

AMAZING! ASTONISHING! YOU'VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE LIKE HIM!

JONATHAN ROGERS

THE  
CHARLATAN'S BOY

A NOVEL

PROFESSOR FLOYD  
PRESENTS

The Wild Man of the Feechiefen Swamp!

SEE A GENUINE HE-FEECHIE  
ALIVE AND IN THE FLESH!

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*For Lou Alice*



A MAP OF  
**CORENWALD**

Abe Goolsby



Abe Goolsby



**CHAPTER 1**

In which I jump out of a box  
and play the Wild Man  
of the Feechiefen Swamp

**I** don't remember one thing about the day I was born. It hasn't been for lack of trying either. I've set for hours trying to go back as far as I could, but the earliest thing I remember is riding in the back of Floyd's wagon and looking at myself in a looking glass.

I've run across folks claim they know everything about their birthday—where it happened, who they was with, what day it was. But if you really press them on it, turns out they don't remember no more about it than I do. They only know what somebody told them.

I don't care who you are—when it comes to knowing where you come from, you got to take somebody else's word for it. That's where things has always got ticklish for me. I only know one man who might be able to tell me where I come from, and that man is a liar and a fraud.

Every time I asked Floyd how he got me, he give me a different story. One time he told me he found me squawling under a palmetto bush and took pity on me. That didn't seem likely since I never known Floyd to take pity on me or anybody else.

Another time he said he bought me from a circus man who was getting out of the business and selling off his animals. Said

he mistook me for a monkey and the circus man was gone before he realized he was tricked. Which might explain how he got me, but it still don't explain why he kept me, does it?

A couple of times Floyd told me my real mama give me to him because I was too ugly to keep. I truly am one of the ugliest fellers you're liable to meet. I'm short and wiry—sort of monkeyish, I reckon. I got one blue eye and one green, and they're closer together than most folks find pleasing. Instead of having two eyebrows, I got one long one that don't know where to stop. My ears is too little, but the way they stick straight out from my head makes them look too big. And my chin is so bashful it just sort of hides all day in the shade of my bottom lip. You can't even tell where my goozle stops and my chin begins if you don't look close. If you ever seen the feechiefolks in one of them puppet shows, you know about what I look like.

If you want to know the truth, I'm pretty sure that's why Floyd kept me.

Back when villagers still believed in feechiefolks—which wasn't that long ago—Floyd made his living by giving lectures about feechiees and charging a copper for a look at a genuine, real-live he-feechie. Which was me. He dressed me up in muskrat and possum hides and slopped gray mud all over me the way feechiefolks are said to do, and we went from village to village in that crickety wagon of his, from one end of Corenwald to the other.

When we come to the edge of a town, Floyd stopped the horse so I could get in my box, and he shut me in. It was a wooden crate with air holes drilled in the top. Floyd used to keep his dancing bear in it before I come along, so it was pretty roomish for a scrawny feller like me. Floyd painted the outside with a picture of a blackwater swamp with alligators and craneys crows and those swell-bottom cypress trees with graybeard moss hanging down so spooky and lonesome. And words painted all over it:

PERFESSER FLOYD PRESENTS: THE WILD  
MAN OF THE FEECHIEFEN SWAMP!

SEE A GENUINE HE-FEECHIE ALIVE AND  
IN THE FLESH!

AMAZING! ASTONISHING! YOU'VE NEVER  
SEEN ANYONE LIKE HIM!

There I'd sit while we rode that last mile or so into the village. Sometimes it was so hot the sweat made the mud run down my face and into my eyes, but it was peaceful in there, with the wagon creaking along and little sticks of sunlight poking through the air holes while bugs and little bits of dust floated in the brightness.

Rolling into one of the villages in my box, I felt like I was worth something. Folks in that village was going to give Floyd a copper coin for the pleasure of looking at me. I wasn't just an ugly little boy with no mama or daddy. I was "AMAZING! ASTONISHING!" I was something them folks hadn't ever seen before.

