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Short Stories

No. VI.

THE NOTORIOUS JUMPING FROG
OF CALAVERAS COUNTY

By Mark Twain



MARK TWAIN



OWEN JOHNSON

Twenty-four famous authors were asked recently to name the best short story in the English language. The choice of Owen Johnson was "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," by Mark Twain, whose complete works are published by Messrs. Harper & Brothers.

IN compliance with the request of a friend of mine who wrote from the east, I called on good natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage, and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous Jim Smiley, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design it succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the dilapidated tavern in the decayed mining camp of Angels, and I noticed that he was fat and baldheaded and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood, named Leonidas W. Smiley, Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, a young minister of the gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of Angels Camp. I added that if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, I would feel under many obligations to him.

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm, but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. I let him go on in his own way and never interrupted him once.

"Rev. Leonidas W.—h'm—Rev. Le—Well, there was a feller here once by the name of Jim Smiley in the winter of '49, or maybe it was the spring of '50, I don't recollect exactly somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume warn't finished when he first come to the camp. But anyway he was the curiousest man about, always betting on anything that turned up you ever see if he could get anybody to bet on the other side, and if

he couldn't he'd change sides. Any way that suited the other side would suit him. Just so's he got a bet he was satisfied.

"But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky. He most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance. There couldn't be no solit'ry thing mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it and take any side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse race you'd find him flush or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog fight he'd bet on it; if there was a cat fight he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken fight he'd bet on it. Why, if there was two birds setting on a fence he would bet you which one would fly first, or if there was a camp meeting he would be there regular to bet on Parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so he was, too, and a good man.

"If he even see a straddle bug start to go anywheres he would bet you how long it would take him to get to— to wherever he was going to, and if you took him up he would foller that straddle bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to him—he'd bet anything the danged feller. Parson Walker's wife laid very sick once for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn't going to save her. But one morning he came in, and Smiley up and asked him how she was, and he said she was considerable better, thank the Lord for his inf'ant mercy, and coming on so smart that, with the blessing of Providence, she'd get well yet. And Smiley before he thought says, 'Well, I'll reek \$2.50 she don't anyway.'

"Thish yer Smiley had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because, of course, she was faster than that—and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the asthma or the distemper or the consumption or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards' start and then pass her under way, but always at the fag end of the race she'd get excited and desperate-like and come envorting and straddling up and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences and kicking up m-o-r-e dust and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose, and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

"And he had a little small bull pup

that to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent but to set around, look ornery and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog. His underjaw'd begin to stick out like the fo'castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover and shine like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him and bullyrag him and bite him and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied and hadn't expected nothing else and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time till the money was all up, and then all of a sudden he would grab the other dog just by the joint of his hind leg and freeze to it, not chew, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed up the sponge, if it was a year.

"Smiley always come out winner on that pup till he harness'd a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had come far enough, and the money was all up, and he come to make a snatch for his pet holt, he seen in a minute how he'd been imposed on and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged-like and didn't try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He give Smiley a look as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for himself if he'd lived, for the stuff was in him and he had genius. I know it, because he had no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances if he hadn't no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'n and the way it turned out.

"Well, this yer Smiley had rat rariers and chicken cocks and toments and all them kind of things till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketch'd a frog one day and took him home and said he call'dated to educate him, and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog to jump. And you bet he did learn him too. He'd give him a little punch behind, and the next minute you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one sum-merset or maybe a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flatfooted and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies and kep' him in practice so constant that he'd nail a fly every time as far as he could see him.

"Smiley said all a frog wanted was education and he could do most anything, and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, 'Fies, Dan'l, fies!' And quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot, as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doing any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightforward as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair and square jumping on a dead level he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand, and when it come to that Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had traveled

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