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# A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY BALLADRY[1]

Some time before daylight, May 11, 1894, at the foot of Jenkins Hill, about two miles from Browning, Linn County, Missouri, a quadruple murder was committed which made a very strong impression upon the people of the countryside. Though the crime was committed nearly twenty years ago, the memory of it is kept fresh in a number of ballads which constitute probably as good an instance of what Professor Gummere calls journalistic balladry as is to be found in modern times.

The trial of the murderers is reviewed, with a summary of the evidence, in the Reports of the Supreme Court of Missouri; but the best account is preserved in a chapbook published by Mr. Walker Ryan at Kansas City in 1896 and bearing the following title:

"Murder of the
Meeks Family
or
Crimes of the Taylor Brothers.
The Full and authentic Story of the Midnight Massacre, by
Bill and George Taylor, of the Meeks Family,
Father, Mother and Three Little Children.
Flight, Pursuit and Capture of the Murderers.
Their Sensational Trials,
Attempts to Bribe Juries and Guards and
Their Escape from Prison,
Recapture and Sentence to Death.
The Gruesome Story of Little Nellie Meeks,
Sole survivor of the Massacre,
Saved by the Hand of Providence to Bring the
Slayers of her Family to Justice.
Published by Ryan Walker, Kansas City, Mo.
921–923 Walnut Street."

[1] Practically all the material for this study in contemporary vulgar balladry was got together by Miss Goldy M. Hamilton of the Kirksville Normal School, chiefly from her students there. Memory of the crime is preserved in balladry, in one version or another, throughout a group of counties in north-

The victims of the murder were Gus Meeks, his wife, and two girls aged five and two. Nellie Meeks, aged nine, was also left for dead by the murderers, but recovered consciousness at daylight and reached a neighbour's house, revealing the crime. According to the chapbook a fourth child, born two months before its time as the mother struggled to escape, must be added to the list. Whether this item appeared in the testimony at the trial or was picked up by the reporter from the rumour of the countryside, I do not know. It is not mentioned in the Supreme Court review of the case. All five (or six) of the bodies were buried under a strawstack in George Taylor's cornfield, which the murderers had prepared beforehand with a view to burning it and so covering the traces of their crime; but it was a misty night and the straw only smouldered. Nellie got to Carter's house, near by, and Mrs. Carter sent her boy Jim to the stack to verify Nellie's story. Here he found George Taylor harrowing around the stack—for the purpose, evidently, of hiding the waggon tracks, as the ground was too wet for harrowing. George, finding that the crime was discovered, fled to Browning to warn Bill, and both took flight. They were captured three months later in Arkansas.

The Taylor brothers were prosperous people and prominent in the community, but already bore a bad reputation. Bill, the elder, had studied law at the State University, and later had been a clerk in the bank of Beverly Bolling at Browning, in which he rose to be cashier. He was also elected to the Legislature. Accused of crookedness in regard to the collection of a pension for a widow, he left Bolling's bank, and soon after became cashier in a new bank started for him by his father-in-law, Leonard, in the same town. Here he raised a draft for two dollars to two thousand, and got George to cash it at a bank in Kirksville. He was indicted for this fraud, but got off through the influence of Leonard and other friends. Then he set fire to a lumber yard for the sake of the insurance on a neighbouring building, and at the same time got a confederate to swear that Bolling set it afire. Meeks, who now first enters the story,

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central Missouri, reaching as far south as Boone County and as far east as Audrain; to this group of counties Kirksville is central. Ryan's chapbook I had access to through the kindness of Mr. F. A. Sampson of the State Historical Society, in whose library a copy of it is preserved. The third or Boone County version of the ballad was secured by Miss Lucy Laws of Christian College, Columbia, where Miss Cowden is a student.

testified that Taylor and his confederate robbed the building before the fire. The confederate was tried and sentenced for five years, but escaped; Taylor got a new trial, and then continuances, until in the words of the chapbook, the case was "lost in the shuffle." Meeks, clearly, was a poor-spirited creature ready to do anybody's dirty work for a consideration; for despite his testimony in the arson case Taylor presently employed him to steal the cattle of a man named McCullough and sell them in Kansas City. Meeks was caught and sentenced to two years; put in prison he confessed, implicating Taylor, and was pardoned by the governor to testify against his employer. It was to prevent such testimony that the Taylors killed him.

