

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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JULY

| | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----|
| The Wind Blows Free (<i>novel</i>) | by CHAD OLIVER | 3 |
| MS. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie | by C. M. KORNBLUTH | 26 |
| Your Ghost Will Walk | by ROBERT F. YOUNG | 37 |
| A Trick or Two | by JOHN NOVOTNY | 46 |
| The Unfortunate Topologist (<i>verse</i>) | by S. D. GOTTESMAN | 52 |
| Life Cycle | by POUL ANDERSON | 53 |
| Summerland | by AVRAM DAVIDSON | 69 |
| The Literate Monster | by WILLIAM CHAPMAN WHITE | 74 |
| Eithne | by IDRIS SEABRIGHT | 75 |
| You'll Feel Better . . . | by CAROL EMSHWILLER | 86 |
| Recommended Reading (<i>a department</i>) | by ANTHONY BOUCHER | 90 |
| S R | by CHARLES VAN DOREN | 95 |
| When Jack Smith Fought Old Satan (<i>novel</i>) | by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS | 102 |
| The Holiday Man | by RICHARD MATHESON | 125 |

"Coming Next Month" appears on page 73

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*One treasures the reliable writers who are always at their characteristic best; but one particularly cherishes the surprising ones who have no fixed characteristics, the wondrous unclassifiables who never write the same kind of story twice, the Avram Davidsons, the Mildred Clingermans, the Andrew Garves, the Enid Bagnolds . . . and, it would appear, the Mary-Carter Robertses. Miss Roberts has recently published an extraordinary novel, *LITTLE BROTHER FATE* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957), which is a sort of montage of three of the greatest murder cases of the 1920's (and of all time): Snyder-Gray, Loeb-Leopold and Hall-Mills—an uncompromisingly realistic and analytical book, in which no one could possibly recognize the author of the following fantasy. This is imaginative literature of a kind and quality which I have not encountered since the death of Stephen Vincent Benét: historical American folklore illuminated by warm sympathy, enlivened by vivid storytelling and memorable prose; and I hope you'll agree that Jack Smith's is the most powerful encounter with the Devil since Dan'l Webster's.*

When Jack Smith Fought Old Satan

by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS

THIS STORY WAS TOLD ME BY A MINISTER, a venerable man of nationwide repute. He heard it from the country people among whom he had spent his youth. They heard it from their forbears, who had repeated it, parent to child, throughout the century that stretched between the happening itself (in 1769) and my clerical friend's birth. Many mouths thus narrated the tale, and all belonged to

godly folk. Obviously, the tale is true.

The event took place on that scrap of land that makes a false nose, as it were, off the southeast corner of Pennsylvania, a dwindling protuberance with its northern half between Delaware Bay and Chesapeake and its southern between Chesapeake and the Atlantic Ocean. This territory is composed of one state—Delaware—

and parts of two others—Maryland and Virginia—but with the parts so cut off by water from the states' main bodies as to have no geographical relationship. In recent years, indeed, people have taken to giving the nose a name of its own, bestowing a territorial identity on it. They call it "Delmarva." That would not have been safe in 1769, for then geography was kept in its place, if you understand what I mean. It was properly turned back at state lines. A Virginian in those days would not be taken dead for a Marylander or Delawarean, a Marylander for a Delawarean or Virginian, or a Delawarean for anybody but himself. Delawareans, of the three populations, were undoubtedly the most exclusive. They still are. My story happened in Delaware.

There was this young man, Jack Smith, and there was the chapel in Bascom's Woods, and to the country people round about it was perfectly apparent that something was wrong with both. But everyone was used to the wrongness of Jack Smith, so the greater concern was felt for the chapel. That structure should have been the local joy and pride. It was new; it had been built by the church members themselves; it was the first sacred edifice in those parts; the people had done the best they could to make it beautiful as well as sturdy; they had bought a very fine-toned bell to hang in its little steeple—and they had never been able to use the

building at all. This was enough to cause any pious congregation plenty of distress—while as for Jack Smith, he had always been the way he was and occasioned no general worry. One person alone cared what happened to him.

Jack Smith was the kind of fellow ordinary folk would like to laugh at—if they dared. His wrongness was about practically everything ordinary folk take for granted. He was against all respected institutions. Nothing on earth could induce him to touch his forelock to his betters; he did not admit he *had* any betters, though he was just a poor freeholder who tilled his few acres with his own hands.

And it was not enough for him to refrain from the gesture of deference. He would march by the local baronet with his hat, which he usually wore at a sideling angle, squarely on top of his head, to make his attitude clear. He did not like any gentry, if it came to that. He called them Pet Cats and said they all lived by licking boots bigger than their own, composing in this way a social system in which he, Jack Smith, would take no part. And since all respectable people respected, above all things, religion in some form, Jack Smith was against religion in *all* forms. He named himself an infidel. Most of the time he was quiet, being busy on his land, but he carried these wrong-headed ideas very close to his surface, kept them right under his skin, as it were, and, with two grogs in him to set him off, he would vo-

ciferate. People generally took the view that he was ridiculous.

This notwithstanding, there was just a single reason—no more—why Jack Smith could be despised in his own neighborhood with safety: he was a minority of one. His mockers knew instinctively that they needed to be in numbers. Jack Smith had a dash about him that spelled danger. It kept him from being comfortably contemptible.

He was twenty when these events happened, a strongly built bucko, black as night as to hair and eye, swarthy of skin, comely of feature but always scowling, as if he dared anyone to say he approved of anything. We would call him adolescent today. In 1769, however, adolescence had not gotten recognized. Fifteen was a man then, and Jack Smith had pushed his maturity still further along by going to the wars, or such wars as there were. He had fought Indians on the frontier and in Canada and had journeyed as far west as the mysterious Ohio River. He had seen more of the world than anyone in his county and he uninhibitedly expressed scorn for the stick-in-the-bogs that were his neighbors. Yet it was not strange that he had returned. He was a Delawarean, and return is a Delaware custom.

People had gathered around him when he came back, but not to learn where he had been or what he might have seen. They just wanted to know if he had changed any. When they found he had not, but was as wrong-

headed as ever, they were pleased, and then and there began nettling him in groups when there was a chance for it.

These chances occurred mostly at the Bear's Claw Tavern, for that was where he went oftenest. The other drinkers soon had a program laid out to use on him. They would wait until he was muddled and then overwhelm him with their witticisms, speaking one after another too fast for him to answer. He would finally explode, curse until it was frightful, and slam out. Then they would all laugh, feeling very sure that never, under any circumstances, would *they* be so absurd.

