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GANDER PULLING.  
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Newton, Ala., Dec. 28th, 1878.

How the hardy sons of the backwoods spent Christmas may be to the student of the kaleidoscopic panorama of human life a question replete with interest and not devoid of value. The sum of human accomplishments consists not alone of steam engines, printing presses, regulation Congressional speeches and elevated railways, but is largely shaped by the great social question, *what* will we do to kill time? This question is asked by the petted darlings of fortune, by the recluse in his hermitage and even by the general, who paraphrases the question by calling for "Blucher or night;" but all this tendency to monopoly by each person does not prevent the butternut from asking the same momentous question and solving it in his own sui generis way. It has been well known for quite an age that the American backwoodsman is a queer specimen of compound independence, good sense, folly, generosity and loyalty to convictions. One has but to "flush" his acquaintance at the country cross-road grocery or the shooting-match to see all the aboriginal peculiarities of each person standing out as openly obtruded as the "quills upon the fretful porcupine", and as likely to prick supersensitive people. Cooper has left his statue of the frontiersman standing out clearly against the background of his age, with outlines softened by that generous prejudice that kills half of truth in the transition from life to history until it wears a veil of poesy and romance. Whatever may be said of the truth of his portraiture of the man of his day it will be readily admitted that the frontiersman or backwoodsman of today is cast in different moulds.



Such thoughts as the above were in my mind on Christmas Day, as I rode along the public road towards a country grocery situated at the <sup>Crossing</sup> ~~forks~~ of two roads, in what is popularly called by politicians the "wiregrass" section of Alabama. I had been duly invited by an ex-parson, who kept the grocery and dispensed "tangle" <sup>tangle</sup> ~~tough~~ leg" and "old Robinson County" whiskeys to the tiplers of the neighborhood, to attend a rare revival of a pastime once prominent in the sport of North Carolina 100 years ago---a "gander pulling". His invitation ran as follows:-

" My Dearly Beloved Sur:-

" Thou are respectfully invited to attend an ancestral gander pullin', at my premises on the 25th inst., etc.

That expression, "ancestral gander pullin'" struck me, and when I was assured by a neighbor that they would have a "rale rip-roaring time" I concluded to go.

As a "solitary horseman" I wended my way toward the scene of this queer celebration of the birth of the Man of Nazareth. Upon my arrival, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, I found a crowd of some fifty gathered around a blazing fire of pine-knots in front of the groggery and scattered over the premises. One notable peculiarity obtruding itself proprio vigore was the way they disposed of their hands. They either whittled or left them to repose with sublime placidity deep down in the profound mysteries of their trousers pockets. When I approached the group around the pine-knots a score of voices greeted me with:-



"Hello, Squire, come to pull the gander?" "Come up and warm," "Give a feller your paw," and the like, followed by a hand-shaking as universal as Kearney's denunciation of the "bloated bondholder", each one followed by a plunge of the hand back into the profound depth of the pantaloons pocket. The air was damp, heavy and chilly, and the wind drove the black, soot-laden smoke from the knots in eddy puffs in all directions and it drifted heavily away among the pine boughs. From all directions citizens were coming in, all on horseback, and after hitching to the trees and saplings in the vicinity, "corned up" at the bar, and gathering about the fire discussed the chances of <sup>The</sup> "pullin'," as they called it. Old men, young men and boys, white and black, were there, and all seemed absorbed in this one great question, and for the time forgot their hands, which reposed safely in their deepest pockets.

Passing into the barroom I was in the presence of the functionary of the place and the occasion. The room was a rude affair, being the smallest of single pine-log huts, clapboards on top, cracks ceiled with the same, a rude fireplace in which a pile of knots blazed and roared; a box at the other end, and behind this place of devotion--a kind of ~~second~~ altar as it were--stood the ex-preacher in the role of bartender. He was a tall, lank, doxology-looking individual, with a small wisp of grayish whiskers three inches in length hanging downward from the point of a chin belonging to an otherwise clean-shaven face of more than usual solemnity. Two dead-oyster looking eyes martyred the feeble glimmer of animation struggling for existence along the outline of an aquiline nose, while his mouth, with drooping corners, seemed to be chief mourner at the



funeral, and was always asking pardon for presuming even that much. His hair was long, and on this damp day hung dank and stringy behind his ears. When I entered he was leaning on the counter, his chin resting in both hands, while he elaborated on the rules of the "pullin'" to half a dozen contestants, most of whom were seated upon empty barrels, tobacco- and cracker-boxes. Of course I was welcomed, and then he went on with his talk about the "rules" of the day, which he had framed in his own style. As the "rules" are worthy of production here I sandwich them in between the comments of the ex-parson:-

THE RULES OF GANDER PULLING.

