Mississippi Bell Witch Legends

Arthur Hudson

1934

It perhaps is not well known that Bell Witch legends are almost as prevalent in Mississippi as they are in Tennessee. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the families of two of John Bell's children, Jesse Bell and Esther Bell Porter, removed to Mississippi in the 1830's. Also, late in life, Betsy Bell Powell removed to Yalobusha County MS where she died in 1888.

The noted folklorist, Arthur Palmer Hudson (1892-1978), was instrumental in preserving two of these legends for posterity.

FIRST VERSION

In 1928, while a Professor of English at the University of Mississippi, Hudson published a book entitled SPECIMENS OF MISSISSIPPI FOLKLORE under the auspices of the Mississippi Folklore Society. At pages 157-160 of this book is found a version of the Bell Witch Legend which differs significantly from the Tennessee legends and which I have appended as follows:

THE BELL "WITCH"

For some time I have known of the existence of the story of the Bell "witch." Miss Lois Womble, of Water Valley, first told me about it. She knew only of its general outlines -- a family by the name of Bell pursued from Illinois (as she heard the story) to Mississippi by a sort of larva familiae which its members called a witch, and which exerted its malign powers in various ways, from rough practical jokes terrifying in their effects to serious harm.

Last summer I asked Miss Ethel Lewellen, who was then living in Panola County, the home of one branch of the Bell family, whether she had ever heard of the Bell "witch." She replied that she had, but beyond mentioning that she

had heard of a book on the subject she was able to contribute little to what I had heard from Miss Womble. She promised, however, to make inquiries and to transmit to me whatever she discovered. To her I owe most of the facts, presented in her own language below.

One other informant, Mr. Fonnie Black Ladd, who formerly resided at Oakland, Mississippi, and who is now a student in the University, added a few details of the story which Miss Lewellen's account lacked.

The details from both accounts do not, I am sure, tell the whole story of the Bell "witch." It is probable that not even the book referred to tells it all, for the story, like all stories that become the property of the folk, apparently has many mutations, and has undoubtedly been growing since the book was published (as the testimony indicates to be a fact). Lacking the book, which I hope eventually to see, I set down the details in the order which they seem to sustain to one another.

Miss Lewellen writes as follows in a letter transmitting her account of the story:

"Bauxite, Arkansas, March 28, 1928.
"Mr. A. P. Hudson, University, Miss.

"Dear Mr. Hudson:

"So far, the book containing the Bell Witch story has not been located; but if I can ever find it, I shall be glad to send it to you.

"I am enclosing some of the stories that the older members of our community could remember about the Witch - or rather the Wizard. I am told that the family of Bells who believed so implicitly in this 'Witch' moved to Mississippi in the hope of ridding themselves of its presence.

"I am glad to send you this for I think it pictures some of the beliefs of ignorant, superstitious, though probably good, people of earlier days.

Sincerely,

ETHEL LEWELLEN."

"To Panola County, about a half century ago," Miss Lewellen begins, "there moved with the Bell family a 'witch' that tormented one of the Bell girls and caused a great deal of suspicion to arise among the other members of the family and the community."

Mr. Fonnie Black Ladd, from recollections of the story as he heard it in his childhood at Oakland, adds some details about the circumstances in which the family moved to Mississippi. The Bells were living at Bell, Tennessee. Becoming dissatisfied, the father of the family expressed his desire to sell his farm and go somewhere else. The mother was opposed to going. One of the daughters agreed with her father and argued in favor of going to Mississippi. One night the lar familiaris of the family spoke to her and warned her against going. The daughter nevertheless persisted in her arguments and finally persuaded her father to sell out and move to Mississippi. Before the family left, the lar addressed her again and threatened to pursue her with its vengeance.

When they got to Mississippi, Miss Lewellen's account proceeds, "the members of the family talked of sending this girl away so that they might be free from the 'Witch's' awful presence. They also hoped that the girl might rid herself of the unspeakable torture which the 'Witch' visited upon her. 'There's no use for you to do this,' said a Voice, 'for no matter where she goes I will follow.'

"No one was ever able to see the 'Witch'; but often some member of the family would see food disappear as the 'Witch' carried it from the cupboard to 'his' mouth. 'His' favorite food was cream, and 'he' took it from every jar of milk. The Bells were never able to get any butter from the milk they churned.

"An old Negro woman once hid under a bed and tried to see the ‘Witch’ but ere she had long been there, something began to bite, scratch, and pinch her; and she was almost killed before she could get out.

"Although the 'Witch' treated the girl very cruelly, 'he' was not entirely inimical to other members of the family; on the contrary, 'he' proved very helpful on several occasions.