The one person who cared what happened to him was always present at these shouting matches, but was prevented by sex and condition of servitude from taking any part. It was the bound girl who worked as the tavern barmaid. This young person had been left on the township an orphan pauper at the age of six, and authorities had bound her out to Horeb Potter, the tavern proprietor, who had signed articles making him responsible for her protection, care and Christian education. That meant he had put her to work. From daylight to dark for the past ten years she had drudged on the Potter property, doing everything. But nobody thought then that such a life was a hardship; so, not knowing she had reason to be sorry for herself, Oma had space in her to be sorry for others. She was sorry for Jack Smith.

In her eyes he was handsome and brave, and certainly superior to his tormentors. When she saw him overcome by their numbers, she would be filled with grieving pity. She was a tender-hearted thing, anyway. She mothered the graceless Potter brats and the chicks in the Potter barnyard, and, until recently, such kind occupations had absorbed all her natural emotions. Up to the time she saw Jack Smith, she had never given a thought to men, except to wonder occasionally how it was that, in an evening of drinking, a dozen of them could talk so much and say nothing anyone could remember. Now she would have liked nothing better than to sit in utter silence while Jack Smith told her the tale of his adventures, but she hardly formulated this dream, for dreams were outside her experience. More practically, she longed for something to turn him from his dangerous, wicked ways, which, she was passionately sure, were no true part of him.

She was a good girl behind the bar. She had a light foot, a strong wrist, a pretty bosom, and fine, silky, golden hair. Nobody gave her a look, however—she had no portion, and she lacked the forward-coming manners that some wenches might have used to get notice for themselves, being modest, seldom lifting her eyes, never her voice. She was pious, too. She had not been taught to read, but she kept her dead mother's little Bible reverently wrapped in a clean kerchief, and every night before she

lay down in the haymow where she was sent to sleep, she said her prayers. Always she prayed for Jack Smith.

He was barely aware of her. When he entered the Bear's Claw, he would come swelling with anger at his former defeats and thinking only of his adversaries and how, this evening, he would triumph over them. Sometimes, sensibly, he would tell himself that the best thing to do would be just to ignore the gnats, have his drink and go. But that never happened. The drink would unlock his speech and soon one familiar thing would lead to another.

That was how matters stood when knowledge of the wrongness at the chapel took hold on people's minds and spread first amazement, then terror, over the countryside.

It started at the very opening service. The circuit rider was there, to dedicate the new House of God, and everyone was eager and excited. They all came in a throng to the Woods and waited until the Reverend arrived, carrying the shining key, his good face shining too. He unlocked the door. Then he, and all the others, as fast as they could crowd up and look in, stopped in unbelieving shock. Everything in the beautiful little church had been flung into the most shameful disorder.

The benches were turned over, the Communion table too, if such a thing can be credited, and the pulpit

chairs. The hymnals were strewn along the aisles. Only the lectern, on which lay the Bible, had been left untouched, but right beside it was the strangest, most sinister evidence of sacrilegious venom in the place: the carpet, which had been carefully cut to fit the lectern's foot and then nailed smoothly down, had been ripped up and flung back all around, the tacks still in it. It was as if someone had come so far, meaning to defile the Book itself, and then had been afraid and had turned a baffled rage on the floor. But all the windows were found to be securely locked, just as the door had been. There was no explanation of the crime whatever.

The circuit rider, a doughty warrior for the faith, was used to frontier rowdiness. He rallied fast. Straight in he went, calling for the other men to help him, and, blasting out a strong fighting psalm as he worked, began to put things to rights. Soon the chapel was once again in order. But of course grief and horror filled all the people's hearts where there had been happiness and pride. By then they were thinking the harm had been done by some debased ruffian who had managed to get a false key. That thought passed through all their minds, that and the hot promise they made themselves to find out who the scoundrel was and see that he got at least a hundred lashes well laid on, at the next assize. With this vague and miserable theory replacing their

joy, they took their seats. They had the dedication service, but, if it had been a funeral, it could not have been less like the radiant time they had expected.

They had planned, as a climax, when the church was finally and fully consecrated, to have the bell peal out. In this way the building itself, with its own voice, would say to God that it belonged to Him, while the givers of the gift sat under the immaculate roof, listening. To make this ritual perfect, the leaders had decided against any preliminary ringing. They had had reports from the foundry of the beauty and mellowness of the bell's tone, and while hanging the instrument, they had tapped the metal and had been delighted with the musical resonance. But not yet had the bell been rung.

Now the moment approached, and a ghost, as it were, of the earlier anticipation crept back into the saddened group. They saw Brother More, who had been chosen ringer for the first term, rise and tiptoe out, and after that they sat keyed up, waiting. It seemed that the voice of the church, when it sounded, would sweep the ugly beginning away. But the voice did not sound. Brother More came back in, and this time he was not tiptoeing. He was walking fast and looking very queer. He advanced halfway down the aisle, stopped, lifted his right hand as if he were taking an oath, and addressed the minister. "Brother," he said, "the bell won't ring."

That was too much. The Reverend came down from the pulpit, coattails flapping, and every man, woman and child stood up. He strode headlong toward the door. Everybody, as he passed, fell in behind him. They all crowded around the doors on either side, craning necks, rolling eyes, staring up into the steeple. They could see the rope hanging in its proper place, swaying as a result of Brother More's efforts. He was telling the preacher that he had felt the bell swing, all right, but that no sound had followed the swinging. Everyone thought the ruffians had either muffled the tongue or stolen it away.

The preacher said, "A ladder." They brought one that they had used in getting the bell hung. They put it in place and he started up. As he was an old man, some of the younger members offered to make the climb in his place, but he went on, fast and spry. When he came down, he too looked queer. The tongue had not been removed or muffled, he said. It was there, he had taken it in his hand and struck it against the bell's side. And no sound whatever had resulted. When the people heard this, they lost heart in utter bewilderment. The men hung their heads, some of the women sobbed, and the children began to shriek and howl.

The Reverend did what he could to comfort the distracted flock. He said he had heard somewhere that there were such things as sick bells, strange as it seemed. He suggested that they send a message to the

foundry, asking that a bell doctor be dispatched to them right away. In the meantime, he reminded them, they had a church, whereas up to then they had had none. They must not weaken because of evildoers. Let them have the lock changed and then, if the mischief went on, let them set a watch.