When the wagon squeaked to a stop, Floyd set up a footbox like a little stage and started his patter. "Laaadies and geeentermen!" he hollered, sort of stretching it out like he was growling it. "Laaadies and geeentermen! My name is Perfesser Floyd Wendellson, collector of the rare and the beautiful, and the world's foremost authority on feechie life and habits!"

My box had a knothole in the side panel, and when I hunkered down, I could see the villagers gathering around the wagon. Things get quiet in the villages, so the commotion of a stranger pulling up in a wagon and hollering about feechiefolks fetched a crowd right off. And once the villagers was in earshot, they wasn't going anywhere. You never seen anybody could hold a crowd like Floyd. He cut a fine figure in his shiny coat and squared-off hat—so tall and straight. His black mustaches wagged when he talked, and even folks who didn't believe a word he said couldn't wait to see what he was going to say next.

I knowed Floyd's patter by heart. He rearranged the pieces pretty freely, stretching it out if folks was slow to gather, or leaving parts out if folks seemed restless, but the main points of the speechifying was the same every time, and they was pretty simple:

First, Floyd was the bravest adventurer ever to pole a flatboat and the only civilized man ever to come out of the Feechiefen Swamp alive.

Second, for one night and one night only, Floyd was giving a lecture in the village hall—a lively report of his travels with a full account of the habits and customs of the feechiefolks, the wild and mysterious native inhabitants of the Feechiefen.

Third, Floyd's lecture would include the displayment of a he-feechie he had brought back from the swamp, the only genuine feechie to be found in the civilized world.

Fourth, everybody in the village was invited to come listen to Floyd's lecture for the small price of one copper coin per person.

Sometimes Floyd started in on all the other so-called feechie authorities—how they'd just find a ugly boy, diaper him in muskrat pelts, slobber him with mud, and call him a feechie. How them other feechie experts was all just charlatans and frauds and only Floyd had the real thing. It took some gumption to tell such a barefaced lie as that. There aint a lot to admire about Floyd, but the man does have gumption.

Sitting in that box and listening to Floyd run on about what a fine specimen of feechiehood I was, can you blame me for believing it myself? "Wild Man of the Feechiefen Swamp" is a heap better than "ugly boy whose mama didn't want him." When it comes to Floyd's tales, you got to pick and choose what to be-

lieve anyway; I figured I might as well believe the tales I liked the best.

And I never believed them feechie tales more than in the five minutes just before the box flung open. By the time Floyd got to my cue, I was about to bust I felt so feechiefied.

“He’s really quite harmless”—that was my cue. When Floyd worked them words into his patter, I commenced to yowling like a panther and growling like a bear and howling like a wolf, thumping around in my box and putting up such a ruckus as you never heard in your life. I kept it up until Floyd whapped on my box a few times with his cane.

It didn’t take much of that business to get the crowd whipped up pretty good. I know Floyd and me was supposed to be the show, but the crowd made a pretty good show their own selves, and I liked nothing better than watching it through my knothole.

A few younguns run off hollering; the rest found a grownup to hide behind. They looked like a nation of popeyed squirrels, peeping out from a forest of trouser legs and ladies’ skirts. Some of the womenfolks raised up their eyebrows and clutched handkerchiefs to their chins, and some of them glowered at Floyd for bringing such a dangerous critter into the midst of their peaceful village. The menfolks mostly kept a brave face, putting on smirks as if to show they didn’t believe Floyd had a feechie in that box. But behind most of the smirks you could see a little doubt.

Floyd made like he was as surprised by the commotion as anybody—like this wasn't the same routine we done five or six times a week as far back as I could remember. He stammered and acted flustered, like he was thrown off and was struggling to get his wagon back on the path. Really he was just giving the smart alecks in the crowd a chance to pitch in. There was always at least two or three of them fellers around.

“What’s the matter, stranger? Cat got your tongue?”

“I used to believe in feechiees too, Perfesser. When I was a *baby!*”

“How about a unicorn, Perfesser? If you got a unicorn, I'd gladly pay a copper to see it.”

“Maybe you should take your feechie show to the next village. This village aint got enough idiots to make a suitable audience.”

