

Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

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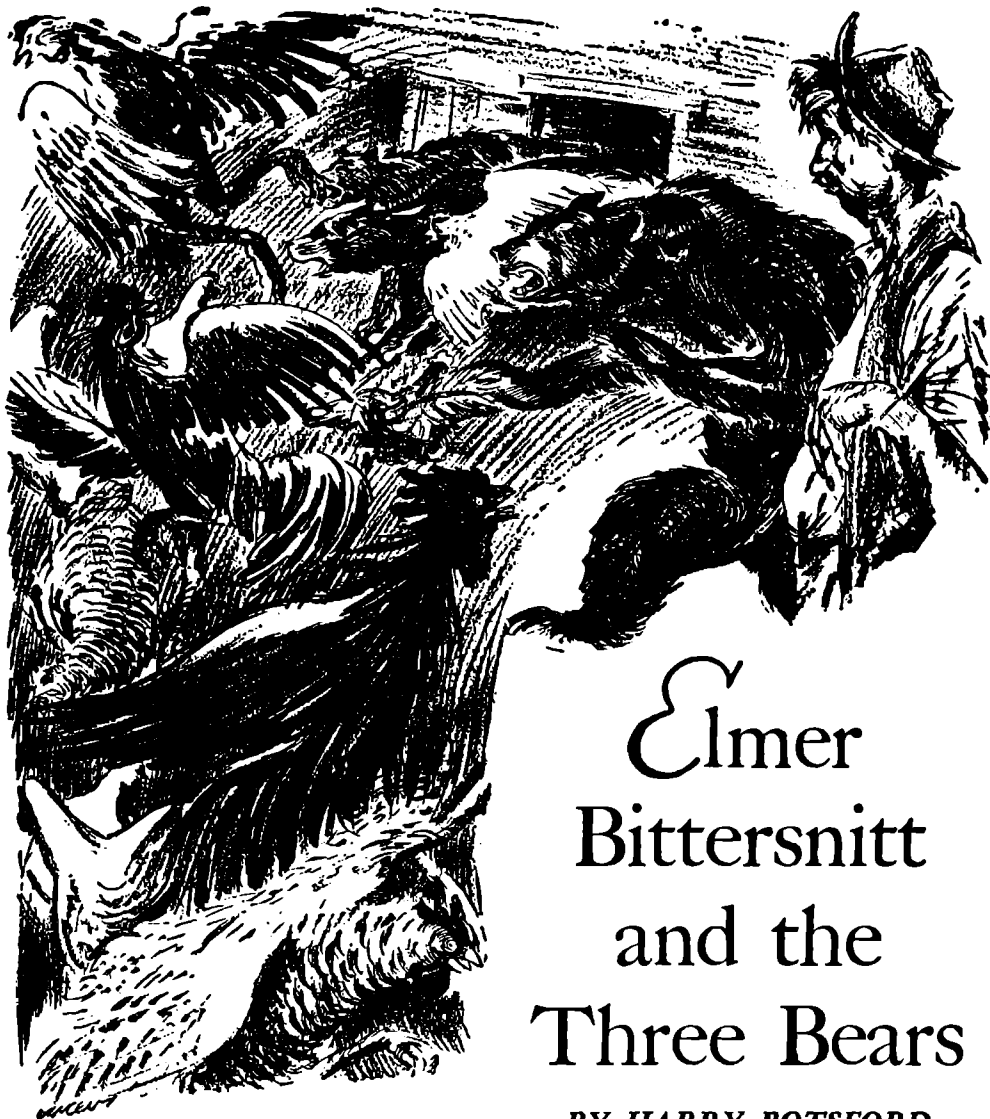
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Seems that Elmer and the bears were all bachelors.