Those were the things he said, his air that of common sense and good cheer. But he was far from feeling that the words covered the truth of the matter. He had a powerful premonition that something worse than bell sickness or mischief-making was involved here, and he longed to stay with the beleaguered congregation and guide it through the danger, whatever it might be. But four hundred miles of rigidly made appointments lay before him and he could not linger, even for a day. So he rode off, promising himself that he would make the chapel in Bascom's Woods the first object of his prayers.

The people followed his advice. They had the lock changed and the smith who did the job was a chapel member. He saw to it that nobody got a glimpse of his work until the lock was in the door. As for the key, he made just one and for it he fashioned an iron case with a lock of its own, so that only the member to whom the sextonship was entrusted ever set eyes on the precious object. And still the mischief continued.

There was never again such a complete hurly-burly as on the open-

ing day, but the insults were not the less striking for being slighter. The people would come in and find a pulpit chair upended on the Communion table. Or the collection baskets would be filled with rocks. Or the cup of the Holy Sacrament would be standing by the common drinking-water bucket.

As these atrocities made it plain that someone had entry to the church, even though entry was impossible, the members took the preacher's other direction and set a watch. Four farmers with muskets stood guard each night for a week. All was tranquil and, when the next meeting day came, nothing was found disturbed. The congregation felt better. Some progress, at least, was being made. Then, right in the middle of the prayer, there was a terrible crash and a window burst in. Burst *in*—that is to say, all the broken glass fell *inside* the room. But no missile was found to explain the breaking—no rock, no chunk, nothing. That window had just exploded. The people were really frightened then.

They made no effort to remain in possession. It was the Devil, they said. And terror spread over the land. Old Satan lived in Bascom's Woods. You did not have to be an ignorant or superstitious person to believe it. Educated people had practically *seen* it. The grove was avoided even in daylight, and soon other stories about it began to circulate.

Someone remembered an old re-

port of how, about a century earlier, a passing schoolteacher had asked Sir Thomas Bascom, the holder of the original patent, to let him have some part of the Woods for a free school for poor children. But Sir Thomas had not considered that the poor deserved educating and had been additionally affronted by the notion that they should have anything free, and so had profanely refused. When the suitor had had the impertinence to inquire what better purpose the land might serve, the nobleman had roared, "I'll let the Devil have it first!" and had ordered his footmen to give the upstart a thrashing.

Now it appeared that the baronet's misuse of the Devil's name had marked one of those patiently recurring occasions in human annals when the Devil himself had been eavesdropping. He had obviously taken Sir Thomas up on his impulsive promise. He had accepted the gift of Bascom's Woods. That, anyway, was what people said. And, dubious as it seemed from some points of view, there was this frightful thing about it—it fit the facts and no other explanation did.

These events tickled the infidel Jack Smith immensely. He told himself the godly had been caught in their own reasoning at last, and were they anything but the poltroons their mothers had unfortunately borne, they would at least admit it. But no—not they. They were like a

man standing on a plank that is balanced over a crossbar—if they took a step in one direction, their footing would fly up and smite them, because of God. If they moved the other way, it would do the same thing, because of the Devil. And nothing could make them say they were not on eternal ground, even while their teeth chattered as they spoke.

Jack Smith saw clearly that it was the alleged personal irruption of the Devil into Delaware that had put the issue in so favorable a light from the viewpoint of an infidel. As long as the godly could settle every philosophical question in terms of their own gab, there was not much a real thinker could bring before them. They buried it all under saws about faith and the Scriptures. But they could not bury Old Horny! He had already shown them that. One snort of sulphur from Horny's nose, and every one of them was on the run, whimpering as he went. What a spectacle!

Eating his bachelor supper in his snug little farmhouse kitchen, Jack Smith chuckled over this out loud. It was the funnier to him because, himself, he did not believe in the Devil—either. The Devil was part of church religion, and, as he could not accept the church God, neither could he the church Adversary. The chapel people, as he saw it, had gotten trapped in their very first need to put their dogma to the proof. And at last, he, Jack Smith, could triumph.

He slapped on his old hat at a desperate pitch and started for the Bear's Claw, and for the first part of his walk he kept himself warm and happy inside by reviewing the scathing things he was going to say when he arrived. Then he came to the branch road that led off toward Bascom's Woods. At the sight of that, he felt his thoughts change. Just who was it, he wondered, that was doing the damage out there, anyway?

He did not doubt that the reports were true. Too many people vouched for them. So—who *was* responsible? Maybe, thought Jack Smith, the really masterly thing for him to do would be to catch the criminal and refute all this Devil possession nonsense by appearing with the fellow—a human being, of course—in person, taken in the act. What a stroke! How would the pious look then? Jack Smith strongly inclined to the idea for a minute. He stood still, squinting narrow-eyed down the road, where already the grass was growing, since nobody now would put foot on the surface, and considered the depredations. He had decided some time earlier that they were committed by someone who came down the chimney. But who?

He ran over the list of low county characters, as he had it in his mind—gamblers, wenchers, sots, petty thieves, runaways—and then shook his head. None of those men was low in a way that would make him

do anything with a fixed purpose. None of them was antireligious either; on that subject they were *fulsomely conformist*. Maybe some smart bound man, thought Jack Smith, articulated to a penny-worshipping chapel member and getting even the only way he could. Maybe. And what would happen to the fellow if Jack Smith collared him and dragged him in? Well, he might be burned in the hand with a red-hot iron. Might be put in the pillory—if he was lucky. Might be flogged to a pulp. Might have his ears cropped. Any of those things could happen to him. He might be hanged. Sacrilege was serious. Jack Smith walked on toward the Bear's Claw.

His mood was altered, though. His happy malice had left him for a somber anger. He still felt able to refute the psalm singers, but now that the time, at long last, had come, he could not feel the enemy worth the effort. He entered the tavern, walked to the bar and laid down his money for a grog. Not more than eight seconds passed while he was doing this, but everyone in the parlor became aware of him. Always it was that way with Jack Smith. It was his dash. He turned other human beings into a crowd—and suffered accordingly.

The crowd that evening was all men. To be sure, there was one female in the room, but she could not be thought of as a woman, or even as completely human, since she was just the bound girl, Oma, washing

glasses behind the bar. When she observed Jack Smith coming in, she felt her heart give a great hard beat. When she noticed that he was morose and scowling, she felt the same organ melt with grief that he should ever be other than perfectly happy. No one she had seen in her life had been perfectly happy, but perfect happiness was what she wanted for Jack Smith, and perfect happiness for herself would have lain in bringing perfect happiness to him. She loved him.