The hecklers figured they was being original and clever. They figured they had the upper hold on Floyd because they was taking him off his script. They never understood that they *was* the script. No smart aleck ever said anything Floyd hadn't already heard a hundred times before. And he might have played like he was flummoxed, but Floyd always had both hands on the reins.

He picked out whichever heckler looked to have the most gumption and the least back-down, and he give him a look of astonishment, like he couldn't believe somebody would doubt his word. Then he raised a trembling finger to point at him.

“You, sir,” he said, and he sort of nickered it like a horse—“You-hoo-hoo-hoo, sir”—like his feelings was so hurt he couldn’t talk right. “Do you suggest that I am a fraud and a liar?”

The smart aleck jugged out his chin, stood up a little straighter, and said, “You said it yourself, stranger, not me.” It played out that way every time. You’d have thought every smart aleck in every village in Corenwald had studied Floyd’s script.

Floyd had him where he wanted him. “Am I to understand, sir, that you don’t believe there is a living, breathing he-feechie in this box?”

“Sounds like you understand about right.”

By now the other villagers was egging on the smart aleck, and he was puffed up like a rooster. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for a feller who was about to get so completely and utterly used up.

Floyd could put this quiver in his voice like he was working hard to control his feelings. “Then perhaps, sir, you would like to step up here and see for yourself.”

Well, what’s a feller going to do? Even if he was starting to feel balky and julous about the whole thing, he couldn’t back down in front of the other villagers. So he made his way to the front, and Floyd give him a smart-alecky bow and swoop and made room for him on the footbox.

Floyd stood there with his hand on the lid of the box for a good long while to give everybody some time to think about

what might happen next, and the quiet and the waiting felt just like the minute before a storm cuts loose.

I hunkered there waiting for the first crack of daylight at the opening of the box lid, and when it come, it was a whole new rumpus. I sprung out like some kind of wildcat and scabbled up onto the smart aleck's head. He was so discombobulated, he didn't know what to do, and I perched there while he staggered around and waved his arms, and I beat my chest and hollered, "Oooliee, oooliee, oooliee!" Meanwhile, the crowd was hollering and scattering and giving me plenty of room to cut whatever capers I might want to cut. Younguns was crying and dogs was barking and the grownups was doing a poor job of hiding their alarm.

I yodeled some more and did a couple of back-over flips and scabbled up a tree, and there I crouched where the crowd could get a good look at me. And when I was in the tree, and the villagers was on the ground, and there was a safe-ish distance between us, I could see the fear and panic melt into something more like fascination. And didn't I feel interesting!

About that time, Floyd marched over to the tree and started his palaver again, and it was like a spell was broken.

"I'm terribly sorry, ladies and gentlemen. He's usually quite docile, I assure you. If you'll give him some room..."

Then he talked to me, real gentle, the way a good horseman talks to his horse. "Grado, Grado..." Grado was my stage name.

My real name is Grady. If I had a last name, Floyd never told me what it was. "Grado," he said, "it's all right. Nobody is going to hurt you. Come to Perfesser. Come back to your box."

I jumped down, and everybody sort of gasped and drew back, but Floyd grabbed hold of my arm and walked me back to my box and shut me in it.

That's how we fetched folks for Floyd's lectures. And we fetched them too. Some nights it seemed like every man, woman, and child in a village paid their copper to hear Floyd talk some more and to get another look at me. Floyd's lectures was entertaining enough—one lie after another about how he poled a flatboat across the Feechiefen and how the feechiefolks had welcomed him into their tribe and initiated him into their mysteries.

Some of that foolishness Floyd got from old nursery stories, but most of it he just made up. He'd change things from night to night, just to keep it interesting I reckon. Some nights he said feechiees had magical disappearing powers, and some nights he said feechiees was just so skilled at camouflage that they only *appeared* to disappear. Some nights he said feechiees was peaceable, and some nights he said they was bloodthirsty savages. Some nights he said they was human, and some nights he said they was swamp monsters, and some nights he said they was elves of some kind. Just according to his mood on a particular night.

Then he brung me out. "Grado here is a full-grown

feechie,” he said. He said that when I was four years old, and he said it when I was twelve years old. “As you can see, feechees are much smaller than we are. And considerably uglier.”

