story. Some of these stories also were reprinted in Evening Standard (London), Der Uhu (Berlin), and in the 1931, 1932, and 1933 volumes of O'Brien's Best Short Stories.

I

THE VISIT TO UNCLE JAKE'S

MY GRANDFATHER BEALS was a slow-talking man. His talk was that of the Virginia hills, and I suppose that the whining Arkansas sharecroppers and the drawling Texans thought him a little queer on account of it. They could understand why their farm neighbors from Kansas and Iowa and other Yankees and foreigners had strange accents, but a man whose talk was Southern and yet unlike their own was unaccountable. They used to mimic the old man when he wasn't around.

His way of talking slowly and gently gave him an innocent air that was a good help to him in his cotton business. While he had a name for honesty and pride, his methods, perhaps, were as sharp as the next cotton-buyer's. Lots of times the farmers, misled by those guileless accents, would be bested in a deal at the very moment they felt that they were skinning the simple old man.

Although his dialect got him a reputation for eccentricity, the only surprising thing I ever heard of his doing was buying a Ford touring-car. During the War he made money with cotton, and after the War he was able to retire, well fixed. He was about sixty-five then, tall and dignified, with a fine head of white hair. The

first thing he did, after he sold the good-will of his cotton business, was buy a flivver.

That was extraordinary, because he had done without a car in his cotton business, where he had had a real need for one. Year after year he had driven about the country, sizing up the cotton crop, in a ramshackle old phaëton hitched to a team of roans. The automobile agents had been after him for years, but he had put them off. Then, when he was an old man and out of business, he up and bought an automobile for his own pleasure.

I say for his own pleasure, because my Grandmother Beals refused, from the day he came driving up with the salesman, to ride with him in his automobile. There was wisdom in her decision, too. My Grandfather Beals never did get to be a very good driver. He had the most trouble with the foot-pedals which that model Ford had for gear shifts, and he was apt to step on the reverse instead of the brake and go wheeling backward to the detriment of whatever was behind him. Another thing that made riding with my Grandfather Beals a dubious pleasure was his habitual neglect of the steering-wheel. Driving his roans in the old days he got used to letting the reins fall idle across the dashboard while he pointed and gestured toward the fields along the way. When he began driving the Ford he was likely to let go the wheel completely while he motioned toward a fine stand of cotton.

It was a wonder that he didn't kill himself and others too. He didn't, though. He plowed through barbed wire, he backed off into deep ditches, he knocked a row

of cast-iron palings off the neighbor's ornamental fence, and once he broke out one end of the converted stable in which he kept the car. The new flivver got woefully scratched and battered, but my grandfather always came through unscathed. That is, excepting the acid comments of my grandmother. They must have wounded him.

But he was a headstrong man, and my grandmother's ridicule served only to make him more determined. He practiced driving on country dirt roads, and he cut a droll figure, jouncing over the ruts with his legs akimbo, crooked up on each side of the steering-wheel. He escaped having any serious accident, and in a few months he was getting the gully-jumper up around twenty-five miles an hour regularly.

II

It was about this time that presages of the post-war business depression were beginning to appear. The first was a lowering of prices on Fords. My Grandfather Beals saw then that he could have saved fifty dollars had he waited two or three months to buy his car. He took this as a personal grievance against Henry Ford. The manufacturer had got the best of him in a business deal. At the time he had bought his car from him, Ford had known that prices were going to be lowered shortly, and he had taken my grandfather to a cleaning. Other price-cutting followed and hard times were at hand. My Grandfather Beals blamed Henry Ford for everything.

"That man Fohd," he would say in opening his re-

marks on the subject, "that man Fohd ought to be took out and hanged on the highest tree in the land."

His resentment was so strong that he could no longer get any pleasure out of driving his automobile. He would have sold it, but it was so bent and torn, it would have brought scarcely any price at all, even if the market had not been falling. So he drove the Ford touring-car into the stable, where he had cut out the stalls and mangers to make a garage, and there it stayed for several years, gray and dejected under its coating of silt and straw and dust.

There was only one thing, perhaps, that could have made my grandfather forget his grudge and set those narrow-tired, mud-crust-ed wheels in motion again. That came one morning in the fourth June of his retirement. It was word from his brother Jacob.

He hadn't seen or heard from Jacob in more than fifty years. There had been eight brothers in that family. As each of them had come of age, the father had given him a horse, saddle and bridle, a jug of brandy and twenty dollars in cash and had told him to light out. Some of them had ridden west, some of them had ridden south, and one of them had ridden over the hill to marry a moonshiner's daughter.

Jacob was the oldest, so he was the first to go. His going made a strong impression on my grandfather, a boy of fifteen, and he carried the memory of it through the years. He had stood in the yard with the rest of the family that morning watching Jacob mount up. Better than half a century had passed since he had stood gazing after Jacob galloping away from the hills, the jug

of liquor bouncing at the saddle-side and the twenty silver dollars clanking in time.