He, for once, gave her a little attention, though not for her own sake. Taking that strange truth in—that he no longer needed to struggle with the others, that he felt completely detached from them—he found himself, in that room with its long association of struggle, queerly lonely, almost forlorn. So when he saw Oma's kind little face turned toward him from the far end of the bar, he waved at her, just from emptiness. "Ah there, sweeting," he said, "You make a poor old man's eyes feel better."

Oma's skin, at that, went from milk-white to a glowing, glorious red, while her eyes changed from still gentleness to the most dazzling sparkle. But Jack Smith did not see these lovely happenings, because at that second Horeb Potter stepped between him and the girl. Horeb, having heard the rallying speech, decided that the guest was in an expansive, or spending, mood and acted to help things along. He did

what was for him almost unheard of. He stood treat. He set a second glass down beside Jack Smith's first, and said, "Do me the honor."

Surprised but courteous, Jack Smith answered, "Your good health," and tossed the liquor off. His new detachment ended then and there.

He listened to the other men talking. They were discussing the chapel mystery, of course—nobody in the county those days discussed anything else—and, unlike Jack Smith earlier in the evening, they were not interested in *who*—they knew who. They were suggesting methods by which the congregation might get the building free.

Cut down the trees, said the squire. Make the whole tract open ground. The Devil wouldn't—couldn't—lurk there without cover.

Hold a great meeting, rejoined the schoolmaster. Have a month, six weeks, of unbroken gospel feast. Services twenty-four hours a day, great bonfires all night. If necessary, let the brethren put up tents in the grove and live there. Crowd the Devil out.

"No, no," exclaimed a sharp, eager, breaking-sticks sort of voice then. It was the notary. He was a little, mean, cowardly man who took great pains to be correct in everything he did and equal pains to find other people guilty of mistakes. He had a rat-type face and just now his light blue eyes were strangely gleaming. "Not by cutting trees or holding

meetings will we drive the Devil from our midst!" he proclaimed. "He does not hide in trees, he does not fear the godly—the few godly of this sinful township. His strength is in the hearts of the sinners, and we have many, many of those. Let us drive the sinners forth, and we will soon see Satan follow."

The squire said, politely but a trifle crustily, "Sinners? If you mean we are lax in enforcing our laws, sir, you are mistaken. We have very few unpunished crimes."

"True, true!" cried the notary. "But *how* do we punish those crimes? With patience, with long-suffering, with mercy. The other day I heard of a bound girl in Bethel township who had been robbing her good mistress, taking the keys while her lady napped, opening the cupboard and helping herself to sugar. What was her punishment? Six lashes. She should have had three dozen! That is what I mean, gentlemen. So merciful are we, the wicked creep to our county from all over the colony, and in every wicked heart the Devil finds a shelter. So now he too has come."

The high fast speech and the blazing eyes had their magnetism. The others exchanged looks questioningly. Maybe he was right, they thought. *Something* was amiss. They had seen the disordered church. They had pulled the bell rope and gotten only silence.

"What do you think we should do?" asked a freeholder.

"Revive our good old laws!" cried the notary, his voice going still higher. "Burn! Brand! Crop ears! Cut off hands! And whip! Whip, whip, whip! Make the Devil-shelterers suffer!"

"That ain't the way I fight," said Jack Smith.

His voice, ordinary in pitch and disgusted in tone, swept the notary's magnetic moment quite away. Once more Jack Smith was the chief man present. Once more the others were a crowd. And the notary, from a peak of leadership, felt reduced to the crowd's least significant member, so that in his heart he bled, though outwardly he looked as bloodless as a little rock. The schoolmaster said affably, "We wouldn't expect *you* to fight the being we are talking of, Master Smith, I assure you."

"I don't care what you expect," said Jack Smith.

"To an infidel, his presence is probably welcome," continued the schoolmaster, and now a faint note of hysteria edged *his* voice, although he usually had good control of himself.

Jack Smith answered, "To *this* infidel, his presence hasn't even been visible. I don't belong to your chapel. So I don't care. But here's what I just heard you people saying. There's a hundred and fifty men that do belong, and there's one old Devil. And the only way you men can figure to lick that Devil is to beat a poor bound girl that ate some

sugar. My remark was—I don't fight that way. You can take it or leave it. I don't care."

It is unnecessary to give in full the charges and countercharges that were then hurled back and forth across the Bear's Claw parlor. Suffice it to report two points—first, Jack Smith made it perfectly clear that he did not believe in the Devil, thereby shocking his hearers far more than when he had denied believing in God; and second, the notary, fairly screeching, invited Jack Smith to walk through Bascom's Woods that very night, and Jack Smith accepted.

He not only accepted. He put a little flourish on it. He said, "I'll walk through the Woods, though it ain't on my way home. If I see Old Satan, and he's civil to me, I'll be civil too. But if he interferes with me, I'll fight him. He won't see me turn and run, like a chapel lad."

He got that far in his speech and saw young Oma's eyes fixed on him—her wonderful, new, blazing, big blue eyes, frankly adoring. Well, he thought. And went on to his flourish.

"I'll fight him any way he likes," he announced. "The fancy. Rattle. Rough-and-tumble, bite and gouge. Canuck. Injun. Any style." And, as he listed the items of his prowess, he gave a demonstration with each one.

Saying "The fancy," he whirled his fists through a sequence of jabs and punches that had the distinction, at least, of being very fast.

Saying "Rassle," he hooked an elbow under an imaginary adversary's chin and pressed back until the watchers fairly heard the bones crack. Saying "Rough-and-tumble, bite and gouge," he removed another adversary's eyeballs with a graphic sweep of his thumbs and bared his hard, white, handsome teeth in some ferocious grimaces.

At "Canuck," he simply gave a kick; it was too fast for the spectators to make anything of it. But at "Injun," he performed his masterpiece. For then he took on a strange, wild, mysterious expression, bent over forward from his hips until he was the shape of a right angle, bounded into the air and after that circled the parlor three or four times, seeming just to float, for when he put a foot down he did so without making a particle of sound or even vibration. It was a passage from the Huron war dance, and, as its climax, called for a war whoop, which Jack Smith faithfully supplied.

Then he laughed with the utmost gaiety, hurled on his old hat, opened the door and went out. The second he was standing on the step alone, he stopped, gathered himself and took a standing broad jump that shot him halfway across the road. He thought he had not felt so good in a long time, but he did not associate this goodness with anyone's beautiful eyes. He had forgotten the bound girl and was delightfully absorbed in himself.