Wasn't we a pair? Floyd made his living by telling lies, and I made mine by being ugly. It wasn't a bad living either. But it didn't last forever. Even in the smallest villages, even far away from the cities, the time come when nobody believed in feechees anymore, and we had to figure out other ways to make a living.

Here's what I want to know: what is this country coming to if everybody's got too civilized and skeptical to pay a copper to see a real-live feechie boy?



**CHAPTER 2**

In which we get out  
of the feechie trade  
and I begin  
my formal education

**I**t was about two years ago that the feechie trade ended for Floyd and me. For a couple of years before that, every crowd seemed a little smaller than the last. There was days when we couldn't get more than a dozen villagers to watch our act. If there's a quicker way for two showmen to starve away to skeletons, it aint been discovered yet.

Floyd got so sullen that you might have mistook him for a cat that was forever getting a bath. But when it was showtime, Floyd and me both put on a brave face. We was professionals, Floyd said, and the show had to go on—although Floyd never explained exactly *why* the show had to go on.

One day we was in some podunk village near the Bonifay Plain, and when I flung out of my box, there wasn't no audience but five fellers standing in a knot—and every one of them a smart aleck.

I'm a professional, so it didn't matter to me whether the audience was five or five hundred. I was going to give them folks a feechie show. I capered over to them old boys and raised my arms and hunkered down and give them a wild-eyed look and went to “oolie-oolie”-ing the worst kind.

I figured them to run away, but they didn't. One of them

spit on the ground between my bare feet and said, "Why don't you dry up, you ugly thing?"

Another of them said, "I aint believed in feechiees since long before I started wearing britches."

That got all over me. I didn't so much mind the feller said I was ugly. Facts is facts. But that feller who didn't believe in feechiees—it appeared to me that when a feller's right in front of your face, believing in him is the most basic courtesy in the world. How could that feller say he didn't believe in feechiees when a genuine, in-the-flesh he-feechie was standing so close he could touch him?

So I knocked him down. Which wasn't very courteous either. I understand that. It also wasn't courteous of me to jump on top of him and put both my knees on his chest. Or to start frailing the tar out of him right there in the village square. I reckon I'd have ruint that feller if two of the other smart alecks hadn't jumped on my back and flattened me.

About that time, Floyd swum in and flung them two fellers in the dirt, and one of them come up swinging. He gentled up considerable though when he seen the other feller running off instead of fighting.

Meanwhile, the other two smart alecks set to howling like a brace of hound dogs, and the locals—the same ones that was nowhere to be found when we was trying to put on a show—

begun boiling out of every doorway and cranny like ants from an ant pile.

I was good and wrathful by then, and Floyd was too. We knocked down about a dozen villagers before the constable came elbowing in, saying, “What’s this here?” and, “Hold on just a minute!”

He was a solid, barrel-chested feller with a close-trimmed white beard. I wouldn’t have thought Floyd could knock him down, but he did. Give him a sockdolager right below the eye. The constable staggered back a step, teetered, then crashed down like a oak tree struck by lightning.

Then the fighting started in earnest. Them villagers was proud of their constable, and they didn’t appreciate a stranger coming in and knocking him down. They fell on Floyd like a pack of yard dogs on a soup bone. They just covered him up.

There wasn’t enough Floyd to go around, so some of the folks on the edge of the scrimmage begun to take their flusterations out on me. It felt like I had fell into one of them big threshing machines that pounds out wheat with sixteen whirling paddles. I tried to give it back to them, but it took me about ten seconds to understand that the smart thing was to curl up and take it until they got some satisfaction.

When the villagers got tired of whipping us, they bundled us up, flung us into our wagon box, and flammed down the lid. Then they give poor old Buttermilk, our horse, a whap with a

hickory switch, and he tore out running away from the village as hard as he could pelt.

I didn't like them villagers very much, but I couldn't help admiring their resourcefulness. I could never get Buttermilk to move no faster than an uninspiring *clippety-clippety*, but them folks got him to hoof it like a quarter-racer.

