

Grinning Man - Alvin Maker Short Story

TALES OF ALVIN MAKER

ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Tales of Alvin Maker:

Book One: Seventh Son (1987)

Book Two: Red Prophet (1988)

Book Three: Prentice Alvin (1989)

Book Four: Alvin journeyman (1996)

Book Five: Master Alvin (1998)

In the Tales of Alvin Maker series, an alternate-history view of an America that never was, Orson Scott Card postulated what the world might have been like if the Revolutionary War had never happened, and if folk magic actually worked.

America is divided into several provinces, with the Spanish and French still having a strong presence in the New World. The emerging scientific revolution in Europe has led many people with 'talent', that is, magical ability, to emigrate to North America, bringing their prevailing magic with them. The books chronicle the life of Alvin, the seventh son of a seventh son - a fact that marks him right away as a person

of great power. It is Alvin's ultimate destiny to become a Maker, an adept being of a kind that has not existed for a thousand years. However, there exists an Unmaker for every Maker - a being of great supernatural evil - who is Alvin's adversary, and strives to use Alvin's brother Calvin against him.

During the course of his adventures, Alvin explores the world around him and encounters such problems as slavery and the continued enmity between the settlers and the Native Americans who control the western half of the continent. The series appears to be heading towards an ultimate confrontation between Alvin and the Unmaker, with the fate of the entire continent, perhaps even the world, hinging on the outcome.

GRINNING MAN

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The first time Alvin Maker run across the grinning man was in the steep woody hills of eastern Kenituck. Alvin was walking along with his ward, the boy Arthur Stuart, talking either deep philosophy or the best way for travellers to cook beans, I can't bring to mind now which, when they come upon a clearing where a man was squatting on his haunches looking up into a tree. Apart from the unnatural grin upon his face, there wasn't all that much remarkable about him, for that time and place. Dressed in buckskin, a cap made of coonhide on his head, a musket lying in the grass ready to hand - plenty of men of such youth and roughness walked the game trails of the unsettled forest in those days.

Though come to think of it, eastern Kenituck wasn't all that unsettled by then, and most men gave up buckskin for cotton during summer, less they was too poor to get them none. So maybe it was partly his appearance that made Alvin stop up short and look at the fellow. Arthur Stuart, of course, he did what he saw Alvin do, till he had some good reason to do otherwise, so he stopped at the meadow's edge too, and fell silent too, and watched.

The grinning man had his gaze locked on the middle branches of a scruffy old pine that was getting somewhat choked out by slower-growing flat-leaf trees. But it wasn't no tree he was grinning at. No sir, it was the bear.

There's bears and there's bears, as everyone knows. Some little old brown bears are about as dangerous as a dog - which means if you beat it with a stick you deserve what you get, but otherwise it'll leave you alone. But some black bears and some grizzlies, they have a kind of bristle to the hair on their backs, a kind of spikiness like a porcupine that tells you they're just spoiling for a fight, hoping you'll say a cross word so's they can take a swipe at your head and suck your lunch back up through your neck. Like a likkered-up river man.

This was that kind of bear. A little old, maybe, but as spiky as they come, and it wasn't up that tree 'cause it was afraid, it was up there for honey, which it had plenty of, along with bees that were now so

tired of trying to sting through that matted fur that they were mostly dead, all stung out. There was no shortage of buzzing, though, like a choir of folks as don't know the words to the hymn so they just hum, only the bees was none too certain of the tune, neither.

But there sat that man, grinning at the bear. And there sat the bear, looking down at him with its teeth showing.

Alvin and Arthur stood watching for many a minute while nothing in the tableau changed. The man squatted on the ground, grinning up; the bear squatted on a branch, grinning down. Neither one showed the slightest sign that he knew Alvin and Arthur was even there.

So it was Alvin broke the silence. 'I don't know who started the ugly contest, but I know who's going to win.'

Without breaking his grin, through clenched teeth the man said, 'Excuse me for not shaking your hands but I'm abusy grinning this bear.'

Alvin nodded wisely - it certainly seemed to be a truthful statement. 'And from the look of it,' says Alvin, 'that bear thinks he's grinning you, too.'

'Let him think what he thinks,' said the grinning man. 'He's coming down from that tree.'

Arthur Stuart, being young, was impressed. 'You can do that just by grinning?' .

'Just hope I never turn my grin on you,' said the man. 'I'd hate to have to pay your master the purchase price of such a clever blackamoor as you.'

It was a common mistake, to take Arthur Stuart for a slave. He was half-Black, wasn't he? And south of the Hio was all slave country then, where a Black man either was, or used to be, or sure as shooting was bound to become somebody's property. In those parts, for safety's sake, Alvin didn't bother correcting the assumption. Let folks think Arthur Stuart already had an owner, so folks didn't get their hearts set on volunteering for the task.

'That must be a pretty strong grin,' said Alvin Maker. 'My name's Alvin. I'm a journeyman blacksmith.'

'Ain'tmuch call for a smith in these parts. Plenty of better land farther west, more settlers, you ought to try it.' The fellow was still talking through his grin.

'I might,' said Alvin. 'What's your name?'

'Hold still now,' says the grinning man. 'Stay right where you are. He's a-coming down.'

The bear yawned, then clambered down the trunk and rested on all fours, his head swinging back and forth, keeping time to whatever music it is that bears hear. The fur around his mouth was shiny with honey and dotted with dead bees. Whatever the bear was thinking, after a while he was done, whereupon he stood on his hind legs like a man, his paws high, his mouth open like a baby showing its mama it swallowed its food.

The grinning man rose up on his hind legs, then, and spread his arms, just like the bear, and opened his mouth to show a fine set of teeth for a human, but it wasn't no great shakes compared to bear's teeth.

Still, the bear seemed convinced. It bent back down to the ground and ambled away without complaint into the brush.

'That's my tree now,' said the grinning man.

'Ain't much of a tree,' said Alvin.

'Honey's about all et up,' added Arthur Stuart.

'My tree and all the land round about,' said the grinning man.

'And what you plan to do with it? You don't look to be a farmer.'

'I plan to sleep here,' said the grinning man. 'And my intention was to sleep without no bear coming along to disturb my slumber. So I had to tell him who was boss.'

'And that's all you do with that knack of yours?' asked Arthur Stuart. 'Make bears get out of the way?'

'I sleep under bearskin in winter,' said the grinning man. 'So when I grin a bear, it stays grinned till I done what I'm doing.'

'Don't it worry you that someday you'll meet your match?' asked Alvin mildly.

'I got no match, friend. My grin is the prince of grins. The king of grins.'

'The emperor of grins,' said Arthur Stuart. 'The Napoleon of grins!'

The irony in Arthur's voice was apparently not subtle enough to escape the grinning man. 'Your boy got him a mouth.'

'Helps me pass the time,' said Alvin. 'Well, now you done us the favour of running off that bear, I reckon this is a good place for us to stop and build us a canoe.'

Arthur Stuart looked at him like he was crazy. 'What do we need a canoe for?'

'Being a lazy man,' said Alvin, 'I mean to use it to go downstream.'

'Don't matter to me,' said the grinning man. 'Float it, sink it, wear it on your head or swallow it for supper, you ain't building nothing right here.' The grin was still on his face.

'Look at that, Arthur,' said Alvin. 'This fellow hasn't even told us his name, and he's a-grinning us.'

'Ain't going to work,' said Arthur Stuart. 'We been grinned at by politicians, preachers, witchers, and lawyers, and you ain't got teeth enough to scare us.'

With that, the grinning man brought his musket to bear right on Alvin's heart. 'I reckon I'll stop grinning then,' he said.

'I think this ain't canoe-building country,' said Alvin. 'Let's move along, Arthur.'