Elmer Bittersnitt and the Three Bears

BY HARRY BOTSFORD

MR. WALT DUTTON chomped happily and vigorously at his breakfast. The fact that he was an uninvited guest failed to dampen a hearty enthusiasm for my cookery. An elderly and engaging rascal, completely devoid of hair and morals, he lived alone in a shack along the banks of Pine Creek. He was toothless, his chin retreated alarmingly, and his smile was guileless and disarming. Moreover, the truth was not in him.

He deftly rolled his final pancake into a cornucopia, filled it with clover honey, opened his mouth and delicately swallowed the entire project at one swift swoop. He wiped his chin free of a dribble of honey, grinned toothlessly through the open cabin door. "My cousin Elmer couldn't abide honey," he said. It was raining. It had rained all night. It would rain all day.

He shook his hairless head sadly. "No trout fishin' today," he opined. He rose

from the table, nimbly ensconced himself in my favorite chair, reached for my tobacco, slowly tamped a heavy charge in an old and charred pipe. He lighted the pipe, drew deeply and with great content. The rheumy old eyes swung toward me and he smiled gently.

"My cousin Elmer Bittersnitt, he lived around here years ago," he said. "They was a bounty on him and he picked bird shot outen hissself for years. But, Elmer, onct a thin man, was fat as butter when he decided that there wasn't much future in living with three bachelor bears. Besides, he smole pretty high by the time he left these parts, and folks had put a price on him."

I poured hot water over the breakfast dishes, sat down in the second-best chair of the cabin. Walt Dutton had a story festering in him, and I knew he wouldn't be happy until he had spun it. It would be improbable, and I said as much with some bitterness. I had listened to many of his tales.

THIS here story, Mr. Dutton said, is the gospel truth. I could bring in a dozen church-goin' people who would tell you so. Moreover, I'm a truthful man, always have been. There has been some which has doubted me, but when I confronted them with hundreds of citizens who testify as to my character, they shut up.

Elmer wasn't what you'd call real bright, even as a boy. He was married onct, but his wife insisted on him workin'. Besides, she had a passion for cats, critters Elmer couldn't abide. So he upped and ran away, got hissself a job in the oil fields down here, an easy job, you may be sure. He was a pumper and all he had to tend to was one well. That there well pumped by steam and she was on the beam, that is she was pumped by a wooden walking beam that teetered up and down. Elmer, he fired up the boiler, then just sat and watched. It was the kind of job Elmer liked.

Elmer had one great failin', and that's why the folks livin' in the Enterprise Valley finally put a bounty on him. Elmer just couldn't say no to any request, unless work was involved. Iffen he hadn't been such a spineless critter, he woulda said no to the three bachelor bears that he took up with onct.

Well, sir, one day I went to visit Elmer at his work. He had an easy job, lived in the boiler house. Elmer was a drinkin' man, same's I was in them days. I was overtook with thirst, and bein' without funds, I thought I'd visit Elmer and see if he had any drinkin' likker. Well, I come into the clearin' where the well was located and I saw a sight that near unnerved me, sufferin' as I was from a hangover.

On opposite ends of the walking beam there sat a big brown bear, their fur kinda dingy, but very happy they seemed as the walking beam teetered up and down. Sittin' on the steps of the boiler house was Elmer and another bear, slightly bigger than the other two. They had a jug between them and every onct in a while they would take a swig out of it. When this happened the two bears on the walking beam would grunt and growl and roar. It seemed they objected. I looked at them and I was convinced that they was far gone in spirits.

Elmer and the bear beside him seemed to be talkin' and gettin' along real cozy like. He looked up and saw me and grinned sort of foolish like. "Come on over, Walt," he says, "and have a snort and meet some friends of mine." I sort of edged over and Elmer hands me the jug and I was sorta nervous when I raised it up and took me a snort. Embarrassed, that's what I was, and maybe I took three or four good healthy snorts. I'd of taken more but I felt myself grabbed by two hairy paws and found myself facin' a mad and thirsty bear. The bear was makin' noises, too, as he grabbed the jug.

