

Can These Bones Live?

by Manly Wade Wellman

I'd dropped my blanket roll and soogin sack and guitar and sat quiet on the granite lump as those eight men in rough country clothes fetched their burden along. It was a big chest of new-sawed planks, pale in the autumn afternoon, four men on each side.

As they tramped, they watched me. I got to my feet. I reckoned I was taller than any of them, probably wider through the shoulders. I wore old pants and boots and rumpy hat, but I'd shaved that morning and hoped I looked respectable.

They came close to me amongst those tree-strung heights and set the chest down with a bump. I figured it to be nine feet long and three feet wide and another three high. Rope loops were spiked to the sides for handles. The lid was fastened with a hook and staple, like what you use on a shed door. One of the eight stared me up and down. He was a chunky, grizzled man in a wide black hat, bib overalls, and a denim jacket.

"Hidy," he drawled, and spit on the ground. "What you up to here?"

"I was headed for a place called Chaw Hollow," I replied him.

They all stared. "How you name yourself?" asked the one who had spoken.

"Just call me John."

"What do you follow, John?" asked another man.

I smiled my friendliest. "Well, mostly I study things. This morning, back yonder at that settlement, I heard tell about a big skeleton that had been turned up on a Chaw Hollow farm."

"You a government man?" the grizzled one inquired me.

"You mean, look for blockade stills?" I shook my head. "Not me. Call me a truth seeker, somebody who wonders himself about riddles in this life."

"A conjure man?" put in another of the bunch.

"Not me," I said again. "I've met up with that sort in my time, helped put two-three of them out of mischief. Call that part of what I follow."

"My name's Embro Hallcott," said the grizzled one. "If you came to poke 'round

them bones, you're too late."

I waited for him to go on, and he went on:

"I dug them bones up on my place, a-scooping out for a fish pond. Some of us reckoned that, whoair he was, he should ought to be buried in holy ground, yonder at Stumber Creek church house. So we made him a box, and that's where we're a-going with him now."

"Let me give you a hand," I said, and slung my guitar and other things to my shoulders.

"He's a stranger man, Mr. Embro," said the scrawny man.

"Sure, but he looks powerful for strength." Hallcott raked me with his eye. "And you feel puny today, Oat. All right, John, grab a hold there where Oat's been a-heaving on this here thing."

I shoved my hand through the loop and we hoisted the coffin. It was right heavy, at that. I heard the others grunt as we took the trail through the ravine. On the trees, autumn leaves showed yellow, different reds, and so on, like flowers. Half a mile, maybe, we bore our load along.

"Yonder we are, boys," said Hallcott.

We came out into a hollow amongst shaggy heights that showed rocky knobs. One, I thought, looked like a head and shoulders. Another jabbed up like a finger, another curved like a hawk bill. The lower ground into which we tramped was tufted with trees, with a trickle of water through it. Beside this stood a grubby white house with a steeple. Stumber Creek Church, I figured it to be.

Hallcott, at a front loop, steered us into a weedy tract with gravestones here and yonder. "Set her down," he wheezed, and we did so. "Yonder comes Preacher Travis Melick. I done sent him the word to meet up with us here."

From the church house ambled a gaunt man in a jimswinger coat, a-carrying a book covered with black leather. Hallcott walked toward him. "Evening, Preacher," he said. "Proud to have you here."

"The grave's been made ready," said the other in a deep-down voice, and nodded to where a long, dark hole gaped amongst the weeds. Then he faced me. "Don't believe I know this gentleman."

"Allows he's named John," grated the scrawny one called Oat.

"I've heard of John," said Preacher Melick, and held out his skinny hand. "Heard of good things you've done, sir. Welcome amongst us."

Hallcott's crinkly face got easy. "If you say he's all right, Preacher, that makes him all right," he said. "I'll tell you true, he made better than a good hand, a-wagging this

coffin the last part of the way."

We hiked the coffin to the side of the grave. On the bank of fresh dirt lay three shovels. Oat touched the hook on the lid.