She, behind the bar, was praying for him with all the terror of her loving heart. He was going into Bascom's Woods! "O God, help him!" she whispered, while she washed glass after glass. And then she remembered the wicked, unreligious things he had said, and wondered in new fear if God *could* forgive such speech. God, as she had had Him described to her, was distinctly a Lord of Vengeance. Where any mercy entered into her concept of the Divine make-up, it was by her own involuntary amendment—involuntary because she could not long imagine anything without some kindness in it. Now she hopefully laid hold of the idea that the Omnipotent might be propitiated by a scapegoat and hastened to offer one. "Punish me in his place," she implored. "Punish me—but help him, please, oh, please!" Jack Smith had said he did not fight that way. . . .

He marched rapidly along and turned into the road to the Woods without a worry. He genuinely did not believe the Devil existed. He had no fear of anything supernatural. However, when he rounded the bend that let him see the Woods's front—a mile-long stretch of unbroken heavy timber—he thought that, since it was a dark night, he might better be wearing his pistol. He could run into human interference, if not diabolical. But who would try to rob him? He was known to be a poor man who never

had anything but a few shillings for his drink. He went on. He entered the Woods. Then he was reminded, out of his frontier experience, of what forest darkness could be. No moon, no stars and a thick canopy of heavy-leaved branches overhead. See the Devil in there—the Devil, who was reputed to be black? See black—*against* black? Jack Smith grinned. He might pass within two feet of Old Satan and never know Satan was there.

He was wrong about that. He saw Old Satan when he had penetrated the Woods about half a mile, and what he saw was precisely a silhouette. Old Satan showed up—*black*—against his black surroundings. He really did. The reason was—Old Satan was so much *black*er.

He was sitting on the ground beside the path, facing toward Jack Smith. Jack Smith saw his horns curving up on the sides of his head, saw his long pointed ears, saw a pair of high shoulders and what seemed to be the sides of a pretty long torso, and that was all he could make out. He had an impression, however, that Old Satan had his knees lifted and was clasping them with his arms. It was Jack Smith's woodsman's eye that took all this in, an eye that worked far faster than human thought. So Jack Smith had seen the Devil, had recognized him and catalogued his points before the awful conclusion arrived—Old Satan was real! There he was!

Jack Smith stood still. He had

been an orphan since he could remember and in consequence was used to feeling himself alone—alone and deprived of something all other people had. This accustomedness was a good thing for him now, for in that moment he felt alone indeed. Alone, alone, alone. Old Satan was real? Then he, Jack Smith, had been wrong in everything that had seemed right to him. It was a great deal to take in without warning. He went on standing still.

Old Satan spoke first. He said, "Jack Smith." His voice was light, a little wooden and not in the least terrifying.

Jack Smith replied, "My name."

"I hear you want to fight," Satan continued, without making a move.

"Well, then, come on and fight," Jack Smith replied, himself unmoving.

Something switched across the path in front of his feet, something like a big and very fast snake. It made several heavy wriggles, straightened out and was still. It was the Devil's tail. Jack Smith knew this without understanding how.

"Step over it," invited Old Satan.

"Horns," said Jack Smith, "and a long tail too. You damned old cow."

He took a very short step forward and aimed a hard kick. With all the blackness, he miscalculated, and that was lucky for him, for, had he landed his foot as he intended, he would have broken every foot bone he had. He grazed the tail as it was, and the mere touch was enough to

tell him that, despite its limberness a few seconds before, it was now like a bar of iron.

"You fight hind-part-to?" Jack Smith inquired.

He then saw a change in Old Satan's silhouetted head. At the tip of each horn there appeared a very, very short pointed flame. These were pale green. The next thing Jack Smith knew, the Devil was up and charging.

The green flames were racing toward him, and they were at about the level of his belly. Evidently Old Satan was meaning to gore him. His herd bull had meant to do that same thing two weeks earlier, when it caught him in close quarters in the feed lot. Jack Smith acted now as he had acted then. He made no attempt to dodge, but threw his whole weight forward against the oncoming Devil, grabbing the horns, shoving down and then twisting hard. He doubted Satan's neck was stronger than the bull's, and he knew that even a neck of great power is not much good if yanked out of line.

His calculations seemed to be right. He soon had Satan looking over his own shoulder, while Satan's feet scabbled hard to keep planted, the sound reminding Jack Smith that those feet were hoofs. A few yanks more, he thought, and bones should crack. It seemed too easy, and it was. Jack Smith was next aware that something was funny about his arms.

They were numb. They were

heavy. They were almost like dead—what on earth? Then Jack Smith realized—his hands, wrists and fore-arms were terribly cold. He could not feel a thing with them; he was keeping his grip just by bringing his weight down, but the weight traveled along his arms as if they were sticks. The reason was that the little flames in the tips of Satan's horns were licking Jack Smith's flesh and spreading this frozen torpor.

In the nick of time Jack Smith let go, forcing his fingers to loosen by sheer will power. Then he sprang aside, anticipating another charge, but Old Satan stopped to rub and feel his neck. He straightened up and Jack Smith saw he was about seven feet tall, a foot taller than he was himself.

Jack Smith spoke. "Put 'em out," he said, and waggled his fingers over his own brow, to indicate that it was the horns he was referring to.

Satan answered, "Why don't you do that?"

"I will," said Jack Smith. And spat. Once, twice. The green flames disappeared.

And Satan, it seemed, could bear this peculiarly abominable insult no better than a man, for he made an angry noise, a sound like that of a teakettle boiling over on a hot stove, and then came on in a rush. This time he did not undertake to gore, but minced up, dancing and prancing, his fists lifted, his chin in, his shoulders weaving and bobbing,

all in the smartest style of the fancy.

Now although earlier that evening Jack Smith had given so flashy an exhibition of his skill in box fighting, he really had no wish to engage in any such bout, for the truth was he knew little of the method. Also, he believed that, in meeting any attack, it was healthy to introduce an element of surprise. So he met Old Satan's scientific pugilism with a wild, savage trick right out of the American woods, the vicious French-Canadian lash, the kick that kills. It is delivered without warning; it travels like lightning, or anyway faster than human sight can go; it is aimed at the victim's chin; and, ideally, it breaks both jaw and neck. Ideally also, of course, it is performed by a foot cased in the French-Canadian logger's spiked and cleated boot. Jack Smith was wearing no such gear—only a Delaware farmer's shoe, lightly armed with a toe of copper.