"He's sayin' you are a hog!" Elmer says. "You ain't to have no more, he says. Further, he opines you better git before the lads on the walkin' beam dismount, for they are both drunk and hungry, and they might not find a few bites of man meat distasteful."

I WAS about to argue the point, my courage havin' picked up considerable after the jolt of likker. But just then Orv Benedict, the man which had hired Elmer, came into the clearin'. He was a temperance man and he sniffed as he approached. Bein' near-sighted, he didn't notice the bears until he got pretty close. The big bear started toward

him, probably figgerin' here was another jug customer. Elmer, a little woozy, spoke to him and the bear stood stock still.

Then and there Orv Benedict caught the smell of spirits and saw the jug, and he knew Elmer had been drinkin'. A violent man, he fired Elmer on the spot, took a kick at the big bear and run fast for his buggy. If the big bear had been sober, he would have caught him, too. But the old man whipped up his horse and managed a get-away, hollerin' threats over his shoulder, his whiskers streamin' behind him in the wind.

Elmer shook his head sadly. "I gotta shut down the engine," he told me. "Then Sammy and Joseph will come down. If you are here, they will do harm to you. I suggest that you git. Me, I can control the big feller here. His name is Oscar. I call these here friends of mine by Bible names: Samuel, Joseph and Oscar. You gonna git?"

I got. It seemed to be the thing to do, me bein' a peaceful man. I wondered where Elmer had picked up his strange companions and what he would do, now he was fired. Elmer, if I knew him, would never resort

to hard work unless he was pretty desperate and downright hungry and thirsty.

It wasn't long before I had the answers. About two years later when Elmer was a hunted man, I helped him escape and he told me the whole story, a most pitiful thing it was, too.

Seems Elmer and the three bears, all bachelors, sort of carefree and independent, took up residence in a big cave on the east side of Dunham Mountain. They was a rumor that Elmer set himself up a small still and that most of the time the four of them was pickled and reckless. When Elmer tole me about this, the tears ran down his face. "Sammy, Joseph and Oscar, they gathered the corn for me and you would be surprised at how active they could be, onct they knew what I wanted and how nice the juice tasted. Agin' the likker was something they couldn't understand. Once they knew how talented I was, my doom was sealed. They held a council of war, decided they would hold me captive."

It was sorrowful circumstances in which Elmer found himself. Oscar, in particular, had a nasty disposition, had a bad habit of

cuffin' Elmer around a little, when things didn't go right. It seems the bears wanted Elmer to rig up another machine, one that could produce food, just as the still made likker. When he said it couldn't be done, they thought it was plumb ridiculous and said as much. Them bears, Elmer told me, had ravenous appetites. Besides they was lazy. They sort of sat in a circle around Elmer and demanded that he show them an easy way to catch food.

After a few swigs of likker, the situation grew acute. Elmer said all of a sudden he realized that if he didn't come up with the answer, they might eat him, and he didn't want that to happen.

THE thought came to him like a inspiration, he said. After all, he did know how to open doors, something no bear ever did know. Also, he had learned how to smash a lock, another trick bears couldn't understand. The first night they went out for a little forage, he led 'em straight to George Otto's farm. They snuck up to the barn and Elmer opened the door to the big sheep pen. The bears entered and what they done to them lambs was a caution. They ate what they wanted, tossed a few dead lambs over their shoulders and capered back to the cave, tellin' Elmer what a great man he was. For two days, Elmer feasted on lamb chops and roast leg of lamb, but when he tried to make a lamb stew, the bears sort of set their feet down and told him it was time for more food. Joseph, not a well bear, suffered from indigestion, and bein' sort of a choosy critter, opined that what he really needed was a nice mess of fish. Oscar sort of rared back on his heels, swallowed a slug of the likker, smacked Elmer on the back and told him that he could also do with some fish.