"Ain't we supposed to view the body?" he wondered us. "Ain't that the true old way?"

"I've done seen the thing," snapped out Hallcott.

"Open it for a moment if you feel that's proper," said the preacher man.

Oat worked the hook out of the staple and hoisted the lid. The hinges creaked. "Wonder who he was," he said.

The bones inside were loose from one another and half-wrapped in a Turkey Track quilt, but I saw they were laid out in order. They were big, the way Hallcott had said, big enough for an almighty big bear. I had a notion that the arms were right long; maybe all the bones were long. Thick, too. The skull at the head of the coffin was like a big gourd, with caves of eyeholes and two rows of big, lean teeth. Hallcott banged the lid shut and hooked it again.

"That there's enough of a look to last youins all day and all night," he growled round at the others.

"Brothers," said Preacher Melick, a-opening his book, "we're here to bury the remains of a poor lost creature. We don't even know his name. Yet I've searched out what I hope is the right text for this burying."

He put his knobby finger to the page. "Book of Ezekiel," he said. "Thirty-seventh chapter, third verse. 'And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.'"

He closed his book. "The Lord God knoweth all things. We're taught that after death will come the life we deserve. Let us pray."

We bowed our heads down. Preacher Melick said, "In the midst of life we are in death," and so on. When he finished, I said, "Amen," and so did Hallcott and two-three others.

"Now lower the coffin," said Preacher Melick.

We took hold and set it in the grave. It fitted right snug, its lid was just inches below surface. Preacher Melick sprinkled a handful of dirt. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he repeated, and then we all said the Lord's Prayer together. Finally the preacher man smiled 'round at us. The service was over.

Three men shoveled in the earth. It took just minutes to fill the grave up.

Hallcott offered some crumpled money bills to Preacher Melick, who waved them

away.

"You took it on yourselves to make the stranger a coffin and bring him here to rest," he said. "The least duty I can do is speak comfortable words without expectation of pay. John, to judge from the gear you brought, you're a-looking for lodging for the night. Will you be my guest?"

"Thanks, maybe later," I said. "I reckon I'll wait here a spell."

"If you come later on, it's half a mile up the trail the far side of the church."

He walked away with his book. The coffin-makers headed the other direction. The sun was a-dropping red to the edge of the western heights.

One of the shovels had been fetched to lean under a fair-sized walnut tree. I put down my stuff next to the roots and sat with my back against the trunk. On the silver strings of my guitar I made a few chords to whisper. The air got gloomy.

"It's kindly creepy a night," said a voice at my elbow. That quick I was up on my feet. Embro Hallcott stood there, his crinkly face a-smiling.

"For a man your height, you move quick as a cat, John," he said. "I done heard you tell Preacher Melick you'd stay 'round, so I decided myself to stay too, for whatever's up."

"What do you reckon's up?" I inquired him.

"If you don't know how to answer that, neither do I."

I sat down under the tree again, and Hallcott hunkered down beside me. He dragged out a twist of home-cured tobacco and bit off a chunk the size of half a dollar.

"I was right interested by Preacher Melick's text from Ezekiel," I said. "All that about could these bones live."

"Ezekiel," Hallcott repeated me, a-folding his ridgy hands on the knees of his overalls. "I done read in that, some time back. Strange doings in Ezekiel—the wheels in the wheels. Some folks reckon that means what they call UFOs."

"They were unknown and they flew, so they were UFOs all right," I nodded him. "And all those prophecies about nation after nation, and the brass man a-walking round to measure Jerusalem. And I've heard it explained that the four faces of the living creatures meant the Four Gospels. But the strangest of all the things is the Valley of Dry Bones, where the bones join together and come to life."

A moon rose up and shone down on the burial ground. Hallcott moved to pull together some pieces of wood and light them with a match. I went to the stream and dipped water in my canteen cup and set it on a rock where it could heat. "I don't reckon you brought aught for supper," I said.

"I've done without no supper before this."

"I've got something left from my noon lunch." I pawed through my soogin and came up with two sandwiches wrapped in foil. "Home-cured ham on white bread."