'Not so fast,' said the grinning man. 'I think maybe I'd be doing all my neighbours a favour if I kept you from ever moving away from this spot.'

'First off,' said Alvin, 'you got no neighbours.'

'All mankind is my neighbour,' said the grinning man. 'Jesus said so.'

'I recall he specified Samaritans,' said Alvin, 'and Samaritans got no call to fret about me.'

'What I see is a man carrying a poke that he hides from my view.'

That was true, for in that sack was Alvin's golden plough, and he always tried to keep it halfway hid behind him so folks wouldn't get troubled if they happened to see it move by itself, which it was prone to do from time to time. Now, though, to answer the challenge, Alvin moved the sack around in front of him.

'I got nothing to hide from a man with a gun,' said Alvin.

'A man with a poke,' said the grinning man, 'who says he's a blacksmith but his only companion is a boy too scrawny and stubby to be learning his trade. But the boy is just the right size to skinny his way through an attic window or the eaves of a loose-made house. So I says to myself, this here's a second-storey man, who lifts his boy up with those big strong arms so he can sneak into houses from above and open the door to the thief. So shooting you down right now would be a favour to the world.'

Arthur Stuart snorted. 'Burglars don't get much trade in the woods.'

'I never said you-all looked smart,' said the grinning man.

'Best point your gun at somebody else now,' said Arthur Stuart quietly. 'If you want to keep the use of it.'

The grinning man's answer was to pull the trigger. A spurt of flame shot out as the barrel of the gun exploded, splaying into iron strips like the end of a worn-out broom. The musket ball rolled slowly down the barrel and plopped out into the grass.

'Look what you done to my gun,' said the grinning man.

'Wasn't me as pulled the trigger,' said Alvin. 'And you was warned.'

'How come you still grinning?' asked Arthur Stuart.

'I'm just a cheerful sort of fellow,' said the grinning man, drawing his big old knife.

'Do you like that knife?' asked Arthur Stuart.

'Got it from my friend Jim Bowie,' said the grinning man. 'It's took the hide off six bears and I can't count how many beavers.'

'Take a look at the barrel of your musket,' said Arthur Stuart, 'and then look at the blade of that knife you like so proud, and think real hard.'

The grinning man looked at the gun barrel and then at the blade. 'Well?' asked the man.

'Keep thinking,' said Arthur Stuart. 'It'll come to you.'

'You let him talk to White men like that?'

'A man as fires a musket at me,' said Alvin, 'I reckon Arthur Stuart here can talk to him any old how he wants.'

The grinning man thought that over for a minute, and then, though no one would have thought it possible, he grinned even wider, put away his knife, and stuck out his hand. 'You got some knack,' he said to Alvin.

Alvin reached out and shook the man's hand. Arthur Stuart knew what was going to happen next, because he'd seen it before. Even though Alvin was announced as a blacksmith and any man with eyes could see the strength of his arms and hands, this grinning man just had to brace foot to foot against him and try to pull him down.

Not that Alvin minded a little sport. He let the grinning man work himself up into quite a temper of pulling and tugging and twisting and wrenching. It would have looked like quite a contest, except that Alvin could've been fixing to nap, he looked so relaxed.

Finally Alvin got interested. He squished down hard and the grinning man yelped and dropped to his knees and began to beg Alvin to give him back his hand. 'Not that I'll ever have the use of it again,' said the grinning man, 'but I'd at least like to have it so I got a place to store my second glove.'

'I got no plan to keep your hand,' said Alvin.

'I know, but it crossed my mind you might be planning to leave it here in the meadow and send me somewheres else,' said the grinning man.

'Don't you ever stop grinning?' asked Alvin.

'Don't dare try,' said the grinning man. 'Bad stuff happens to me when I don't smile.'

'You'd be doing a whole lot better if you'd've frowned at me but kept your musket pointed at the ground and your hands in your pockets,' said Alvin.

'You got my fingers squished down to one, and my thumb's about to pop off,' said the grinning man. 'I'm willing to say uncle.'

'Willing is one thing. Doing's another.'

'Uncle,' said the grinning man.

'Nope, that won't do,' said Alvin. 'I need two things from you.'

'I got no money and if you take my traps I'm a dead man.'

'What I want is your name, and permission to build a canoe here,' said Alvin.

'My name, if it don't become "One-handed Davy", is Crockett, in memory of my daddy,' said the grinning man. 'And I reckon I was wrong about this tree. It's your tree. Me and that bear, we're both far from home and got a ways to travel before nightfall.'

'You're welcome to stay,' said Alvin. 'Room for all here.'

'Not for me,' said Davy Crockett. 'My hand, should I get it back, is going to be mighty swoll up, and I don't think there's room enough for it in this clearing.'

'I'll be sorry to see you go,' said Alvin. 'A new friend is a precious commodity in these parts.' He let go. Tears came to Davy's eyes as he gingerly felt the sore palm and fingers, testing to see if any of them was about to drop off.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Journeyman Smith,' said Davy. 'You too, boy.' He nodded cheerfully, grinning like an innkeeper. 'I reckon you couldn't possibly be no burglar. Nor could you possibly be the famous Prentice Smith what stole a golden plough from his master and run off with the plough in a poke.'

'I never stole nothing in my life,' said Alvin. 'But now you ain't got a gun, what's in my poke ain't none of your business.'

'I'm pleased to grant you full title to this land,' said Davy, 'and all the rights to minerals under the ground, and all the rights to rain and sunlight on top of it, plus the lumber and all hides and skins.'

'You a lawyer?' asked Arthur Stuart suspiciously.

Instead of answering, Davy turned tail and slunk out of the clearing just like that bear done, and in the same direction. He kept on slinking, too, though he probably wanted to run; but running would have made his hand bounce and that would hurt too much.

'I think we'll never see him again,' said Arthur Stuart.

'I think we will,' said Alvin.

'Why's that?'

'Cause I changed him deep inside, to be a little more like the bear. And I changed that bear to be a little bit more like Davy.'

'You shouldn't go messing with people's insides like that,' said Arthur Stuart.

'The Devil makes me do it,' said Alvin.

'You don't believe in the Devil.'

'Do so,' said Alvin. 'I just don't think he looks the way folks say he does.'

'Oh? What does he look like then?' demanded the boy.

'Me,' said Alvin. 'Only smarter.'

Alvin and Arthur set to work making them a dugout canoe. They cut down a tree just the right size -

two inches wider than Alvin's hips - and set to burning one surface of it, then chipping out the ash and burning it deeper. It was slow, hot work, and the more they did of it, the more puzzled Arthur Stuart got.

'I reckon you know your business,' he says to Alvin, 'but we don't need no canoe.'

'Any canoe,' says Alvin. 'Miss Larner'd be right peeved to hear you talking like that.'

'First place,' says Arthur Stuart, 'you learned from Tenskwa-Tawa how to run like a Red man through the forest, faster than any canoe can float, and with a lot less work than this.'

'Don't feel like running,' said Alvin.

'Second place,' Arthur Stuart continued, 'water works against you every chance it gets. The way Miss Larner tells it, water near killed you sixteen times before you was ten.'

'It wasn't the water, it was the Unmaker, and these days he's about give up on using water against me. He mostly tries to kill me now by making me listen to fools with questions.'

'Third,' says Arthur Stuart, 'in case you're keeping count, we're supposed to be meeting up with Mike Fink and Verily Cooper, and making this canoe ain't going to help us get there on time.'

'Those are two boys as need to learn patience,' says Alvin calmly.

'Fourth,' says Arthur Stuart, who was getting more and more peevish with every answer Alvin gave, 'fourth and final reason, you're a maker, dagnabbit, you could just think this tree hollow and float it over to the water light as a feather, so even if you had a reason to make this canoe, which you don't, and a safe place to float it, which you don't, you sure don't have to put me through this work to make it by hand!'

