

# BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

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*Miss Tarmity's  
Profession*

By **ROY HUTCHINS**

*She made a living by her nose  
—and raised a devil of a stink  
when Satan showed up in Vermont!*

Illustrated by **KOSSIN**

**S**OME say Old Scratch doesn't spend much time in Vermont, because the natives are just naturally so mean and cussed that they don't need his help. Leastwise, that's the story you'll hear across the river in New Hampshire, but everybody knows there hasn't been a New Hampshireman since Daniel Webster fit to twist the Devil's tail.

Fact is, the Old Boy does sneak around some in Vermont, but he's mighty careful about letting himself be recognized. He knows well



enough that even the women folk are likely to be more than he can handle. Found that out better than a century ago, up Poverty way, when the Ladies' Society held its annual picnic.

The way my Gramp tells it, that picnic was just the end of the affair. To understand what happened, you have to know Miss Tarmity and Mr. Higgins. The whole village of Poverty was concerned, but these two more than anybody, and they were Poverty's outstanding citizens.

Mr. Higgins was the biggest man in the countryside in just about every way. He had the best farm, the most money and a bass voice that rolled off the walls of the meeting house and shook the gravestones over in the cemetery. Folks felt right proud to have a man in the village who could shake the hand of a visiting State senator and not be the least mite flustered. They'd voted him one of the selectmen years ago and they automatically put him back at the end of each term.

**M**R. Higgins, along into his middle fifties, was a bachelor. That was no accident, but the result of some nimble sidestepping on his part. So many women had been flung at his head, he tended to shy if a bird flew over. The menfolk chuckled and allowed he was a smart one, and the village

wives snapped right back that he'd get his comeuppance some day.

Miss Tarmity had been the schoolteacher even longer than Mr. Higgins had been a selectman. She was a tiny body, but so straight and starchy that she walked tall alongside anybody. Her eye had been borrowed from a watchdog and her tongue from a sergeant major, folks said, but there was never any question about her spirit. That was all her own.

She had an ability besides teaching that made her even more valuable to the village. Anybody could teach, but only Miss Tarmity could smell trouble. It didn't interfere with smelling ordinary things, like flowers, or sausage frying, but trouble had, to her, an odor like nothing else, and it blocked out common smells so she couldn't miss it, when it occurred. Actually, the smell of trouble came in varying degrees. While it was mostly unpleasant, it could be almost sweet when warning her that a pair of nine-year-olds, bursting with energy like spring buds, were innocently trying to brain each other out in the schoolyard.

Of course, in a place as practical as a Vermont village, such a talent was put to use. Miss Tarmity made a tidy income on the side, sniffing crops and animals for signs of impending difficulty. With one whiff, at a cost of five cents, she could tell if weeds or bugs

were threatening a cornpatch, often saving the farmer days of unnecessary labor if they weren't. And hardly a man in the countryside would buy a horse or an ox without having her sniff the critter—ten cents—for incipient spavins or hoof rot. On deeds and legal documents, she demanded and got twenty cents. A clear title is a mighty important thing.

Community work she did free. Drummers and other strangers in town were quickly maneuvered upwind from Miss Tarmity. At her nod, they were welcomed; upon her frown, they were escorted to the edge of the village and advised to try the next. Only once had she smelled serious trouble and it had nearly overpowered her with nausea. But she'd picked up her skirts and led the villagers blindly through the woods to a brush fire in a hidden valley back of Stone Mountain. That was in a dry year. Given a day's start, the resulting forest fire would have wiped out Poverty.

She had been orphaned at seventeen, before she discovered her talent. Everybody expected she'd get a husband pretty quick, by the ageless country method, if necessary. Instead, she wangled the schoolteacher's post, which paid ten dollars a month and board. Miss Tarmity was too independent, even then, to board out. She had her father's farm and his team

to plow the garden with, and she managed to get by all right.

IT was known that Mr. Higgins—young Dodd, in those days—was sort of sweet on her, but what with him so cautious and her so independent, Cupid busted a couple of arrows on them and gave up. For thirty-five years now, they'd been good friends, not agreeing on everything, but not disagreeing too often, either. Looked as though it would always be that way, until Mr. Higgins took a trip down to Rutland.

