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518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
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# "The Golden Arm"

## Collecting and Performing the Folktale

**BY TIMOTHY JENNINGS**

[*Editor's Note:* Tim Jennings, a storyteller of folktales, is back with another story of a tale and how he presents it. In his previous article, in the Spring-Summer 2014 issue of *Voices* (www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic40-1-2/liver.html), Jennings wrote of performing "Dead Man's Liver," and introduced the storyteller's concept of the "jump tale," in which the storyteller builds suspense, then jumps and shouts loudly to elicit similarly jumps, shouts—and laughter—from the audience. In this new piece, he explores his collection and retelling of Mark Twain's "The Golden Arm," again sharing his storyteller's technique.]

### Introduction

Like many people, I read Mark Twain's "The Golden Arm" when I was a child. My buddy Stevie and I had been swapping scary stories on the school bus ride home. I told him stuff out of Poe—"Tell Tale Heart" was my best— and he told me elements of Lugosi's *Dracula*, *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, and most memorably something about "The Mad Axman," who comes into rooms out of any corner that's too dark to see into. (That's one that'll come back to you after bedtime.)

Naturally, I was on the lookout for something new. And here was this compelling, traditional oral tale, transcribed by an author I loved, with instructions for performance. Around 1850, little Sammy Clemens heard it just before bedtime; much later, as the legendarily effective public speaker Mark Twain, he performed it in front of large audiences all around the world and wrote it down in an essay "How to Tell a Story."

His words are fun to read; you can see how they work. Best of all—and rare to this day—in addition to the words of the story, Twain gave tips on how to tell it. Most emphatically, Twain told me (he said "you," so he was definitely talking to me) that the story would create a big effect. But, he said, that would only happen if I could manage the timing on a particular pause just before the final line. He said, "you must get the pause right; and you will find it the most troublesome and aggravating and uncertain thing you ever undertook."

Yes, it was.

Instinctively, I dropped the dialect. (Twain assumed the persona of the black man who had told it to him as a boy.) After the usual early stumblings, I got control of the narrative, so the story would reliably take hold and ratchet up tension all the way to the climax. I shed a lot of sweat over the ending, and by the time I was an adult, I was able to spring what Twain calls "the snapper" without telegraphing its approach.

Twain wasn't lying about that pause. It—or something—was aggravating. Somewhere in my twenties, I began to suspect that the promised final effect never was going to pay off the way Twain said it should.

Nobody gave out a "dear little yelp." I never made anybody "spring right out of her shoes." Sometimes nothing happened. Sometimes something did—maybe their stomachs sank—but it wasn't enjoyable. I might see them shrink a little, or look stunned, or cringe. To tell the truth, they often looked abused. The slow-winding energy of the build never got released, there was no laugh (which you expect from a "snapper"), no sense of fun.

At its most effective, the story left us all feeling stupid and a little sore; it was like being on a roller coaster that goes up and up and up, then at the top somebody slaps you and you have to get out.

Maybe I just didn't have the chops? Then I saw Hal Holbrook in "Mark Twain Tonight"—lots of chops there—tackle the same story, with similar results to mine.

For a modern teller, it doesn't help that, thanks to Twain's essay, the story is so well known. Much of an audience's enjoyment from this kind of tale comes from the sudden final surprise. As Twain points out, if a listener can figure out the surprise is coming, the whole set-up "fails of its purpose and makes trouble."

It's a problem with all jump tales. As listeners figure out what kind of story they're hearing, they begin to brace themselves, and it's hard to get under their guard. I gave up on "The Golden Arm" a few years into my professional career. I had taken to telling "Dead Man's Liver," a different jump tale I'd collected myself, with my own timing and my own balance of humor and scares. It worked. The roller coaster went up and up and up, teetered on the brink, then plunged, reliably delivering its brief payoff rush of primal fear. I watched my audience jump, recoil (in a visible wave sometimes), squeal, then after the briefest catch-your-breath silence, explode into ten to thirty seconds of laughter and loud talk. That's what you want, it turns out—that's the sign the thing has landed right, and you've given your crowd a good time.