'You working too hard?' asked Alvin.

'Harder than is needed is always too hard,' said Arthur.

'Needed by whom and for what?' asked Alvin. 'You're right that I'm not making this canoe because we need to float down the river, and I'm not making it because it'll hurry up our travel.'

'Then why? Or have you give up altogether on doing things for reasons?'

'I'm not making a canoe at all,' says Alvin.

There knelt Arthur Stuart, up to his elbows in a hollowed-out log, scraping ash. 'This sure ain't a house!'

'Oh, you're making a canoe,' said Alvin. 'And we'll float in that canoe down that river over there. But I'm not making a canoe.'

Arthur Stuart kept working while he thought this over. After a few minutes he said, 'I know what you're making.'

'Do you?'

'You're making me do what you want.'

'Close.'

'You're making me make this tree into something, but you're also using this tree to make me into something.'

'And what would I be trying to make you into?'

'Well, I think you think you're making me into a maker,' said Arthur Stuart. 'But all you're making me into is a canoe-maker, which ain't the same thing as being an all-around all-purpose maker like yourself.'

'Got to start somewhere.'

'You didn't,' says Arthur. 'You was born knowing how to make stuff.'

'I was born with a knack,' says Alvin. 'But I wasn't born knowing how to use it, or when, or why. I learned to love making for its own sake. I learned to love the feel of the wood and the stone under my hands, and from that I learned to see inside it, to feel how it felt, to know how it worked, what held it together, and how to help it come apart in just the right way.'

'But I'm not learning any of that,' says Arthur.

'Yet.'

'No sir,' says Arthur Stuart. 'I'm not seeing inside nothing, I'm not feeling inside nothing except how my back aches and my whole body's pouring off sweat and I'm getting more and more annoyed at being made to labour on a job you could do with a wink of your eye.'

'Well, that's something,' says Alvin. 'At least you're learning to see inside yourself.'

Arthur Stuart fumed a little more, chipping away burnt wood as he did. 'Someday I'm going to get fed up with your smugness,' he says to Alvin, 'and I won't follow you any more.'

Alvin shook his head. 'Arthur Stuart, I tried to get you not to follow me this time, if you'll recall.'

'Is that what this is about? You're punishing me for following you when you told me not to?'

'You said you wanted to learn everything about being a maker,' says Alvin. 'And when I try to teach you, all I get is pissing and moaning.'

'You also get work from me,' says Arthur. 'I never stopped working the whole time we talked.'

'That's true,' says Alvin.

'And here's something you didn't consider,' says Arthur Stuart. 'All the time we're making a canoe, we're also unmaking a tree.'

Alvin nodded. 'That's how it's done. You never make something out of nothing. You always make it out of something else. When it becomes the new thing, it ceases to be what it was before.'

'So every time you do a making, you do an unmaking, too,' says Arthur Stuart.

'Which is why the Unmaker always knows where I am and what I'm doing,' says Alvin. 'Because along with doing my work, I'm also doing a little bit of his.'

That didn't sound right or true to Arthur Stuart, but he couldn't figure out an argument to answer it, and while he was trying to think one up, they kept on a-burning and a-chipping and to and behold, they had them a canoe. They dragged it to the stream and put it in and got inside it and it tipped them right over. Spilled them into the water three times, till Alvin finally gave up and used his knack to feel the balance of the thing and then reshape it just enough that it had a good balance to it.

Arthur Stuart had to laugh at him then. 'What lesson am I supposed to learn from this? How to make a bad canoe?'

'Shut up and row,' said Alvin.

'We're going downstream,' said Arthur Stuart, 'and I don't have to row. Besides which all I've got is this stick, which is no kind of paddle.'

'Then use it to keep us from running into the bank,' said Alvin, 'which we're about to do thanks to your babbling.'

Arthur Stuart fended the canoe away from the bank of the stream, and they kept on floating down until they joined a larger stream, and a larger, and then a river. All the time, Arthur kept coming back to the things Alvin said to him, and what he was trying to teach, and as usual Arthur Stuart despaired of learning it. And yet he couldn't help but think he had learned something, even if he had no idea at present what the thing he learned might be.

Because folks build towns on rivers, when you float down a river you're likely as not to come upon a town, which they did one morning with mist still on the river and sleep still in their eyes. It wasn't much of a town, but then it wasn't much of a river, and they weren't in much of a boat. They put in to shore and dragged the canoe on to the bank, and Alvin shouldered his poke with the plough inside and they trudged on into town just as folks was getting up and about their day.

First thing they looked for was a roadhouse, but the town was too small and too new. Only a dozen houses, and the road so little travelled that grass was growing from one front door to the next. But that didn't mean there was no hope of breakfast. If there's light in the sky, somebody's up, getting a start on the day's work. Passing one house with a barn out back, they heard the ping-ping-ping of a cow getting milked into a tin pail. At another house, a woman was coming in with the night's eggs from a chicken coop. That looked promising.

'Got anything for a traveller ?' asked Alvin.

The woman looked them up and down. Without a word she walked on into her house.

'If you wasn't so ugly,' said Arthur Stuart, 'she would have asked us in.'

'Whereas looking at you is like seeing an angel,' said Alvin.

They heard the front door of the house opening.

'Maybe she was just hurrying in to cook them eggs for us,' said Arthur Stuart.

But it wasn't the woman who came out. It was a man, looking like he hadn't had much time to fasten his clothing. In fact, his trousers were kind of droopy, and they might have started laying bets on how quick they'd drop to the porch if he hadn't been aiming a pretty capable-looking blunderbuss at them.

'Move along,' the man said.

'We're moving,' said Alvin. He hoisted his poke to his back and started walking across in front of the house. The barrel of the shotgun followed them. Sure enough, just as they were about even with the front door, the trousers dropped. The man looked embarrassed and angry. The barrel of the blunderbuss dipped. The loose birdshot rolled out of the barrel, dozens of tiny lead balls hitting the porch like rain. The man looked confused now.

'Got to be careful loading up a big-barrel gun like that,' Alvin said. 'I always wrap the shot in paper so it don't do that.'

The man glared at him. 'I did.'

'Why, I know you did,' said Alvin.

But there sat the shot on the porch, a silent refutation. Nevertheless, Alvin was telling the simple truth. The paper was still in the barrel, as a matter of fact, but Alvin had persuaded it to break open at the front, freeing the shot.

'Your pants is down,' said Arthur Stuart.

'Move along,' said the man. His face was turning red. His wife was watching from the doorway behind him.

'Well, you know, we was already planning to,' said Alvin, 'but as long as you can't quite kill us, for the moment at least, can I ask you a couple of questions?'

'No,' said the man. He set down the gun and pulled up his trousers.

'First off, I'd like to know the name of this town. I reckon it must be called "Friendly" or "Welcome".'

'It ain't.'

'Well, that's two down,' said Alvin. 'We got to keep guessing, or you think you can just tell us like one fellow to another?'

'How about "PantsdownLanding"?' murmured Arthur Stuart.

'This here is Westville, Kenituck,' said the man. 'Now move along.'

'My second question is, seeing as how you folks don't have enough to share with a stranger, is there somebody who's prospering a bit more and might have something to spare for travellers as have a bit of silver to pay for it?'

'Nobody here got a meal for the likes of you,' said the man.

'I can see why this road got grass growing on it,' said Alvin. 'But your graveyard must be full of strangers as died of hunger hoping for breakfast here.'

On his knees picking up loose shot, the man didn't answer, but his wife stuck her head out the door and proved she had a voice after all. 'We're as hospitable as anybody else, except to known burglars and thieving prentices.'

Arthur Stuart let out a low whistle. 'What you want to bet Davy Crockett came this way?' he said softly.