Miss Tarmity didn't even know he had returned when Mrs. Beall stopped her the morning she was hurrying to the general store for a bag of salt. She pulled up reluctantly in the path and turned into the August-burned grass toward the Beall house. The sun had been up long enough to prove it would be another bake-oven day. Already she could feel the heat through her high-necked, long-sleeved dress and she'd been hustling to get her salt and get home. Miss Tarmity often told her older girls it was unmaidenly to persevere in public.

"Mornin', Lettie," said Mrs. Beall from the door. "Step in and set a spell. It's too hot to be hurryin' and Grampa says it'll be hotter 'fore we git rain."

"Good morning, Charity," said Miss Tarmity, and then set her

lips stiffly when she saw the loose cotton thing Mrs. Beall had on for a dress. And her a married woman! But Charity looked cool and Miss Tarmity felt a pang that might have been envy, except it was most likely the cold biscuit she'd had for breakfast.

Mrs. Beall poked up the fire with a stick and swung the teakettle into place, chattering about the forthcoming ladies' picnic. Mrs. Turnbull, the chairlady, had asked if Miss Tarmity would bring some of her chicken sandwiches.

"I always do," said Miss Tarmity. "Two dozen."

She observed that Charity Beall was beginning to lose her figure and suddenly she smelled trouble. Not the everyday, sour-sweet trouble scent, but a strange and acrid kind she'd never known before. She noticed now the peculiar expression on Charity's face and realized that Charity was talking a little too fast, even for such an expert gossip. *Aha!* thought Miss Tarmity and sat up straighter in her chair.

There was a lull while Charity went to the cupboard. When she came back with her best cups, Miss Tarmity knew something was afoot.

Charity's peaked features were carefully composed as she leaned past Miss Tarmity to set out the cups. Only a sly gleam in her eyes and a furtiveness in her motions

told that she was about to get to the point.

"I s'pose you've seen Dodd Higgins since he got back?" remarked Charity.

Miss Tarmity allowed herself to relax a little.

"Haven't had occasion to," she said.

**T**HE village had long since exhausted the possibilities for speculation about her friendship with Mr. Higgins. Not even Charity could rouse new interest there. Probably Dodd had brought some new gimcrack from the city, as he sometimes did, and Charity just had to build it up as a seventh wonder and tell her all about it.

"Why, he's been back two days," said Charity.

"And I've been putting down carrots and beets for three," Miss Tarmity replied with a little snap in her voice.

"Oh! 'Course, that explains it. Only it don't really, what with you being directly concerned, you might say."

"Tush," said Miss Tarmity, refusing to bite. "Dodd Higgins isn't directly concerned with me. Never has been and never will be."

"Goodness, no, not that way," exclaimed Charity, coloring and obviously enjoying herself tremendously. "Certainly not *now*."

"Well, I don't know. Guess I'm

as able as any," said Miss Tarmity, stung to daring. She eyed Charity's plumpness. "And livelier than some."

That should hold Charity Beall for a while, she decided, nevertheless feeling guilty and rather indecent. The trouble smell grew stronger. She watched Charity swallow painfully and grope for the teakettle to fill the pot, and a prickly unease made Miss Tarmity frown and adjust the pleats of her skirt.

Charity poured the tea carefully. Just as carefully, she said. "I'm not one to mix in people's business, but fair's fair. That's what I said to Mr. Beall. When a body's served others for years and years, the least they can do is show a body some consideration. Like an old hoss, I said. You put him out to pasture decently, not just turn him loose to starve."

Miss Tarmity scowled in the effort to make sense of this. "You mean folks are dissatisfied with something Mr. Higgins has done?"

"There's some are, and some aren't," said Charity, peering sharply over her teacup. "What I say is, the feelin's of the person concerned had ought to be taken into account."

Miss Tarmity let slip a tiny sigh of relief. "Folks often disagree with Dodd, but he has a way of being right. He's helped run the village so long, it isn't likely they'd

put him out now, Charity."

"Wasn't no question of that. But when a man comes back from Rutland with . . . Well, I guess he's reached the foolish age, but that's small excuse."

Miss Tarmity put down her cup with a firm gesture.