Elmer was sorta stumped, but he was a resourceful man was Elmer, for he had lived on his wits for many years and he knew how to catch fish in wholesale lots. He tried to explain how this was done, but the bears had a little difficulty understanding it. What Elmer did is the thing that practically cleaned out all the trout in Pine Creek, and that's why you have such poor fishin' today. That night, carefully guarded by three bears, Elmer busted into the hardware store owned

by Harry Mapes, at Pleasantville, and stole a box of dynamite. He carried the box with some pieces of fuse and detonators, down to Pine Creek, stopped at the riffles just above the deep Basin Pool. This was when that there pool was thick with big brook trout.

He stationed two of the bears on the banks of the pool, cautionin' them to hide behind rocks until he give the signal. The other bear, Oscar, tagged along to see that Elmer didn't escape. Elmer did what he knew pretty well. He tied three sticks of dynamite together, fused one of them, lit it and tossed it in the riffles. His timing was perfect; spang in the middle of the pool that dynamite let go. A minute later, the surface was covered with stunned and dead trout. Elmer and Oscar galloped down to the pool and the three bears went to work. They liked fish. Elmer grabbed three big fish, slipped them inside his shirt, went back to the dynamite, ready to take off. The bears seemed to understand that Elmer had committed himself so much that now he couldn't afford to escape. He whooped and hollered for the bears to stop their feastin', but they was three gluttons and kept scooping the fish out and eatin' them. They was so engaged when Henry Loveless, the game and fish warden, who had heard the explosion and suspected what had happened, came to the pool, fire in his eye. He yelled at the bears, informed them they had broken the law and to git to hell outen there. Joseph, now feeling better, resented the language, reached into the water and cuffed out a sucker that was two feet long. He flang this fish at Henry and it smacked him full in the face and he dropped to the ground very insensible.

Elmer knew he wouldn't stay that way very long, and he also knew that Henry Loveless always carried a shot gun with him when he was after violaters. The bears, stuffed and gorged with fish, came out of the water and joined Elmer and they started for the cave. It was a moonlight night and Henry Loveless waked up, mad as a wet hen. He saw the three bears and Elmer going up the mountain and he follered them a ways then he took aim and fired.

Elmer felt something sting him on the back, then in front. "I'm a gonner,"

he gasped, grabbing his stomach. "Shots went through me, my insides is hanging out." The bears looked down at Elmer, fishy sorrow on their faces, then Elmer suddenly realized what had happened. The shot had just broken the skin on his back. What he felt on the front was one of the stunned trout who had come alive and started to flop. They went back to the cave and the bears liked to kill themselves laughing at Elmer. Elmer said he felt real hurt about it, but he fried him a tidy mess of trout and felt better.

Meantime, Henry Loveless found his way back to town. He told folks what had happened, that Elmer Bittersniff had sort of teamed up with three renegade bears. He had a bruise across his face where the sucker had hit him. But folks just refused to believe him. In fact, they accused him of lyin', and him as truthful a man as I be.

After that, every onct in a while, the bears insisted on fish and Elmer had to oblige. But, the worst blow came when the bears surrounded Elmer one night, deep in October and said they were really fond of chickens, ducks and turkeys, and how about getting some for them. By this time the bears was fat and sassy and their coats were full and rich. But, they was still lazy. Also, they had great confidence in Elmer. By this time, Elmer realized that he had painted hisself into a corner. The more food and delicacies he got for them bears, the more valuable he became. It looked like he was trapped for life. They forced him to pick pails of blackberries and huckleberries and when he didn't move real pert, Oscar, a hard taskmaster, would cuff him into action. Now they wanted some poultry. Matter of fact, Elmer felt he could eat some, too.

After that there was a series of raids on locked hen-houses and the carnage was terrific. Ducks, geese, turkeys, and chickens died by the dozens. One night, Elmer busted the lock on the chicken coop of Preacher Tobey and the old man looked out and saw Elmer motion for his companions to come in and help themselves. A pious man, but a man of courage, the old parson grabbed his shot gun, took aim at the group when they come out of the coop and fired. Oscar got most of the birdshot and he was highly uncomfortable for several days and person-

ally blamed his troubles on Elmer. Never a bear with a sunny disposition, he got into the habit of cuffin' Elmer without reason, took joy in it. When I saw Elmer, his back was a patchwork of scratches.

