

Cletus's Big Fish



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is a Perry County, Tennessee native who left to find work, stayed gone over forty years, and chose to return home here near his roots. During the sojourn he enjoyed a military career, traveled widely, and saw a large portion of the world. After leaving the military He worked in adult education for several years, on all levels, beginning learners through junior college. In 2004 he retired for the second time, and now participates in various civic organizations, dividing his spare time between his amateur radio hobby and writing.

Cletus Tolber was a certified character in his community and was not unheard of in others. He was a bachelor and tended to look and usually smell the part. In the winter he always had a head cold and runny nose which he seldom bothered to blow or wipe. He could usually be found still wearing his long john underwear as late as early July. If asked why, he would lecture you on the benefits of staying warm as a means of staving off colds. People who knew him always said that Cletus was a little “different,” which was just a nice way of saying he was about two Tacos short of a combination plate in the brains department. Cletus was functional though and most people accepted him as he was.

Cletus lived alone as he had been unsuccessful in finding anyone of the female persuasion who would put up with his habits. As a bachelor he could pretty much do as he pleased, and fishing pleased him. Although he fished a lot, he was not good at it and his catches usually reflected his skills and judgment. He wanted desperately to catch a large catfish. It was a burning within him that would not stop. He was driven by the need and went to unusual lengths to achieve his objective. He devised unusual strategies for setting his lines, tried every thing he could think of as bait and still did not catch his big fish. Usually he was lucky if he caught enough for his frying pan. Strategies such as only baiting every third hook on the theory that scarcity would increase competition and bring home the big one didn't help much. His attempts became a part of local lore and people often asked others if they knew whether or not Cletus had caught his fish. Needless to say he suffered a lot of ribbing at the store from people who enjoyed seeing him squirm.

One Saturday afternoon in August, Cletus joined a group sitting in the shade of the store porch next to the blacksmith shop. He seated himself on a nail keg, pulled a plug of chewing tobacco out of his overall pocket, blew off some of the bigger pieces of lint, and tried to bite off a chew. Unsuccessful, he pulled out a rusty old Barlow knife and cut off a corner, popped it into his mouth and began working the chew. If he noticed the others shifting to seats upwind of him he didn't say anything. After a few minutes, he spat

Cletus's Big Fish

between the boards of the floor and said, "Howdy fellers."

"Howdy Cletus," a chorus of voices responded.

"You been catching any fish lately?" one asked.

"Naw, too hot," replied Cletus. "They ain't bitin."

That was the opening they had been waiting for.

"No, Cletus," said Roscoe White, a farmer who seldom if ever fished, "this is the best time of all for catchin the big ones. You just gotta know how and what bait to use."

"You been catchin any, Roscoe?" asked Cletus.

"Why, yes I did, Cletus. I set a throw line with only eight hooks on it in that little slough behind my peanut patch. I got five catfish and a turtle off it yesterday."

"Any size to em?" asked Cletus, beginning to get excited.

"Well, no," Roscoe replied, "These was little uns, wouldn't run more than twelve to fifteen pounds apiece, but I didn't expect bigguns in that slough in hot weather. The bigguns are holding in the deep water where the current is strong."

Cletus thought about that for a moment. "What did ya use fer bait?" he asked, spitting toward a crack between the floorboards and missing, splattering his shoe.

"Cletus, I hate to tell you cause I know you'll laugh at me and I'd hate that."

"No I won't Roscoe, I wouldn't never laugh at anything you told me, you know that." He leaned closer to Roscoe.

"Well Cletus, I'll trust you, but step over here a ways and I'll tell ya, I don't want them other fellers to hear." They stepped a few paces down the store porch.

Cletus leaned nearer. "What is it," he whispered

"Elbow macaroni!" whispered Roscoe.

"No," said Cletus, "you don't mean it!"

"Gospel truth, Cletus, the big stuff works best."

"How long do you cook it?" asked Cletus

"No, you're missing the point, Cletus, you don't cook it at all. You put it on the hook dry. Cooking kills the flavor for a catfish."

