

Janice Daugharty
Rt. 1
Stockton, Ga. 31649
Short Story

Two and Twain are the Same

It had been a long hot morning, and the sun was still advancing toward noon.

Ocie rocked back on the heels of the rickety chair and waited, fondling the mended legs.

"Yessir," he said, tossing his head back to guffaw, moving up the ranks on his stunned yankee brother-in-law. "They ain't nothing like living in this neck of the woods if you want to have a big time."

The visit hadn't started out in guarded hostility, but it looked as if it would end that way - if it ever did end. Still, the energetic wit-sparring beat the heck out of listlessly sneaking around, as Ocie had since Their arrival the evening before, trying to improvise quiet in which to read his newspaper and learn what They'd done to cause his piddling stocks to drop.

Hadn't that son-of-a-yankee, John Merritt, been treating them like they were quaint ever since he had swaggered through the door? Ocie asked himself - even asking Ida before he had retreated to the temporary privacy of the side yard.

He clasped his hands behind his nappy gray head and cut his eyes toward the shed of the old cotton house, cluttered with relics resurrected from the old homeplace. He'd already

defiled one-third of the sacred treasures in the spawning of his deliberate tales. Oh, there was a measure of truth in all of them but more exaggeration.

Let's see, he'd used up the glass demi-john jug, webbed with scratches, which Ida planned to turn into a terrarium, first chance she got: one-hundred proof moonshine up to the rim, everybody - even the younguns, when they had been home - sampling, staggering back to the still in the pinewoods behind the house for a refill.

His laughter caught in his throat as he recalled his tale, glancing at John Merritt, black hair pruned like a city cedar, on his right. John looked odd correctly seated in the other discarded chair beside Ocie's cotton-shed exhibit. Ocie usually entertained only intimate friends there in his little clearing between the voluptuous grapevine, arbored with stout rustic posts, and the archaic, even naked, practicality of the cotton shed. The woods breathed at his back with locusts and crickets in the requiem of souging pines.

Beside the white modest house on his left, the clearing provided a generous view of the dirt road out front where his neighbors passed enroute to work in Valdosta, Georgia, ten miles north, to community and church functions, or to the country store a mile away at the crossing. Most of them farmed, as he had before he had retired. The sounds of each of their tractors he could identify. Hoke Timmer's engine peeped like a killdeer, intermittent, pleading. Ocie'd offered to tamper with it and

locate the problem as soon as Hoke got the crops in. Cranford Hall had bought a new one with his crop money from last year, a sweet smooth hum on the day. It had been a mistake, and Ocie had told him. Farming was too unstable for 1988. But he was secretly glad that someone still had the faith to purchase a new red tractor.

No. He'd already taunted John Merritt with the story about the mule he and his Pa had worked to death that summer in 1925, he thought, allowing his eyes to roam from the plow stock hung on the seasoned wall of the cotton shed. He smiled, thinking of John Merritt's reaction. His pupils had dialated with unbridled agitation, and he'd babbled some unintelligible lament.

"Yessir," Ocie had said. "I'm here to tell you, a tractor ain't nothing up agin a mule. Twelve ears of corn a day - if you can remember to feed him - and he'll work till he drops. I reckon I must've forgot to feed up the day before. Anyhow, he shore dropped dead in the field. Course, me and Pa had been taking turns walking behind him since first light. Weren't no water in the branch what run back've the field cause of the drought.

"Onliest way he'd have got some was if we'd a-toted it and we didn't have time, what with the corn needin laying by like it did. By sundown, he was staggering, us working on till the moon riz. And that's when old Creasy got started to twitching.

"Pa says, 'Boy, what you done to that mule?' Course I says I ain't done nothing. 'What you reckon ails him, then?' Pa says, standing there drinking a glass of canesugar water Ma sent out in a jug to perten us up.

"'I ain't got no notion, Pa,' I says, already trying to figger out if I'd fed him the night before or not. 'Reckon he might need a swig of water?' I asked Pa. And before he could study on it, standing their scratching his old shaggy head, red neck blistered from the sun, that danged mule just dropped like a rock. Didn't move ary hair, blowflies blowing him, buzzards circling overhead. Know what Pa says?"

"What?" John Merritt said, sitting erectly in his chair, his white shirt glaring in the sun.