Hallcott took one and thanked me kindly. As the water grew hot, I trickled in instant coffee and stirred it with a twig. We ate and passed the cup back and forth.

"I appreciate this, John," said Hallcott as he swallowed down his last bite. "How long you aim to stop here?"

"That depends."

"I reckon you'll agree with me, them bones we buried were right curious. Great big ones, and long arms, like on an ape."

"Or maybe on Sasquatch," I said. "Or Bigfoot."

"You believe in them tales."

"I always wonder myself if there's not truth in air tale. And as for bones—I recollect something the Indians called Kalu, off in a place named Hosea's Hollow. Bones a-rattling round, and sure death to a natural man.'

"You believe that, too?"

"Believe it? I saw it happen one time. Only Kalu got somebody else, not me."

"Can these bones live?" Hallcott repeated the text. "Ain't there an old song about that, the bones a-coming together alive?"

"I've sung it in my time," I said, and picked up my guitar and struck out the tune. "It goes like this:

Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Hear the word of the Lord."

Hallcott sang the verse with me, his voice rough and husky:

The toe bone's connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone's connected to the heel bone,

Hear the word of the Lord.

And we sang the rest of it together, up to the end:

The shoulder bone's connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone's connected to the jaw bone,
The jaw bone's connected to the head bone,
Hear the word of the Lord.

Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Connect these—

Hallcott broke off then, and so did I. "John," he said, "looky yonder where we buried him. What's that there white stuff?"

I saw it, too. In the shine of the moon above the grave stirred a pale something or other.

It made just a sneaky blur, taller than a tall man. It came toward us with a ripple in it.

"Mist," Hallcott stuttered. "Comes from that there fresh-dug-up dirt—"

"No," I said, "that's no mist."

I leant my guitar to the walnut tree and got up on my feet as whatever it was came nearer, started to make itself into a shape.

I heard Hallcott say a quick cuss word, and then there was a scrambly noise, like as if he was a-trying to make his way off from there on hands and knees. I faced toward whatair the shape was, because I reckoned I had to.

As it came slowly along, the moonlight hit it fair. It looked scaffolded some way. That was because it was just bones. I could see a sort of baskety bunch of ribs, and big, stout arm bones with almighty huge hands a-hanging down below crooked knees. The shallowy skull had deep, dark eyeholes. The long-toothed jaw sank itself down and then snapped shut again. The skull turned on its neck bone and gave me a long, long look.

Then it reached out its right hand with finger bones the size of table knives, and laid hold on a young tree and yanked it out by the roots, without air much a-trying. It stood and tore off branches, easy as you'd peel the shucks from an ear of corn. It made itself a club thataway, and hiked it over the low skull and moved to close in on me again.

No point in it for me to try to run away from such a thing, and well I knew it. Turn and run from a haunt or a devil, it runs after you. If it catches you, then what? I quick grabbed up the shovel where it leant on the walnut trunk. Compared to that club the bony thing had, it was like a ball bat against a wagon tongue.

"What you want of me?" I said, but I felt I didn't have to be told that.

Bones like those, long worn bare and scattered apart and now joined and made to live by words of power, they'd wake up hungry. They'd be starved for food. If they got food, maybe they'd put flesh back on themselves, be themselves as they'd been once before. What food was closer to hand than I was?

Man-eaters—such things were told of by old Indians, wise men who'd sworn to them. The wendigo, up in Northern parts. The anisgina, recollected in Cherokee tales to make you shiver. Supposed to be all died out and gone these days, but when bones rise up ...

The bones came a-slaunching close. I heard them click.

I hiked up the shovel with both my hands, and held the blade edge forward like an axe. I'd chop with that. The bones stood a second, the whole skeleton of them, tall over me. In the glow of the moon those bones looked like frosty silver. My head wouldn't have come put to those big cliffs of shoulders. The jaws opened and shut. They made a snapping sound.