"One day Mr. Bell was talking of visiting a family in which every one was ill. 'I have just come from there,' said a Voice from nowhere, and proceeded to describe the physical condition of every member of the family, and also to tell what every member of the family was doing on that particular day. Investigation showed that the report of illness was false and proved the accuracy of every detail of the Voice's account of the state and activities of the family.

"On another occasion Mr. Bell was preparing to go for a doctor to attend one of his sick children. The Voice said, 'There's no need for you to go; I can get the doctor.' No one else went, but in due time the doctor came.

"One day the 'Witch' caused the wagon in which the Bells were going to church to stop on level ground. After vain efforts to get their horses to start the wagon again, the unseen hand of the 'Witch' lifted the wagon and horses off the road, transported it through the air a short distance, and set it down again without harming any one."

Mr. Ladd tells another story of the wagon which may be merely a variant of the foregoing, but which has some circumstances indicating that it is independent. To understand its proper connection beyond Miss Lewellen's remark that the “witch's" attentions to other members of the family were not always malignant but were sometimes benevolent, the reader will remember that Mrs. Bell, according to Mr. Ladd's account of the circumstances attending the removal of the family to Mississippi, opposed leaving the Tennessee home. Thus, according to Mr. Ladd, the "Witch" was always kind to the mother. Mr. Ladd's story runs like this:

One day the whole family was invited to attend a quilting bee. Mrs. Bell was ill; there was therefore some discussion about the propriety of leaving Mammy at home sick. As Daddy was invited too, the children all insisted on his going. There was a family row, the upshot of which was that everybody piled into the wagon and started, leaving Mammy at home sick. But before the happy party had proceeded far, the "Witch," champion of Mammy's rights, asserted himself. One of the wheels of the wagon flew off and let the axle down into the road with a bump. Not much disturbed by what seemed to be a mere accident, the boys and the old man piled out and replaced wheel and "tap." They had gone but a short distance when another wheel mysteriously flew off. Again they replaced the wheel and proceeded, somewhat sobered. Then one of the children saw a spectral hand pull another wheel off. When they had put it back in place, they held council, turned the team around and drove back home, going softly. On the way back not another wheel came off.

Another story by Mr. Ladd illustrates the puckish character which the Bell "Witch" sometimes assumed. On several occasions when the old man and the boys went out to catch the mules and horses in preparation for a day's work or a trip to town, the animals would resist bridling like mustangs, plunging around in the stable as if stung by invisible hornets or possessed of evil spirits. When finally harnessed or saddled, they would buck like broncos. These antics were always explained as the work of the Bell “Witch."

Miss Lewellen's account continues, showing that Mr. Bell had something of the scientific spirit:

"Mr. Bell was very curious about the 'Witch,' and finally persuaded 'him' to permit the familiarity of a handshake. He promised not to squeeze the hand. The hand that Mr. Bell shook was as small, soft, and chubby as a baby's. One day Mr. Bell raised a discussion of how the 'Witch' entered the house. 'I raise a certain corner of the house and come in,' said a Voice outside. 'Watch.' The house top was raised several inches and then let down.

"Other people of the community reported that they often met what appeared to be a riderless horse; but the horse would stop, and some one on his back would carry on a conversation with the person met.

To return to the girl, the devoted object of the “Witch's” vengeance. Mr. Ladd was unable to recall concrete details of the general statement that the “Witch” tormented her and tortured her. Miss Lewellen gives only one instance:

"One time the girl whom the 'Witch' tortured was getting ready to go to a party. As she was combing her hair, it suddenly became full of cockleburs. The 'Witch' explained, 'I put these in your hair; you have no business going to the party.' The men-folks came in and fired shots in the direction from which the voice came; but every shot was met by one from the invisible hand of the 'Witch,' and the engagement proved a draw.

Miss Lewellen concludes her account of the Bell “Witch" with the statement;

"The girl grieved her life away; and after her death the 'Witch' never returned either to torment or to comfort the Bells."

Mr. Fonnie Black Ladd supplies the final detail describing the funeral of the unhappy girl. The coffin containing the body was conveyed to the country graveyard in a farm wagon. As the little procession drove out of the yard of the homestead, some one looked up and saw a great black bird, something like a buzzard or the bird which the Negroes call a "Good God," with a bell around its neck slowly ringing, This great bird flew with miraculous slowness above and just ahead of the lumbering wagon all the way to the graveyard, and poised in air over the grave while the funeral service was being held. Then it flew away, the bell still, slowly ringing. And the Bell "Witch" never visited the family again.