"Charity Beall, you've been a tease since the first day you came to my school. Now you've had your fun and I'm not going to listen to nonsense any longer. Just out and tell me what newfangled notion Dodd Higgins came back with this time."

Charity's hand went to her mouth and she did a poor job of looking flustered. Miss Tarmity smelled something terribly strong when she saw the eager eyes and witch's lips, and a trickle of chill worry stiffened her spine.

"Why, I never realized!" cried Charity falsely. "I thought you knew, or I'd have been the *last* to tell you."

"*What* did he bring back?" snapped Miss Tarmity in her schoolhouse voice.

Now the slyness and malice stood clearly on Charity's peaked face. She smiled.

"You poor thing! He brought a young hussy to be the new schoolmarm!"

**M**ISS TARMITY had never been one to sidestep an issue. Folks still talked about the

time she met a bear in the school-house path, and the bear was the one that turned aside.

She was numb when she left the Beall place, conscious that Charity was watching from the door, but she marched straight toward the general store. Salt she had come out for, and salt she would get, if hell froze, the Devil turned blue and the world ground to a stop.

Miss Tarmity would get her salt and *then* she'd see.

If there was a mite less spring in her step than usual when she entered the general store, why, it might have been the heat, for all anyone could tell. Nate Barker was behind the counter and she noted the expression that crossed his face when he looked up and saw her coming around the flour barrel. There was a sudden silence over at the group around the checker-board, and then Nate recovered.

"Howdy, Miss Tarmity," he said. "What can I get you today?"

"A pound of salt," she told him and turned deliberately to look at the loungers beyond the big, empty pot-stove. Seldom had a game of checkers in Barker's store received such quiet, intensive study. Old Wade was there, and Bub Miller, and she knew well enough what the talk had been that stopped so abruptly at her entrance. Not all gossips were female, she thought, with her lips tightening.

Bub Miller's mouth was twitching, and Miss Tarmity took a few determined steps over that way. She thought she detected a rather sour odor, but that might have been Old Wade.

Bub saw her coming and he reached hastily for the board, shoving a man directly into his opponent's path. Then Miss Tarmity was standing beside him, straight as the bore of a Pennsylvania rifle, and nobody moved at all. There were six men there and she looked at the six, all together and one at a time, as if she meant to remember them always.

MISS Tarmity picked up a black checker and jumped the red one Bub Miller had moved blindly, plus two others left vulnerable.

"You're wide open, Bub. Comes of tending to things besides your own business. I'd certainly hate to smell trouble on a young fellow like you."

Nate Barker handed Miss Tarmity a broad grin with her bag of salt and the store was still silent when she stepped out into the heat. Dodd Higgins' farm was around the bend on the river road, but Miss Tarmity took the path across Mead's pasture and through the woods, knowing it would be cooler as well as shorter. She walked with her head up, but without seeing the path or the woods, won-



dering what she could say to make Dodd see reason.

That was when she reeled from the smell of overwhelmingly big trouble for the second time in her life.

**T**HE Devil had had a difficult morning, what with a shipment of souls from the Orient who insisted he must be their revered ancestor, and another from the Arctic who huddled so gratefully on the eternal fires that he'd soared raging out of Hell. Badly in need of a laugh, he recalled the selectman from Poverty, against whom he'd thrown the ambitious and amoral young Rutland school-teacher.

Disappointed at the lack of results to date, he was sitting on a stump, inducing some highly disturbing visions in the mind of Mr. Higgins, when he became aware that someone was approaching. The Devil was comfortably invisible, so he didn't bother to move. He saw the straight, angular spinner and he thought for a moment he'd get his laugh by placing a few ideas in her mind before she reached Mr. Higgins. But a second look quickly decided him against it. He knew human beings; some not even the Devil could tamper with.

To his surprise, he saw Miss Tarmity stagger and put her hands to her head, as if in dizziness. She

recovered and then her head came around until she was staring directly at the place where he sat, her nostrils quivering. For an instant, he was completely amazed, until a sense of danger swept over him and he dropped through the stump toward the security of Hell.

Miss Tarmity stood quite still. Briefly, she'd been nearly felled by the smell of bigger trouble than she'd dreamed existed. Then, abruptly, it was gone, and she'd never before known trouble to be cured without someone tending to it. But she had present facts to deal with, not momentary fancies, and the nearest fact was Mr. Higgins, whose house lay just ahead.