'I never stole a thing in my life,' said Alvin.

'What you got in that poke, then?' demanded the woman.

'I wish I could say it was the head of the last man who pointed a gun at me, but unfortunately I left it attached to his neck, so he could come here and tell lies about me.'

'So you're ashamed to show the golden plough you stole?'

'I'm a blacksmith, ma'am,' said Alvin, 'and I got my tools here. You're welcome to look, if you want.'

He turned to address the other folks who were gathering, out on their porches or into the street, a couple of them armed.

'I don't know what you folks heard tell,' said Alvin, setting down his poke, 'but you're welcome to look at my tools.' He drew open the mouth of the poke and let the sides drop so his hammer, tongs, bellows, and nails lay exposed in the street. Not a sign of a plough.

Everyone looked closely, as if taking inventory.

'Well, maybe you ain't the one we heared tell of,' said the woman.

'No, ma'am, I'm the exact one, if it was a certain trapper in a coonskin cap named Davy Crockett who was telling the tale.'

'So you confess to being that Prentice Smith who stole the plough? And a burglar?'

'No, ma'am, I just confess to being a fellow as got himself on the wrong side of a trapper who talks a man harm behind his back.' He gathered up his bag over the tools and drew the mouth closed. 'Now, if you-all want to turn me away, go ahead, but don't go thinking you turned away a thief, because it ain't so. You pointed a gun at me and turned me away without a bite to eat for me or this hungry boy, without so much as a trial or a scrap of evidence, just on the word of a traveller who was as much a stranger here as me.'

The accusation made them all sheepish. One old woman, though, wasn't having any of it. 'We know Davy, I reckon,' she said. 'It's you we never set eyes on.'

'And never will again, I promise you,' said Alvin. 'You can bet I'll tell this tale wherever I travel - Westville, Kenituck, where a stranger can't get a bite to eat, and a man is guilty before he even hears the accusation.'

'If there's no truth to it,' said the old woman, 'how did you know it was Davy Crockett a-telling the tale?'

The others nodded and murmured as if this were a telling point.

'Cause Davy Crockett accused me of it to my face,' said Alvin, 'and he's the only one who ever looked at me and my boy and thought of burglarizing. I'll tell you what I told him. If we're burglars, why ain't we in a big city with plenty of fine houses to rob? A burglar could starve to death, trying to find something to steal in a town as poor as this one.'

'We ain't poor,' said the man on the porch.

'You got no food to spare,' said Alvin. 'And there ain't a house here with a door that even locks.'

'See?' cried the old woman. 'He's already checked our doors to see how easy they'll be to break into!'

Alvin shook his head. 'Some folks see sin in sparrows and wickedness in willow trees.' He took Arthur Stuart by the shoulder and turned to head back out of town the way they came.

'Hold, stranger!' cried a man behind them. They turned to see a large man on horseback approaching slowly along the road. The people parted to make way for him.

'Quick, Arthur,' Alvin murmured. 'Who do you reckon this is?'

'The miller,' said Arthur Stuart.

'Good morning to you, Mr Miller!' cried Alvin in greeting.

'How did you know my trade?' asked the miller.

'The boy here guessed,' said Alvin.

The miller rode nearer, and turned his gaze to Arthur Stuart. 'And how did you guess such a thing?'

'You spoke with authority,' said Arthur Stuart, 'and you're riding a horse, and people made way for you. In a town this size, that makes you the miller.'

'And in a bigger town?' asked the miller.

'You'd be a lawyer or a politician,' said Arthur Stuart.

'The boy's a clever one,' said the miller.

'No, he just runs on at the mouth,' said Alvin. 'I used to beat him but I plumb gave out the last time. Only thing I've found that shuts him up is a mouthful of food, preferably pancakes, but we'd settle for eggs, boiled, scrambled, poached, or fried.'

The miller laughed. 'Come along to my house, not three rods beyond the commons and down the road towards the river.'

'You know,' said Alvin, 'my father's a miller.'

The miller cocked his head. 'Then how does it happen you don't follow his trade?'

'I'm well down the list of eight boys,' said Alvin. 'Can't all be millers, so I got put out to a smith. I've got a ready hand with mill equipment, though, in case you'll let me help you to earn our breakfast.'

'Come along and we'll see how much you know,' said the miller. 'As for these folks, never mind them. If some wanderer came through and told them the sun was made of butter, you'd see them all trying to spread it on their bread.' His mirth at this remark was not widely appreciated among the others, but that didn't faze him. 'I've got a shoeing shed, too, so if you ain't above a little ferrier work, I reckon there's horses to be shod.'

Alvin nodded his agreement.

'Well, go on up to the house and wait for me,' said the miller. 'I won't be long. I come to pick up my laundry.' He looked at the woman that Alvin had first spoken to. Immediately she ducked back inside the house to fetch the clothes the miller had come for.

On the road to the mill, once they were out of sight of the villagers, Alvin began to chuckle.

'What's so funny?' asked Arthur Stuart.

'That fellow with his pants around his ankles and birdshot dribbling out of his blunderbuss.'

'I don't like that miller,' said Arthur Stuart.

'Well, he's giving us breakfast, so I reckon he can't be all bad.'

'He's just showing up the town folks,' said Arthur Stuart.

'Well, excuse me, but I don't think that'll change the flavour of the pancakes.'

'I don't like his voice.'

That made Alvin perk up and pay attention. Voices were part of Arthur Stuart's knack. 'Something wrong with the way he talks?'

'There's a meanness in him,' said Arthur Stuart.

'May well be,' said Alvin. 'But his meanness is better than hunting for nuts and berries again, or taking another squirrel out of the trees.'

'Or another fish.' Arthur made a face.

'Millers get a name for meanness sometimes,' Alvin said. 'People need their grain milled, all right, but they always think the miller takes too much. So millers are used to having folks accuse them. Maybe that's what you heard in his voice.'

'Maybe,' said Arthur Stuart. Then he changed the subject. 'How'd you hide the plough when you

opened your poke?"

'I kind of opened up a hole in the ground under the poke,' said Alvin, 'and the plough sank down out of sight.'

'You going to teach me how to do things like that?'

'I'll do my best to teach,' said Alvin, 'if you do your best to learn.'

'What about making shot spill out of a gun that's pointed at you?'

'My knack opened the paper, but his own trousers, that's what made the barrel dip and spill out the shot.'

'And you didn't make his trousers fall?'

'If he'd pulled up his suspenders, his pants would've stayed up just fine,' said Alvin.

'It's all unmaking though, isn't it?' said Arthur Stuart. 'Spilling shot, dropping trousers, making them folks feel guilty for not taking you in.'

'So I should've let them drive us away without breakfast?'

'I've skipped breakfasts before.'

'Well, aren't you the prissy one,' said Alvin. 'Why are you suddenly so critical of the way I do things?'

'You're the one made me dig out a canoe with my own hands,' said Arthur Stuart. 'To teach me making. So I keep looking to see how much making you do. And all I see is how you unmake things.'

Alvin took that a little hard. Didn't get mad, but he was kind of thoughtful and didn't speak much the rest of the way to the miller's house.

So nearly a week later, there's Alvin working in a mill for the first time since he left his father's place in Vigor Church and set out to be a prentice smith in Hatrack River. At first he was happy, running his hands over the machinery, analysing how the gears all meshed. Arthur Stuart, watching him, could see how each bit of machinery he touched ran a little smoother - a little less friction, a little tighter fit - so more and more of the power from the water flowing over the wheel made it to the rolling millstone. It ground faster and smoother, less inclined to bind and jerk. Rack Miller, for that was his name, also noticed, but since he hadn't been watching Alvin work, he assumed that he'd done something with tools and lubricants. 'A good can of oil and a keen eye do wonders for machinery,' said Rack, and Alvin had to agree.

