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# WHAT SORGHUM SAYS

By Cyril M. Kornbluth

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1941

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Up in the foothills of the Cumberlands they have something new in the way of folklore. If you're lucky and haven't got the professional gleam in your eye, the tale is unfolded something like this:

Sorghum Hackett lived by himself up by Sowbelly Crag, not because he was afraid for his still, but because when he was a young man some girl blighted his life by running off to Nashville with a railroad man. Ever since that, he's been bitter against most people.

So this spring morning, when the scientific man came climbing up to his house he got out his squirrel gun and asked him like the mountain people do, "Will you make tracks or your peace with God?"

"Shut up!" said the scientific man, not even looking at him. Then he went pacing off the ground and writing down figures in a book. At last he turned to Sorghum. "How much do you want for your property?" he asked. "I suppose it's yours."

"Anyone in his right mind wouldn't be eager to dispute it," said Sorghum dryly. "But it ain't for sale."

"Don't be stubborn," said the scientific man. "I haven't any time to waste on benighted peasants."

Sorghum dropped his gun in real admiration for the bravery of the man, whoever he was. He held out a hand, saying, "I'm Sorghum Hackett, and I've killed men for less than what you said."

The man shook his hand absent-mindedly. "I'm Wayne Baily, and I've got to have the use of your land for about a month."

Hackett nearly fell in love with the man; he didn't know there was anyone who could stand up to him that way, and he liked it. "I'm willing," he said at last. "But I won't take your money—it ain't clean."

So Baily just laughed, and then went down to the village and came back up with a Ford truck loaded to the gills with junk. "Hackett," he said, "first thing we do is run this penstock down from that springhead."

And by the next morning they had forty yards of big piping down from Chittling Spring, and the water gushing out the end of the pipe would have irrigated a whole farm. Baily rigged up a metal globe that he bolted to the pipe's end, a globe with a small-gauge turbine wheel in it, and he hooked that up to a little dynamo that stayed on the truck.

When a week was up there was precious little room in Sorghum's house for him and Baily, because it was cluttered up with the junk from town—insides of radios, big coils of wire, aeriels, rods stuck into the ground so deep they were cold from underground water they touched—everything crazy you could think of, and all lit up every now and then whenever Baily turned on his dynamo in the truck.

Finally Baily said to Sorghum, "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Hackett. Now there's only one stipulation I'm putting on you, and that is to knock all my machinery into pieces as soon as I'm gone."

"Gone?" asked Sorghum, because Baily didn't say it as though he was going down to town for another storage battery.

"Yes—for good, Hackett," said Baily, pattering with the wires and finally turning a switch. The things lit up and glowed even brighter than ever before. "Goodbye, Hackett," said Baily. Then he grabbed at his chest and his face twisted.

"Heart!" he gasped faintly, and even fainter he cut loose with a string of curses that made Sorghum blush.

Baily hit the floor, and Sorghum listened for his breath, but there wasn't any. He scratched his head, wondering how he'd

explain things to the coroner, and reached automatically for his jug to help him think.

But one of the things he didn't think of was that his jug had been moved outside to make room for what the late Mr. Baily had called a condenser. Sorghum got a shock that sent him crashing back on his heels into some of the deep-driven rods. The last thing he knew, the lights were still sparkling and glowing, but he never could tell what hit him.

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There was a dizzying splash and Sorghum found himself floundering in water up to his knees. He looked around and wasn't in any place he knew, because he didn't know any places that were all marble and tile. Overhead a hot sun was beating down on him.

"Well!" said someone. And right there Sorghum knew that something was wrong, because though what he heard was "Well!" the sound he heard wasn't anything like that—more like "Aho!"

He looked up and saw a man facing him, dressed in sandals and a shirt that fell to his knees. And the man said, still talking so that Sorghum could understand him but not making a single sound in English, "It's a blundering assassin that falls into his victim's fishpond. Tiberius chooses unwisely."

"Are you calling me a bushwhacker, mister?" demanded Sorghum, who never killed except fairly.

The man, who had been grinning proudly, looked surprised then. Not frightened, surprised. "I don't know what language you speak, assassin," he said, "but it's a damnably strange one that confounds and is clear at the same time." He looked closer at Sorghum. "And you don't seem altogether real. Are you always as ghostly when you're sent on the Caesar's errands?"

Sorghum looked at himself and saw that the man wasn't lying. His own flesh seemed to have got a funny trick of being half here and half there, like a column of smoke that's always ready to break. "I reckon you're right, mister," said Sorghum, cracking one of his icy smiles. "I seem to be in a predicament. But I ain't what you take me for. I'm Sorghum Hackett of Tennessee."