But he did have the speed and muscle. He kicked his demonic enemy as if he were a demon himself. He flashed his leg up as if there had been no such thing as gravitation. His foot traveled like a weight on the end of a rope that is swinging *down*, gaining speed and force, not losing it, longing for the climax of its arc when it should crash against its target. It was a magnificent lash.

One thing, however, went against its success. That was the pitch darkness. (The Canucks seldom lashed in the dark themselves; barrooms

and torch-lighted camps were their sites for this kind of battle; in the dark they simply stabbed.) So Jack Smith failed of his target, though not by a complete miss. His shoe scraped Old Satan's cheek and tore one of his long ears. It brought blood. Jack Smith could see that—pale-green blood, the color of those flames, seeped out of one side of Satan's head and ran onto his shoulder. It did not shine in the dark, but it was brightly visible. It painted the ragged edge of the ear that had been torn—no thicker than a membrane—against the air behind it.

Old Satan did not resume his fancy fighting. He took a new attitude, out of which Jack Smith could at first make nothing. Slightly, just slightly, Satan bent his body and every one of his limbs, spreading the limbs abroad, holding his elbows out from his sides, taking a wide-planted stance on his hoofs. Then he pulled in his neck, so that his head seemed to be right on his shoulders, sticking a little forward. In this position he looked like just one thing, and Jack Smith recognized that thing for what it was, at last.

Ever since he had first glimpsed Satan sitting there beside the path, he had been wild in one quarter of his mind because there was nothing for him to liken his adversary to. Old Satan was not like a man, despite having human speech, erect posture, hands and the general outline of a man's body. He was not like a field beast—horns, hoofs, ears

and tail notwithstanding. But those were the only creatures that he could reasonably be compared to, since they were the only ones whose properties he shared. Now Jack Smith saw the real likeness of him and that turned him sick, for it was the one member of the animal kingdom that Jack Smith simply could not abide—not in sight, in thought, or in memory—the spider. Hunching there in the midst of his curved limbs, Old Satan was spiderlike and nothing else. Jack Smith even had an idea that Satan was not standing on his hoofs at all, but was hanging from a thread of web. And Jack Smith's stomach went clear over.

In this horrible second, Old Satan addressed him with a sentence of austere rebuke. He said, "You do not fight fair."

Spinning through Jack Smith's already spinning mind went the answer he might make: "I don't take it out of the backs of bound men and girls, either." For at that second, at the sight of his lifelong, inborn dread and hate—the insect murderer—so magnified, so black against pure blackness, Jack Smith felt *all* his hates come together. And Old Satan, hanging there, was not just a spider in his eyes but was smugness and hypocrites, and aristocracy and cowards; and no-justice-for-the-poor; and the agonies of branding iron, pillory and gibbet; and the tears of all the hopeless people—and of little orphan boys too. The whole sum of the bitter emotions that had kept

Jack Smith from ever being a petter of Pet Cats, and had made him Jack Smith, infidel, blazed up in him, directed against the dangler opposite.

And if, previously, he had been accepting his battle with Old Satan as a fight between, at least, two male beings, he no longer did. He could not conceive that Old Satan had even the single warm attribute of sex. Sex was the means by which men changed, giving life to new men, sons to come after them—and Satan did not change. He was always the same and he had always been there—the same—for every man who had drawn breath. The Old One. Jack Smith did not try to put any of this clot of concepts into lucid words. He just roared, "And serve you right!" and gathered himself for what might come next.

Then Satan leaped. Still keeping his spread-out posture, he sailed through the black air that was between him and Jack Smith. He landed hard, chest to chest, and they went down, Jack Smith of course being underneath. Satan at once enwrapped him, using arms, legs and tail as well.

Then it was rough-and-tumble, nothing else. They kneed, clawed, ground, choked and hammered. Jack Smith did not remain underneath, but neither could he remain on top. He and Satan rolled, thrashing over a wide expanse. Sometimes they spun fast, each contriving to defeat the other's tactic as soon as it was applied. Sometimes they lay,

seemingly still, for moments, measuring each other's strength, each gathering his own resources. This went on a long time, and all of that time the two were in a close embrace, body against body, sometimes face against face. Jack Smith in this manner got an intimate comprehension of what Old Satan's physical being was.

Spiderlike, indeed. Old Satan was neither warm, as a man would be, nor cold, as a fish or lizard. He was just a trifle coldish—and utterly dry. And he was a prober and sucker in every particle of him. He was completely covered, Jack Smith found out, with very, very short thick fur, and each hair of this coat had a life of its own—which was to probe and suck. Wherever a surface of Old Satan came in contact with a bare surface of Jack Smith, the satanic surface took hold. Each separate hair on it wriggled to investigate Jack Smith's skin and, having satisfied itself that way, went to work, fastening its tip down, sucking. So that Jack Smith, as well as his mighty battle with the spider that was seven feet high, had also these thousands of infinitesimal, eager indecencies to madden him. Ghastly as they were, they helped him, in a way. They kept him from sinking into routine, either physical or mental. They gave him the spur of horror. He fought like one inspired, inventing and applying new tricks without being aware of it, driven to brilliance by desperation. Just to get away from

the feel of Satan—that was the whole of his state of mind in this passage of the fight.

And yet, frantic as he was, he forbore to use one well-proved, effective trick, forbore again and again, for he had repeated chances. That was the bite. He would, in need, have taken a beast-devil's ear or even tail in his teeth. He would have taken a man-devil's hand or sinew. But the hairy, temperatureless anatomy of a spider! Jack Smith fought this part of his fight with his jaws clenched and his lips pressed together too.

However, if the bite was omitted from consideration, not so was the gouge. Jack Smith presently fixed his mind on gouging as the best method of getting free, could he but attain the necessary position. The gouge, very simply, consisted in removing an opponent's eyes. It was quick, requiring only a few seconds to achieve its purpose. It was economical of effort, for it called for no strength. It might kill an adversary or it might not, but that was unimportant. It *would* end a fight.

At long last Jack Smith got his opportunity. He found himself on top with his forearms free and above his head. The position could change in a second—Old Satan was trying, with both his arms, to heave Jack Smith off his chest, while with his thick, coldish tail he was tearing at Jack Smith's leg hold, sometimes latching on and pulling, as if the tail had been a cable, sometimes

flailing, as if with a whip. So Jack Smith acted fast. He felt over Satan's face to the spots where the eyes should be (up to then he had seen no light come from Satan's countenance, nothing except the pale-green fire and blood) and, finding the eyes in the normal places, though covered with furry lids, he instantly set his thumbs.