Floyd and me tumbled around that box like dice in a dice cup. If we wasn't tenderized from the whipping them villagers put on us, you can be sure we was after Buttermilk run us at fifty leagues an hour over every rock and rut in the Western Road for what seemed to me like a day and a half.

I reckon Buttermilk would still be running if the back axle hadn't broke. The wagon skidded to a stop, which flung Floyd and me against the front wall of the box. If you ever flung ripe persimmons against a tree trunk, you got a pretty good picture of what Floyd and me looked like.

Poor old Buttermilk went to raring and bucking and trying to drag the wagon, broke axle and all, but Floyd and me was able to get the top of the box open and drag ourselves out.

After a little while, Buttermilk settled down enough that I could let him out of his traces and tie him out to graze beside the road. Then Floyd and me stretched out in the grass and lay there groaning. We didn't even eat supper that night. We just slept where we lay.

The next morning Buttermilk seemed no worse for the

wear, but I was slow to get moving, I was so stiff from the whipping. I poked Floyd with my foot, and he just grunted and moaned but didn't even do much of that. Didn't open his eyes, didn't move a finger.

"Floyd," I said, sort of gentle. He looked like a loud noise might hurt him. "Floyd, the axle's broke."

"Unnnnnnhhg."

"Floyd," I said again. "The axle's broke."

"Unnnnnnhhg."

It hurt me to see Floyd in such bad shape. His lip was split, one of his eyes was purple and swole, and his mustaches was setting caterwampus, like he had took them off somebody else's face and stuck them on in a hurry.

"I had all I want," he said, real raspy and low.

"All of what?" I asked him.

"I had all I want of the feechie trade." His eyes was still closed. He could have been talking in his sleep. "The feechie act is finished," he said. "We aint doing it anymore."

My stomach went tight and then flopped over. The feechie trade was the only life I'd ever knowed, and I couldn't picture me and Floyd doing anything else.

"Boy, aint you ever wondered?" Floyd's eyes was still closed while he talked. "Aint you ever wondered why every other feechie showman on this island has quit the trade and gone to selling miracle cures and running games of chance?"

“Because they’re all frauds, Floyd.” My voice come out a little higher than I meant it to. “Because they don’t have a genuine, in-the-flesh he-feechie like you do.”

Floyd smiled a little and wagged his head. “Naw, boy. They quit because they seen what I shoulda seen a long time ago. There aint no money in the feechie trade anymore. Them days are over. It’s time we figured out something else.”

“What are we going to do, Floyd? Get jobs?”

Floyd’s good eye popped open, and he barked a little laugh. But then he groaned again and raised a fist to his forehead. “Unnnnnhhg. My head.” He felt around with his other hand, found a money purse, and held it out to me. “Go find a village, boy. Take Buttermilk and get us a new axle. And drag me over to the shade of the wagon box before you leave.”

I strapped the pieces of the broken axle onto Buttermilk’s back and led him down the Western Road. We hadn’t walked more than three or four leagues before we come to a little village called Ardmore. It was a pretty village; folks kept their yards swept and put flowers in the windows. On the street everybody nodded to one another real friendly.

I always wondered what it would be like to live in a village, to wake up every morning and see a dozen folks you seen the day before, and the day before that, and every day since you was

born. I seen Floyd every day of my life, of course, but that aint what I'm talking about. I'm talking about neighbors, friends, old ladies that pinch your cheeks, little fellers that look up to you and try to be like you.

I always wondered what it would be like to have people you pass on the street know your name. Seems like it would make a feller feel mighty important, like he matters to somebody. Just imagine it:

“Hello there, Grady!”

“Why, hello there, Miss Genia. Aint it a pretty day?”

“It sure is, Grady—if it don't get too hot.”

You go into a village, and folks is having them kinds of conversations every single day. Just once in my life I'd like to have a conversation like that—one that don't mean nothing except, “We're friendly, aint we, and don't we have a lot in common?” I don't reckon one person has ever asked me how I felt about the weather.