"I never thought of that," said Cletus. "I won't tell nobody neither. But," he leaned close again, "how do ya get it on the hook?"

"Well, there's two ginnly 'cepted ways I know of. The best but hardest way is to take pliers and straighten yore hooks, run them through the macaroni and then bend the hooks back. The easiest way and quickest way is to take some string and just tie em on. I usually just tie em on."

"Well I shore thank ya for telling me Roscoe, and your secret is safe with me." Cletus paused as if in thought and said, "Well, gotta get on back home." He got up and went inside the store.

The men on the store porch turned their attention to Roscoe. "What did you tell him?" one of the men asked.

"I told him to use dry elbow macaroni." He paused. "I'll bet you he's in there buying macaroni right now."

No one took the bet, but tried to appear disinterested while attuned to the door. After a few minutes Cletus came out of the store, the distinct shape of a box of macaroni visible under his

Cletus's Big Fish

shirt.

"Yep," said Whit Whitwell, another local farmer, "he bought macaroni."

"Where do y'all reckon he'll set his lines?" asked Clem Stokes, gazing after the rapidly disappearing Cletus, puffs of dust dogging his heels like playful puppies.

"Probably down there by the bluffs where the water is swift and deep" said Ralph Jones. "Doubt he'll catch much tho, hit's too hot, fish ain't bitin."

II

The men assembled on the store porch were running out of things to talk about. The weather was unchanged and the heat was intense. August was just drifting from one day to the next with little sense of urgency. Most of the farmers' crops were too tall to plow again and neither weeds nor corn was growing much in the heat. There remained little more to do beyond daily chores until harvest time. Unless the weather broke and the rains came there would be little to do at harvest. The men were used to this; it seemed every year was pretty much like the one before and they didn't devote a lot of discussion to the weather. Roscoe White was getting ready to go home; he stood, stretched, scratched his back on the corner of the building.

John Tanner asked, "Roscoe, have you seen Cletus since you gave im that fishing advice?"

"Naw, I ain't seen him since then," Roscoe answered, picking up his sack of purchases. "I bet he never caught nothin though or we'd a-heard from im."

"Yep," said Muley Barnes, "iffen he ever does catch a biggun, he'll make sure everybody knows it."

Roscoe got in his old pickup and left in a cloud of dust. The men watched him leave.

"Speaking of Cletus" said another, "ain't that him a-coming yonder?"

"Yep, looks like im," said Muley, "I believe he is dirtier than he was last week. You'd think anybody fishes much as he does would get wet now and then by accident."

Cletus, his face dripping sweat, walked up to the men in the shade, nodded his head to the group and took a seat on an up-ended nail keg. He pulled a faded and dirty bandana out of his overalls and wiped his face. "Shore is a hot-un," he said to the group in general.

"Yep," someone replied, "shore is."

Muley Barnes said "One good thing though, after a few days of hot weather like this, hit shore makes the fish bite good."

"I'd a thought it wus to hot fur em to bite," said Earnest Jones.

Ralph White, Roscoe's brother, chimed in, "I'd a-thought so too, but Roscoe caught a big mess two nights ago. We et fish till we was stuffed." He continued, "Nothing like a big catfish cooled outside in a wash pot. Tastes better n them little-uns cooked in a skillet."

Cletus was all ears; he stopped mopping his face and listened. Maybe Ralph would let slip what he used to catch them. He didn't want to appear too interested though. He hadn't had any luck with the elbow macaroni. After sticking himself far too many times trying to thread the hooks through the elbows without breaking the dry macaroni to pieces, he had resorted to tying the elbows on the hooks with twine. He had caught no fish but apparently the fish were

Cletus's Big Fish

eating the macaroni; his hooks were empty when he pulled his lines.

"Yeah, bigguns do taste better cooked that way," said Muley. "Did Roscoe say what he baited with?"

"Naw, he didn't say, but I know 'e bough a case of Redbird brand Vi-ennies that day here at the store. Now I know Roscoe don't favor Vi-ennies all that much. Likely he used um fur bait."