Nobody wants my second-best jump tale, I decided. It was useful. I'd learned from it, now let it go.

"He re-e-e-eached in and felt around." Tim Jennings in storytelling performance of "The Golden Arm." Photo by Terry J. Allen, courtesy of the author.

Then one day during a course of elementary school workshops in Chester, Vermont, a girl in the fifth grade told a story she got from her auntie. It was "The Golden Arm" all right, but miles away from Twain's version, clearly coming from no book. And it was great!

Best of all, the ending was different from anything I was familiar with. Actually, I realized later, I had come across that ending in the text of an English dialect tale, but had turned my nose up at it. I had to hear it performed to know it was perfect.

I tell the story that way, now using that little girl's ending and structure, mixing in some of Twain's set-up and flourishes, a few things I've learned from performing the "Liver" story, and a lot of stuff—maybe too much—that just comes up on its own. It's one of my wife's favorites, and it always works.

## The Golden Arm

There was a man who lived in the swamp; he was a miser; he loved to get and keep and never spend, more than anybody you know. He lived in the swamp because it was free, and because nobody came around to bug him out there, trying to get something from him. He built himself some kind of a house out of the things people dumped out there. And actually, he was pretty handy; it was an OK kind of place to live, considering it was made out of junk, in the middle of the swamp.

Now they say there's somebody for everyone in this world, and I guess it must be true, because this man had a wife, somebody got married to him. She was an ordinary person, nothing unusual about her, except for three things. First, she was willing to marry him. Second, she was sickly; she was never very well. (Maybe that's why she married him; maybe she thought he was her last chance.) And finally—I probably should have told you this first—one of her arms, instead of flesh and bone, was made out solid gold.

And that's why he married her.

He figured, because she was his wife, community property, her arm was kind of his arm, too. And, like I said, she wasn't very well; a swamp's not a healthy place; maybe she'd die, then the golden arm would really belong to him.

No, he didn't kill her! He wasn't that kind of man; not wicked, he wouldn't do that, not a murderer. Just, very, very tight, very greedy.

A swamp is not a healthy place, and she got sicker and sicker, and one day she went to bed and didn't get up. She called him over to him. She said, "Honey, maybe I'm not going to get better this time, and now it's time to tell you. I know why you married me. I'm not blaming you, I knew who you were when we got married, we've done all right, you've been good to me, considering, as good as you know how. But, now I need you to make me a promise. When I die, I want you to bury me with my arm. It's part of me, and I want to go into the ground whole. I want you to promise me that, right now."

He said, "Oh, honey!" He said, "You're not going to... I would never… how could you think… I didn't… Alright, I promise."

And, she did die, just a little while after.

He didn't get her a coffin, they cost too much, and for what? He wrapped her in a sheet. It was good enough for his grandparents; it was good enough for anybody. He wasn't going to bury her in the churchyard, you have to pay too much, big waste of money. He knew a spot in the middle of the swamp, where the ground rose up to a high place, dry enough that trees and flowers grew there, and berries, and birds came, and butterflies. He thought she'd like it.

He carried her up there; he dug the hole, put her in and covered her up, then started back home.

Every step he took away from the golden arm, he grew more angry and upset. He started talking to himself as he walked.

"Why did she make me promise that? How selfish can you get! But I promised, damn it. I'm a man of my word, I do what I promise." A little further on, more angry, more upset, "It's wrong! I never should have promised. She never should have made me! Why? What good is it doing her? Doing anybody? I should have said no, I should have changed the subject. Aaaa! … But I keep my promises, I'm man of my word." He walked a little further, furious: "Wasted! It's wasted! She can't use it! In the ground, in the dirt! Oh! It's stupid! It's wrong! It's wicked! In the grave, with the worms! No good to anybody! And I waited so long!" Over and over, more angry and upset every step he took. Until, suddenly, he stopped.