"My dear friends, a gander's head is offul hard to fetch," he said, "and the feller what gets it will yearn what he gits; but I don't say this to discourage any of you. I want you all to pull and show your spunk. It will add to the success of the pullin' to have you all in it. You want to hear the rules? Well, here they are:-

" First--Thou shalst not pull at the gander till thou hast pade a quarter a piece.

" Second--Thous shalst ride each his own hoss and each one for hisself.

" Third--Thou shalst not pull at the gander if thy hoss is not in a gallop.

" Fourth--Thou shalst have five pulls at the gander for one quarter.

" Fifth--If thou pullest off the head of the said gander thou shall have \$2.50 for a quarter chance and \$5.00 for two chances.

" Sixth--The head of the said gander shall be greased.

" Now these is the rules to conduct this pullin'. It makes



"one feel young agin to be at a gander pullin'. It reminds me of my  
"early days in old North Car'liny. Them was good days. We pulled  
"every Christmas and sometimes on Fourth of July; but all them things  
"fadeth away, as the Psalmist says, like the grass that groweth up  
"and is cut down. Ah, my friends, we only sees such times <sup>occasionally</sup> ~~once~~ in  
"this vale of tears."

He was boring for a tear and got it. He struck water--or  
whiskey. Anyway it was a tear.

These "rules" are an exact copy of the original sheet, taken  
by me under pretence of a desire to introduce them at the first  
"pullin'" I got up.

THE SCENE.

Near the groggery was an old field from around which the  
fence had been removed, and thither the "congregation", as the ex-  
preacher styled the crowd, repaired at twelve, to indulge in this  
novel pastime. A fork had been set in the ground, into which a  
long pole had been placed, one end of which was <sup>na</sup> ~~nailed~~ to a stump,  
and the other projected about thirty degrees above the horizon and  
many feet beyond the fork. This end was smaller than the other and  
limber, and hung about <sup>four</sup> ~~five~~ feet above the head of a man on horse-  
back. As all were eager for the sport an antiquated gander was im-  
mediately swung to the limber end of the pole by the feet, head down-  
ward, his neck well "greased", and presented a job apparently as  
tough as a United States Treasury report. A judge, armed with a  
whip, with which to accelerate the speed of any horse which was too  
slow, took his stand near the gander, who, for the first time in life,  
was to be truly dramatic, and blend with his "Quack! quack!" the  
glamour of martyrdom.



The ex-parson, who was master of ceremonies, read out the "rules", the list of contestants, cast lots for position and formed them in a row one behind another. He again read the "rules" to the motley throng<sup>of "pullers"</sup>, among whom was a son of "Afric's sunny clime," mounted upon a lineal descendant of Balaam's ass. Many rough jokes flew back and forth, and Peter came in for a goodly share, to which he only grinned and exhibited a hand whose grip was too well known in the neighborhood not to be regarded as a formidable rival for the honor of the decapitation. Fourteen were in line, headed by a lank, red-headed ex-candidate for Sheriff, mounted upon a gaunt and spiteful sorrel mare. His stirrups were at least four inches too short, and hence his knees poked out to the front with painful angularity, while between the tops of his socks--now down over the quarters of his shoes--and the hem of his yellow jean pants elapsed a space of bare bluish-red shin gleaming bleakly in the raw wind. As one of the bystanders remarked, he "rode deep"; that is, he sat considerably on the small of his back. All such comments, and they were numerous, had no effect upon the bland smile of ~~an~~ unapproachable superiority that dwelt kindly but patronizingly upon those plebians who were not in the pulling. The balance of the contestants were of the usual backwoods cut, and were as variously mounted as they were themselves unique in character.

The programme was to dash under the descendant of the saviors of Rome and snatch for the head. If one missed from any cause it was his loss. The neck of the gander was already "greased" and the "trouble began". The ex-candidate came first upon the fiery sorrel. Starting some fifty yards from the judge she came tearing along at a scattering half speed. Just as her rider was preparing his hand for



the grab the gander gave a tremendous "quack" and a flutter, the judge's whip fell across the sorrel's rump with a cruel hiss, she shied clear of the point and dashed away across the field and was taken up by the ex-candidate 300 yards away. A yell arose from the crowd as the mare dashed away, followed by another when a fat fellow upon a large flea bitten gray made his grab full five feet beyond the gander's head. The "celebration" was now fully opened. Rider after rider dashed by, the judge's whip hissing unmercifully as it swung through the air down upon the horses' rumps, and the head was not yet touched when Peter came in to close the "first drawing". He put spurs to the ass, and the judge, meeting him full half way, plied the whip, but the ass was true to his original opinion that it was quite undignified and improper for one who could trace his lineage back through a long line of solemn ancestors to the days of David, King of Israel, to get out of a condensed space, and just as Peter was making a covetous and murderous grab at the devoted but yet triumphant head, the Judge, red in the face from his exertions, yelled out:-

"Dont' pull; I rule you out. Your ass goes too slow".