"Where did he fish?" asked Earnest.

"He put his lines in that fast water that runs by the island on the Decatur County side. He likes deep water this time a-year. I reckon the biggest one he caught would a weighed better than forty pounds. Only kept that un and a little un around twenty pounds, said he threw a bunch a tha little-uns back in." He paused and spat, "Said he'd let um grow up some and catch um again when they get respectable size. Said the biggun had a stomach full of something looked like white dough or noodles or somthin and he had a lot of scars around his mouth. I reckon he was a smart old bait stealer."

"Yeah, likely he was," said Muley. "Where you off to Cletus? You just got here."

Cletus, who had heard enough, had gotten up from his seat and was walking toward the store door.

"Got work to do," he said. "You fellers take care." He went into the store.

"Well" said Ralph, "bet he's a fixing to buy Red Bird Vi-ennies."

"Wouldn't doubt hit a-tall," said Earnest. "Old man Henry ought to give us commissions on macaroni and vi-ennies."

"Tha'l be tha 'day," mused Muley. "Old man Henry's likely still got the first nickel he ever made in that store business."

Cletus came out of the store, a sack in his hand showing the outlines of a small box just the right size for a case of sausages.

"What's yore hurry Cletus, stay awhile and talk," called Ralph.

"Ain't got time right now fellers," said Cletus as he walked away, the ever present puffs of dry dust following him down the road.

Henry Clayton, the storekeeper came out on the porch. "What did you fellers tell Cletus about them Redbird vienna sausages?" he asked.

"Why nothing direct, Henry," said Ralph. "We did mention that they was good catfish bait," he grinned.

"You fellers ought to be ashamed of yoreselves," said Henry. "He bought my last case and anybody ought to know they won't stay on a hook worth a damn."

The men watched as Cletus grew small in the distance.

"Wonder just what kind of a monkey shine he'd cut iffen he was to catch a fish over ten pounds!" Ralph mused. "I bet he wouldn't waste any time getting tha word out neither."

"Next time les tell him to try owl gizzards," said Ralph.

"Reckon he'd believe it?" said Earnest.

"Hell, he's too lazy to skin an owl," said another man. "He won't know a owl ain't got no gizzard."

The men watched Cletus disappear from sight around the curve toward home and river.

Cletus's Big Fish

III

Eddie McCain and Larry Stiles, teenagers, sat listening to the men talk. They'd been present previously when the men convinced Cletus to try elbow macaroni. To them it looked like the vienna sausages was about as far as events could be carried without Cletus realizing he was being set up.

Eddie poked Larry in the ribs and said, "Come on, Larry, I got a fine idea, let's go."

"Where we going?" asked Larry, reluctantly leaving the shade of the store porch. The wall of heat reflected off the road washed over them.

"Let's follow Cletus and see where he sets his lines. We should have enough time to get to the river before he does, if he stops at his house."

"What do we care where he sets em?"

"Well, you heard the men say old Cletus would cut a shine if he caught a big fish didn't cha?"

"Yeah I heard em."

"Well hit don't look like he ever will catch a biggun. Wadda ya think he'd do if he thought he caught a big fish?"

Larry thought a moment. "How can we fool im? If we wuz to tie a dead weight on his line he won't know the difference, even old Cletus ain't that dumb!"

"Well, we'll just have to make him think it's a live weight, won't we?" Eddie said.

The boys walked on in silence, considering possible ways to simulate a live fish. The heat was taking its toll even late in the afternoon. By sundown, the boys were hidden in the tree line near the old stump where Cletus kept his boat tied. They settled back in the shade to watch for Cletus. Their wait was short-lived.

Cletus arrived carrying his trotline with most of the hooks already baited with vienna sausages. The boys watched him set the line in his boat, untie the mooring rope and shove off. He picked up a long handled paddle and began pulling down river. They followed along the shore, staying well back in the shade but keeping Cletus in sight. A few minutes later, Cletus paddled up to a snag sticking out of the water and, reaching down, tied his line to the snag below the surface. He paddled away into the current, the line unwinding from the box and strung out behind him. In a few more minutes the boys watched him attach a weight and drop the line overboard. He then turned up river and paddled back to the mooring stump.