Henry Loveless felt better, much better, once Preacher Tobey told his story. People came and looked at the tracks, sure enough, there was three bears and a man. Well, sir, that's when folk's started to rally around and offer a bounty for the capture and conviction of Elmer Bittersniff. Elmer, while this was goin' on, was feasting on roast duck and fried chicken, dodgin' cuffs from Oscar.

ONE night Elmer went prowlin' alone. The bears knew he would come back. He found that Missus Herrick, who used to live just over the hill over there, had baked seven mince pies that day and set 'em on the window sills to cool. Elmer always did have a likin' for mince pie. He sat down and ate two of them, took the rest back to the three bears. They tasted the pie and liked it real well. Elmer sort of thought old lady Herrick was a little too partial to cinnamon, but the bears didn't have his educated taste, so they didn't complain.

Within a few days, they told Elmer to go forth and fetch some more mince pies. He explained that Thanksgiving was past and it would be pretty hard to find any more mince pies. But their sweet teeth craved sweets. So Elmer, never a very smart boy, asked them did they like honey. They beamed on him, told him that they had often robbed bee trees of their honey, but it was a lot of work. Elmer, fool that he was, told them there was an easier way of getting honey. He told them about hives of bees, bustin' with honey in the farm yards and the bears fair drooled. That night, he took 'em to Orv Benedict's farm and showed 'em a neat row of hives. It was a warm November and the bees was real lively and pretty annoyed. The bears insisted that Elmer show them how to get the honey out of the hives. Elmer showed 'em, but he was stang pitiful and they had to lead him back to the cave. His face was swole real bad and they laughed and laughed at him, told him to hurry up and git well so they could do it again. Meantime, folks was annoyed

and they held meetin's and heisted the bounty on Elmer, a thing Elmer finally found out about when he picked up a newspaper.

End of November was cold, and the bears started to yawn. They insisted on one big meal before they hibernated for the cold weather. Elmer showed them how to snatch a freshly killed fat pig from the woodshed of a farm house. They feasted, and sleepily wiped the fat from their jowls. About half of the pig was left when they told him it was time for the Long Sleep. Elmer, while not as bright as some, had sort of foreseen this comin' up and had hidden some food from the bears. They almost closed up the mouth of the cave, made a bed of leaves, curled up and went to sleep. The bears was fat as butter, their coats were thick and in good shape, and as they snored, Elmer felt sort of proud of them.

He sliced off a mess of fresh pork, fried it and slept a little hisself. It wasn't a long winter, but by the time it was over, Elmer's hair and whiskers was real long and he wasn't too happy with his lot. Just before the bears wakened, Elmer ventured out one night to do a little prowlin'. His stock of food . . . s about gone. But, before he had gone two miles someone took a shot at him and he heard a dog barkin' on his trail. Elmer sort of took off, bein' able to run very fast. He hit this here crick and waded in the icy cold water for a half mile before he left it and took to the cave. The hound stood on the bank of the crick when he lost the scent and cried like a baby.

Elmer was real gloomy when the bears stretched and wakened. They was hungry, they told Elmer, about as hungry as three bears could be. They were united in a desire for a mess of fish. Elmer had part of the box of dynamite left, so they went down to Pithole Pool and Elmer dynamited it. They ate and grabbed fish and again took off for the cave. Elmer told me nothin' ever tasted as good as that mess of fried trout he cooked. Immediately, the bears seemed to feel better. They wanted a drink of likker.