He admitted her to the cool kitchen without actually looking at her, and the same acrid odor was here that had startled her at Charity Beall's. But here it was much stronger and Miss Tarmity had to brace herself against it.

"Didn't know you were back from Rutland until this morning," she said.

**M**R. HIGGINS emitted a strangled sort of grunt and stared over her head at some point outside the kitchen door. A bad sign, she thought. He's feeling guilty and he'll be touchy as an old he-bear awakened in mid-winter. Well, if the field's rough, set the plow deep.

"Charity Beall told me you were



back and she told me other things, about a new schoolteacher for Poverty. I came to hear from you if that's true."

"Well, now, Lettie . . ." said Mr. Higgins uncomfortably.

"So it *is* true. Why? Everybody in the village who's younger than us got his learning from me. With some it took and with some it didn't — there'll always be the wise and the foolish. Does that mean I haven't been a good teacher?"

"No, no," protested Mr. Higgins. "You don't understand, Lettie. Down to Rutland, and in all the cities, they got new ways of doin' things, including teaching. To keep up with the world nowadays, a body's got to have better education. We can't let Poverty slip behind all the rest."

Still he wouldn't meet her eye. Miss Tarmity instinctively squared up to him for a moment. Then she sniffed the bitter air of trouble about him again and let her shoulders drop. Dodd Higgins was fighting himself. She'd have to find some other way.

"At least bring her out and introduce us," she suggested.

"Why, she ain't here!" exclaimed Mr. Higgins, looking shocked. "Mady — Miss Hunt, that is — is boardin' at the Browns'."

She might have known Charity would give her the wrong impression on that point, Miss Tarmity

thought. "Guess I'll meet her soon, then," she said aloud, and turned toward the door.

"Lettie . . ." began Dodd Higgins awkwardly. When she paused, he continued, "Guess you know there's nothing *personal* about this. We've always been friends and this is for the good of Poverty. Besides, you make more money smelling trouble than keeping school, anyhow. I thought of all that and losing the school shouldn't bother you none."

"That's for me to say, isn't it, Dodd? But I'll tell you this — there's something bothers me a sight more than losing the school, and that's the smell of bad trouble around you."

He stared directly at her for a moment, then shifted uneasily. The big, booming voice went so low, she could scarcely hear it.

"No, Lettie, you've made a mistake this time. There couldn't be — anything like that."

"Suppose we let time tell," said Miss Tarmity. "That's my professional opinion. There's nothing *personal* about it! No charge, either."

**H**AVING made two stops on her way home, Miss Tarmity admitted to herself the time might have been better spent in her root cellar. Charlie Sayers and Bates North, Poverty's other two selectmen, were aligned solidly if un-

comfortably behind Mr. Higgins in the matter of a new schoolteacher. Charlie, whose eyesight wasn't very good until a pretty girl walked by, practically smacked his lips as he described the amazing teaching abilities of Miss Mady Hunt from Rutland. Bates retired into taciturnity, after stonily pointing out that the selectmen picked the schoolteacher and had to act for the good of the village.

She thought of stopping by the Browns' to meet this teaching marvel, but decided against it. She'd encounter Miss Hunt soon enough. First, she must try to decide how to wage her fight.

There was no hope from the selectmen — she'd already failed there. They'd been pushed or charmed onto the side of Miss Hunt, and there they'd stay. Miss Tarmity had struggled with the minds of Vermonters for thirty-five years and she knew how they worked.

There were just two things that could make the selectmen change their minds, she realized—either a complete reversal by Dodd Higgins, or an aroused village refusing to accept a new schoolmarm. The first was as unlikely as finding a stoneless field in Poverty. The second, however, might just be possible. Dred Taylor came plodding into her yard late in the afternoon, leading a long-legged horse.

"By Japers, it's hot!" he announced, wiping his brow. "Miss Lettie, I'm fixing to buy this here mare from Old Wade. Figgered I'd better have you sniff her over, just to make sure."

"Sorry, Dred," replied Miss Tarmity. "Guess I won't be doing that any more."