"Never heard of the town," said the man. "I'm Asinius Gallo. Need I explain that this is Rome?"

Now, Sorghum had heard that foreigners were peculiar, but he didn't expect anything as peculiar as this, and he said so.

"Foreigners!" yelled the man. "I don't know what barbarous land you're from, stranger, but bear in mind that when you're in the City *you're* the foreigner until and unless naturalized. Though," he added, calmer, "what with that avaricious slut the Lady Livia raising the prices on the roll week after week, soon a Julio-Claudian himself won't be able to stay in his place."

"I don't get your talk, Mr. Gallo," said Sorghum. "I'm here by accident, and I'd like mightily to get back to Tennessee. How can I earn some passage money? I reckon it's overseas."

"Work, eh?" asked Asinius Gallo. "What can you do?"

Sorghum considered. "I can do a little carpentering," he said. "And I can make the best white mule in the Cumberlands."

"Carpentry's out of the question," said Asinius Gallo. "The Joiners' Guild has it tight as a drum. But I don't know of any guild covering the manufacture of white mules—doubt that it can be done."

"Do ye?" asked Sorghum, grinning again. "Just give me some corn, some copper, and a few days and I'll show you."

Asinius Gallo abruptly nodded. "It might be worth trying," he said. "Certainly I can't raise my own. And if they're really good they can be resold at a profit. Sorghum Hackett, I'll finance you."

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So, working in privacy, the way the mountain folks like to, it took him a few days before he got a good run. He had to

fool around a lot because they used a funny, stunted kind of grain, but finally it came out all right.

"Here, Mr. Gallo," he called to his backer. "It's finished."

"Will it kick?" asked Asinius Gallo cautiously.

Sorghum laughed. "Like the devil with a porky quill in him, I promise you that much. Best you ever saw."

"Well," said Asinius Gallo uncertainly as he entered. Sorghum held up the big jug he'd caught the run in. "What's that?"

"The white mule," Sorghum said, a little hurt.

His backer was downright bewildered. "I expected an animal," he explained. "What you've got in there I can't imagine."

"Oh," said Sorghum. "Well, if you don't agree with me, Mr. Gallo, that this is better than any animal you ever tasted, I'll make you an animal." And he said this because he felt pretty sure that the benighted idolater wouldn't take him up. Sorghum had asked the terrified servants, and they told him that they didn't have anything stronger than the sticky red wine they drank at supper. And that, Sorghum judged by the body, was no more than twenty proof, while this run of his would prove at least a hundred and twenty. He poured a medium slug—four fingers—for his host, who smelled it cautiously.

"Don't put your eyes over it, Mr. Gallo," cautioned Sorghum. "Just drink it right down the way we do in Tennessee." He filled a glass of his own with a man-sized drink.

"Feliciter," said Asinius Gallo, which sounded like "good luck" to Sorghum.

"Confusion to Tories," he replied, downing his.

His host immediately after swallowed his own shot convulsively. Almost immediately he screamed shrilly and clutched at his throat. Sorghum held a water pitcher out to him, grinning. The pitcher was empty when he took it back.

"That," said his host hoarsely, "was a potion worthy of Livia herself. Are you sure it won't kill me?"

"Sartin," replied Sorghum, enjoying the backwash of the home product. "That was almost the smoothest I've ever made."

"Then," said Asinius Gallo, "let's have another."

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The Tennessee man had a few more runs, each better than the last as his equipment improved and settled, and with Asinius Gallo as his agent he had amassed quite a bit of the coinage of these foreigners. Altogether things were looking up when a slave appeared with a message.

Sorghum's host read from it: *The Lady Livia will be pleased to see Sorghum Hackett, the guest of the Senator Asinius Gallo. She believes that there are many mutual interests which it will be profitable to discuss.*

"Right kind of her," said Sorghum.

"Hah!" groaned his backer. "You don't know the old hag. Sorghum Hackett, you're as good as dead, and it's no use hoping otherwise. She's always been down on me, but she never dared to strike at me direct because of my family. Now you're going to get it. Oh, I'm sorry, friend. And I thought I'd kept you a pretty close secret. Well, go on—no use postponing fate."

Sorghum grinned slowly. "We'll see," he said. He picked up two bottles of the latest run and rammed them into his boot tops. "Goodbye, Mr. Gallo," he said, entering the sedan chair that was waiting for him.