This was received with a roar of laughter, and an offer from a red-eyed fellow, with a bottle in his side pocket, to give three cheers for the ass, as soon as a committee on refined distinctions could report which of the three was the ass. Another roar of laughter followed this cut.

THE END.

The "first drawing" had taken place and was as fruitless as the drawings in a flash lottery--no one had touched the head. The ex-preacher and master of ceremonies had provided a huge jug of "tangle-leg", and as the "pullers" returned they rallied around the attractive object. While this was going on outsiders gathered in groups, and



numerous flasks were fished up from the cavernous depths of as many pockets and twinkled in the air <sup>over</sup>~~of~~ the red noses of many loyal sons of this free and glorious Republic. All was hilarious joy and bright expectation, rose-hued and gander-born, for nearly everyone had a bet on the gander's head. The betting was brisk, and the ex-candidate sold highest in these rude and informal pools. Many drinks depended on his grip.

The procession was formed a second time, and the fiery sorrel bore down the track again in splendid style, while the gander hung quietly and serenely, evidently filled with an indifference and contempt for the impending danger born of the ignominious and signal failure of the first drawing; but his serenity was ill-timed, and the bony digits of the ex-candidate ~~grappled~~ around his neck and slid away, thanks to the "grease", with a spirit more reckless of the gander's comfort than was to be expected from one who had lately shook hands as a soft and purring candidate near on to seventy-two thousand times. The jerk gave the pole a swing and the gander went bobbing back and forth, up and down and around, fluttering and squalling. Close on behind the sorrel came the fleabitten gray, which, not being accustomed to such fluttering overhead, shied as the fat fellow reached aloft for the head. The girth broke and down he came upon the ground with a heavy thump, the gray's heels flying in the air among the human legs. Another cheer arose from the crowd, and as he picked himself up his flying gray disappeared among the pines in the direction of his home. One chap with mingled solemnity and mock eagerness rushed up to the unhorsed knight with:-

"I am so glad, Jim, you got the head; let us see it".

A square blow from Jim's hard knuckles, planted full upon the



solemn "fiz", laid the curious chap in the grass, and his part of the fun ended there and then. That was his last joke. He afterwards said he did not include that among his <sup>real</sup> jokes.

THE GANDER PULLING.

The others went through, several touching the head, and when they assembled for the "third drawing" the gander hung limp from the end of the pole. He was dead. The excitement reached a fever heat about this time. Drinks were passed around while they were forming, and a hushed expectancy hung over the crowd as the sorrel went down the track again. A violent wrench at the head threw the ex-candidate from the saddle upon the mare's crupper, but the head held on. Two or three more jerks followed, when a beardless youth of twenty grasped the neck, threw himself forward on his horse's neck, and the body of the gander hung headless from the pole. A shout from the crowd told the contestants who were taking up their horses out in the field that someone had won the prize. A crowd soon gathered around young Bazeman, the successful "puller", who still held the head of the gander in his hand, and all seemed greatly excited.

THE EX-PARSON'S ADDRESS.

The ex-parson pushed his way into the crowd, and, mounting a stump, said:-

"My dearly beloved friends, thou perceivest that Si Bazeman  
hast severed the head of the gander, and by the rules he is entitled  
to \$2.50, which I now hand him in your presence. Permit me to congratulate him on his success, and all the other pullers, on their  
high moral deportment, and to wish them all good luck. This congregation and the public is now dismissed".

THE CONCLUDING SCENES.



"Gander Pulling"

Some swore that it was unfair and a pow-wow ensued, with much drinking of "tangle<sup>leg</sup>leg"; and by the time the crowd reached the grocery it was in good trim for a free fight, which was inaugurated by the ex-candidate, who knocked a Bazeman partisan down for saying "yaller-legged roosters aint no count for candidates nor gander pullin's no how". Amid the pell mell I rode away. The last I saw of Bazeman he was royally "corned" and surrounded by a half dozen boys of his own age who seemed to be trying to take him home. He was resisting and swearing, "I'll be goldarned if I can't outganderpull any man in South America", accompanied by wavings of his right hand, in which he still held the greasy and bloody head of the gander. His comrades, one and all, joined him in this dare to South America, and in this condition a turn in the road shut the groggery and crowd from view.

Any notice of this affair to Bergh would perhaps be ill timed.

*Shute*  
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