SECOND VERSION

Arthur Palmer Hudson published, in collaboration with Pete Kyle McCarter, a more lengthy and somewhat different version of the Witch legend in the

Journal of American Folk-Lore, Volume XLVII (January - March, 1934), at pages 45-63. This 1934 Palmer-McCarter version of the Witch legend follows:

THE BELL WITCH OF TENNESSEE AND MISSISSIPPI: A FOLK LEGEND

Arthur Palmer Hudson and Pete Kyle McCarter

The legend of the Bell Witch recounts the misfortunes of a family named Bell who moved from North Carolina to the midlands of Tennessee in the early 1800's and then, in one branch, to northern Mississippi, about forty years later. It is well known to oral tradition in the designated sections of the two latter states. The Tennessee versions of it have been made the subject of at least two obscurely published books. In 1894, at Clarksville, Tennessee, appeared M. V. Ingram's An Authenticated History of the Famous Bell Witch. The Wonder of the 19th Century, and Unexplained Phenomenon of the Christian Era. The Mysterious Talking Goblin that Terrorized the West End of Robertson County, Tennessee, Tormenting John Bell to His Death. The Story of Betsy Bell, Her Lover and the Haunting Sphinx.

This book professes " ... to record events of historical fact, sustained by a powerful array of incontrovertible evidence ... The author only assumes to compile data, formally presenting the history of this greatest of all mysteries, just as the matter is furnished to hand, written by Williams Bell, a member of the family, some fifty-six years ago, together with corroborative testimony by men and women of irreproachable character and unquestioned veracity."

Ingram's book is now rare and hard to get. Drawing on much the same sources and telling much the same story is Harriett Parks Miller's The Bell Witch of Middle Tennessee (Clarksville, 1930). This pamphlet and letters from residents of Middle Tennessee attest the independent oral survival of the legend in that region. As late as 1910 it was still told, "under the most appropriate surroundings -- country parties, hayrides, and fireside gatherings."

In northern Mississippi, where descendants of the original family concerned still live, the legend survives in somewhat fragmentary but independent, orally traditional form. Of the considerable number of people who told it, or parts of it, to us, a few said that they had seen “The book” (Ingram's) a long time ago, and most of the others had heard of a book; but we were unable to find a copy in Mississippi.

Our following version of the legend has been recovered exclusively from oral tradition in Mississippi, and was put together before we ever saw a printed version. Most of our sources know the main outlines but remember especially some particular episodes or motives. A few tell the whole substantially as we reproduce it. But there is great diversity in the details and motives. We have taken the main outline on which all agree and have sketched in, as consistently as possible, the minutiae from numerous Mississippi sources. The dialect used, the few simple figures of speech, and the folk locutions are genuine and are true to the speech of our informants.

Back in the days before the War there lived somewhere in old North Carolina a man by the name of John Bell. Bell was a planter and was well-fixed. He had a good-sized plantation and a dozen niggers of field-hand age, and mules and cows and hogs a-plenty. His family was made up of his wife, a daughter thirteen or fourteen years old they say was mighty pretty, and two or three young-uns that don't figure much in this story. Until he hired him an overseer, Bell got along fine.

The overseer was a Simon Legree sort of fellow, always at sixes and sevens with other folks, and especially with the niggers. He didn't even mind jawing with his boss. They say Mr. Bell was half a mind to fire the scoundrel and hire another one. But he tended to his business. He had a way with the women-folks. Some say he had an eye open for Mary, the daughter. And Mrs. Bell stood up for him. So he stayed on for a good while, and the longer he stayed the uppiter he got. Whenever he and Bell had a row -- and their rows got bigger and bitterer -- the overseer went out and blacksnaked three or four niggers, for they were the only critters in the shape of man that he could abuse without a

come-back. He was the worst kind of a bully, and a man of high temper, in fact, a regular overseer of the kind you hear about in Yankee stories.

Mr. Bell had a tall temper too, and the men did not spend a lot of time patting each other on the back and bragging about each other's good points. A stand-up fight was bound to come off.

It did. Some say it was about the way the overseer had beat up one of the niggers. Some say it was about something Mr. Bell heard and saw from behind a cotton-house one day when Mary rode through the field where the overseer was working a gang of niggers. Bell went away blowing smoke from his pistol barrel, and mumbling something about white trash. The overseer didn't go away at all.

Of course Bell was brought into court, but he plead self-defense, and the jury let him off. He went home, hired him another overseer, and allowed that everything was settled. But the truth was that everything was now plumb unsettled.

That year and the next and the next the crops on the Bell place were an out-and-out failure: bumblebee cotton and scraggly tobacco and nubbin corn. His mules died of colic or some strange disease like it. His cows and hogs got sick of something the horse-doctor couldn't cure. He had to sell his niggers one by one, all except an old woman. Finally he went broke. He got what he could for his land -- lock, stock, and barrel -- and moved with his family to Tennessee. They say that where he settled down the town of Bell, Tennessee, was named for him. Anyway, he bought him a house and a patch of land near the home of old Andy Jackson, who had knocked off from being President and was living in a big house called the Hermitage.