In later years Jacob's destiny was my grandfather's favorite topic for surmise. He would spend futile hours making guesses about what had become of his oldest brother. Out of fictitious circumstance he would build up possible careers for Jacob, and then, at the end, he would reject all of them.

He had kept up with all the others. His brother Charlie, he knew, had a good thing of it with a melon farm in Colorado. Lacey had frozen to death in the Yukon, Web had a homestead in Idaho, Dick was a tobacco farmer back East, and so on down the line. But Jacob interested him more than all the others put together, and of Jacob he knew nothing.

Then one morning the letter came bearing word of my grandfather's oldest brother. It had an Arkansas postmark, and it was written by Jacob's second wife.

She explained that they had been married three years. She had been a widow and he had been a widower and both of them had families grown and gone away. She called Jacob "daddy," and I thought that was out of keeping when I read the letter. Daddy had often wondered about his brothers and sisters, but he had never made any attempt to get in touch with them. At last she had written to the cross-roads postmaster near the old home back in the Virginia hills, and from him she had obtained the addresses of various members of the family. Daddy was getting old, she wrote, and she thought it would be nice if he could hear from his favorite brother before he passed on.

My grandfather was not a demonstrative man, but the letter put him in a transport of joy. He was triumphant. It was as if he, unaided, had worried through to the solution of a problem that had puzzled everyone for ages. He wore the letter to a limp, ink-stained frazzle, rereading it, studying it, speculating on ambiguous phrases, trying to read more than was in the writing.

The woman wrote a fine Spencerian hand, making her first essses like f's and finishing off words with slight curlicues. That was a good sign. Jacob's second wife was an educated woman. My grandfather said, "Well, Jake's got him a good woman, as old as he is, so he must have got to be somebody." But the handwriting was wavering, and that showed that the woman was old.

My Grandfather Beals got a road-map of Arkansas and began hunting for the town of the postmark. It was a hard search. But finally, deep among the hachures of the Ozarks, dense as a handful of eyebrows, he located the name in print so fine it was barely legible. The discovery delighted him almost as much as the letter had, and he was in a fever of excitement.

That same day he backed the old Ford out of the stable. It was the first time he had laid hand on it in three years. He washed it carefully. What black enamel there was left on the scarred, dented sides was peeling, so he made a quick job of repainting the body. He used some paint he had around the barn. When this turned out to be a peculiar shade of green, my grandfather

insisted that it was "ginger blue," a good color and the very one he was after.

He made his preparations quickly, and when he announced one night that he was going on a trip over into the Arkansas hills the next day, and that my brother Ed and I were going along, he took everyone so completely by surprise, no one opposed him. At least that is the only explanation I can make for our ever going with him on that wild trip. As I remember it, no one raised any objection at the time. All I remember is that my grandfather told me and Ed the evening before we started that we'd have to get to bed early, because we were going to start for Arkansas the next morning before day.

"It's three hundud mile, a right smaht piece," my Grandfather Beals said, "and we ah goin' to staht in the mawnin' befo' day."

III

The cold engine banged and started all the roosters in the neighborhood crowing before their time. A spasm shook the old car and it shivered and clanked as my grandfather twisted the wheel around and the flivver lights cut a broad arc. We rolled out of the abandoned barnyard, halting for Ed to get out and close the gate. Ed ran back and got up in the front seat. I sat in the back drowsing and running my tongue over my front teeth, feeling the place where the breakfast coffee had scalded it.

We rattled out of town and went wheeling eastward at a great speed. The lights let a dim, quivering swath

ahead on the dirt road, turning the cool, dewy dust to talcum. My grandfather pulled the gas-lever down and the powdered road went slithering out from under us. Ed and I held on for dear life. Through the dark we could make out the grim set of Grandfather Beals's jaw.

It was getting light and the foot-hills had appeared out of the dusk before us when he finally pushed the throttle back up to its usual notch. As the speed slackened and the engine quieted, he turned to Ed.

"I alluhs like to staht in like I can hold out," he said, smiling softly.

These were the first words spoken, and Ed took advantage of the opening to ask, "How long are we going to stay over in Arkansas, grandpa?"

"Oh, we'll talk about that when we get thah. Me and brothah Jake ah goin' to have lots to talk about."

He had put the treeless prairies behind us and we were in the shaded hills when the sun, like a bloody thumb, came poking up through the mist wreaths.

As day broadened and we were rolling along at a more leisurely rate, my Grandfather Beals began to take notice of the surrounding landscape. We were climbing a mountain road, where a slight jog to the right would have meant plunging over the bluff into the creek-bottom, hundreds of feet below. My grandfather let go the wheel and threw out both his hands with a Delsartian gesture toward the smoky valley.

"Now, look ye thah!" he exclaimed. "Ain't that a mästuh sight?"

"Watch it, grandpa, watch it!" said Ed, snatching at the wheel.

Grandfather Beals resumed the wheel coolly and held it until, a short distance on, a vineyard marching up over a hill-top attracted his attention.

"See thah, you boys. You-all ain't nevah seen nothin' like that. That just like back East. You-all ain't nevah known what it is to live in the hill country."