Because they wanted to bite a chunk out of me. Those teeth in the jaws, they were as long and sharp as knives. They could break a man's arm off if they jammed into it.

But I didn't run. To run nair had helped me much in such a case. I'd stand my ground, fight. If I lost the fight, maybe Hallcott could get away and tell the tale. I bent my knees and made my legs springly. I hoped I could move faster and surer than those big, lumbering bones.

Preacher Melick had said the Bible words to make them live, had said them without a-thinking. And that song, I'd have been better off if I'd nair sung it. I watched the thick, bony arms rise up and fetch the club down to bust my head.

That quick, I sidestepped and danced clear, and down came the big hunk of tree, so hard on the ground it boomed there like a slamming door. I made a swing with my own shovel, but the club was up again and in the way. My blade bounced off. Again the club hiked up over me; it made a dark blotch against the moon. I set myself to dodge again.

Then it was that Embro Hallcott, come back up just behind me, started in to sing in his husky voice:

The toe bone's connected from the foot bone,
The foot bone's connected from the heel bone ...

And quick on from there, about the shin and thigh and hip bones, about the back bone and the shoulder bone. I stood with my shovel held up in both hands, and watched the thing come apart before my eyes.

It had dropped that club that would have driven me into the ground like a nail. It swayed in broken-up moonlight that shone through tree branches. It fell to pieces while I watched.

I looked at the bones, down and scattered out now. The skull stared up at me, and one more time it gave a hungry snap of those jaws. I heard:

The neck bone's connected from the jaw bone,
The jaw bone's connected from the head bone,
Hear the word of the Lord.

The jaw bone snapped no more. It rolled free from the skull.

Hallcott was up beside me. I could feel him shake all over.

"It worked," he said, in the tiredest voice you could call for.

"That song built him up," I said back. "And that song, sung different, took him back down again. Though it appears to me the word should be 'disconnected.'"

"Sure enough?" he wondered me. "I don't know that word, that disconnected. But I thought on an old tale, how a man read in a magic book and devilish things came all 'round him, so he read the book backward and made them go away." His eyes bugged as he looked at a big thigh bone, dropped clear of its kneecap and shin. "What if it hadn't worked, John?"

"Point is, it did work and thank the good Lord for that," I told him. "Now, how you say for us to put him back in his coffin again, and not sing air note to him this time?"

Hallcott didn't relish to touch the bones, and, gentlemen, neither did I. I scooped them in the shovel, all the way along to where the grave was open and the coffin lid flung back. In I shoved them, one by one, in a heap on top of the Turkey Track quilt. I sought out air single bone, even the little separate toe bones that come in the song, a-picking them up with the shovel blade. Somewhere I've heard tell there are two hundred and eight bones in a skeleton. Finally I got all of them. I swung the lid down, and Hallcott fastened the hook into the staple. Then we stood and harked. There was just a breath of sweet, cool breeze in some bushes. Nair other sound that we made out.

Hallcott picked up another of the shovels, and quick we filled that grave in again. We patted it down smooth on top. Again we harked. Nair sound from where we'd buried the bones a second time.

"I reckon he's at rest now," I felt like a-saying. "Leastways, all disconnected again thataway, he can't get up unless some other gone gump comes here and sings that song to him again."

"For hell's sake, whatever was he?" Hallcott asked, of the whole starry night sky.

"Maybe not even science folks could answer that," I said. "I'd reckon he was of a devil—people long gone from this country—a people that wasn't man nor either beast; a kind of people that pure down had to go, but gets recollected in ugly old tales of man-eating things. That's all I can think to say to it."

I flung down the shovel and went back to where my stuff lay against the walnut tree. I slung my blanket roll and soogin on my back, and took my guitar up under my arm. Right that moment, I sure enough didn't have a wish to play it.

"John," said Hallcott. "Where you reckon to head now?"

"Preacher Melick kindly invited me to his house. I have it in mind to go there."

"Me, too, if he's got room for me," said Hallcott. "Money wouldn't buy me to go nowheres alone in this night. No sir, nor for many a night to come."

The End

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