When the snows came, Elmer had a small reserve of likker left, but durin' the cold nights, it sort of disappeared. He had to tell Joseph, Samuel and Oscar that there was

none. They wanted to go out and gather corn, but Elmer explained they would have to wait a long time before the corn was planted and ripened, before it could be gathered for the little still. The bears mourned and mourned over this dreadful situation until Elmer spoke up. He wasn't, as I have said, a bright person. He told them about hotel bars and their eyes stuck out as they listened to him, and they licked their chops. There was a bar at the Eagle House in Pleasantville and Elmer, who likewise suffered from a thirst, told them he thought it could be safely raided. But, he was smart enough to tell them they would have to obey his orders and enter the bar late at night, just before it closed.

The three bears, still a little weak from their fast, were led to the outskirts of town. Elmer felt sorry for them, so while they waited, he stole a big chunk of salt pork from the meat market. It cut their hunger a little, but it also set up a ragin' thirst. At one minute of eleven, the bears, who had snuck down back streets, walked into the bar of the Eagle House. Max Bodine, a fat driller, was deep in his cups, talkin' to John Henderson, a rig-builder. They was the only customers in the bar at that unseemly hour. Bert Shaffer was behind the bar. They heard the bears enter, turned to see who it was, scarcely believing their eyes, thinkin' maybe what they saw was because of too much drink. Howthesoever, they both had the same idea, to git out of there. They lept through the window. Unfortunately, the window wasn't open at the time, but that didn't stop them. They hit the sidewalk runnin' and didn't stop until they got home. Both of them refused to tell their women folk why they was pantin' so hard.

BERT SHAFFER said it all happened fast, that he was cool and calm, but when Oscar and Samuel started to climb over the bar, he decided it was time to close the bar and git for home. He left, and as he went through the door, his legs churnin', Joseph give him a real smart cuff on the seat of his pants. Shaffer always said he heard a snicker at this time and it was probably true. Elmer was always one to titter at the misery of others.

An oil drilling crew reported the next

day that when they passed the bar at 1 o'clock, they saw an amazing sight: Elmer, whiskers to his waist, was sittin' on the bar, a bottle of brandy in his fist, while Joseph held a bottle of rum and Oscar and Samuel each had bottles of rye. Elmer was offering a toast to Liberty and the bears was uppin' their bottles and drinkin' deep and hearty. Samuel, usually a peaceful bear, a bear with sort of preacher blood in his veins, strolled over to the broken window. He staggered a little but he was alert. He saw the drillin' crew and he set up a big growl and started after them. They whipped up their team and just barely managed to escape.

Elmer practically wept when he told me what had happened when they got back to the cave. They was all pretty tipsy and the three bears insisted on singing a tune. Elmer said he didn't know the words or the music, but he sung real hard just the same. Samuel, now growed to be the biggest of the bears, the one Elmer had thought of as a sort of an elder statesman, talked a little more fluently than Oscar or Joseph. Clutching a bottle of cognac in his paws, the old fellow rocked and bellered with bear laughter. Between drinks, he told Elmer about the song. It was, Samuel said, a wooing song. True, the three bears had been happy and care-free bachelors for several years, but the likker had all of a onct convinced them that they should no longer live in single blessedness. In conclusion, Samuel said very solemnly, "Oscar has decided to go forth and sing all over the mountains. He is asking for four handsome brides. After all, my friend, you also sung the song and Oscar is convinced that you, too, seek a bear bride. He should be back in an hour."

Elmer, a shy man even if dumb, was horrified at the change that had taken place. He had no desire for a bear bride, and he visualized new bosses, more and more food to rustle, greater hardships in the future. He was in what you call a quandary. Samuel was far overtook by drink and Joseph sat in a corner, a foolish simper on his ugly face and fast asleep. From the mouth of the cave he could hear the clarion mating call of Oscar across the valley. He hoped that Oscar would git him a mate with an evil temper, a shrewish old girl with an appetite, a habit of cuffing her mate in moments of peevishness. He was forced to act, and fast.