And he was forgetful of the steering-wheel again.

Occasionally we would stop to consult the road-map, or to question ruminative mountaineers.

"Just keep right on follerin' this main-traveled road, and it'll get you whurever you're goin'," they always said.

The road led through summer-resort towns with their concrete, wire-fenced bathing-pools, past tall-stacked canning factories, along the base of high, sheer stone bluffs, with Bible texts, sets of gums and teeth advertising dental parlors, and short Holy Roller exhortations stenciled on the rock. By noon, however, these encroachments vanished. We were deep in the hill country. We came to the town of the postmark.

The postmaster let his tilted chair thump down on the store-porch floor. "They's a Jake Beals that gets his mail out on the Goshen Road," the postmaster said, rubbing his thighs, "but most possible he lives off back of the road a ways."

All along the Goshen Road, an engine-racking mountain trail, we stopped to look at mail-boxes. Finally we found one, almost hidden by tall weeds, with "Jake Beals" scrawled on it in black paint. There was no sign

of a house, but a narrow, rock-strewn lane wound off from the road.

After we turned off on this lane, I remember thinking that it was all very much like one of those Irish stories in which the heroes are always stepping over into the land of youth. Grandfather Beals had hurtled us back through fifty years of time with his quaking flivver, let alone over a hundred miles of high road and low road.

When I got out to inquire at a cabin, I noticed a hand-wrought grubbing-hoe in the yard and the ax sticking in the chopping-block had a whittled handle. A stately, red-haired woman chewing a snuff-twigg said, "Uncle Jake Beals? Why him and his woman lives up the lane a piece, over on Seven Mile Crik. Won't you-all git out and come in?"

IV

But we drove on, and just as the lane was petering out we reached a log house on a knoll. A barrel-stave hammock was stretched between two trees in the yard, and lying in it was a small, white-haired man dressed in faded blue overalls. As my grandfather stopped the Ford and shut off the engine, the little man sat up in the swing, blinking.

"Howdy do, suh?" said my Grandfather Beals.

"Quite well, thank you, suh. How ah you, suh?" said the little old man. He got to his feet and sauntered out to the car.

A faint smile quivered on my Grandfather Beals's lips. "We're lookin' foh a man by the name of Jones

that lives around in this country somewhuh," he said.

"Jones?" said the old man of the hammock. "Well, now it appeahs to me like thah is a family of Joneses livin' on down the crik a ways, but I 'low you'll have to go back around by the big road to get thah. Won't you-all light and rest yo'-se'ves a while?"

My Grandfather Beals was close to tears. His eyes glistened. This was the meeting he had tried to envisage untold times during the fifty years they had been separated. It was sad that he should recognize Jacob without Jacob's knowing him.

"Don't you know me, Jake?" he said softly.

The old man stepped back, startled. He put his hand up to his frowsy white head, scratched, and peered suspiciously at the man in the automobile.

"Why, no, stranguh, I can't say as I do."

"It's Jawn," said my grandfather in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"How was that?"

My grandfather cleared his throat. "It's yo' brothah Jawn," he said.

The transformation was immediate. The gnomish little man jumped and pranced.

"Jawn! Jawn!" he shouted, scrabbling up on the running-board. "Get out o' thah and let me see you!" He jumped back down and made off toward the house to bring up short and bawl, "Mahthy, come out o' thah! Brothah Jawn's hyah!" Then he came charging back.

My Grandfather Beals descended stiffly from the car. This was not the tender reunion he had dreamed about. His dignity, alongside the joyous unrestraint of his

older brother, made him seem pompous and a little ridiculous.

He was straight and well fed, whereas Jacob was stooped and scrawny. The inactivity of his retirement had let my grandfather develop a paunch.

When he stepped to the ground Jacob ran up to him with a rigid forefinger. "Lawdy, what a belly!" he shouted. "Jawnnie! Jawnnie! Lawdy, what a belly!"

My Grandfather Beals colored and chuckled uncomfortably. His older brother ran circles around him, as delighted as a puppy.

A woman came out from the cabin. She wore a dingy Mother Hubbard. Her yellowish-white hair flew in strings about her face, and her eyes were pink and weak.

"Mahthy," cried Jacob, "this is my brothah Jawn you heered me talk about."

Martha batted her eyes and smiled a toothless smile and shook hands. "And whose younguns air them?" she asked pleasantly, turning to Ed and me. It was the first time we'd been noticed.

"These ah Cayoline's boys," my grandfather said, "Eddie and Dave."

"Cay'line's boys?" said Jacob. "Who's Cay'line? That yo' old woman?"

"No, Cayrie's my oldest daughtah."

"Law, law, got a grown daughtah and grandchild-uns!" shouted Jacob. "Little Jawnnie! And lawdy! what a belly! Little old Jawnnie!"

He capered up to the Ford and ran his hand over the green-enameled sides. "Little Jawnnie," he murmured proudly, "come drivin' up hyah in a cah, just as