A hurt look spread over Dred's face and he fumbled in a shirt pocket, coming up finally with a shiny coin.

"I got the ten cents right here. Hain't I always paid you before, Miss Lettie?"

"Of course," said Miss Tarmity gently. "I know you pay your debts. But I'm not smelling trouble for anybody from now on. If Poverty doesn't want me as teacher, they'll have to do without my other services."

"Japers!" cried Dred. "But what'll I do about this mare? I got to give Old Wade an answer."

"I really don't know," said Miss Tarmity regretfully. "I put cotton in my nose when I saw you coming."

**A**N hour after Dred Taylor left, the procession began. Seemed as though everybody in Poverty had something he'd been meaning to have Miss Tarmity smell. If it was portable, he brought it along—Harry Glass, for instance, showed up with his daughter, who'd disappeared briefly with the hired

man during haying and was suspected of being in an interesting condition. If the object couldn't be moved, folks came to fetch Miss Tarmity to it.

But she stuffed more cotton in her nose and stiffened her straight back. The well-off tempted her with higher prices and the poor pleaded. To each she said no and repeated what she'd told Dred.

"Drat that Higgins and his big-gety ideas!" said one. "What'll we do without you to smell out trouble for us?"

"Other places don't have anybody who can do what I can," said Miss Tarmity honestly, though she smiled to herself. "They get along."

Finally, only a trickle of people came and then none. Miss Tarmity removed her nose plugs, took a good breath of air and waited to see what would happen.

What happened was exactly nothing. Young Scott Miller, who was of more account than his brother Bub, stopped by two days later and told her that Mr. Higgins had taken his protégée to just about every home in the village and introduced her. Miss Hunt, apparently gifted with skills apart from teaching, had buttered up the wives like plump roasting birds and smiled bewitchingly upon the men. Even young Scott seemed badly affected as he told Miss Tarmity about it.

So her campaign to unite the village behind her had failed. Worse, Miss Tarmity realized suddenly, she'd gambled with her only remaining means of livelihood and lost. To go back on her vow would be unthinkable. The other alternatives seemed to be living upon her savings until she gracefully starved to death, or moving away from Poverty, where her family had been for a hundred and ten years.

**T**HE day of the Ladies' Society picnic dawned the color of molton copper. Even after the sun was fully up, it hung balefully in a gauzy sky, promising heat with no sign of relief.

Miss Tarmity had her chicken sandwiches ready early, but she was deliberately late getting to the pond where the picnic was traditionally held. She made doubly sure of not meeting anyone on the way by cutting around behind Stone Mountain, instead of taking the path over the spur. Even in the woods, it was hot, a still, oppressive heat that clung like a shroud on the land.

Ahead, the shrill buzz she'd been hearing began to break into individual feminine noises. Every able-bodied woman past her fourteenth birthday would be here today and, as usual, they all seemed to be talking at once.

She located the path that would

down from the spur and turned into it, emerging shortly at the edge of the pond, where sixty women instantly set up an excited gabble at her appearance.

Miss Tarmity said a general hello and a number of particular ones, and was relieved of her sandwiches by the chairlady. She braced herself to hear the latest on Mrs. Gaines' rheumatism and, hence, was unprepared when Liz Brown seized her arm.

"Lettie, dear," said Liz, "you *must* meet Mady Hunt!"

Miss Tarmity caught a confused glimpse of Charity Beall's pinched, eager face in the background, caught a bitter whiff of the trouble-smell — then she was being introduced to a self-assured young woman in a daring city dress. At least she had the figure for it, thought Miss Tarmity, *and Heaven help Dodd Higgins!*

"I'm so glad we've finally met," said Miss Hunt in a low, throbbing voice. "I've heard about your—ah—talent and we do have so much in common. The school, I mean."

Miss Tarmity recognized the sugary approach and wondered how soon the acid would burn through. The acrid odor that only she could detect was stronger now. She uttered a conventional greeting which passed almost unnoticed.

"I understand you're not smelling trouble any more," Miss Hunt

went on, "but perhaps that's wise. A man came through Rutland, claiming he could cure sick folks by the laying of hands on them, and I hear they have him in jail down in Boston. But I do want to have a long, long talk with you and get your advice about the schoolchildren."