At three in the morning, I was wakened by a horrible beatin' on the door of my shanty. I opened it a mite and there stood Elmer. He smole of likker and the fact that his clothes was in rags and on account he hadn't took a bath in a year. His hair and whiskers reached most to his waist and his eyes rolled in fear.

I LET him in and he told me what had happened. He wasn't happy about it. He had lost a good home. When the bears wakened the next morning, they would be sufferin' from hangovers and their tempers would be real touchy. They would find that their pal and provider Elmer had went. They would crave a drink. They knew that the man who could provide it would be Elmer. They had keen noses and they would track him down, not a hard thing to do considering how he smole. As his only living relative, would I hide him, give him a disguise, or help him escape.

I decided Elmer was the sort of a person you couldn't hide, any more than you could

hide a million pounds of limburger cheese. Best thing was to provide him with a disguise and tell him to git. I heated up a pail of water, gave him a mirror, a pair of shears and an old razor and a piece of soap. He took the stuff and a lamp into the woodshed and it took him nearly a half hour of steady cussing, much of which was done in the bear language, before he looked in. He had done a right good job, his hair was cropped short, his face clean-shaven, givin' him the look of a scared buck rabbit. I had heated a tub of hot water and made him help me carry it to the woodshed. I handed him a cake of scrubbing soap. "You take a bath, Elmer, a good bath, best disguise in the world!" "No! No! Not that, please," he begged. But I reached behind the door, grabbed my shot gun and sorta insisted that he take the bath. I supervised the bath, I might add, saw that it was thorough. He looked new and kinda shiny when he stepped from the bath. I tossed him a pair of old overalls, a shirt and a pair of shoes that didn't fit me.

"You take that tub of water and empty it down the gully," I told him. "Then you wrap up them old clothes and whiskers and hair and take them down into the gully and burn them up. When you come back, I'll have a drink for the road with you and a mess of side meat and pancakes and a cup of coffee. Then, Elmer Bittersnitt, you are gonna depart from these parts. No one will recognize you, with the whiskers and hair gone, with you smellin' as sweet as a posy. But, don't linger, just git far away from this neighborhood. I'm a respectable and a truthful man, and I don't want my reputation spoiled."

What a breakfast that man ate! He babbled that it was the first home meal he had ate since one morning he and the bears had scared the Fitts family away from the table and he had et the meal while the bears foraged for meat.

He didn't want to go, but when I reached for the gun he went.

WELL, sir, I never did see Elmer Bittersnitt again. Without Elmer to guide and instruct them, the three bears and their wives conducted themselves in a very orderly manner. Folks noted this, decided that in a moment of hunger or anger, the bears had et Elmer Bittersnitt, a deed they didn't consider as other than a great public service.

While I didn't see Elmer again, I did hear about him. Seems that he went back to his wife. Bein' a sentimental creature, she took pity on him, but she regarded him with great suspicion when he told her about his residence with the bears. She put him to work. They got along real good until one night the wife put a big plate of clover honey in front of Elmer. Maybe he had what do you call it, an allergy? Against honey, that is, for he had never forgotten what happened to him when he first took the bears honey-huntin'. Well, sir, Elmer Bittersnitt, at that moment, became a ravin', whoopin', hollerin' maniac, a very violent man, his wife wrote me.

There was only one thing she could do. She thought some of putting him out of his misery, but decided against it. She had him committed to North Warren, where the State takes care of them as are unhinged. He recovered almost immediate. But they kept him there, and he ate regular meals, had no work to do, slept in a clean bed every night. The other inmates, crazy as some of them was, knew he was crazy because he insisted on telling them about Oscar, Samuel and Joseph. He got into a fistfight with one man who insisted there wasn't anyone in the Bible named Oscar. You know Elmer wasn't a very bright man, but I often think maybe he was pretty smart after all. He ended up where everything was free, where he lived comfortable, too. I have been told that he knew where the cooks hid the lemon extract and would drop in and git hisself a big snort every onct in a while.

Mebbe Elmer was smarter than I took him for, what do you think?