Here's the other thing I always wondered about living in a village. What do you do when you make your neighbor mad? Whenever Floyd and me make folks mad, we run off to another village. But if you're a villager, you can't just run off. You got to live with the feller that's mad at you. You got to see him in the High Street the next day and howdy him—or maybe you don't howdy him. I never understood how them things worked.

I found Ardmore's wagoner's shop and dropped off the

busted axle. The wagoner said he needed an hour to get the wheels on a new one, so I got Buttermilk a bag of oats and tied him outside the shop to eat it while I kicked around the village.

I heard younguns' voices busting out of a building on the other end of the High Street and knew it was the schoolhouse, so I sauntered over in that general direction.

I never spent no time in school; Floyd and me was always too busy making a living. I never seen much use in it anyway. There aint but so many letters and so many numbers, and I knowed all of them by the time I was as high as Floyd's belt sash. When Floyd showed me how to string letters into words and stack numbers to add and subtract, that was the end of my formal education. My lack of schooling never bothered me much. I gathered from Floyd's lectures that feechees don't go to school anyway.

I never understood what younguns did in school all day, day after day, but I was curious. So I snuck over to the window and peeped in to watch the education while it was happening. The marm at that school was a young woman, so trim and so big eyed that she put me in mind of a she-deer. Just looking at her through the window, I could tell she smelt good.

I reckon there was two dozen younguns in the class. The little ones on the front row looked to be five or six years old, and the big ones in the back was quite a bit bigger than the schoolmarm. The younguns was so robustious and the marm

was so soft voiced that I don't reckon anybody was learning one thing. But that young marm looked so sweet I thought about taking up schooling then and there just so I could look at her every day.

She had written on the blackboard, *The cow says moo*, and she was pointing at the words and saying them real slow to the little fellers in the front. Poor lady. I wouldn't want the job of educating such thickheaded younguns. What five-year-old don't know what a cow says?

The marm had just begun explaining that *The dog says bow-wow* when I felt a big, rough hand on my shoulder and heard a voice just as big and rough right in my ear. "Hi there, mister," the voice said. "You get back in that schoolhouse!"

He was a big farmhand-looking feller. He had me by the shoulder so tight my feet hardly touched the ground as he steered me through the schoolhouse door and into the room with all the other younguns.

"Good morning, Miss Parmelia," the farmhand said. He let go of my shoulder so both hands would be free to fumble with his hat. "I found this one outside skipping school." He shoved me down onto a bench. "I reckon he'll behave hisself now, Miss Parmelia."

The farmhand's face went red, and the younguns that been staring with their mouths open begun snickering, and Miss Parmelia looked mighty perplexed. But I could tell she was too

sweet to hurt the farmhand's feelings by telling him that it wasn't one of her students he'd dragged into her classroom. So she said, "Thank you, Abey. That will be all."

Abey backed out of the room, bowing at Miss Parmelia three or four times and dropping his hat twice. "Thank you, Miss Parmelia," he said. "Thank you."

I don't know what exactly he was thanking her for—I reckon it was just for speaking to him and shedding so much beauty, which was reason enough to be thankful.

When Abey had crawfished out the door, Miss Parmelia give me her full attention. "Good morning, young man," she said, "and welcome to our classroom. My name is Miss Parmelia. What's yours?"

I thought on that one. I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to give my real name or not, for fear somebody'd come find me once I quit school. But I couldn't look right into a face like Miss Parmelia's and tell a lie. "Grady. My name's Grady."

Miss Parmelia nodded at me real kind. The little fellers in the front was still staring gape mouthed like they did when Abey first shoved me through the door, but the older ones in the back was starting to whisper and snicker.

Miss Parmelia said, "Grady," and it sounded like music when she said it. "How old are you, Grady?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Twelve probably? I didn't keep up with it when I was little, so now it's hard to say."

The ones that was gaping gaped wider, and the ones that was snickering snickered louder, and one of the boys in the back row sung out, “You sure piled up a heap of ugly in twelve years!”

Miss Parmelia’s eyes flashed at the boy, and she said, “Isom!” real sharp, and he melted back into his seat.

Miss Parmelia turned back to me, all sweetness again. “How much schooling have you had, Grady?”