"Indeed," said Miss Tarmity. "I'd heard your new methods were so good, you'd never need the help of an old-fashioned body like me."

**N**OW the Devil was in a snarling mood when he settled on the stump outside Dodd Higgins' place. There were so many stubborn damned souls trying to take over Hell that he was thinking of banking the fires and going South until they wore each other out. It was a sad day when he couldn't feel comfortable in his own domain.

Accordingly, he was not disposed to fool around with this Mr. Higgins. He wanted entertainment *now* and he wasn't going to wait for the hick to make a fool of himself in his own way. The Devil perched on his stump and flung a barrage of mad desires and sensory impressions into Mr. Higgins' mind that would have rocked the oldest roué in Paris.

After a short while, Mr. Higgins emerged from his house with a dazed expression and shambled

into the woods. The Old Boy licked his chops and rose easily into the air to follow. For a bit he was puzzled. Then he plucked from the selectman's churning brain the fact of the ladies' picnic. Better and better! This could be a highly amusing mess. It occurred to him that he could go ahead and perhaps line things up a bit for Mr. Higgins' arrival.

When he coasted, still invisible, down the still, hot hillside to the pond, he saw at a glance that the lunch was finished. The older ladies were chatting a bit drowsily, seated on the dry grass. Then he noted, to his delight, that a group of girls had walked several hundred yards around the shore, seeking a cooler spot. They were hidden from the matrons by an outward curve of the shoreline. What could be a better arrangement for a poor, bored, out-of-sorts Devil?

All he had to do was send back a mental call to change Mr. Higgins' course slightly and put a simple, attractive idea up to one of the girls. Then, when the madened Mr. Higgins chased twenty naked girls back to their elders, all Vermont wouldn't contain the resulting mix-up.

He found a comfortable tree limb and leaned back to watch.

Below him, twenty young ladies, who were the pride of Poverty, stared out over the waters of the

pond, wishing for relief from the heat. They all realized the water was cool and inviting, but their training was strong and decent young women didn't do what they were thinking about. One, however, knew how to overcome that. She turned to another.

"Bet you don't dast take off your things and go swimming," she challenged.

The others gasped, more in admiration than shock.

"Well! Guess I do!"

Vermont tradition satisfied, a pile of dresses and petticoats grew in a moment and the girls splashed innocently into the pond, while the Devil chuckled fit to die up on his limb.

But he stopped laughing, aware that the plan was going awry. Mr. Higgins would arrive shortly and here the girls, being strong swimmers, were too far from shore. They'd just safely tread water and squeal for help when the man came on the scene—no fun in *that*.

He had to bring them back to shore.

Scare them back?

Then Lucifer had his idea—and made his biggest mistake since the time he tried to swipe Gabriel's horn.

**M**ISS TARMITY listened to the buzz of conversation, wishing she were home getting about her spinning. Her lunch had been

spoiled by the sour trouble smell hanging over Miss Mady Hunt, and not even Charity's summer-apple pie tasted right. Furthermore, this sly cattiness was wearing on a body—Miss Tarmity liked to out and get things settled. Now the odor of trouble was getting stronger. What next?

But then it swept over her and she retched, knowing this was a separate thing, far bigger than any feud between two schoolmarms.

"Are you sick, Lettie?" asked Liz Brown apprehensively.

"I smell trouble!" gasped Miss Tarmity, fighting the nausea. "Worst . . . ever!"

"Oh, come," said Miss Hunt coolly. "Don't you think you've carried this far enough?"

"Worse than the fire," snapped Miss Tarmity, ignoring her. The other ladies stirred uneasily. Miss Tarmity was getting control now, despite the waves of illness that still came. Her sharp eye swept the clearing. "Where are the girls?"

"Why, they went for a walk," said Liz.

"That way," Miss Tarmity ordered, sniffing out the direction and staggering again when the full strength of the bitter smell hit her.

She started down the shore, but Miss Hunt blocked her way.

"Don't be silly," said Miss Hunt. "You've fooled these ladies for years, but you know perfectly

well nobody can smell such a thing as trouble. I won't let you spoil their picnic, just because you've lost the school—and a dear friend—to me."

"Young woman . . ." began Miss Tarmity in her schoolhouse voice, but then there came a screech fit to chill the August air.