But after those first few days, Alvin's happiness faded, for he began to see what Arthur Stuart had noticed from the beginning: Rack was one of the reasons why millers had a bad name. It was pretty subtle. Folks would bring in a sack of corn to be ground into meal, and Rack would cast it in handfuls on to the millstone, then brush the corn flour into a tray and back into the same sack they brought it in. That's how all millers did it. No one bothered with weighing before and after, because everyone knew there was always some corn flour lost on the millstone.

What made Rack's practice a little different was the geese he kept. They had free rein in the

millhouse, the yard, the millrace, and - some folks said - Rack's own house at night. Rack called them his daughters, though this was a perverse kind of thing to say, seeing as how only a few laying geese and a gander or two ever lasted out the winter. What Arthur Stuart saw at once, and Alvin finally noticed when he got over his love scene with the machinery, was how those geese were fed. It was expected that a few kernels of corn would drop; couldn't be helped. But Rack always took the sack and held it, not by the top, but by the shank of the sack, so kernels of corn dribbled out the whole way to the millstone. The geese were on that corn like - well, like geese on corn. And then he'd take big sloppy handfuls of corn to throw on to the millstone. A powerful lot of kernels hit the side of the stone instead of the top, and of course they dropped and ended up in the straw on the floor, where the geese would have them up in a second.

'Sometimes as much as a quarter of the corn,' Alvin told Arthur Stuart.

'You counted the kernels? Or are you weighing corn in your head now?' asked Arthur.

'I can tell. Never less than a tenth.'

'I reckon he figures he ain't stealing, it's the geese doing it,' said Arthur Stuart.

'Miller's supposed to keep his tithe of the ground corn, not double or triple it or more in gooseflesh.'

'I don't reckon it'll do much good for me to point out to you that this ain't none of our business,' said Arthur Stuart.

'I'm the adult here, not you,' said Alvin.

'You keep saying that, but the things you do, I keep wondering,' said Arthur Stuart. 'I'm not the one gallivanting all over creation while my pregnant wife is resting up to have the baby back in Hatrack River. I'm not the one keeps getting himself throwed in jail or guns pointed at him.'

'You're telling me that when I see a thief I got to keep my mouth shut?'

'You think these folks are going to thank you?'

'They might.'

'Put their miller in jail? Where they going to get their corn ground then?'

'They don't put the mill in jail.'

'Oh, you going to stay here, then? You going to run this mill for them, till you taught the whole works to a prentice? How about me? You can bet they'll love paying their miller's tithe to a free half-Black prentice. What are you thinking?'

Well, that was always the question, wasn't it? Nobody ever knew, really, what Alvin was thinking. When he talked, he pretty much told the truth, he wasn't much of a one for fooling folks. But he also knew how to keep his mouth shut so you didn't know what was in his head. Arthur Stuart knew, though. He might've been just a boy, though more like a near-man these days, height coming on him kind of quick, his hands and feet getting big even faster than his legs and arms was getting long, but Arthur Stuart was an expert, he was a bona fide certified scholar on one subject, and that was Alvin, journeyman blacksmith, itinerant all-purpose dowsers and doodlebugs, and secret maker of golden ploughs and

reshaper of the universe. He knew Alvin had him a plan for putting a stop to this thievery without putting anybody in jail.

Alvin picked his time. It was a morning getting on towards harvest time, when folks was clearing out a lot of last year's corn to make room for the new. So a lot of folks, from town and the nearby farms, was queued up to have their grain ground. And Rack Miller, he was downright exuberant in sharing that corn with the geese. But as he was handing the sack of corn flour to the customer, less about a quarter of its weight in goosefodder, Alvin scoops up a fine fat gosling and hands it to the customer right along with the grain.

The customer and Rack just looks at him like he's crazy, but Alvin pretends not to notice Rack's consternation at all. It's the customer he talks to. 'Why, Rack Miller told me it was bothering him how much corn these geese've been getting, so this year he was giving out his goslings, one to each regular customer, as long as they last, to make up for it. I think that shows Rack to be a man of real honour, don't you?'

Well, it showed something, but what could Rack say after that? He just grinned through clenched teeth and watched as Alvin gave away gosling after gosling, making the same explanation, so everybody, wide-eyed and happy as clams, gave profuse thanks to the provider of their Christmas feast about four months off. Them geese would be monsters by then, they were already so big and fat.

Of course, Arthur Stuart noticed how, as soon as Rack saw how things was going, suddenly he started holding the sacks by the top, and taking smaller handfuls, so most of the time not a kernel fell to the ground. Why, that fellow had just learned himself a marvellous species of efficiency, returning corn to the customer diminished by nought but the true miller's tithe. It was plain enough that Rack Miller wasn't about to feed no corn to geese that somebody else was going to be feasting on that winter!

And when the day's work ended, with every last gosling gone, and only two ganders and five layers left, Rack faced Alvin square on and said, 'I won't have no liar working for me.'

'Liar?' asked Alvin.

'Telling them fools I meant to give them goslings!'

'Well, when I first said it, it wasn't true yet, but the minute you didn't raise your voice to argue with me, it became true, didn't it?' Alvin grinned, looking for all the world like Davy Crockett grinning him a bear.

'Don't chop no logic with me,' said Rack. 'You know what you was doing.'

'I sure do,' said Alvin. 'I was making your customers happy with you for the first time since you come here, and making an honest man out of you in the meantime.'

'I already was an honest man,' said Rack. 'I never took but what I was entitled to, living in a godforsaken place like this.'

'Begging your pardon, my friend, but God ain't forsaken this place, though now and then a soul around here might have forsaken Him.'

'I'm done with your help,' said Rack icily. 'I think it's time for you to move on.'

'But I haven't even looked at the machinery you use for weighing the corn wagons,' said Alvin. , Rack hadn't been in a hurry for Alvin to check them over - the heavy scales out front was only used at harvest time, when farmers brought in whatever corn they meant to sell. They'd roll the wagons on to the scales, and through a series of levers the scale would be balanced with much lighter weights. Then the wagon would be rolled back on empty and weighed, and the difference between the two weights was the weight of the corn. Later on the buyers would come, roll on their empty wagons and weigh them, then load them up and weigh them again. It was a clever bit of machinery, a scale like that, and it was only natural that Alvin wanted to get his hands on it.

But Rack wasn't having none of it. 'My scales is my business, stranger,' he says to Alvin.

'I've et at your table and slept in your house,' says Alvin. 'How am I a stranger?'

'Man who gives away my geese, he's a stranger here for ever.'

'Well, then, I'll be gone from here.' Still smiling, Alvin turned to his young ward. 'Let's be on our way, Arthur Stuart.'

'No sir,' says Rack Miller. 'You owe me for thirty-six meals these last six days. I didn't notice this Black boy eating one whit less than you. So you owe me in service.'

'I gave you due service,' says Alvin. 'You said yourself that your machinery was working smooth.'

'You didn't do nought but what I could have done myself with an oilcan.'

'But the fact is I did it, and you didn't, and that was worth our keep. The boy's worked, too, sweeping and fixing and cleaning and hefting.'

'I want six days' labour out of your boy. Harvest is upon us, and I need an extra pair of hands and a sturdy back. I've seen he's a good worker and he'll do.'

'Then take three days' service from me and the boy. I won't give away any more geese.'

'I don't have any more geese to give, except the layers. Anyway I don't want no miller's son, I just want the boy's labour.'

'Then we'll pay you in silver money.'

'What good is silver money here? Ain't nothing to spend it on. Nearest city of any size is Carthage, across the Hio, and hardly anybody goes there.'