The bearers let him off at the Augustan Palace and conducted him to a side entrance. He waited only a moment before the door opened and a cracked voice bade him enter. "Come in, young man; come in!" it shrilled.

Sorghum closed the door behind him and faced the notorious Livia, mother of the Emperor Tiberius, poisoner supreme

and unquestioned ruler of Rome. "Pleased t' meet-cha, ma'am," he said.

"You're the Hackett they tell me about?" she demanded.

He studied her wispy white hair and the bony, hooked nose as he answered, "I'm the only Hackett in these parts."

"It's true!" she shrilled. "You are a magician—your body waves like a flame, and your language is strange, but I can understand it. Everything they said is true!"

"I reckon so, ma'am," admitted Sorghum.

"Then you're condemned," she said promptly. "I won't have any magicians going about in my empire. Can't tax the brutes—they're unfair. You're condemned, young man!"

"To what?" asked the Tennessean.

"Amphitheater," she snapped. "Wild beasts. Take him away, you fools!"

Sorghum's arms were grabbed by two of the biggest, ugliest people he had ever seen in his born days and he was hustled down flights of stairs and hurled into something of a dungeon with other condemned magicians.

"You got in just under the wire," one of them informed him helpfully. "We're going to get chased out into the arena in a few minutes."

"What can I do?" asked Sorghum.

"Don't struggle. Don't shield your throat—let the animals tear it out as soon as possible. That way it's over with at once and you cheat the mob of watching you squirm."

"I reckon so," said Sorghum thoughtfully. He remembered his courtesy and the bottles in his boots. "Have a drink?" he asked, producing them. The magicians clustered around him like flies around honey.

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The afternoon games were to consist of such little things as a pack of craven magicians and fortunetellers being killed in a mass by leopards. Consensus favored the leopards; odds were quoted as something like eighty to one against the magicians.

Tiberius waved his hand from the emperor's box in one end of the colossal amphitheater, and the gate which admitted the beasts opened. There was a buzz from the audience as the magnificent animals came streaming through like a river of tawny fur.

The emperor waved again, and the public prepared to be amused by the customary sight of unwilling victims being prodded out into the arena by long-handled tridents. But something must have gone wrong, for the craven magicians came striding boldly out, roaring some song or other. At their head was a curiously shimmering figure who was beating time with two enormous bottles, both empty.

It roared in a titanic voice, as it sighted the animals, "Look out, ye hell-fired pussycats! I'm a-grapplin'!" The magicians charged in a body to the excited screams of the mob.

Roughly there was one cat to every man, and that was the sensible way that the men went about eliminating the cats. The favorite grip seemed to be the tail—a magician would pick up a leopard and swing it around heftily two or three times, then dash its head to the sand of the arena. The rest would be done with the feet.

In a surprisingly short time the magicians were sitting on the carcasses of the cats and resuming their song.

"Let out the lion!" shrilled Tiberius. "They can't do this to me!" The second gate opened, and the king of the jungle himself stalked through, his muscles rippling beneath his golden skin, tossing his huge mane. He sighted the magicians, who weren't paying him any attention at all, and roared savagely.

The shimmering figure looked up in annoyance. "Another one!" it was heard to declare. The song broke off again as the grim, purposeful body of men went for the lion. He eyed them coldly and roared again. They kept on coming. The king of the jungle grew somewhat apprehensive, lashing his tail and crouching as for a spring. The bluff didn't work, he realized a second later, for the men were on him and all over him, gouging his face cruelly and kicking him in the ribs. He tumbled to the sand rather than suffer a broken leg and grunted convulsively as the magicians sat heavily on his flanks and continued their song.

"It was dow-wen in the Raid River Vail-lee—" mournfully chanted the leader—he with the empty bottles.

Tiberius stamped his feet and burst into tears of rage. "My lion!" he wailed. "They're sitting on my lion!"

The leader dropped his bottles and sauntered absently about the arena. One of the deep-driven iron posts of the inside wall caught his eye. He reached out to touch it and—was gone, with a shimmer of purple light.



Sorghum's reappearance was as unchronicled as his disappearance. He didn't tell anybody until they asked him, and then he told them from beginning to end, substantially as I have told it here.

But every once in a while he remarks, "Foreigners are sartinly peculiar people. I know—I've lived among them. But some day I'm going to get me some money and take a boat back there and see that Mr. Gallo to find out if he ever did get the hang of running the mash. Foreigners are sartinly peculiar—behind the times, I call 'em."

That's what Sorghum says.

[The end of *What Sorghum says* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]