George was a Normal School graduate and had been a teacher. He was the handsome man of the family, and a loose liver; he had killed a man and a boy in Stone County, but Bill, then in the Legislature had brought him off. He had married into the Gibson family, and was a well-to-do farmer near Browning.[1]

Thus the Taylors were prominent people with a numerous and influential connection—as appears from Bill's immunity in the arson and cattle cases. The chapbook reckons that their party included about one hundred persons. The case seems to have taken on something of the character of a clan fight. It was tried under change of venue in Carroll County—tried twice, for the first jury was dismissed under the suspicion, afterwards proved, of bribery. The ease with which the murderers escaped after the crime points to a favouring element in the community. George escaped a second time—from the Carroll County jail, shortly before the time set for the hanging—and has never been heard from since; but Bill was hanged at Carrollton, April 30, 1896.

So much for the murder and its perpetrators: now for the ballad. The chapbook has a passage which carries us back to the Golden Age of vulgar balladry and suggests an origin for some of the versions. Describing the trial, it says: "Men and women travelled hundreds of miles to Carrollton to listen to the trial or to get a glimpse of the two noted murderers. Fakirs by the dozen flocked to the town and took possession of the public square with their catch-penny arrangements. There was no end of red lemonade stands, cigar wheels, cane racks, medicine

[1] Browning is close to the north edge of Linn County, and about nine miles south of Milan, Sullivan County, where Meeks lived.

and soap hawkers and strolling musicians of all kinds." At least one version of the ballad was current before the hanging, for a stanza of it is quoted in the chapbook as sung by the crowd in the street, to the tune of *Joe Howell*, while Bill was being led to the gallows. But the earliest version was composed before the trial and even before the capture of the murderers in August, 1894, if we may judge from the last stanza:

"About one mile from Browning,
  Upon the Jenkins Hill,
Gus Meeks and family were murdered
  By the Taylors, George and Bill.

"The first they killed was Mr. Meeks,
  And the woman began to cry
And beg them to spare her little ones:
  But they told her all must die.

"In vain they looked around
  For their mischief to conceal;
So loaded them into a wagon
  And drove to George's field.

"Next morning George was seen
  With his team out in the field,
Harrowing around the old straw stack
  Where their victims were concealed.

"But the hand of Providence was there,
  As you all know very well,
To spare the life of the little one,
  On the murderers to tell.

"And when she arose from her strawy grave
  To Carter's house she went
And told them of the tragedy
  And the horrible night she had spent.

"And when George Taylor heard of this,
  He went to his brother Bill
And told him of the mistake they had made:
  'There is one we did not kill.'

"So they hustled around, as you all know,
  And soon they left the town,
And ever since been hunted for,
  But still they can't be found.

"Now they are at large and the officers seem
  To think that they are gone.
And if ever they catch those desperate men
  I shall complete my song."

This ballad is declared by all who know it to be the production of Arthur Wallace, a blind huckster, musician, and travelling showman, whose home was until recently at Eversonville, Linn County. Luther Crookshank, a student at the Kirksville Normal School, who lives near Jenkins Hill and who remembers the coming of posses to search for George Taylor after his escape in 1896, gives some interesting particulars about Wallace. The ballad, he thinks, was written within three or four weeks after the murder. Wallace, who is probably not over fifty now, travelled mostly in Linn and Livingston counties, buying up old rubber. He was blind, and took a boy with him. He knew nearly everybody in the two counties by his voice. Alternately or along with his huckstering he ran a "show." For this purpose he had two other men with him, a driver and a man to set up the tent. The show included fiddling and singing by Wallace and, later, moving pictures, which he was the first to exhibit in that part of the country. Crookshank saw his show about ten years ago. It may be running still; it was two or three years since.

It is a curious testimony to the conservatism of the ballad memory or the poverty of Wallace's invention or both that this version, halting as it does before the capture of the murderers and the sensational escape of George Taylor, still holds its own in popular favour. But certain other versions are probably more widely known. At least one of these was made to be sung by Nellie Meeks in a show of which she was the chief feature.

The career of Nellie Meeks after the murder of her parents and sisters can be but imperfectly traced. George Meeks doubtless knows what became of her, but we have not questioned him. According to the chapbook she was adopted by the prosecuting attorney of Sullivan County; but this, if a fact, must have been a merely temporary arrangement. While still a little girl she was on exhibition, whether to excite pity or to draw trade does not appear, in a store window, in Kirksville. People now living in Kirksville remember seeing her there. Later she travelled with a "carnival company" on a salary, singing the tragic event of her childhood. Her singing was poor, but no doubt her presence on the stage contributed to the success of the show. She performed at Browning, among other places. Then there is a rumour of her having worked in a department store in Saint Louis; of her having married and appeared in her native place with a child;

and then—silence. The following version evidently owes its origin to Nellie's stage career:

"In Milan, Sullivan County,
There lived a family poor,
A father and a mother,
Three children round the door.
This man was sent to prison,
For stealing he had done,
And telling of some other,
His freedom it was won.