Not long after the move to Tennessee, strange things began to happen in the Bell home. The children got into the habit of tumbling, or being tumbled, out of bed at least once a week, and of waking up every morning with every stitch of the bed-clothes snatched off and their hair all tangled and mussed up. Now for young-uns to tumble out of bed and to wake up in the morning with their

heads uncombed is a mighty strange thing, and the Bells realized it. The children couldn't explain this carrying-on, for they were always asleep till they hit the floor; and it was a peculiar fact that they were never tumbled out while awake.

The old nigger woman told them it was the ha'nt of the overseer Mr. Bell had killed that was pestering the children. She was as superstitious as any other nigger, and she said she had always felt jubous about what the ha'nt of a man like the overseer would do. But she had spunk, and one day she allowed she would find out whether she was right by spending the night under the young-uns' bed. In the middle of the night Mr. and Mrs. Bell were fetched out of their bed by a squall like a panther's. When they lit a lamp and ran into the room, they found the old nigger woman sprawled in the middle of the floor, dripping cold sweat like an ash-hopper, her face gray-blue as sugarcane peeling, and her eyes like saucers in a dish-pan. She was stiff-jointed and tongue-tied. When they got her sitting up and her tongue loosened, she screeched: "It's him! It's him! For God, It's him! It pinched me all over, stuck pins in me, snatched de kinks outen ma haiuh, an' whup me, Lawd Gawd, how it whup me, whup me limber an' whup me stiff, whup me jes' lack him. Ain't goin back there no mo', ain't goin back there no mo'."

The Bells were so scared they told some of the neighbors. Old Andy Jackson heard about it and decided to ride over. He didn't take any stock in ha'nts, and as he rode through the gate he spoke his mind out loud about tarnation fools that believed nigger tales about them. He hadn't got the words out of his mouth before something whaled him over the head and skipped his hat twenty or thirty yards back down the road. Old Andy didn't say any more. He motioned his nigger boy to hand him his hat, and he went away from there.

It seems like the Witch could get hungry like folks, and was satisfied with folks' grub. But it had to be the best. One day the old nigger woman came tearing into the front room where Mrs. Bell was quilting and said the Witch was back in the kitchen drinking up all the sweet milk.

Mrs. Bell was scared and said the old woman was lying. “Come see for yo'se'f, missus. Come see for yourself. Ah was back there a mixing up de biscuits, and ah reached ovah to get a cup of milk, and fo' Gawd, de cup was in de middle of de air, and de milk was a runnin' right outen hit -- and hit wa'n't gwine nowhere, missus -- hit wa'n't goin nowhere. Jes' run outen de cup, an' den Ah couldn't see hit no more.” “You're just seeing things,” said Mrs. Bell.

"Jes, whut Ah ain' doin' -- ain' seein' de milk. Go on back in de kitchen efen you don' believe it. Go on back daub an' look fo' yo'self -- No, ma'am, Ah hain' gwine back in dar place. No, ma'am, dat ha'nt kin guzzle an' bile up all de milk de cows ever give before Ah raise mah finger to stop hit."

Mrs. Bell went back into the kitchen and looked. There was a cup there that had had milk in it, and the milk was gone, sure as shootin'. She was now as scared as the old nigger woman, and sent right away for her husband to come out of the field.

They couldn't figure out how a ghost could drink milk, or what becomes of the milk if he does. Does the milk dry up into the ghost of itself? If not, where does it go when the ghost swallows it? Ghosts can't be seen. At least, this one couldn't. They could see through where it was. If they could see through it, why couldn't they see the milk as plain when it was inside the ghost as when it was outside? The old nigger woman said the milk was running out of the cup, but it "wa'n't goin nowhere." An old Holy Roller preacher from down in Tallahatchie bottom who rode over to talk about it argued that, if the old woman's tale was true, milk must be of a higher class than folks. When it turns into the soul of itself, it leaves nothing behind; but folks leave behind a corpse that must be covered up with dirt right away. Folks argued about it on front galleries in the summer time and around the fire in winter -- but they didn't argue about it on the Bells’ front gallery or by the Bells’ fire. And the preachers preached about it at camp meetings.

But the Witch didn't let up on the Bells' grub. No one ever saw it; but lots of times some member of the family would see something to eat dive out of the cupboard or pop out of the safe. The Witch's favorite was cream, and he got to

skimming it from every pan in the spring-house. The Bells were never able to get any butter from the churning.

