

[Mrs. J. Bennett]

Tales - Anecdotes 3

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Marion Charles Hatch

ADDRESS 862 First Avenue, New York

DATE October 18, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK STUFF - STORIES TOLD BY MRS. J. BENNETT

1. Date and time of interview

October 13, 1938 - EVENING.

2. Place of interview

Residence of informant.

3. Name and address of informant

Mrs. J. Bennett 862 First Ave.

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

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No one. I became acquainted with informant as a result of living in the same house with her.

5. Name and address of person if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

I interviewed Mrs. Bennett in the kitchen of her three-room apartment on the second floor, facing First Avenue. She had a wood fire crackling in the stove as she feels chills quickly. She keeps her apartment scrupulously clean, but with a faint note of disarray issuing from the fact of her rheumatism, which prevents her moving about easily.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Marion Charles Hatch

ADDRESS 862 First Avenue, New York

DATE October 18, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK STUFF - STORIES TOLD BY MRS. J. BENNETT

1. Ancestry Irish

2. Place and date of birth

Ireland. About 73 years of age.

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3. Family

Widow of an American

4. Places lived in, with dates

Ireland during early childhood England until about 25 years of age Since then in America

5. Education, with dates

She was educated in a Catholic school in England, reaching what would be the equivalent of high school. She studied Latin read Dickens and Shakespeare.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

She has been a carpet sewer since living in America. She worked for most of the big department stores, such as Wanamaker's, where sales were often conditioned on changes being made in carpets to fit odd rooms, fire-places, etc.

7. Special skills and interests

Being crippled she enjoys reading and listening to the radio.

8. Community and religious activities

Catholic

9. Description of informant

Although a woman of 73 years, she still has beauty, represented in eyes that still retain a deep blue sparkle, even features, excellent forehead. She has few wrinkles and her white hair is silky. Age has been successful mainly in compressing her cheeks and stealing

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something of the form of the mouth and chin. Pictures on the wall show her strikingly beautiful in youth.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New YORK

NAME OF WORKER MARION CHARLES HATCH

ADDRESS 862 First Avenue, New York

DATE October 18, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK STUFF - STORIES TOLD BY MRS. J. BENNETT

I had asked Mrs. Bennett previously to tell me some stories so when I entered she said: "I have a little story all fixed up." She handed me a piece of paper with a story written in pencil. The original I attach to the end of this document. What she had written on the paper was as follows:

"My mother and I called on an acquaintance one evening. The husband of the lady was violinist. He wanted to entertain us with some classic music. He started with Cavalleria Rusticana. In the middle of it his wife jumped up, pulled up her skirts and did a step dance, and said: "Oh, give us 'Johnnie get your gun, get your gun.'"

I read the story and laughed and then the interview proceeded as follows:

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My mother and I were so mortified. He was so mortified, but we didn't dare laugh. But on the way home we screamed with laughter. Didn't dare laugh. She did two or three steps. I wished I could do it but I can't. (Mrs. Bennett, 73 and crippled with rheumatism, gets up and tries to imitate the dance). We never went there again. You know Cavalleria Rusticana? He started with such pathos, you know. So serious about it. Ha! ha! ha! (Laughs loud and musically).

My sister and I. My mother was expecting a baby and my sister and I were sent, what shall we say, nurse, nurse. She was a very cross old woman. They always are. The midwife. They don't have any midwives any more. What happened to them?

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They used to do quite some business around here, at one time, yessir! Midwives and the doctors never got paid. They were called for and they were promised the money but they never got paid. They just came, they saw, they conquered. (Stops to interpose some remarks on Mrs. Slavic, the deaf janitor) - (I was in there last night and he gave her a long conversation in his own language, you know, and at the end she looked up and she said, 'HmMMM!' just like that. I laughed in the night. He just said, 'O, go to hell'. Back to her story .) We took it on the run, of course, when we were sent for that cranky old midwife. She being older than I, what shall I say, she saw the importance of making haste. I was tired of running and I asked her what we were running for. And she said, "Oh, mother's going to have a baby and Mrs. Tutor is bringing it". Sure, put her name in; she was over seventy then and she's probably dead and buried by now. She hasn't anything to worry about if she's gone to the right place. If not, she will have plenty to worry about. So I was tired of running. I said, "If that's the case I'm not going to run any more. We don't want any more babies. Ha! ha! You know I never told my mother that. We never discussed having babies. Isn't that funny? Having a hard time, or anything of the kind.