"I kept my promise. I said I'd bury her with her arm, and I did! I am a man of my word. But I'll tell you what I didn't promise. I never said I wouldn't go back there and dig her up again."

And that's just what he did. That mean, grasping, greedy man turned around and went back to her grave. He dug down to where she was, re-e-e-eached in, felt around—there it was—reached into the sheet, pulled it out. Then he filled in the hole, and started back home, heart pounding, hugging the arm tight against his chest.

Well, by this time, with all the carrying and digging, and going back and forth, it was growing dark, and from the coolness of the night after the heat of day, a thick mist was rising in the wetlands. And as he walked down into the mist, a big moon rose up above it. He couldn't see the moon itself, but the moonlight turned the mist white. He could see a step before him and a step behind him, but beyond that was just like a glowing white wall.

He wasn't concerned, he'd been that way many times, his feet knew the way without him thinking about it at all. His heart and his mind were full of the golden arm, as he hugged it tight to his chest.

And now up above the mist, a wind rose up. He didn't feel it down where he was, but he could hear it blowing up there, it made a kind of moan: *whoooooooooooooooo*.

And while he was listening to that, he began to imagine he could hear something else, too, under the wind: his own footsteps, of course, but also—was it an echo?—something that sounded like another set of footsteps coming along behind him. But

how could it be an echo? There's no echo in a swamp.

He stepped a little faster; the echo did the same. And now he began to hear the moaning of the wind almost like a voice: *whoooooooooooooooooooo*. He walked a little faster, and the steps kept right up. *Whooooooooooooooooooo ssssssssstooooooooooooole*. He walked faster; the steps behind him came faster. The wind was getting louder, it sounded more and more like a voice, and if you let yourself, you could hear words: *Whooooooooooooo sssssssssssssstooooooooooooooole my gooooooooooooooooolden arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm?*

He stopped walking. The other footsteps kept coming.

He ran, fast as he could, he never knew how he got home; the next thing he knew clearly was that he was in his house, heart pounding, hugging the arm to him, looking around wildly. "Where am I going to hide it? Where can I put it where nobody will find it?"

He saw the cellar door, went down into the cellar. There was a dry stonewall set up against the dirt and in front of that was a set of shelves, with jars of pickles and peaches and jam. He pulled the shelf out, took some of the stones down from the wall, dug a nook into the dirt, and put the arm in there. Then he set the stones back up in front of it, moved the shelf back, went back up to the house and shut the cellar door.

He paced around for awhile, listening to the wind, looking out the window, trying to see into the mist, until he finally went upstairs to bed. But he couldn't sleep. He just lay there in bed, wide awake for hours, staring out the window, listening to the wind.

Then, at midnight, the wind stopped. He heard footsteps outside, shuffling towards the house. He heard the steps come up onto his porch, heard the screen door open, heard the kitchen door open, and then slam together shut. He heard the footsteps moving around downstairs, under his bedroom floor; then he smelled, coming up through the floorboards, a dank smell of earth, of mold. Then he heard ripping and crashing and smashing and tearing below him. Then he heard the steps go toward the cellar. He heard the cellar door open, heard footsteps going down.

"No!" he thought. "Don't! Leave it alone!" But he didn't say anything; he was too scared. He wanted to jump up, to go down and stop it, whatever it was, keep it away from his arm, but he was paralyzed, he couldn't move. Then he heard the steps come back up to the living room and leave the house, and go away. And the wind came up again; he couldn't hear anything else. He wanted to go downstairs—so bad!—and see what had happened, but he didn't dare. He stayed in bed, still wide awake, until the first light of day.

Then he got up and ran downstairs. The couch and tables had been turned over; cushions ripped open, cabinet doors open, dishes smashed all over the floor. The cellar door was open! He ran down the cellar stairs, The shelf was moved, pulled away from the wall, the stone wall part way taken down.