The technique then was to push down, driving the eyeballs back in the skull a certain distance. After which, the thumbs should be bent at the first joint and the direction of the push changed—from down to outward. By this very simple sequence of motions, if all went well, the eyes would be scooped forth. It was an old method of human combat, descending from the Neanderthals by way of the Greeks, Romans and European mercenary armies to the American frontier, where it had been well established for a century. Jack Smith was perfectly familiar with it. He proceeded correctly. He drove his thumbs down, Satan's furry eyelids being under them.

What happened next was that Jack Smith's thumbs went on an unexpected distance. For Satan's eyes did not wait to be pushed in; they withdrew, as it were, before the pushers, retired of their own accord, and left Jack Smith's thumbs sticking down in Old Satan's skull in seeming vacancy. For a few seconds. Then Jack Smith realized what was happening. His thumbs were freez-

ing and the cold was crawling up his wrists and forearms. It was the same cold as had struck him from the flames in the horns, and it acted the same way, of course. It was so terrible that it numbed without warning. Jack Smith's hands were half paralyzed before he even felt a chill. He jerked his thumbs out with a yell and, in the whole horror that he felt, he let go of Old Satan completely and sprang to his feet and rushed back three or four yards.

Old Satan in no way interfered with this. He sat up himself, taking the easy attitude in which he had been resting when Jack Smith first saw him. For a second, no more, he allowed Jack Smith to see his eyes—two pale-green slits—as if to inform him that they were uninjured. Then he patted the ground in front of him with the end of his tail, giving a gentle thump. That was all he did.

And Jack Smith, standing still and breathing loud, feeling the life creep, with an agony as of death, back into his hands, but also feeling, on every particle of his exposed skin, the loathsome memory of the hairy violations, vivid and crawling and vital—Jack Smith, at this point, decided to finish this fight Injun style was clean. There was no hugging and rubbing in it. There was no contact at all, up to the last moment. So the Injun fight would be his method from now on. He was a master Injun fighter.

There had been one whole summer in the north woods when he

had fooled some bands of Huron trackers who, themselves, were reliably reported to fool the Devil daily. So it would take a smart Injun to fool Jack Smith—a smarter one than had yet lived to brag of it—and a smart devil too. Having laid this plan, Jack Smith vanished.

He had been standing by a tree and he became part of the tree trunk. How? You could not say he stepped. He glided, maybe. Or drifted. Or dissolved and floated, if you choose.

Best to say, Jack Smith just was gone. He had been in one place, and then he was not in that place, nor had he moved to any other, so far as a watching eye could see. Such was the essence of the Injun stalk.

Jack Smith loved this way of fighting. As soon as he decided to use it, he underwent that wonderful change that he had had earlier in the Bear's Claw Tavern—he ceased to be a Delaware farmer; he became the free, gleeful, savage child that was bred of the American wilderness. He was an Injun.

That meant he was the trees, the undergrowth, the air. He *was* Bascom's Woods as well as was *in* it, for he drew it all into himself, calling on the sub- and supersensory faculties that men in breeches never know they have.

This was the way to fight! For this was the primitive essence of the fight—fight and hunt combined—and the sublimation, since it was fight on a mental plane, mind against mind, no other force involved. Well,

that did not leave *him* much to fear, Jack Smith thought, grinning. Old Satan was no Injun fighter. Jack Smith, after he blended into that tree, never had Old Satan out of his sight (though he never came in line of Satan's vision either) and he could easily perceive that Satan knew not the first thing about the stalk. Old Satan showed a really pitiable ignorance.

He first cocked his horned head at the tree into which Jack Smith seemed to have entered, telling himself, practically out loud, that, as Jack Smith *must* have gone behind the tree, he would have to come *out* from behind it sooner or later. When this did not happen, Old Satan got up and walked around. He did not leave the comparatively clear space in which they had done the rough-and-tumble, and it was apparent to the watching Jack Smith that he was uneasy, for twice he whirled suddenly around, fists lifted, evidently expecting Jack Smith to be creeping up behind. Finally he sat down again, but remained edgy; Jack Smith could tell that by his tail, which switched back and forth in nervous short arcs. Jack Smith, in the meantime, was never more than fifty feet away. His plan was to get Old Satan completely baffled, but not give him time to conclude that his opponent had run off, and then come in and cut Old Satan's throat.

His weapon for the blow was not much. It was a little clasp knife that he carried in his pocket. It had a

single blade and that was no more than two inches long. It was razor-sharp, however, and two inches, if applied accurately and fast, would be enough to split the big vein that was in any neck that was a neck at all, human or devilish. Jack Smith, gliding through the pitch darkness and seeming to be part of it, felt calmly sure of himself. He prolonged the stalk about ten minutes and then closed in.

He came across the little clear space that was between him and Old Satan, as silent as a cloud. He got up to Satan's back. The tail, switching its little arcs, was laid on the ground to Satan's right. That was a good thing. Jack Smith aimed to strike on the left—the vein was there. He struck. He drove his blade in its full length, stabbing Satan's neck just about under the left ear and then dragging hard toward the front. The vein parted. Jack Smith knew this because at once the pale-green blood spurted up, looking like the jet of a fat fountain; but Jack Smith could not stop. So violent was his hatred, he dragged on and achieved a half decapitation. Then Old Satan's head clunked down on his chest and Jack Smith quit cutting because he had to. He took his fingers from the knife handle, leaving the blade in the gash, and started to rise up to expel the great "Ah-h-h!" of victory. The "Ah-h-h" did not follow.

Instantly, before he got his back straight, he was thrown into a frenzy

by Old Satan's blood. It had drenched his hand, wrist and sleeve, and now he felt it act precisely as the hair had acted. It seemed to separate into an infinity of particles, each of which had the hairs' hideous investigative propensity and the revolting sucking mouth. Instead of the "Ah-h-h," Jack Smith expelled a shout of disgust and rage. He flung off his coat, he ripped out his shirt sleeve, he grabbed a great handful of leaves and scrubbed at his skin until at last he felt clean again. Not until he had done all this did he pay the slightest attention to Old Satan.

Then he saw that Old Satan was clear down, prostrate. He was lying on his back. The blood, spurting from his neck, had made a puddle all around his head and shoulders. Against the pale green, Jack Smith could plainly see the hairy, horrible and sinewy formation of his late enemy. He could also see the handle of his little knife, still stuck in Satan's neck. He stood still and sighed.