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I was working in a house another woman was sent to help me and there was live wire. The electrician was working and he left a live wire exposed. It was on a lamp. And he was doing something on the lamp. She, being deaf, didn't hear the man say it was alive. She went to touch it and I stopped her. She would have been shocked, if I hadn't stopped her from touching it. Going home she wouldn't go down the stairs. She got in the elevator and wanted me to come too. I wouldn't go in and I shut the door for her and down she went. Ha! Ha! (laughs loud) She went up and down half a dozen times. Ha! Ha! She couldn't get it stopped. She looked like wax work. (Interposes: You never saw Madame Tussaud's in London? There's a funny thing. My brother was in Madame Tussaud's and he had a uniform of the English infantry, red coat, tall, looked fine, six feet, regular scarlet coat, and he was standing there admiring 3 the waxworks. He had never seen them before. And women started to admire him. Finally he started to move and a woman got quite a start. She thought the statue had come to life). So she was clutching the lever. Everybody was shouting to her. The caretaker was "far-down" from the North of Ireland. The Lord knows where they are now. That was in J.P. Morgan's house. (They gave lots of work. They occupied lots of people. So the "far-down. " [?] (They were always having something done over and they treated everybody so nice. One time we were there and she thought the work wasn't going as well as she thought it should be. She said she wouldn't have anything to do with any of the work people. She was finished with the boss and she threw everybody out in the first place. So we thought we were through. But we asked another man, and he said if our work was satisfactory just to go back in the morning. Morgan's daughter said, "I thought I told you I [you?] was through." I took a chance. I said, "But we come from another office". And she said all right, "Then stay at work". And so we kept the job and later she gave us \$5 and laughed about the incident.)

"Take your haan off the haandle " you can't put the accent [int?]. She kept up to the roof and down to the cellar. Couldn't stop that elevator. She went up and down several times.

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She looked more like a statue than anything else. Then I went like this to her (gestures) but you can't put that down. And she judged from that to take her hand off the handle. So finally she took her hand off the handle and stopped the car. Oh, she was a devil, a devil of a woman. I wished afterwards she had touched the live wire and got a shock. Ha, ha, ha! Oh she was horrid in every way, a mean woman, I couldn't describe her really. I think all deaf people are mean. Suspicious because they can't hear.

(Mrs. Maistrelli comes in. Mrs. M. had lived in the house for twenty years but had recently moved a block or two away. She was now moving again, this time to 86th Street. She came in to say good-bye. "You're going away now. I won't see you again. I could cry. (Mrs. Bennett can hardly keep the tears back). "Oh don't do that Mrs. Bennett. Donta cry." Mrs. Bennett: "Oh you have no sentiment.

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You're too tired to have sentiment. You don't feel. You are going away and you don't even want to cry." Mrs. Maistrelli: "Weell whata you think! I'm going to 86 street. Not going to Italy or Europe, just to 86th street." Mrs. Bennett: "You have no sentiment. You don't feel." Mrs. Maistrelli: "You musta have a little philosophy. I'll be coming down here." Mrs. Bennett: "Yes, but not so often." At door, Mrs. Maistrelli (using an euphemism), "Well, good night, Mrs. Bennett." Mrs. Bennett (almost weeping, choking) "Good bye!" Mrs. Bennett follows her into the hall to say something alone.

When I was a child I was in bed and asleep, woke up and saw a man looking through the window at me. I immediately tucked my head under the bed clothes and went off to sleep. Ha! Ha! That settled that. Another kid would bawl. That was on the ground floor. We were in bed, three of us slept in a great big bed, one night. My father had an extension made over; the extension was a sort of a loft where father kept leather. He made boots

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for the army officers. Had to have a lot of leather. He Used to keep leather in the loft. One night we were all in bed and we went to sleep. We heard some creeping overhead. Sh! sh! listen! Creeping came over further and further and the first thing the fellow did he fell through the ceiling. His leg came through the ceiling. Ha! ha! ha! We jumped out of bed. We nearly knocked each other down trying to get out quick (laughs). Nobody wanted to be last for fear he would catch us. Well, we ran up to my father and mother. Of course, shouting, not crying. Somebody getting in or something. Well, of course, my father, just right away, thought of the leather. So him and my mother went out to see what it was all about. Of course, the fellow was gone when he heard us shout. There was nobody there. A hide of leather was gone. There must have been somebody there throwing the leather down. So we stayed up in mother's room till everything was over. Mother said, 'Oh, it was nobody there. It was some cats. How did the cats fall through the ceiling? Oh, the ceiling was weak!' We believed it all and went right back to sleep.

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My father made shoes. He could make lady's shoes, gentlemen's running pumps, a lady's patent slipper. Turned inside out. He was a swell shoemaker. I heard my father say, telling some stories, he said when he was serving his time he had to serve seven years. There was seven of them slept in one room. And when one fellow wanted to go out with his girl the other six had to stay home. They had only one good suit between them. Ha! ha! ha! I've heard my father tell that many times. My mother used to be awfully ashamed and so did we but afterwards it seemed so ridiculous. And when one went with his girl the others had to stay home. Oh, dear, dear, dear. What funny things! That's all life! Them fellows don't care as long as they are having a good time.

***** (Reverting to scare) ' It's a wonder our hearts didn't jump out of place. How were they kept intact.

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They were apprentices, you know, they weren't full-fledged. They didn't have much money. You don't get much when you're an apprentice. I guess they feed them, that's all. I can just see us getting out of bed with one accord. Ha! ha! ha! The last one's a sissy, ha! ha! ha! The last one would be somebody. Ha! Probably one of the men that worked for my father. Years after my mother told us but father wouldn't tell us. The men who worked for father knew the leather was there. Many and many a soldier us kids used to shield. They stay out to see their girl. They stay over time. If they're caught out in the town without a pass they take them to the guard house. You know. Many and many a soldier I've seen hiding. When the provost asked we'd say they've gone. They would stand in some niche, you know, and stand there so they wouldn't be seen.