Mr. Bell might have stood for having his young-uns' rest disturbed and his old nigger woman all tore up this way, but he couldn't stand for letting the ghost eat him out of house and home. So he called the family together and allowed he would move again -- this time to Mississippi, where land was rich and cheap. Mrs. Bell raised up.

"Pa," said she, "it seems like to me we have been getting along tolerable well here. I don't see any use moving away. What would be to keep the Witch from following us down there?"

“Nothing in the world,” spoke up a hide-bottomed chair from a corner of the room. "I'll follow you wherever you go," the Chair went on. “And I'll tell you what: if you stay on here, I won't bother you much; but if you go traipsing off to Mississippi -- well, you'll wish you hadn't.”

Mr. Bell was scared and bothered, but he studied a while and screwed up his courage enough to ask the Witch why he couldn't live where he pleased. But there was no answer. He asked some more questions. But the Chair had lapsed into the habit of silence that chairs have.

Mary, Mr. Bell's daughter, was now old enough to argue with the old folks about things. She was pretty as a spotted puppy, they say, and had lots of spunk and took after her pa. She sided with him. Girls always like to be moving. So when the family got over its scare about the Chair they argued back and forth. But finally Mrs. Bell and what they remembered about the Witch got the upper hand. Mr. Bell and Mary gave up the idea of moving to Mississippi, for a while anyway.

And for a while the Witch eased up on them. It even did some good turns. One day Mr. Bell was talking of visiting a family across the creek where he had heard everybody was sick. “I have just come from there,” said a Voice from the eight-day clock, and went on to tell how well everybody was and what

everybody was doing. Later Mr. Bell met up with a member of the family and learned that everything the Witch said was so.

Maybe because she had taken side with him in the argument about going to Mississippi, the Witch was partial to Mrs. Bell. The old nigger woman said the ha'nt sided with her because she had stood up for the overseer when Mr. Bell wanted to fire him in North Carolina.

One Christmas time the family was invited to a taffy-pulling. Mrs. Bell was sick and couldn't go. They talked about whether they ought to go off and leave their mammy feeling poorly. Mr. Bell was invited too, and they needed him to do the driving; so Mary and the children begged him to take them. Mrs. Bell told them to go ahead, she didn't need them and could make out all right. So they all piled into the wagon and started.

But before they got far one of the wagon wheels flew off and let the axle down into the road with a bump. It looked like a common accident, and the old man climbed down and put the wheel back on the axle and stuck the linchpin in. He looked at all the other linchpins and saw they were on all right. Before long another wheel flew off. They looked on the ground for the linchpin but couldn't find it there. Mr. Bell whittled a new one, and when he went to put the wheel back on he found the old one in place. He fixed the wheel and drove off again, telling all of the children to watch all of the wheels. Soon they saw something like a streak of moonshine dart around the wagon, and all four wheels flew off, and the wagon dropped kersplash into a mud-hole. They put them back on, turned round, and drove back home, going quiet and easy, like sitting on eggs.

When they got there, they found their mammy sitting up by the Christmas tree eating a plate of fresh strawberries, and feeling lots better.

Other pranks were laid to the Witch. Often when the old man and the boys would go to the stable to catch the horses and mules for the day's plowing or a trip to town, the critters would back their ears and rare and kick and stomp like hornets or yellow-jackets were after them. Some morning they would be puny as chickens with the pip, and caked with sweat and mud, and their

manes and tails tangled in witch-locks. The neighbors said that off and on they met an unbridled and barebacked horse, and the horse would stop, and something on his back that they couldn't see would talk to them -- but not long -- they had business the other way.

Maybe because Mary had sided with her pa against her mammy and the Witch, the Witch was harder on her after the argument than on anybody else. She would wake up in the middle of the night, screaming and crying that something cold and heavy had been sitting on her breast, sucking her breath and pressing the life out of her.

One time she was getting ready to go to a play-party. Some of the young sprouts were waiting for her in the front room. While she was combing her long, black hair, it suddenly was full of cockleburs. She tugged and pulled and broke the comb to untangle it, and when she couldn't, she leaned on the bureau and cried.

"I put them in your hair," said the Witch from the looking-glass. "You've got no business going to the party. Stay here with me. I can say sweet things to you."

She screamed, and the young fellows rushed in the room, and when she told them about the Voice they shot at the glass with their pistols. But the glass didn't break. And the Witch caught every bullet and pitched it into their vest pockets and laughed. So they called it a draw and went out of there. And Mary stayed at home.

Mary was now mighty near grown. She had turned out to be a beautiful woman. She had lots of beaux. But whenever one of them screwed himself up to the point of popping the question he always found that the words stuck in his throat and his face and ears burned. For young fellows these were strange signs. But it was always that way. And none of them seemed to be able to ask Mary the question. They laid it on the Witch, and finally quit hitching their horses to the Bell fence.