"We know where his line is," said Larry, "now what?"

Eddie thought a few minutes then said, "I think I know how we can fool him. We need a few things, some strong line or a rope, a big bucket lid of some kind and a really heavy weight. Wonder where we can get em?"

The boys walked back up the river bank toward Cletus's boat. They walked around the point and found themselves in a cook site the musselers had been using. They skirted it while following Cletus down river since Cletus might have seen them crossing the open area.

The vats were well used but serviceable and the area appeared recently used. Several brails were stored on a rack fashioned on two trees.

Eddie said, "Look over there by that last vat, ain't that a lard stand lid?"

Cletus's Big Fish

Larry walked over and looked closer, "Yep shore is, kind of rusty though. Does that matter?"

He walked a few steps, "Here is the rest of that lard stand too, stinks turrible, looks like they wuz storing mussel meat in it.

"Get the lid," answered Eddie. He picked up a length of quarter inch brail rope he found in the weeds and gave it a pull test. "This'll do," he said, pulling the rope free of the weeds and coiling it on his arm. "All we need now is a heavy weight."

"Shore ain't none here, ain't even no good rocks. All I seen around here is that old tractor block on the other side of Cletus's stump."

"That might work," said Eddie, "if the wasps don't have nests in it. Let's go see."

The boys made their way past Cletus's boat tied once again to the stump and soon came to the old rusty tractor block located about fifty yards up stream. The paint was long gone and all the salvageable parts had been removed. The old block was wasp free but partially buried in the sand. They began to dig.

Eddie paused, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and asked, "How heavy you think this thang is anyhow?"

Larry sat back, looked the object over and said, "Least two hundred pounds, I'd say. It's purty thick steel, ya know."

"Well, let's get it over to tha water's edge. Then we can bring Cletus's boat up here to it."

They continued digging in the soft sand and soon had the block free. They rolled it end over end to the water's edge and stopped to catch their breath. After a few minutes they walked back to Cletus's boat, placed the rope and lid inside, and untied. The boat was messy with bits of line, a partially crushed snuff can, and other odds and ends, including several pieces of vienna sausages. Larry jumped in and pushed off with the paddle while Eddie waded along the water line pulling the boat with the tie rope. They secured the boat beside the bank under the tractor block. They slid the block down the ramp and into the boat. They then set off for Cletus's trotline.

Once they reached the snag where Cletus had tied his line, Eddie fished around for a moment and pulled the line up. Using the line to pull and guide and the paddle to push, they soon reached the mid point of Cletus's line. All the baits had washed free and the empty hooks glinted dully in the last of the light from a setting sun.

"Hold still against the current, Larry," Eddie said as he measured off a long length of the rope they had salvaged, cut it, and tied a series of bows in it using slip knots. He then used his pocketknife to punch a hole in the middle of the lard stand lid. He threaded the rope end through the hole and tied a knot in it to secure the lid.

"These bowknots will pull on the line when they catch the current as Cletus pulls it in, and then let go, he'll think he has a fish on fur sure," he said.

"Where we going to tie the tractor block?" asked Larry.

"A few hooks futher out," Eddie said, pulling in more line. "Don't let that lid catch the water fore we get the weight on, don't want the current to strip all them bows out."

When he had pulled a bit more out into the river he tied the remaining rope to the line and attached the other end to the tractor block. "Now," he said, "let's let the line back in gentle and

Cletus's Big Fish

get this block overboard quick."

The boys positioned themselves either side of the block; they carefully avoided the hooks and eased the line over the side. Quickly they picked up the block and pitched it overboard. It made a resounding splash and sank to the bottom in the strong current.

"Now let's check it out," Eddie said, as he seized the paddle and began paddling back to the snag.

Larry reached down, grabbed the line and began pulling it in. As the boat drew near the lid, it caught the current and pulled the line viciously, whipping it back and forth, then as the first bow gave way released pressure on the line, much like a live fish as he swims toward the angler.