Then Old Satan spoke. In a tired, bored, very faraway voice, he said, "You cannot kill me, Jack Smith, for you are just a man. I am Evil-in-the-World, and no man can destroy me. I have played out this nonsense of a fight with you to teach you that. I have let you use all your tricks, and have let you seem to win. So that you would learn that you cannot win. A blade in my throat?" Old Satan languidly lifted his tail toward his head and let a loop slide

over the handle of Jack Smith's weapon. The tail then plucked the knife from the wound, carried it to Old Satan's left chest and drove the steel in there. After which the tail seemed to collapse. It simply flopped back on the ground. Old Satan went on, exhaustedly talking.

"In my throat, in my heart, in me anywhere, a human weapon is impotent. Jack Smith, I tell you again: a man cannot fight the Devil. But once in a while, once in a great, great while, far too infrequently for my needs and purposes, there is a man who can *be* a devil. A man who can rise so high. You are such a one. You can be one of my helpers and friends. With me, you can throw confusion into human hypocrisy. You already hate it. You have already cut yourself off from it. Now, with me, you can confound it. Come on."

Jack Smith thought how those words fit into every story he had ever been told about Old Satan. Old Satan tempted people. He made them great promises and then dragged them off to Hell. Anybody knew that. But why, Jack Smith asked himself, did Satan, trying now to win a recruit, put on so poor a showing? Why lie there, weltering in his blood, talking in a beyond-the-grave voice, while telling Jack Smith what a great future he could offer him? If, as he said, he *really* was unscathed? Why? Jack Smith squinted hard at the flat, sunken form before him. The green blood

still flowed—what a lot the creature had. Were the jets slowing a little now? Jack Smith tried to believe they were. And Old Satan, making it clear that he read Jack Smith's mind, thought for thought, gave a demonstration.

Out of his chest there rose another Old Satan, just like himself, except that he was uninjured and full of vigor. And behind this second Satan came a third, and a fourth and fifth, and so on, until a throng of them filled the clear space full. Everywhere Jack Smith looked he saw horned heads, high shoulders, long bodies, pointed ears. None of these new Devils did anything. They just stood. For perhaps a minute they stood, while the green blood spurted from the Devil on the ground. After which, as they had arrived, so they departed. One at a time they sank down into the first.

"I am Evil-in-the-World, and no man can destroy me, Jack Smith," said Old Satan again. "Come on."

Jack Smith knew then exactly what he had to do—and he did it. He spun on his heel and walked straight away from the thing before him, walked straight indeed, walked hard and fast, for he was filled with consummate purpose. Right in his path stood an oak, the biggest oak in Bascom's Woods, one that was named the Five Hundred Year Tree, because people said it must be so old. Jack Smith did not swerve as he approached it. He did not slow down, either. He walked plumb

into the monster trunk and shoved his breastbone against it and spread-eagled his arms, which, at their full extent, did not cover a fifth of the tree's circumference.

And so standing, Jack Smith belated out, in a voice that rang through Bascom's Woods from one end to the other, the very prayer of all human prayers, the basic, desperate petition that lies in every simple heart when it has seen the determination and elaborateness of evil. "O God," he roared, "HELP me!" And then he planted his feet with all his might, did as much as he could with his arms to grasp that great wall of bark, and heaved. The tree came up.

Jack Smith felt its profound center root move first. That gave, then rocked and swayed. The vast root mat that was above it then relinquished the unstirring mold in which it had lain for half a millennium, and finally out sprang the long root arms that stretched along the surface, waving and flying like pennons of victory. And to the sound of a thunder too vast to be imagined, Jack Smith found himself standing with the Five Hundred Year Tree resting on his shoulder.

It was an awkward thing to hold, and he had to act fast to keep it in balance. He did. He passed the trunk rapidly along from hand to hand until he grasped it about thirty feet short of the top. Then he swung the whole tree back, over his shoulder, as if he were using an ax, and

then forward, and then down. With all the fire in his heart he made his aim, and with the same fire he expressed it. "Get!" he screamed. He hit. The awful weight of the central mat came down exactly where he sent it—smack—on the bleeding spider. And then Jack Smith was there alone, the tree trunk in his hands, himself the center of a cataclysmic commotion.

Nothing visible was moving, but through the length and breadth of Bascom's Woods, and of the whole township and county, and probably of all Delaware, if it comes to that, the sound waves were leaping and pitching and soaring like the surface of the sea at the height of a hurricane. The crash of the oak had been simply indescribable. It was so big that Jack Smith could not hear it; he became aware of it only when, finally, it ended and there was quiet once more. And then, so stunned, so numbed was he, he might not have apprehended silence itself, except that *this* silence had a very peculiar little noise moving through it. It was like the singing of a bullet, beginning loudish but rapidly rushing away, yet, from both its direction and a certain thickness in its tone, making plain that the object producing it was traveling not through air but earth, straight down. And Jack Smith understood what the object was. It was Old Satan, heading home—Old Satan diving for Hell so fast he made the rocks hum with his passage. Fainter and fainter grew

the note, dwindled to a last, slim, V-shaped g-l-o-o-c-k, and stopped. After that, into Bascom's Woods the real quiet came.

Jack Smith let the trunk slide out of his hands. It sank gently to the ground. He followed its motion. His knees began to bend and went on bending until they brought the full length of his shins to the earth. He did not stop at that. He kept on sinking until he was sitting on his heels. All the time his eyes stayed fixed on the vast hole made by the uprooting.

At last Jack Smith spoke. "You *did*," he said.

More quiet followed, a period of the kind that can never be measured on a clock. Then, sensibly, pleasantly and cheerily, the little chapel bell began to ring. Jack Smith knew no human hands were pulling on the rope. He looked toward the sky and, very, very humbly, he touched his forelock. And the sun came up.

Oma and Jack Smith were married soon after that night. Theirs was the first wedding in the chapel. The good people of the township (for of

course there were good people there, as Jack Smith himself could see when he looked at what was before his eyes instead of what was stored in his mind) made up a purse for them, in gratitude. He at first refused the gift, as contrary to his independence. But Oma, the bride, plucked his sleeve and whispered, and he accepted. They used the money to buy freedom for the bound girl who had sampled her mistress' sugar.

Jack Smith and Oma had a long happy life together. For seven years, to be sure, they were separated; that was when he went to fight in General Washington's War, the conflict that ensued when Delaware decided to expel the British Empire—and did. Despite the interruption, however, the pair contrived to have a good many children. You will find Smiths all over the United States today, fine citizens too—but, if descended from farmer-soldier Jack and bound girl Oma, making nothing of it. For *those* Smiths are from Delaware and Delawareans are, as I said at the beginning of this story, exclusive people.