"He says for me to go to the cotton shed, right yonder, and get the shovel so as we can bury him right where he lays," Ocie said, cutting his eyes toward John, waiting.

"That shed?" John Merritt asked, nodding toward it without looking.

"Yeah," said Ocie. "Same old shovel yonder we used when that old nigger Creasy dropped dead down the end of the lane..."

"The mule was named Creasy," John Merritt corrected, kneading his soft white hands.

"Yeah, we named the mule after old Creasy," interjected Ocie. "Anyhow, when old Creasy dropped dead, we aimed to drag him off in the woods, like anybody else would, but we figgered the fitting thing was to bury him where he'd plowed so many furrows in his good days..."

"The mule," John said, bearing down on Ocie with his clear tone.

"Old Creasy," Ocie said. "So, we dug a hole, say, six by two or so - and us plum wore out to the bone - and both of us

together tugged at him till we got'em in. Pa says a few words over him, thanking the Lord-above for good cheap..."

"Labor?" John Merritt said, leaning toward Ocie.

"Equipment," said Ocie, scowling at John Merritt.

"My Pa was a righteous man, Hard-shell Baptist, salt-of-the-earth," said Ocie, glimpsing an old white tobacco sheet draped over an inside rafter through a crack in the cotton house wall. "I don't know if you knowed it or not but he was the one headed up the first Klu Klux Klan in these parts."

"No!" said John, mouth agape.

"Swear to God!" said Ocie, mirroring John's Merritt's expression.

He reared back, furtively twisting his neck toward the women's kitchen clatter and laughter wafting on the yard. Stalling, for effect, he inhaled the gnawing odor of stale coffee at odds with the scent of the rich savage earth beneath the grapevine.

A mockingbird chirped from within the tangled vines.

"One dark night," Ocie hissed, heaving madly as he leaned nearer John Merritt. "It was about this time've the year... You ever seen that picture show, TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD?"

"Yes. Why?" John Merritt asked, too loud, scanning the yard, clearing his throat and crossing his legs punctiliously.

"Well, you know how stuff gets started out've nothing in the south, then," Ocie said, glancing back - one, two - again at John Merritt. "Oh, me! I'm here to tell you!"

"What?" John Merritt hissed. "What?"

"I can't tell it."

"Huh?" John Merritt said. "I wouldn't tell anyone."

"You a Mason?"

"A what?"

"You know, a Mason, a member of the Masonic Order? Yall ain't got no clubs in New York?" Ocie asked, squinting at him, deliberately exposing his top row of teeth until his gold tooth flashed; John winced and Ocie posed.

"We've got the Rotary Club. I'm a member in good standing."

"Naw, that won't do," said Ocie. "Won't do at all."

He covertly observed John's disappointed face: his clean dimpled chin twitched.

"You a Shriner?" Ocie asked solemnly.

"No," John Merritt said, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Well, I be derned if that weren't old Clute Tuten come by and didn't even stop!" Ocie said, jerking upright and clasping his hands between his knees, stretching forward to watch the old blue Ford pickup being swallowed by the dust as it pattered past. "That sucker might think he's gonna get my vote without paying for it, but he's gonna get a fooling."

"Paying," said John, squeaking, stretching, inhaling the dust spreading across the sun-grazed yard.

"Yeah, Will Sanders appreciates a man's vote. Gone up to ten dollars, five in the quarters."

John Merritt's breathing grew labored and even, as though he coaxed each natural function through.

"Ocie, yall come on and eat!" shouted Ida from the back

screendoor, her voice striking sharply on the lull.

"We're a-coming, Dear," Ocie called in a natural solicitous tone, going fiendish, malevolent. "Damn aggravating woman! She better have my grits and chittlings this time. I'm gonna have to take the whip to her, first 'n last."

John Merritt gazed with Ocie at the aged-leather whip neatly coiled and hung from a nail on a hand-hewed post. "Can't get it right without a whipping!" Ocie added, laughing fiendishly. "Yaa, Lordy!" he said, subsiding, wiping tears of glee from his sun-bright cheeks. "That puts me in mind of what our preacher said the other day. He didn't tell this, I want you to know, while he was preaching; it was afterward while a bunch of us men was gathered around outside trying to figger out what to do about them dern Methodists trying to get our members. Anyhow, Brother Levi - that's our Baptist preacher - said his wife, Sister Coretta, she got so used to getting whipped for slubbering over her house work, got to where she was coming to him for it reg'lar on mornings when she didn't feel up-to-snuff to get herself going."