Old Mrs. Turnbull went the color of stone-ground cornmeal and gasped, "Landation goodness, the girls have met a bear!"

"A bear?" echoed Miss Hunt weakly, falling aside.

Miss Tarmity grasped her arm. "Nonsense! None of my girls would be *that* scared of any bear. And they're your girls now—come on!"

WITH that, came another screech, this one sharp enough to saw the limb off a rock maple, and Miss Tarmity grabbed up her skirt and started to run along the shoreline, dragging Miss Hunt helplessly along.

After a sprint that burned her lungs with great mouthfuls of the terrible trouble odor, she burst around a clump of spruce with Miss Hunt, and then she stopped and just stared. For here was a big heap of clothes and there, in the water, twenty naked young ladies. Every last one of them was flailing toward dry land, hollering worse than a camp-meeting preacher.



**R**IGHT in front of her were six or seven girls who had reached shallow water. But they were in such a hurry that they stood up and climbed right over each other, and now they were a splashing, thrashing tangle of pink arms and legs. They were still in a hurry, however, and the whole clambering pile was rolling toward shore.

Miss Tarmity watched all this for maybe ten seconds, with her jaw down to her hemline, when she heard a faint squeak from Miss Hunt. There, beside them, stood Dodd Higgins, staring first at the small mountain of nudity and then at Miss Hunt, with the look of a potentate whose harem had gone mad.

Miss Tarmity could smell that he was deep in the trouble, but she knew from his eyes that his head wasn't right. She took a step forward and said, "*Dodd!*" Then she reached back far and she swung high and fetched him a slap like a thunderclap.

His head near snapped off, but his eyes were sane when he got them uncrossed. Whereupon he gave a horrified look at the naked girls scrambling for shore. "*Sufferin' Babel!*" he gasped, and fled for the woods.

Immediately the trouble smell left him and the source seemed to swing out over the pond. Miss Tarmity strained her eyes past the

swimmers and saw nothing, though she noticed that the real loud shrieks came not from a few girls, but from one after another. They were all yelling pretty steady, but first one and then another would rear back and bounce a shriek off the White Mountains, clear over in New Hampshire. After that, the girl would kick like a jabbed heifer, fair rising out of the water like a hooked bass.

"There's *something* in the water besides girls," said Miss Tarmity.

"I'll run for help," offered Miss Hunt instantly.

"Don't stop till you reach Rutland," said Miss Tarmity.

Without hesitation, she started wading into the water, just as if she were jumping in to break up a fist fight or a dog fight back in her schoolyard.

She detoured the tangle of bodies flopping in the shallows and ignored swimmers in the home stretch. She plodded in with the angry eye of a setting hen until the water was above her waist, then stopped and peered into its depths. One of the young ladies came past on the surface, full head of steam up and raising a fine bow wave, so mindful of reaching port that she never noticed Miss Tarmity.

In her wake, Miss Tarmity spotted a dark shape, which wriggled close to the girl's legs and, at that moment, another screech split the bark on the birches. Miss Tarmity

plunged under water, grabbed something slippery and came up holding tight to it.

"Got you!" she gasped triumphantly and shook the water out of her eyes to see what she'd got.

IT was a big catfish with whiskers eight inches long, and Miss Tarmity saw at a glance that a meaner, shiftier-looking catfish never had lived. The trouble smell was so strong, she knew she couldn't stand worse and live through it. Suddenly she recalled that in fifty years she'd never heard of a catfish in those Vermont waters.

Right there, she realized whom she really had caught, and she clamped down on his gills quick because it's common knowledge that the Devil has to take a deep breath to change his shape.

He was flopping and squirming in her hands like a saved sinner, but Miss Tarmity had enough spit and hickory in her to hold two like him. She could tell from the look in his near catfish-eye that she'd be in misery up to *here* if he could get away. The expression in that eye was so downright nasty that she turned him around where all he could see was the black-walnut cross she wore on her mother's gold chain.

"Just you behave," she said tartly and, after that, he did.

Miss Tarmity trudged ashore with her catch and all her girls

clustered around to see what it was, forgetting clothes in their indignation. They weren't scared any more, not with Miss Tarmity there.