All but one. His name was Gardner. He was a catch for any girl, smart as a briar, good-looking, easy-going and open-hearted, and the owner of rich

bottom land, a passel of niggers, and a home as big as the courthouse, with columns as tall and white. He got all wrapped up in Mary, and they say Mary was leaning to him.

The way of the Witch with him was different, more businesslike. Maybe it was because the Witch realized this was the man Mary was setting her heart on. One night when Gardner was walking up the row of cedars in the Bell yard to see Mary, something he couldn't see reached out from a big cedar and touched him on the shoulder, and a voice said, "Wait a minute." Gardner was afraid to wait, but he was more afraid to run. So he waited.

"You might as well understand, here and now, that you are not going to have Mary Bell."

"Why not?" Gardner asked.

"You might have guessed from all that's happened round here. I'm in love with her myself. It's going to be hard to get her consent, and it may be harder to get the old man's. But she's not going to marry you. I'll see to that. If you open your mouth about it tonight, you'll be dead as a door-nail before morning."

Gardner studied a while and said, "If you'd only come out like a man."

The cedar tree stepped out and snatched his hat off and stomped it.

"Well, I reckon I'll have to lay off for a while," says Gardner. "But I do love her, and I'd go to the end of the world for .... "

"Well, you don't have to go that far, and it wouldn't do you any good if you did, and if you love her the only way you can keep her out of hell is to get out yourself. If you keep on hanging round here, I'll make it hell for you. Now this is how far you go. Pack up your traps and get out of the country, hide and hair. Go any place you think the Bells won't hear tell of you -- and go before breakfast. If you slip out quiet without raising any ruckus I'll never pester you again. What's more, on the day you get married I'll give you a pair of new boots you'll be proud of all your life."

Gardner couldn't see why the Witch's promise of a pair of wedding boots was in the same class as the threat of death before breakfast, but he didn't split hairs, and he didn't argue any more. He picked up his hat, sneaked back to his horse, and rode off.

He never said or wrote a thing to the Bells about what had happened, part because he was scared, but more because he was ashamed of being scared. He left the neighborhood before sunup and moved to the western part of the state. He got somebody else to sell out for him. They say the town of Gardner, where he settled, was named after him when he got old and respected.

After he had been there a while he fell in love with a girl and got engaged to her. And they say that when he was dressing for the wedding he couldn't find his boots. He looked high and low, every place a pair of boots was liable to be and lots of places where they couldn't possibly he, but no boots could he find. He was about to give up and go to his wedding in his sock feet, when a Voice told him to crawl out from under the bed and look in the bed. And there between the sheets he found a pair of shiny new boots. He put them on and went his way rejoicing and thinking of how well a ghost kept his word, and wondering if the boots would ever wear out and if they were like the Seven-League boots he had read about in old McGuffey.

But they looked like natural boots. He told some of his friends how he had got them. They thought he was a liar. But they had to own up they were wrong. One day Gardner's houseboy made a mistake and carried them instead of another pair to a cobbler. The cobbler said they were in perfect shape; they were not made by mortal hands; and the soles were sewed on in a way that no man or man-made machine could have stitched them. And there is a lady in this neighborhood who has seen the boots.

While Gardner's mind was getting mossed over about Mary, Mr. Bell decided again to move to Mississippi. It looked like his move from North Carolina was jumping from the frying pan into the fire, but he figured maybe the skillet wouldn't be any hotter. Gardner's break-up with Mary and Mary not marrying hung heavy on his mind. Mrs. Bell raised up again, telling him about rolling

stones. And the Witch homed in. By this time the family got used to the Witch and would talk free with him, but respectful. Every time the question came up there was a row between Mr. Bell and Mary on one side and Mrs. Bell and the Witch on the other. The old nigger woman told Mr. Bell the ha'nt didn't want him to move because he was afraid of witch hunters in Mississippi. She said there were powerful ones down there.

And so one winter after the crops had petered out on him again, he sold his place dirt cheap. But the old nigger woman told him to wait till spring to start. She said Easter was early that year and there would be plenty of time to pitch a crop. Good Friday would be a good day to leave, she said, for the ha'nt would have to go back to his grave and stay three days under the ground and would be puny-like several days more. While he was in good working order he could be in two or three places at once and be in any of them in the bat of an eye, but then he would have to lie low, and that would give them plenty of start. So Mr. Bell early on Good Friday stacked his furniture and duds in a couple of wagons, climbed into the front one with Mary, put the old nigger woman and his biggest boy into the hind one, and told Mrs. Bell, "Get in with old Patsy if you're a-comin', and don't forget the young-uns."