"No!" and he reached back behind the stones—Oh! Thank god! The arm was still there. He pulled it out, hugged it to him. "Where can I put it? She's going to come back. Where can I hide it where she'll never find it?"

He carried the arm out of the cellar, went into the bathroom. He pulled the clawfoot bathtub away from the wall. Some of the tiles on the wall next to it were loose; he took them off, behind them was bare lathing. He pulled some of that out a bit, and dropped the arm back behind it into the wall. Replaced the lathing, stuck the tiles back, moved the tub up against the wall where it had been.

And, everything was fine from then on. Nothing happened after that. He knew where the arm was; he could put his hand up on the wall near it whenever he took a bath. Whenever he wanted, he could take down the tiles again, reach down behind the lathing, and touch it, or take it out and look at it. Everything was great. For a year.

Then a year later, to the day, the sun set, that same white mist rose up, with that same wild wind above it. And at midnight exactly, lying in bed he heard the wind stop. He heard the shuffling footsteps come into his house, smelled that powerful smell of mold, much worse now. Heard it go down into the cellar, then smashing crashing, like rolling stones, splintering glass. Heard it come back up the cellar stairs and go into the bathroom. "NO!" he thought. But he couldn't move, he didn't dare, he was paralyzed. Heard smashing and crashing in there, then the steps left the bathroom, left the house, and he heard them shuffle away. The smell drifted away, the wind picked up, and again he lay there motionless till the first light of dawn.

Then he ran downstairs, down into the cellar. The shelf was thrown down, jars broken, pickles and peaches and glass all mixed on the floor. The stonewall was down. If the arm had still been there, she would have found it.

He ran up to the bathroom. The cabinet was open, bottles and pills and such all tossed onto the floor. The tub had been moved out from the wall! The tiles were disturbed. "NO!" He pulled the tiles down, reached behind the lathing— Ah! Thank god! It was still there. He took it out, hugged it to him.

"She's going to come back! I know she is! Where can I put it where it'll be safe?— I know! I'll hide it under my pillow."

And he did. From then on, every night, he'd sleep with it under his pillow, he could feel it under his neck; he could touch it whenever he wanted. And everything was fine. Nothing happened. For a year.

And exactly a year later, to the day, that same weird weather, the white mist, the moaning wind. At midnight, the wind stopped, and as he lay in bed he could hear the shuffling footsteps come into his house. The smell of mold was overpowering, rising up through the floorboards. He heard it cross the room to the staircase. He heard it coming up the stairs. He heard it outside his bedroom door. Saw the doorknob turn. Saw the door swing open. Saw it at the foot of his bed.

"Honey—what happened—to your… long, long… hair?"

"Faded awayyyyyyyyyyyyy. Faded awayyyyyyyyyyyyy."

"Honey—what happened to your... bright blue... eyes?"

"Faded awayyyyyyyyyyyyy. Faded awayyyyyyyyyyyyy."

"Honey—what happened to your… long, long… legs?"

"Faded awayyyyyyyyyyyyy. Faed awayyyyyyyyyyyyy."

"Honey— what happened to your… golden…arm?"

"YOU GOT IT!"

## Performance Thoughts

As usual with texts of performance material, much of what makes the thing good doesn't reveal itself until you start working with it.

The great Viola Spolin had a useful prompt for improvisers: "Show, don't tell." Characters in a tale can speak and act from within their emotions—anger, terror, tension—there is no need to say, "He said, in a frightened voice." So, when the man has run home with the arm, the story-medium of text requires the words "looking around wildly," but a live storyteller need not say that, but can rather show the guy looking around wildly, speaking breathlessly: "where am I gonna hide it?"

Similarly, as you say "he re-e-eached in and felt around," demonstrate what you're talking about—it's a normal part of high-value speech to show as well as tell. No careful mime here, just ordinary conversational gesture and high-level tone and timing.

You can skip the moaning of the wind if you want, I imported it from Twain, I don't always use it.