. . . . . .
. . . . . .

"And thus the governor pardoned him,
And sent him home to stay
Until he was needed farther
To swear before the court,
Against the Taylor brothers,
His country to support.

"'Twas on the night of May the tenth,
Two men to Milan came,
To get the Meeks family
And murder them the same.
They said they wanted to 'lease him,
And tell him of their scheme,
They would give him a thousand dollars,
A wagon, and a team.

"The wife said, 'They will kill you,'
But the father he thought no.
So they bundled up their baggage,
And started off to go.
They travelled very nicely
Till near the Taylors' farm,
And thus the murder ended
With but a slight alarm.

"I saw them kill poor papa,
Dear mamma and sisters too,
And then they tried to kill me,
And that was all I knew,
Until we reached the straw yard,
Our burial to prepare,
And God was there before me,
And God was with me there."

Of the third version there are two copies. The one quoted is from the manuscript ballad book of Ada Belle Cowden of Wood-

landville, Boone County, who learned it from a boy of her acquaintance a few years ago. On the whole the two copies correspond pretty closely, though the second omits the third stanza which seems to have been made from the fifth and sixth stanzas of Wallace's.

"About one mile from Browning town,
At the foot of Jenkin's Hill,
Took place this awful murder
By the Taylors George and Bill.
Gus Meek's wife and children
Were taken from the home,
Were taken by those tailors
To meet their awful doom.

"They wrote Gus Meeks a letter
Telling him to be ready at ten,
And try to leave the country
To save disgrace from them.
How little did he think then
Those taylors George and Bill
That night would murder his family
Upon the Jenkins Hill.

"But the hand of providence came
To little Nellie and said
Ere the break of morning
A save escape she made,
She came from out her straw-made grave
And to Carter's house she came,
And told this mournful story,
That adds to our country's shame.

"She stood before the doorway
With that awful gash cut in her head,
While she sobbed and wept most bitterly
These were the words she said.
Some very cruel men came
And took us from our bed.
They shot our papa and mamma
And thought us three were dead.

"They put us in a wagon
And took us to our straw-made grave
How little did they think then
Their sad little Nellie would save.
But providence was against them,
The righteous hand was there
And willed against those murders
Little Nellie's life to spare.

"Next morning after the murder
George was seen out in a field
A-harrowing out the wagon tracks
His mischief to conceal.
But this was all in vain,
For nothing could they avail.
By J. E. South they were captured
And taken to the Carrollton jail.

"Once I had a dear mother,
A mother kind and true,
But those wicked men shot her
And shot my papa too.
Now I am an orphan
Nobody cares for me,
May God's blessing go with them
Wherever they may be."

Of the fourth version we have one copy, probably incomplete, and three fragments. The copy entitled *Nellie's Lament* derives from Grundy County.

"Once I had a mamma, likewise a papa too,
Two darling little sisters, of course I loved them true.
But they were foully murdered and I alone am left,
Of those I loved so dearly, alas I am bereft.

*Chorus*

"Sad, sad to be a little orphan here,
No more to see my little sisters dear,
They are in heaven, the voices they are still,
The fatal blows were given upon Jenkins Hill.

"Full well I do remember, 't was in the lovely spring,
The earth was wrapped in slumber, the birds had ceased to sing.
The sun in all its beauty o'er hill and valley smiled,
Its gentle rays were shining upon an orphan child.

"Next morning I awakened, my head was wrapped with pain,
I gazed in speechless wonder upon my kindred slain.
The sun in all its beauty o'er hill and valley smiled,
Its gentle rays were shining upon an orphan child.

"I wandered to a cottage and there I did relate
How they had been murdered, I felt an awful fate.
Then friends around me gathered, but I nevermore shall see
My sisters and my parents that were so dear to me."