'I don't use Arthur Stuart to discharge my debts. He's not my -'

Well, long before those words got to Alvin's lips, Arthur Stuart knew what he was about to do - he was going to declare that Arthur wasn't his slave. And that would be about as foolish a thing as Alvin could do. So Arthur Stuart spoke right up before the words could get away. 'I'm happy to work off the debt,' he says. 'Except I don't think it's possible. In six days I'll eat eighteen more meals and then I'll owe another three days, and in those three days I'll eat nine meals and I'll owe a day and a half, and at that rate I reckon I'll never pay off that debt.'

'Ah yes,' says Alvin. 'Zeno's paradox.'

'And you told me there was never any practical use for that "bit of philosophical balderdash", as I recall you saying,' says Arthur Stuart. It was an argument from the days they both studied with Miss Larner, before she became Mrs Alvin Smith.

'What the Sam Hill you boys talking about?' asked Rack Miller.

Alvin tried to explain. 'Each day that Arthur Stuart works for you, he'll build up half again the debt that he pays off by his labour. So he only covers half the distance towards freedom. Half and half and half again, only he never quite gets to the goal.'

'I don't get it,' says Rack. 'What's the joke?'

By this point, though, Arthur Stuart had another idea in mind. Mad as Rack Miller was about the goslings, if he truly needed help at harvest time he'd keep Alvin on for it, unless there was some other reason for getting rid of him. There was something Rack Miller planned to do that he didn't want Alvin to see. What he didn't reckon on was that this half-Black 'servant' boy was every bit smart enough to figure it out himself. 'I'd like to stay and see how we solve the paradox,' says Arthur Stuart.

Alvin looks at him real close. 'Arthur, I got to go see a man about a bear.'

Well, that tore Arthur Stuart's resolve a bit. If Alvin was looking for Davy Crockett, to settle things, there might be scenes that Arthur wanted to see. At the same time, there was a mystery here at the millhouse, too, and with Alvin gone Arthur Stuart had a good chance at solving it all by himself. The one temptation was greater than the other. 'Good luck,' said Arthur Stuart. 'I'll miss you.'

Alvin sighed. 'I don't plan to leave you here at the tender mercy of a man with a peculiar fondness for geese.'

'What does that mean?' Rack said, growing more and more certain that they were making fun of him underneath all their talk.

'Why, you call them your daughters and then cook them and eat them,' says Alvin. 'What woman would ever marry you? She wouldn't dare leave you alone with the children!'

'Get out of my millhouse!' Rack bellowed.

'Come on, Arthur Stuart/' said Alvin.

'I want to stay,' Arthur Stuart insisted. 'It can't be no worse than the time you left me with that schoolmaster.' (Which is another story, not to be told right here.)

Alvin looked at Arthur Stuart real steady. He was no Torch, like his wife. He couldn't look into Arthur's heartfire and see a blame thing. But somehow he saw something that let him make up his mind the way Arthur Stuart wanted him to. 'I'll go for now. I'll be back, though, in six days, and I'll have an accounting with you. You don't raise a hand or a stick against this boy, and you feed him and treat him proper.'

'What do you think I am?' asked Rack.

'A man who gets what he wants,' said Alvin.

'I'm glad you recognize that about me,' said Rack.

'Everybody knows that about you,' said Alvin. 'It's just that you aren't too good at picking what you ought to be wanting.' With another grin, Alvin tipped his hat and left Arthur Stuart.

Well, Rack was as good as his word. He worked Arthur Stuart hard, getting ready for the harvest. A late summer rain delayed the corn in the field, but they put the time to good account, and Arthur was given plenty to eat and a good night's rest, though it was the millhouse loft he slept in now, and not the house; he had only been allowed inside as Alvin's personal servant, and with Alvin gone, there was no excuse for a half-Black boy sleeping in the house.

What Arthur noticed was that all the customers were in good cheer when they came to the millhouse for whatever business they had, especially during the rain when there wasn't no field work to be done. The story of the goslings had spread far and wide, and folks pretty much believed that it really had been Rack's idea, and not Alvin's doing at all. So instead of being polite but distant, the way folks usually was with a miller, they gave him hail-fellow-well-met and he heard the kind of jokes and gossip that folks shared with their friends. It was a new experience for Rack, and Arthur Stuart could see that this change was one Rack Miller didn't mind.

Then, the last day before Alvin was due to return, the harvest started up, and farmers from miles around began to bring in their corn wagons. They'd line up in the morning, and the first would pull his wagon on to the scale. The farmer would unhitch the horses and Rack would weigh the whole wagon. Then they'd hitch up the horses, pull the wagon to the dock, the waiting farmers would help unload the corn sacks - of course they helped, it meant they'd be home all the sooner themselves - and then back the wagon on to the scale and weigh it again, empty. Rack would figure the difference between the two weighings, and that difference was how many pounds of corn the farmer got credit for.

Arthur Stuart went over the figures in his head, and Rack wasn't cheating them with his arithmetic. He looked carefully to see if Rack was doing something like standing on the scale when the empty wagon was being weighed, but no such thing.

Then, in the dark of that night, he remembered something one of the farmers grumbled as they were backing an empty wagon on to the scale.

'Why didn't he build this scale right at the loading dock, so we could unload the wagon and re-weigh it without having to move the darn thing?' Arthur Stuart didn't know the mechanism of it, but he thought back over the day and remembered that another time a farmer had asked if he could get his full wagon weighed while the previous farmer's wagon was being unloaded. Rack glared at the man. 'You want to do things your way, go build your own mill.'

Yes sir, the only thing Rack cared about was that every wagon get two weighings, right in a row. And the same system would work just as well in reverse when the buyers came with their empty wagons to haul corn east for the big cities. Weigh the empty, load it, and weigh it again. When Alvin got back, Arthur Stuart would be ready with the mystery mostly solved.

Meanwhile, Alvin was off in the woods, looking for Davy Crockett, that grinning man who was singlehandedly responsible for getting two separate guns pointed at Alvin's heart. But it wasn't vengeance that was on Alvin's mind. It was rescue.

For he knew what he'd done to Davy and the bear, and kept track of their heartfires. He couldn't

see into heartfires the way Margaret could, but he could see the heartfires themselves, and keep track of who was who. In fact, knowing that no gun could shoot him and no jail could hold him, Alvin had deliberately come to the town of Westville because he knew Davy Crockett had come through that town, the bear not far behind him, though Davy wouldn't know that, not at the time.

He knew it now, though. What Alvin saw back in Rack's millhouse was that Davy and the bear had met again, and this time it might come out a little different. For Alvin had found the place deep in the particles of the body where knacks were given, and he had taken the bear's best knack and given as much to Davy, and Davy's best knack and given the same to the bear. They were evenly matched now, and Alvin figured he had some responsibility to see to it that nobody got hurt. After all, it was partly Alvin's fault that Davy didn't have a gun to defend himself. Mostly it was Davy's fault for pointing it at him, but Alvin hadn't had to wreck the gun the way he did, making the barrel blow apart.

Running lightly through the woods, leaping a stream or two, and stopping to eat from a fine patch of wild strawberries on a riverbank, Alvin got to the place well before nightfall, so he had plenty of time to reconnoitre. There they were in the clearing, just as Alvin expected, Davy and the bear, not five feet apart, both of them agrinning, staring each other down, neither one budging. That bear was all spiky, but he couldn't get past Davy's grin; and Davy matched the bear's single-minded tenacity, oblivious to pain, so even though his butt was already sore and he was about out of his mind with sleepiness, he didn't break his grin.

just as the sun set, Alvin stepped out into the clearing behind the bear. 'Met your match, Davy?' he asked.

Davy didn't have an ounce of attention to spare for chat. He just kept grinning.

'I think this bear don't mean to be your winter coat this year,' said Alvin.