Laughter claimed Ocie as he reared back on the bogging chair legs and almost lost his balance, catching on one hand. Recovering, he locked eyes with his stricken brother-in-law.

"You whip Grace, now and then, too, don't you?" he said soberly, one gray-spoked eye twitching.

"No," John Merritt said, wiping his dewy brow.

"Yall don't do that up there?"

"No," John said, showing symptoms of enlightenment in a growing smile.

Ocie decided he'd best move on to another subject, sensing that he had tarried too long on that one. Desperately, covertly, he began canvassing the toolshed for a relic which would wax John's waning regard. Something good! Something great! The devining rod. Yes. No. Muleshears. Cotton scales. A smokey lantern. A fiddle bow.

Now capable and self-assured as things meshed, objects focussed, he complimented himself on his acuity, his imagination. A black cat dashed under a ladder against the toolshed; Ocie groaned, willing himself pale, spastically genuflected, rolling his thin cotton shirt sleeve on his stout hairy arm. He groaned again and rubbed the blue-green tatoo etched on his forearm which read, "Raisin hell." He almost sniggered as he rolled his eyes back and wrenched his neck, like a dying mule, seeing John Merritt's concerned white face above him. What next? he thought, holding.

"Morning, Mr. Ocie! How you?" called a familiar voice from the front.

Ocie looked up at the sandy dirt road and saw Ichabod Crane idling along the edge near the ditch, grinning idiotically and staring from a sideways strut.

"How you doing, Little Nigger?" Ocie said with relish, booming, the address bursting, flourishing on the end.

"I be doing all right. How bout you?" Ichabod said, twisting his cretinous body in the road, scuffing circles with his laceless brogans. His spoiled-slick twill pants bagged to his knees, belted by a waist length of hayrope. Across one shoulder, he carried a cane fishing pole and a hobo stick, flagged with a red kerchief.

Grinning wide, he exposed bare pink gums, flecked with brown. His tongue constantly flicked at the gnats swarming around his broad flat nose. The whites of his eyes were flecked with brown, like his gums. His jet black back and chest blinked through slits in his tattered red shirt. Thin as a rail, he gyrated, timidly lurching about, rolling his eyes as he continued his aimless salute.

"Who that you got there, Mr. Ocie?" he said, his speech in trilling iambs.

"Oh, that's just my wife's sister's husband from up around New York," Ocie said, still booming, grinning, watching John Merritt's aghast face.

"Miss Ida's brother, you say?" Ichabod said, dancing foot-to-foot. "All the way come from New York?"

"Yeah, he's just down here for Miss Grace to visit the old homeplace, check up on family and all," said Ocie.

"That good! That good! Gotta check on the family," said Ichabod, restive, eager to be off.

"Off a-fishing, huh?" said Ocie.

"Yawsuh, gonna see if I can't catch me a mess of red-fin pikes out've the branch, suh."

"Catch many yesterday?" Ocie asked.

"Nawsuh, weren't enough for a mess."

"Don't say," said Ocie. "Well, come on back by and get you a mess of black-eyed peas when you get the chance," said Ocie, toning down.

"Shore will, now," said Ocie. "I be seeing yall, heah."

"Good-day," said Ocie, watching him amble along the ribbon of gray sand, curled at the curves.

"My God!" said John Merritt, purblind, flushed and fanning, watching Ichabod limp off. "Where do you whip your negroes at?" he asked, still hypnotised.

"Hub?" said Ocie.

"You know!" said John Merritt. "Whipping. Where do you people whip them?"

"Little Nigger?" asked Ocie, waspishly, falling into cadence again. "I tell you, my Pa's whipped a many a nigger in..."

"Ocie, yall come on now!" shouted Ida from the back door.

"Once upon a time..." Ocie started, letting it linger as he stood and carried both chairs to the shed, seeing all the implements and tools from the past so proudly displayed on the wall. He had hung each on existing nails where his grandfather and father had conveniently hung them over the span of a century. He thought he would choke on his own stammering, smother in John Merritt's excited breath on his neck.

As he placed the chairs against the wall, a tarnished confederate saber fell, striking, bridging the two chairs, seat to seat.

the end