The latest, and the weakest, of the Meeks ballads is the only one that we certainly know to have circulated in print. It is

the production of George Meeks, and was transcribed from a printed copy in Meeks's possession by Luther Crookshank, who visited him at his home in Milan. He lives in a little tumble-down clapboarded cottage on the outskirts of the town, and seems to be in dire poverty. He is very old, bedfast, and almost blind —he has some vision, but "his eyes jerk and wobble." In winter he makes brooms when he is able. Until recently he met the trains, selling peanuts from a stand made by putting a box on the framework of an old baby carriage. He is not a little vain of his authorship. Not thinking much of Wallace's song, he wrote this one, to the tune of *Narragansett Bay*. He says he sold five hundred copies of it at Unionville; but he had no copy with him at the time except that of his scrapbook. He claims also to be the author of *Joe Howell*, *I Wish I Were Single Again*, and *I Went to See Marinda*.

"Come, friends, and gather round me
And listen to my song,—
A sad and solemn story,—
I'll not detain you long.
'Twas eighteen hundred ninety-four
And on the tenth of May
The parents and three children
That night were called away.

*Chorus*

"Toll, toll the bell,
Sad stories it will tell,
For all of them that was left that night
Was darling little Nell.

"It was a solemn parting,
For friends were left behind.
With fear and anxious sorrows
Had seized their troubled mind.
It was the wicked Taylors,
Whose names were George and Bill,
The authors of that tragedy
Upon the Jenkins Hill.

"And when their work they thought was done
And all was laid away,
The angel spared little Nell that night
To give the crime away.
And in the morn at break of day,
When all around was still,
The neighbours learned the tragedy
Upon the Jenkins Hill.

"The courts declared that George and Bill
  Should under justice come,
But George escaped in a mysterious way
  And Bill at last was hung.
But how he rests or how he fares,
  Nobody knows, nobody cares,
The murderers, George and brother Bill,
  The authors of the tragedy
Upon the Jenkins Hill.

Notwithstanding the "five hundred copies sold at Unionville," it is clear that this feeble and faded composition would not get far by oral transmission. As a matter of fact we have no report of it except from Meeks himself. It is not in the ballad convention; and it shows a remarkable insensibility to the effect-values, as the art critics say, of the story.

But the other versions may still claim to be living popular ballads of a sort that goes back at least to the early days of the printing-press, if not farther; and it would be interesting to know just what part print has played in their dissemination. One would like to know, too, how the versions are related to one another, and something of the authorship of the second, third, and fourth. The first of these questions we are not in a position to answer, though it may be assumed that where the ballad was sung professionally—on the stage, in the tent, or on the street corner—printed copies of it were also offered for sale. With regard to the relation of the several versions to one another, plausible conjectures may be made. Wallace's is evidently the first, and with its "Jenkins Hill" stanza forms a kernel or basis for all the rest. Even Meeks could not miss the plaintive sonority of that rhyme. The second version enlarges this, supplying a conventional opening, "In Milan, Sullivan County, there lived a family poor," adding narrative details, and fitting the whole to be sung by Nellie Meeks in the "Carnival Company." The third is even more closely related to Wallace's than is the second; but it appears to have been made for strolling musicians, street singers, and the general ballad-loving public rather than for Nellie herself. The fourth is an independent working over of the theme, in the florid-sentimental vein of vulgar balladry, for the same public. The genesis of the fifth version is explained by Meeks himself. Of the four versions that have attained the dignity of genuine oral tradition only one can be confidently traced to a known author; but the other three, despite their

present anonymity, are clearly distinct productions—employing like other poetry, the matter and phrase of earlier workers upon the same theme—and originated with individual ballad-makers.

It will perhaps be an occasion of surprise to some to find vulgar balladry, and the social conditions from which it arises, flourishing so vigorously in a central commonwealth of the United States in our own time. The Meeks family murder is less than twenty years old, yet it has attained a comparatively wide circulation—considerably beyond the limits of any personal interest in the murderers or their victims—and in a respectable number and variety of versions. Will it have vanished in another score of years? One can only speculate. The murder itself, what might be called the plot of the ballad, lends itself to perpetuity by its uncomplicated brutality and its simple pathos. These are the things that appeal to the taste of the simple; and the simple, like the poor, we have always with us. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the social conditions will be swept away. For they too, under slight surface changes, are always with us. The mountebank in the court-house square, the blind fiddler on the street corner, the itinerant showman, and the school children singing his ballads at the noon hour—these, with slight changes of costume and "business," belong no less to our society than they did to Sidney's, and Gay's, and Goldsmith's, if one will but see them. It is too bad that our blind singer Meeks did not acquit himself better; for it is not every wandering bard that has the advantage of a *cause célèbre* in his own family.

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