Davy just grinned.

'In fact,' said Alvin, 'I reckon the first one of you to fall asleep, that's who the loser is. And bears store up so much sleep in the winter, they just flat out don't need as much come summertime.'

Grin.

'So there you are barely keeping your eyelids up, and there's the bear just happy as can be, grinning at you out of sincere love and devotion.'

Grin. With maybe a little more desperation around the eyes.

'But here's the thing, Davy/ said Alvin. 'Bears is better than people, mostly. You got your bad bears, sometimes, and your good people, but on average, I'd trust a bear to do what he thinks is right before I'd trust a human. So now what you got to wonder is, what does that bear think will be the right thing to do with you, once he's grinned you down?'

Grin grin grin .

'Bears don't need no coats of human skin. They do need to pile on the fat for winter, but they don't generally eat meat for that. Lots of fish, but you ain't a swimmer and the bear knows that. Besides, that bear don't think of you as meat, or he wouldn't be grinning you. He thinks of you as a rival. He thinks of you as his equal. What will he do? Don't you kind of wonder? Don't you have some speck of curiosity

that just wants to know the answer to that question?'

The light was dimming now, so it was hard to see much more of either Davy or the bear than their white, white teeth. And their eyes.

'You've already stayed up one whole night,' said Alvin. 'Can you do it again? I don't think so. I think pretty soon you're going to understand the mercy of bears.'

Only now, in his last desperate moments before succumbing to sleep, did Davy dare to speak. 'Help me,' he said.

'And how would I do that?' asked Alvin.

'Kill that bear.'

Alvin walked up quietly behind the bear and gently rested his hand on the bear's shoulder. 'Why would I do that? This bear never pointed no gun at me.'

'I'm a dead man,' Davy whispered. The grin faded from his face. He bowed his head, then toppled forward, curled up on the ground, and waited to be killed.

But it didn't happen. The bear came up, nosed him, snuffled him all over, rolled him back and forth a little, all the time ignoring the little whimpering sounds Davy was making. Then the bear lay down beside the man, flung one arm over him, and dozed right off to sleep.

Unbelieving, Davy lay there, terrified yet hopeful again. If he could just stay awake a little longer.

Either the bear was a light sleeper in the summertime, or Davy made his move too soon, but no sooner did his hand slide towards the knife at his waist than the bear was wide awake, slapping more or less playfully at Davy's hand.

'Time for sleep,' said Alvin. 'You've earned it, the bear's earned it, and come morning you'll find things look a lot better.'

'What's going to happen to me?' asked Davy.

'Don't you think that's kind of up to the bear?'

'You're controlling him somehow,' said Davy. 'This is all your doing.'

'He's controlling himself,' said Alvin, careful not to deny the second charge, seeing how it was true. 'And he's controlling you. Because that's what grinning is all about - deciding who is master. Well, that bear is master here, and I reckon tomorrow we'll find out what bears do with domesticated humans.'

Davy started to murmur a prayer.

The bear laid a heavy paw on Davy's mouth.

'Prayers are done,' intoned Alvin. 'Gone the sun. Shadows creep. Go to sleep.'

That's how it came about that when Alvin returned to Westville, he did it with two friends along -

Davy Crockett and a big old grizzly bear. Oh, folks was alarmed when that bear come into town, and ran for their guns, but the bear just grinned at them and they didn't shoot. And when the bear gave Davy a little poke, why, he'd step forward and say a few words. 'My friend here doesn't have much command of the American language,' said Davy, 'but he'd just as soon you put that gun away and didn't go pointing it at him. Also, he'd be glad of a bowl of corn mush or a plate of corn bread, if you've got any to spare.'

Why, that bear plumb ate his way through Westville, setting down to banquets without raising a paw except to poke at Davy Crockett, and folks didn't even mind it, it was such a sight to see a man serve gruel and corn bread to a bear. And that wasn't all, either. Davy Crockett spent a good little while picking burrs out of the bear's fur, especially in the rumpal area, and singing to the bear whenever it crooned in a high-pitched tone. Davy sang pert near every song that he ever heard, even if he only heard it once, or didn't hear the whole thing, for there's nothing to bring back the memory of tunes and lyrics like having an eleven-foot bear poking you and whining to get you to sing, and when he flat out couldn't remember, why, he made it something up, and since the bear wasn't altogether particular, the song was almost always good enough.

As for Alvin, he'd every now and then pipe up and ask Davy to mention whether it was true that Alvin was a burglar and a plough-stealing prentice, and each time Davy said no, it wasn't true, that was just a made-up lie because Davy was mad at Alvin and wanted to get even. And whenever Davy told the truth like that, the bear rumbled its approval and stroked Davy's back with his big old paw, which Davy was just barely brave enough to endure without wetting himself much.

Only when they'd gone all through the town and some of the outlying houses did this parade come to the millhouse, where the horses naturally complained a little at the presence of a bear. But Alvin spoke to each of them and put them at ease, while the bear curled up and took him a nap, his belly being full of corn in various forms. Davy didn't go far, though, for the bear kept sniffing, even in his sleep, to make sure Davy was close by.

Davy was putting the best face on things, though. He had his pride.

'A man does things for a friend, and this here bear's my friend,' said Davy. 'I'm done with trapping, as you can guess, so I'm looking for a line of work that can help my friend get ready for the winter. What I mean is, I got to earn some corn, and I hope some of you have jobs for me to do. The bear just watches, I promise, he's no danger to your livestock.'

Well, they heard him out, of course, because one tends to listen for a while at least to a man who's somehow got himself hooked up as a servant to a grizzly bear. But there wasn't a chance in hell that they were going to let no bear anywhere near their pigsties, nor their chicken coops, especially not when the bear clearly showed no disposition to earn its food honestly. If it would beg, they figured, it would steal, and they'd have none of it.

Meanwhile, as the bear napped and Davy talked to the farmers, Alvin and Arthur had their reunion, with Arthur Stuart telling him what he'd figured out. 'Some mechanism in the scale makes it weigh light when the wagon's full, and heavy when it's empty, so the farmers get short weight. But then, without changing a thing, it'll weigh light on the buyers' empty wagons, and heavy when they're full, so Rack gets extra weight when he's selling the same corn.'

Alvin nodded. 'You find out if this theory is actually true?'

'The only time he ain't watching me is in the dark, and in the dark I can't sneak down and see a thing. I'm not crazy enough to risk getting myself caught sneaking around the machinery in the dark, anyway.'

'Glad to know you got a brain.'

'Says the man who keeps getting himself put in jail.'

Alvin made a face at him, but in the meantime he was sending out his doodlebug to probe the machinery of the scale underground. Sure enough, there was a ratchet that engaged on one weighing, causing the levering to shift a little, making short weight; and on the next weighing, the ratchet would disengage and the levers would move back, giving long weight. No wonder Rack didn't want Alvin looking over the machinery of the scale.

The solution, as Alvin saw it, was simple enough. He told Arthur Stuart to stand near the scale but not to step on it. Rack wrote down the weight of the empty wagon, and while it was being pulled off the scale, he stood there calculating the difference. The moment the wagon was clear of the scale, Alvin rounded on Arthur Stuart, speaking loud enough for all to hear.

'Fool boy! What were you doing! Didn't you see you was standing on that scale?'

'I wasn't!' Arthur Stuart cried.

'I don't think he was,' said a farmer. 'I worried about that, he was so close, so I looked.'

'And I say I saw him stand on it,' said Alvin. 'This farmer shouldn't be out the cost of a boy's weight in corn, I think!'

'I'm sure the boy didn't stand on the scale,' Rack said, looking up from his calculation.

'Well, there's a simple enough test,' said Alvin. 'Let's get that empty wagon back on to the scale.'