"He *tickled* me with those horrid whiskers!" squealed Patience Beall.

"Me, too!" cried Florence Howe.

"On my—"

"Girls!" said Miss Tarmity. "I've always taught you to be observant. Sniff this catfish. Just sniff him!"

"Sulphur!"

"A burny smell, too."

"Sulphur and brimstone is a trouble anyone can smell," said Miss Tarmity. "Appears to me that we've caught the Devil."

There was a chorus of shrieks and whinnies, and then Patience pointed a quivering finger.

"Look at his eye! He — he's *ogling* us!"

Truth was, the Devil couldn't get much air and he was nigh helpless, but he was a philosopher to the last. Vermont young ladies may have been a mite prim, but they were undeniably healthy and he viewed the ample surrounding scenery with the raffish eye of a connoisseur.

Miss Tarmity saw the leer in the catfish eye and the smirk on the catfish face and she whacked his nose for him. The young ladies scattered like plucked pullets,

grabbing in the pile for the first clothes that came to hand.

**B**UT when they were dressed, things took an ominous turn. The honor of Vermont womanhood had been besmirched and they gathered around the catfish angrily. Several suggestions were made, but Miss Tarmity, getting tired of holding him, said tartly that *she* didn't know anything about catfish anatomy and she wasn't sure their ideas would work. The Devil stopped quaking when he heard that, but they'd given him a turn, so he made a voice come out of the catfish.

"Listen, ladies," pleaded the Devil, "I'm powerfully sorry if I've offended you. I promise, if you let me go now, that I'll send each of you a fancy Eyetalian lace dress and I'll never come to these parts again. Your menfolk can go to Hell in their own way."

"You horrid thing!" cried Florence Howe. "Trying to cozen us with pretty dresses after you . . ."

She off with her boot and hit the catfish, and then they all lambasted him and even stuck hatpins into him. Finally Miss Tarmity said enough was enough.

"He must have learned his lesson," she said. "Besides, he knows that if he ever comes back, I'll smell him out. Now stand aside, girls."

She swung the catfish-Devil

over her head, heaved two-handed, and he arched through the air, landing on a great boulder which split with a *crack!* They all smelled the brimstone, forty feet away.

Miss Tarmity lined up the whole Ladies' Society right there by the edge of the pond and swore them to undying silence about the events of that day. But *that* story was too much for sixty ladies — even Vermont ladies, who could keep it if anybody could. Find Vermont on your map, which is easy, because the rest of New England hides behind it, and, up in the northeast corner, you'll notice a tiny body of water labeled *Ticklenaked Pond*. That's where the Devil got his due in Vermont, so you can see that the secret leaked out.

**M**ISS HUNT apparently didn't stop running short of Rutland, and maybe not there, because nobody ever saw her again. Folks acted kind of sheepish when they told Miss Tarmity that the school would always be hers, and would she sniff Harry Glass' daughter now? The dratted girl was beginning to bulge.

"Trouble with her, she's just eating too much," Miss Tarmity informed the anxious father. "She's hankering for that hired man and just can't help herself—or helps herself to too much. She'd be all right, if it weren't for interfering parents with ideas about

what they want for a son-in-law.”

Harry Glass sighed and said, “Well, ’twasn’t really *my* idea. Missus Glass had her eye on—”

“You tell her to stop interfering or she’ll have me to deal with,” Miss Tarmity pronounced.

“Yes, *ma’am!*” said Harry Glass, looking relieved.

That evening, a penitent Dodd Higgins showed up. He said, “I never thought I’d make a danged fool of myself over any woman, Lettie, but since it seems I have, I guess it’d better be you I make a fool of myself with.” He paused, eying her forbidding expression uneasily. “Maybe this proposal isn’t exactly romantic, but—”

“No call to make a bigger idiot

of yourself,” Miss Tarmity replied tartly. “I reckon we’re both old enough to know our own minds. The answer is yes.”

As for the Devil, he fled back to his own region, to nurse his bruises of flesh and spirit with applications of hot lava. Nor has he been seen up Poverty way since. Even elsewhere in Vermont, he’s mighty careful about minding his manners, for the descendants of Dodd and Lettie Higgins have a way of smelling him out when he shows up to make trouble for anyone.