And that was the way the Bell family came to Mississippi. Mr. Bell bought him a little place in Panola County, ten miles east of Batesville on the Oxford road. He was all ready to begin life over again without supernatural interference.

But the Witch made a quick come-back, not before the family got there, but before they moved into their new home.

When Mr. Bell first got to Batesville, or Panola as they called it then, he left the family there and went out to look at the land he aimed to buy. When he got a place that suited him, he went back to town for his family and stuff. There was some sort of hitch, and the wagons did not get started till late in the evening. As the wagons moved slowly out of town, dark clouds began to roll up in the south and west, and before they had gone three miles the storm broke. Dark came on earlier than usual, for the clouds hid the sun. The rain beat down on the wagon covers. Every now and then the lightning flashes lit up the swaying

trees on each side of the road, the draggle-tailed horses, and the road itself, -- a long, muddy creek, -- and then it was dark as a stack of black cats. The folks all stopped talking. There was nothing to listen to but the beating rain and the thunder and the suck of the horses' feet and the wheels in the mud.

All at once the hind wagon, with the family in it, slid to the side of the road and sunk into the mud up to the bed. Mr. Bell saw it in a lightning flash and came back. It couldn't be moved; the horses had no purchase and the wheels were in too deep. The fix they were in

And then the Witch took a hand.

"If you'll go back to your wagon and stop your cussin'," said the empty dark beside the wagon, "I'l1 get you out. Hump it back to your wagon now -- light a shuck!"

Mr. Bell waded back and crawled in.

And then the horses and the wagon and the furniture and the family and the dog under the wagon and the calf tied behind and everything else but the mud on the wheels rose up about eight feet high and floated down the road till they were just behind the front wagon, and then they settled down easy and went on home without any trouble.

The family got settled down in their two-story double-log house amongst the cedars on the Oxford road.

A few nights later, the Witch spoke up from one of the andirons and told Mr. and Mrs. Bell he was in love with Mary. He said he wanted to marry her. Mr. Bell was shocked and surprised. He explained, respectful but emphatic like, that he could never dream of letting a daughter of his marry a ghost, not even so noble a ghost like the one he was talking with.

"I got a claim on you, John Bell," said the Witch. "I got a claim on you and on yours. I got a claim." And his voice was deep and hollow-like.

This was a point Mr. Bell maybe didn't want to hear any more about. So he said, "Have you spoken to Mary?"

"No, not spoken."

"Well, how do you know she would have you?"

"I don't. But I haven't got any reason to believe she wouldn't love me. She's never seen me. She doesn't know whether she would or not. Maybe she would consider it an honor to be married to a ghost. Not many girls are, you know. Why, it would make her famous."

"I don't want any daughter of mine getting famous that way. And besides, what if you were to have children? What in the world do you reckon they'd be like? Like you or her? Maybe half good human meat and bone, and the other half sight unseen. Or maybe, they'd be the vanishing kind and going round here and raising hell invisible. Do you think I want a passel of soap suds young-uns floating round here and popping up into puffs of wind every time I pointed to the stove wood pile or sprouts on a ditch bank? Not on your life. I reckon plain flesh and blood's good enough for Mary."

"But, John Bell, I love Mary. And remember. Remember."

"So do I, and that's why I'm not going to let you marry her. Why, when she got old and hard-favored I reckon you'd quit her for some young hussy. You could do it easy enough. Mary'd have a hard time keeping up with a stack of wind and a voice, and I'd have a hard time tracking down and shooting a low-down, no-count dust devil. When Mary marries, she marries a man that's solid and alive in body."

"I gather, John Bell, that you're opposed to me courting your daughter. But she's the one to say, and I'm going to talk to her about it. You'll be my father-in-law yet, or you'll be a-mourning, a-mourning."

"But what kind of wedding would it be like?" Mrs. Bell put in. "Think of it. Mary standing in front of the preacher and the preacher saying, 'Do you take this woman?' to a vase of flowers. And the ring floating down to Mary from the hanging-lamp maybe, or rising up from under a bench. I won't stand for it. I've stood for a lot of things, and you can't say I haven't been a friend to you. But I won't stand for Mary being a laughing-stock and disgrace to the family."

"If we're a-going to add to this family," Mr. Bell took up, "we're a-going to be able to see what we're adding. I don't even know what shape you've got, if any."

"Oh, I can give you some idea what shape I have. I'll let you shake hands with me. But you must promise not to squeeze. We're very delicate, especially when we touch folks. Here, hold out your hand, and I'll put mine in it."