One of the tale's biggest payoffs comes on the line "I know. I'll keep it under my pillow." Pause after you say that, share the moment with the audience and enjoy their reaction. Try to notice other places like that as you perform.

Clearly, there is quite a bit of similarity between this and the "Liver" story, and for that matter a host of other jump tales you may have heard, like "Big Toe," or "Teeny Tiny Woman." A Horrible Thing comes in, climbs the stairs, enters the bedroom, and approaches the bed. Sometimes, I use the bit from the "Liver" story where the man pulls the bedclothes up over his face, and the Thing grabs them from the foot of the bed and pulls them down again. I may have gotten it from Jackie Torrence; I'm not sure. It's a nice touch. I use it when the audience hasn't already heard me tell the "Liver" story.

Generally speaking, you don't follow one jump tale with another, but I have followed the "Liver" story with this one (generally, at different ends of the show), because the distinctive finale will go a long way to make the jump happen anyway, even though they know it's coming.

Do not memorize this story. Start by cutting it to the bone. Figure out how it works, and make it your own. If you're like me, it'll start stretching out again soon enough, and you'll know why. Using your own words naturally and engagingly on stage is paradoxically difficult—ask any aspiring comedian—but it's the only thing that pays off in the long run.

## Getting the End Right

By the ghost's final visit, you already should have demonstrated how the man looks, as he's lying in bed, terrified, holding his bedclothes up under his chin.

The cadences and language of the final dialogue are as I received them from the little girl.

As the man, I address the Thing (ghost or zombie or whatever it is) directly, speaking to the space above the foot of his bed, six feet in front of me, up in the air. (I think of her as floating.) I smile nervously at his wife, speaking in a hesitant, conciliatory, reasoning tone of voice.

The ellipses (…) in the husband's questions indicate pauses. Take them, it's important. Don't even think about what she looks like. Say her lines blindly, staring off into space, in a quiet, moaning, trailing, singsong voice.

Like the little girl from whom I got this story, I widen my eyes on the word "eyes." (She and I both have blue eyes.) It doesn't really make sense, it's the man's line, not his wife's, but I'm sure she got the move from her auntie and it had a surprising impact when she did it, so I do it, too.

The rhythm of question and response stays the same with each iteration, though there's room to build within the sentences, and in the spaces between sentences.

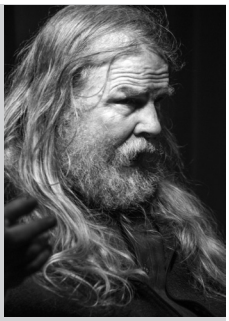
The man can be increasingly nervous, conciliatory, smiling, swallowing—reacting to each of the ghost's chants.

The ghost can vary between intense, resigned, spooky, or sad. But the music of the chant must remain the same.

As the man begins to speak his final line, it should be clear that he knows he shouldn't ask it, and in fact is in some way fighting against asking it, but he is somehow trapped by the structure, it's almost pulled out of him against his will, like poor Little Red Riding Hood squeezing out "Oh Grandma…What big … teeth … you have."

The audience also knows he shouldn't ask that question, and is bracing itself. If you play it right, though, their ancient preverbal social intercourse module should set them up irrationally to expect a chant of "faded awayyyyyyyy" before anything else happens. So they will be unprepared, unbraced, when you go in sharp and sudden to get'em.

Once you get the dynamics right, you can get 'em every time. It's bulletproof.



Tim Jennings has been telling folktales for a living since 1980. Recordings of live performances made with his wife, Leanne Ponder, have received American Library Association and Parents' Choice Foundation awards. In addition to their storytelling, Tim and Leanne have released instrumental music recordings as the harp and concertina duo "Sheefra," and contributed four cuts to the 2008 FolkSounds compilation *English International: A history of the English Concertina with some of the best players from around the World."* Tim and Leanne live in Montpelier, VT, with a feisty little dog and a ginger cat. Their website is *www.folktale.net*. Photo by Terry J. Allen, courtesy of the author.

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