Now Rack grew alarmed. 'Tell you what,' he said to the farmer, 'I'll just give you credit for the boy's weight.'

'Is this scale sensitive enough to weigh the boy?' asked Alvin.

'Well, I don't know,' said Rack. 'Let's just estimate.'

'No!' cried Alvin. 'This farmer doesn't want any more than his fair credit, and it's not right for him to receive any less. Haul the wagon back on and let's weigh it again.'

Rack was about to protest again, when Alvin said, 'Unless there's something wrong with the scale. There wouldn't be something wrong with the scale, now, would there?'

Rack got a sick look on his face. He couldn't very well confess. 'Nothing wrong with the scale,' he said gruffly.

'Then let's weigh this wagon and see if my boy's weight made any difference.'

Well, you guessed it. As soon as the wagon was back on the scale, it showed near a hundred pounds lighter than it did the first time. The other witnesses were flummoxed. 'Could have sworn the boy never stepped on that scale,' said one. And another said, 'I don't know as I would have guessed that boy to weigh a hundred pounds.'

'Heavy bones,' says Alvin.

'No sir, it's my brain that weighs heavy,' said Arthur Stuart, winning a round of laughter.

And Rack, trying to put a good face on it, pipes up, 'No, it's the food he's been eating at my table - that's fifteen pounds of it right there!'

In the meantime, though, the farmer's credit was being adjusted by a hundred pounds.

And the next wagon to come on the scale was a full one, while the scale was set to read heavy. In vain did Rack try to beg off early - Alvin simply offered to keep on weighing for him, with the farmers as witnesses so he wrote down everything square. 'You don't want any of these men to have to wait an extra day to sell you their market grain, do you?' Alvin said. 'Let's weigh it all!'

And weigh it all they did, thirty wagons before the day was done, and the farmers was all remarking to each other about what a good corn year it was, the kernels heavier than usual. Arthur Stuart did hear one man start to grumble that his wagon seemed to be lighter this year than in any previous year, but Arthur immediately spoke up loud enough for all to hear. 'It don't matter if the scale is weighing light or heavy - it's the difference between the full weight and the empty weight that matters, and as long as it's the same scale, it's going to be correct.' The farmers thought that over and it sounded right to them, while Rack couldn't very well explain.

Arthur Stuart figured it all out in his head and he realized that Alvin hadn't exactly set things to rights. On the contrary, this year Rack was getting cheated royally, recording credits for these farmers that were considerably more than the amount of corn they actually brought in. He could bear such losses for one day; and by tomorrow, Alvin and Arthur both knew, Rack meant to have the scale back in its regular pattern - light for the full wagons, heavy for the empty ones.

Still, Alvin and Arthur cheerfully bade Rack farewell, not even commenting on the eagerness he showed to be rid of them.

That night, Rack Miller's lantern bobbed across the yard between his house and the mill. He closed the mill door behind him and headed for the trapdoor leading down to the scale mechanism. But to his surprise, there was something lying on top of that trapdoor. A bear. And nestled in to sleep with the bear wrapped around him was Davy Crockett.

'I hope you don't mind,' said Davy, 'but this here bear took it into his head to sleep right here, and I'm not inclined to argue with him.'

'Well, he can't, so that's that,' said the miller.

'You tell him,' said Davy. 'He just don't pay no heed to my advice.'

The miller argued and shouted, but the bear paid no mind. Rack got him a long stick and poked at the bear, but the bear just opened one eye, slapped the stick out of Rack's hand, then took it in his mouth and crunched it up like a cracker. Rack Miller proposed to bring a gun out, but Davy drew his knife then. 'You'll have to kill me along with the bear,' he said, 'cause if you harm him, I'll carve you up like a Christmas goose.'

'I'll be glad to oblige you,' said Rack.

'But then you'll have to explain how I came to be dead. If you manage to kill the bear with one shot, that is. Sometimes these bears can take a half dozen balls into their bodies and still swipe a man's head clean off and then go fishing for the afternoon. Lots of fat, lots of muscle. And how's your aim, anyway?'

So it was that next morning, the scale still weighed opposite to Rack's intent, and so it went day after day until the harvest was over. Every day the bear and his servant ate their corn mush and corn bread and drank their corn likker and lay around in the shade, with onlookers gathering and lingering to see the marvel. The result was that witnesses were around all day and not far off at night. And it went on just the same when the buyers started showing up to haul away the corn.

Stories about the bear who had tamed a man brought more than just onlookers, too. More farmers than usual came to Rack Miller to sell their corn, so they could see the sight; and more buyers went out of their way to come to buy, so there was maybe half again as much business as usual. At the end of the whole harvest season, there was Rack Miller with a ledger book showing a huge loss. He wouldn't be paid enough by the buyers to come close to making good on what he owed the farmers. He was ruined.

He went through a few jugs of corn likker and took some long walks, but by late October he'd given up all hope. One time his despair led him to point a pistol at his head and fire, but the powder for some reason wouldn't ignite, and when Rack tried to hang himself he couldn't tie a knot that didn't slip. Since he couldn't even succeed at killing himself, he finally gave up even that project and took off in the dead of night, abandoning mill and ledger and all. Well, he didn't mean to abandon it he meant to burn it. But the fires he started kept blowing out, so that was yet another project he failed at. In the end, he left with the clothes on his back and two geese tucked under his arms, and they honked so much he turned them loose before he was out of town.

When it was clear Rack wasn't just off on a holiday, the town's citizens and some of the more prominent farmers from round about met in Rack Miller's abandoned house and went over his ledger. What they learned there told them clear enough that Rack Miller was unlikely to return. They divided up the losses evenly among the farmers, and it turned out that nobody lost a thing. Oh, the farmers got paid less than Rack Miller's ledger showed, but they'd get a good deal more than they had in previous years, so it was still a good year for them. And when they got to inspecting the property, they found the ratchet mechanism in the scale and the picture was crystal-clear.

All in all, they decided, they were well rid of Rack Miller, and a few folks had suspicions that it was that Alvin Smith and his half-Black boy who'd turned the tables on this cheating miller. They even tried to find out where he might be, to offer him the mill in gratitude. Someone had heard tell he came from Vigor Church up in Wobbish, and a letter there did bring results - a letter in reply, from Alvin's father. 'My boy thought you might make such an offer, and he asked me to give you a better suggestion. He says that since a man done such a bad job as miller, maybe you'd be better off with a bear, especially if the bear has him a manservant who can keep the books.'

At first they laughed off the suggestion, but after a while they began to like it, and when they proposed it to Davy and the bear, they cottoned to it, too. The bear got him all the corn he wanted without ever lifting a finger, except to perform a little for folks at harvest time, and in the winter he could sleep in a warm dry place. The years he mated, the place was a little crowded with bearflesh, but the cubs were no trouble and the mama bears, though a little suspicious, were mostly tolerant, especially because Davy was still a match for any of them, and could grin them into docility when the need arose.

As for Davy, he kept true books, and fixed the scale so it didn't ratchet anymore, giving honest weight every time. As time went on, he was so well-liked that folks talked about running him for mayor of

Westville. He refused, of course, since he wasn't his own man. But he allowed as how, if they elected the bear, he'd be glad to serve as the bear's secretary and interpreter, and that's what they did. After a year or two of having a bear as mayor, they up and changed the name to Bearsville , and the town prospered. Years later, when Kenituck joined the United States of America, it's not hard to guess who got elected to Congress from that part of the state, which is how it happened that for seven terms of Congress a bear put its hand on the Bible right along with the other Congressmen, and then proceeded to sleep through every session it attended, while its clerk, one Davy Crockett, cast all its votes for it and gave all its speeches, every one of which ended with the sentence, 'Or at least that's how it looks to one old grizzly bear.'