"Damn!" said Larry, "if I didn' know better I'd swear a fish wuz on there."

"Good, ort to fool im all right. He ain't never caught a biggun nohow so hit'l all be new to'im," said Eddie.

The boys secured Cletus's boat to the mooring stump and placed everything back where it had been as near as they could remember.

"We need to be in position to watch im run his line. When do you think e'll do it?" Larry asked.

"Let's be here bout six. I doubt he will be earlier than that. We can watch him from the trees below that mussel camp."

The boys left the river. The heat was less intense and the walking easier now that the sun had set.

Early the next morning Eddie reached the mussel camp. Larry was nowhere in sight and Eddie settled in to wait. He was watching the swirling surface of the river as it washed against the near bank, a piece of driftwood passed, caught in the current. He heard the raucous call of a blue heron as it flew from its feeding site, disturbed. Shortly Larry came out of the brush.

"Sorry I'm late, he said, "had' t'feed the damned cows or tha old man wudda kicked my butt."

"You feedin this early?" asked Eddie. "We don't usually start feeding till late fall."

"Well, both them heffers is fresh with calves. He's afraid the pickins in the pasture is too thin with all this hot and dry weather. He wants to keep em milking as long's e can."

Eddie considered this, "Well, guess e's got a point there."

"Where is Cletus?" Larry said, looking both up and down river.

"Ain't bin here yet," said Eddie, settling back in the morning shade. The boys dozed and eventually slept. They were startled awake by the sound of a paddle being dropped into a boat. They realized Cletus had begun his line run. They sat up and watched him pull in his line, the wet empty hooks sparkled behind him in the morning sun. Suddenly he seemed to sit up straighter, he tugged on the line. He stood up, braced his foot on the side of the boat and pulled hard on the line. The line whipped back and forth in the water and then gave slack. Cletus sat down hard in the boat. He pulled again, and again the line swung wildly back and forth in the current, then again gave slack. Cletus seemed to be in thought then he lowered the line gently back into the water, picked up the paddle and pulled furiously back to the mooring stump. He tied the boat and walked rapidly back up the road, his brogans throwing spurts of

Cletus's Big Fish

sand behind him as he disappeared rapidly into the distance.

"Look at' im go," Larry said, "where you reckon he's going in such a hurry?"

"Dunno," replied Eddie. "Probably goin after help. Looks like the fun is over and I don't want to be here when he figures out what we done. Let's go."

A few days later the men were relaxing on the store porch. They had already discussed the weather, the price of hogs, and the corn market. Finally one of the men asked, "Anybody seen Cletus since he bought them vi-ennies?"

"Yeah," said Whit Whitwell, "he' wuz back here bout one a-clock the next day. I was eating a bologna sandwich for lunch and talking to the blacksmith. He wanted the blacksmith to make him a ten inch grappling hook with a long handle on it."

"Wadda'e want with that?" asked another, continuing to whittle long shavings off the side of the cola case he was sitting on.

"Well, he told the blacksmith he had a 400 pound catfish on and couldn't get it out, his grappling hook being too small. He said he got it out of the current and in the still water but it dived to the bottom and wouldn't move. He finally broke his line trying to wrench it out." He paused, "Said he wuz gonna 'stall a windlass on his boat and when he catches it again he wants the long hook to reach down and find him then snag im and drag it on the windlass. He told Henry to order im another case or two of Redbirds."

"You reckon he did hook on to a biggun?" said Roscoe White, looking amused.

Whit Whitwell said, "Naw, was a couple of them boys went down there and tied a lard stand lid and a tractor block to his line."

A low laugh swept through the group as they imagined Cletus struggling to raise the tractor block.

"I wudda loved to a seen it," said a voice from the group.

"Does Cletus know that?" said another man.

"No, and he better not find out," said Whit, "e's likely to shoot them boys."

"Well, guess it'd be best if he don't find out," said Roscoe.

"Yeah, most likely would," said Whit. "Don' know what the world is coming to. Boys these days just don't know when to quit."