“None,” I told her. “As we say in the show business, this here is my debut performance.”

There was more snickering at that, but Miss Parmelia shut it down pretty quick, and then she invited me to set up in the front with the little fellers.

“Grady,” she said, “we were just finishing up our reading lesson when you came in, so why don’t you join us for mathematics while the older students finish their essays?”

The axle wouldn’t be ready for another half hour or more, and I had nowhere else to be, so I said, “Sure, Miss Parmelia. Why not?”

She give me kind of a long look, and some of the younguns snickered. I had a feeling I said something wrong; I just didn’t know what. The little ones on the front bench scooped over to make room for me. I nearbout tipped the whole kaboodle over, I was so much bigger than my bench mates.

Miss Parmelia held up a money pouch and said, “Class,

we're still learning how to count money." She reached in and pulled out some wooden chips. Some of them said one copper, some said five coppers, and some said ten coppers.

"Grady," she said, "we'll start with you since you're new. Say you have ten coppers."

"All right." That seemed easy enough for a first assignment. I cleared my throat and said, "I have ten coppers."

"No," Miss Parmelia said. Her smile didn't look quite as stretchy in the corners of her mouth. "I mean, *pretend* you have ten coppers."

I patted my money purse. "I don't have to pretend. I got ten coppers and more."

Miss Parmelia gave me a squint, and her smile shrunk just a little bit more. She turned toward a little feller on the other end of the row. "Actually, I think I'll let Berk answer this first one. Berk, let's say you have ten coppers."

Berk nodded at Miss Parmelia. He was listening close.

"And let's say I gave you three more coppers," she continued.

"Why would you give him three coppers?" I asked. "I don't see what kind of work a six-year-old could do to earn three coppers."

"No," Miss Parmelia said. "Berk didn't earn three coppers. I'm just giving them to him."

"Oh," I said. "I get it. He skint you for it."

“Skint me?”

“You know, skint—tricked you, cheated you. If you give him money he didn’t earn, seems to me he must have skint you.”

Miss Parmelia was finished smiling by now, but the younguns in the class was smiling more and more. “No, Grady, Berk didn’t ‘skin’ me. We’re just pretending for teaching purposes that Berk had ten coppers and I gave him three more coppers. My reasons for giving him the money don’t figure into the problem.”

In the show business, a person’s reasons for giving you money *always* figure into the problem. But I decided not to get into it. I shrugged. “All right, Miss Parmelia. If you say so.”

Berk had pulled one of his bare feet onto the bench and was counting on his toes. “Thirteen,” he said in a high, squeaky voice. “If I started with ten coppers and you give me three, I would have thirteen.”

“Good, Berk.” Miss Parmelia held up three one-copper pieces and one ten-copper piece. “Now, Berk,” she said, “if I told you I would give you three one-copper pieces or one ten-copper piece, which should you take?”

Berk looked at the three coppers in her one hand and the ten-copper piece in the other. He pointed at the three coppers. “I’d take the three,” he said. “Three moneys is better than one money.”

“No,” Miss Parmelia said, real gentle, “the three coppers

may *look* like more money than the ten-copper coin, but you should take the ten-piece. It's the same as *ten* coppers."

"Naw," I said. "Berk had it right the first time. Take the three coppers, Berk."

Miss Parmelia wasn't looking quite so patient anymore. "Grady, a ten-copper piece is worth more than three times as much as three one-copper pieces."

"Oh, I know all about that," I said. "That aint the problem. It's just that it don't pay to be greedy. You skin a feller for three coppers, and he may not notice. You skin a feller for ten coppers, he's going to set up such a calabermment that you'll never see another copper out of that village. No, Berk, take the three coppers and hope for more."

Miss Parmelia was gaping at me, and so was the whole class. "Class," she said, "why don't we take an early recess?"

That sounded good to me. I had had enough education for one day.

As the younguns filed out of the schoolhouse, I slipped off to the wagoner's, picked up my axle, and strapped it onto Buttermilk. The students was back on their benches when I passed back by, so I give them a wave as I headed out of town. There's a reason nobody's ever heard of a feechie school, and I had found out the hard way.