Mr. Bell held out his hand, felt something, and grabbed it. It was, he said later, the hand of a new-born baby -- soft and crinkly and warm and just about the size of a new-born baby's hand. "How big are you all over?" he asked. "I can't tell you that."

"Well, there's one other thing I want to know. How do you get into this house any time you want to when every window and door is locked and barred? Do you ooze through the walls?"

"No. It's a lot easier than that. If you'll watch the corner of the ceiling up there, you'll see."

And all the rest of his life Mr. Bell swore to trustworthy witnesses that he saw the corner of the ceiling raised a good three feet and then let down again--all without the slightest racket.

"Do you mean to tell me that anything with a hand like that can lift the top off of the house that way?"

"Sure," came the answer. "But -- about Mary. I'm going to talk to her right off."

"Don't," said Mr. Bell. "Do you want to drive her crazy?"

But the meeting was over, for there was no answer. And the fire had died down, and the andiron looked glum.

The story is kind of skimpy here. Nobody seems to know what the Witch said to Mary or what Mary said to the Witch.

But the family noticed next day that she was drooping and wasn't minding what was going on around her. For days she wandered about the house and

up and down the yard under the gloomy old cedars, like somebody sleep-walking. And the color left her face, and deep in her wide-open black eyes was a far-away look, like she was trying to see something that ought to be but wasn't there. Every day she got up later and went to bed earlier.

And finally there came a day when she didn't get up at all. In the evening a screech-owl hollered in a cedar right by the gallery.

That night her fever was high, and by midnight she was raving. "We've put off seeing a doctor too long," said Mrs. Bell.

"The roads like they are, it'll take me two hours going and him and me two hours coming," said Mr. Bell. "It'll be might' nigh daylight before we get back. But I reckon you're right, and I'll go as quick as I can saddle a horse."

"No use," said a Voice. "All the doctors and medicines in the world won't cure her. But if you want one, I'll get him, and get him a lot quicker than you can."

The doctor got there just as the old eight-day clock struck one. "I heard somebody hollering at my window about midnight, telling me to come out here right away. When I got to the door, nobody was there; but I thought I'd better come anyway." He was a young doctor just starting out. "Say, what kind of road overseer and gang do you fellows have out this way? Last time I came over this road, about Christmas, it was the worst I ever saw. Why, I picked up a Stetson hat in the middle of a mud-hole near the four-mile board, and by George there was a man under it. 'You're in the middle of a bad fix, old man,' I said.

'Hell,' he said, 'that ain't nothin' to the fix this mule's in under me.' I had to lift up my feet half the way to keep them from dragging in the mud by the horse's belly. But tonight my horse skimmed over it in an hour. Well, who's sick out here?"

"It's her mind and nerves," he told them after he had questioned them and examined Mary. "I won't conceal from you, she's in pretty bad shape. And medicine won't do her any good. You've just got to be gentle and careful with her. Humor her and be patient with her. I'll give her something to put her to

sleep when she gets like this. Watch her close and don't let her get lonesome. She's young and strong and ought to come round in time."

But she never did. For a month she lay there on the bed, looking at nothing and yet straining to see something, something too far off. At night her pa and ma took turns sitting up. They didn't want the neighbors in. They called the doctor back a few times, but he shook his head and said he couldn't do any more. So they would watch and wait, wanting to do something, but helpless.

One night her ma was sitting there, holding Mary's hand and stroking the dark hair back from her forehead. Suddenly Mary pushed her mother away and sat up and looked across the foot of the bed, as if somebody was standing there.

"Mamma," she whispered, "Mamma, I see him at last. And I think, I think I'm going to love him."

And she died with the only expression of happiness they had seen on her face in months.

Some folks have tried to explain Mary's strange death. A few say the Witch tortured her continually and kept her in such constant terror that her mind was affected. Others have heard that a school-teacher ventriloquist that was jealous of Gardner played tricks on her and the family, and then, when she wouldn't have him, tormented and frightened her to death. Some believe she was in love with the overseer from the first, and then when he was killed she was in love with the Witch and didn't want to live because she knew she would never be happy with him until she too became a ghost.

But she died, just the same. And they say that on the day of the funeral, when the coffin was carried from the house to a wagon a great black bird flew down from the sky and hung in the air just above the wagon. And around its neck was a bell that tolled in the most mournful tone ever heard by the ear of man. And when the funeral procession began to move, the great bird floated just in front of it all the way to the graveyard and circled round and round the grave during the burial, the bell tolling all the while. And when the mound was rounded up, the bird swung high up in the air and flew away to the west and

finally became just a little speck above the treetops and disappeared. But long after it was gone the mourning notes of the bell floated back to those who stood and watched.

Such is the Mississippi version of the Bell Witch legend.