I went to a bachelor's apartment and two men, very nice. Oh, I got quite chummy with them, afterwards they were very nice. I went to sew and my scissors were down beside me. I'll give you an idea of the scissors. I have some similar. Of course, it isn't the same as all those years. You wouldn't imagine how much callous you can get cutting. (She shows scissors with a piece of binding to protect the hands). We hang it on our waist so we don't throw it on the floor afterwards. You can always tell a person doesn't know how to work. How they rig themselves. How they cut the thread. A big bull dog came in and sat in front of me, watching me. I was in there by myself, so terrified. I was in there alone and the big bull dog came in watching me. Was I seared? I was afraid to pull out my hand to sew. I was afraid to lift out the scissors. If I lifted up the scissors he'd go for you, I think. So I called out, after a while, 'Will somebody come and take this dog away.' I was so frightened, my own voice was frightened. 'Oh', he says, 'he wouldn't hurt you, he's an awful nice dog. He wouldn't hurt you.' I was afraid to pull my hand out - afraid to cut the thread with the scissors. "If you don't take him away I'll never do any work," I said.

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This one, I don't know whether I should tell you or not. That was a big private house on Lexington Avenue. The son of the house was a son of a gun. Ha! ha! I was sitting on the floor, sewing the carpet. Oh, I could go to the court, but I don't like that. They would only say I was an adventuress. I had no witnesses. I couldn't prove anything. I was very plump in those days, today I'm broad, but then I was plump. He sat down beside me, on his hunkers, and told me I had a wonderful complexion. I paid no attention to his flattery. Then I saw something. I just got up and ran. I would have thrown those shears through a window to attract somebody's attention, but the window had shutters and I couldn't do that. So I ran until I couldn't run any more. I was tired out. Of course, other people have better stories, but (sarcastically) (imitating a refined prude) "They wouldn't remember them." Oh, no, no, no! "I'd like to see him do that to me. He'd know better." (She laughs) So he ran after me until I couldn't run any more. I turned on him and held my shears. "If you come a step nearer, I'll push these right through you."

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

Mrs. Bennett answered: Well, it was all over by then. Nothing more.

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Mrs. Slavic, the superintendent, very deaf, knocks at the door: Mrs. Bennett: Is she back? Don't answer the door! She's a nuisance! I don't want her to see you in here. She's so nosey. (Mrs. Slavic pushes in) Oh, was that door unlocked?

Mrs. Slavic: (Speaks in a loud, uncontrolled voice of deaf person) Look at this! (She has copy of the magazine LIFE, opened) Is this awful? It's pictures of a baby. How you get baby. (Mrs. Bennett interposes, right in front of Mrs. Slavic) "Isn't she stupid? She can't hear anything we say. Or perhaps she can. If she can hear, she's getting an earfull."

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Mrs. Slavic: The things they print now. My boy showed this to me. Oh, it's awful, awful.

Mrs. Bennett: All right, go on home now. (Mrs. Slavic, of course, doesn't hear.) (Finally, Mrs. Slavic completes her criticism of LIFE, sees that we are busy, and goes out.)

Mrs. Slavic is deaf. So I went in there. She was making bread. She offered me some of this hot bread. I couldn't eat anything in there. (Ugh! - gesture of repugnance) So I said no, I don't want anything. She said, it won't hurt me. I said, No! No! I don't want any. I know what's good for my system. "Oh," she says, "I didn't know your sister was in the city. You sister isn't here?" Ha! ha!

Reverting to first story about "Johnny, get your gun": We were laughing so they must have thought we were drunk; we were taking both sides and the middle. We couldn't walk straight.

This lady was named Susan. The landlady, the janitor. Her friends didn't like her name Susan, so she changed her name to Bessie as a favor to her friends. So when she had her little boy christened, the priest asked for her name and she told him Bessie. The priest put it down, "Elizabeth". Well, when that lady came home she was so 8 indignant. "What do you think?" she says, "he put me down 'Elizabeth'"! I said, "That is Elizabeth". Of course, she didn't know until she came home and somebody read it to her because she can't read, you know. You can imagine the fun I have sometimes with them.

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Next door the girl was always crying. She didn't know what she was crying for. I would tell her, "You're crying there, just crocodile tears." Then later, the mother would turn on the daughter and say, "Oh you, and your crooked dile tears."

I came down to this room so I'd be able to get down to the street easier. And I've been here six months and haven't been down once. (laughs) I've got now so I don't want to go down. I just sit at the window and look down at the world. It's fun. Sometimes I have trouble getting my groceries. One day I dropped half a bucket of ashes down to the street trying to attract some boy's attention. The delicatessen charges a couple of extra pennies for everything and I have to give the kids a couple of pennies.

(As I prepared to go:)

(Very politely) Now, I've done you a favor, perhaps you can do me one. Get me a loaf of Banner whole wheat bread and a quarter pound of butter.

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