

A ROSE FOR DARWIN

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I suppose it is best not to use his real name, though this is a true story. The reader must be warned, however, that the "truth" is a compound of fact, local tradition, and legend. I make no apologies for this. Maybe it is the best one can do after the passing of sixty or seventy years. And the story seems to me, in Hawthorne's phrase, a kind of parable or allegory of our own time. I had run across part of this man's puzzling story nearly twenty-five years ago, but perhaps the final piece of the puzzle--the key--was dropped into my hand by an old man of 92, on a beautiful day in May, 1976, as we talked on his porch hundreds of miles from the old home of the man I am writing about.

Let's call the man E.W. Jameson. Whitman was his middle name, but his neighbors knew him as "Whit." His first name, which he never used at all, was a Bible Name, Ephraim. I believe it was also his father's name. That's what the old census records suggest.

Whit Jameson was an unbeliever, or an infidel, as they called a person with his views then. I suppose he would have preferred to describe himself as a freethinker or rationalist, because, if he did not believe in what he saw as the superstition of religion, he certainly had a faith. He believed, ardently, in the power of human reason, and in the possibility of the creation of a world of light and justice through the exercise of that reason. But the little West Kentucky village he lived in was definitely a part of the "Bible belt," and it must have been difficult for him at times. Yet Jameson was a good man and a good neighbor, and he fitted in pretty well. A successful merchant, he ran a store and did a little money-lending on the side. He was also noted for his love for the many roses he cultivated in his yard. According to local legend, Jameson did have at least one neighbor who saw things as he did, so he was not entirely without someone outside the family to talk to.

Jameson lived in the little village of Golden Pond around the turn of the century. As nearly as I can piece things together, he must have died about a decade after the first World War. Golden Pond (this is its correct name) was given birth shortly before the middle of the 19th century, and was always small, never consisting of more than a couple of hundred people, I would guess. It was murdered by the Federal Government's Tennessee Valley Authority in 1969, in the name of progress and enlightenment. Because Reason suggested that the majority's need for a wilderness and recreation area should outweigh the minority's emotional attachment to home and liberty, the minority's rights, property, and feelings were sacrificed--in the name of the good of Man.

TVA's Land Between the Lakes, as it is known today, consists of 170,000 acres, wrenched from the hands of a few thousand citizens of Lyon and Trigg Counties in Kentucky, and Stewart County in Tennessee. Billed as a "National Recreation and Conservation Demonstration Area," the

"LBL" is a "demonstration" all right. It is a demonstration of the kind of destruction of liberty made possible by a democracy's tendency to ignore minority rights in the interest of a majority, especially an economically interested majority. It lies between two lakes dammed up by the Corps of Engineers, Kentucky Lake on the Tennessee River, and Lake Barkley on the Cumberland. Golden Pond's site was approximately in the middle of the ten-mile wide strip of land separating the rivers, which flow, on parallel courses, due north into the Ohio River. It is a lovely area, but behind the beauty is an object lesson in tyranny, the kind of tyranny made possible when the people's servants get enough power to become their masters.

The people of this area, which was once known locally simply as the "Between the Rivers" section, were not numerous enough to have the political clout that seems essential for the protection of a minority in this land dedicated, they say, to "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Indeed, some wanted to sell out, and still others, though reluctant, were willing to. But those who resisted were treated with contempt by the TVA and by the courts, who acted as if citizens' rights meant nothing against Government demands. One judge contemptuously dismissed the appeal of a group of landowners to the Constitution. They believed that the law authorizing the recreation area violated the Constitution's restrictions on Government activity, but the judge, providing that justice *is* blind, refused to look beyond the specific law on the matter to the law of the land. Its guarantees meant nothing. Today, as one walks the area's ridges to hunt, or fishes or camps on the lake shore, he is uncomfortably aware of the ghosts who walk there.

Whit Jameson, who may be considered one of those ghosts, might have been startled by these developments, had he still lived there when the Federal juggernaut, the engine of man's Reason, turned its attention to the destruction of a community of American citizens. But in 1969, when this little village center of a rural community died, Whit Jameson had long been dead--for over forty years.

Jameson, as I said before, was a respected member of his community, with a reputation for honesty, kindness, and courtly, gentlemanly behavior. But he was different. He was not a Christian, and, though he did not try to impose his views on others, he would expound them if anyone wished to discuss the subject. He believed in the basic goodness of man and in the progress achievable through human reason, but rejected what he considered the superstitious ignorance of religion. His heroes were men like Voltaire and Thomas Paine, who insisted that orthodox religion was a device for enslaving the mind of man. He subscribed to freethinkers' journals like *The Truth Seeker*, and, in one of them, he advertised for a wife, stipulating that she must be an atheist like himself.

The woman who answered the ad and became Mrs. E.W. Jameson came from a Northern state, but in spite of geographic origin and her unorthodox views, she too fitted in reasonably well in the little Southern community. She was kindly and charitable, and as neighborly as anyone else.

But, neighborly or not, and despite the fact that they were respected citizens, the Jamesons were considered odd. The fact that they did not attend church services tended to set them apart in the close-knit little village, though not as much as it might have, since, as I have indicated, one of their neighbors, old Winfield Scott Jackson, was also an infidel. But old Winfield was just a crusty, blasphemous, unabashed unbeliever, period, with nothing intellectual about his stance. He occasionally jeered at believers but mostly just stubbornly refused to consider the subject. He did listen to Whit Jameson's thoughts occasionally, and even agreed with him to a point. But Jackson's viewpoint was negative, just total unbelief, rather than an affirmation of the possibilities of man's reason, and he must have been a disappointment to talk to.

The neighbors probably thought it a little queer that Whit, who would never enter the nearby church, liked to sit on his porch on warm Sundays and listen to the congregation singing hymns. But Whit's oddity was best shown to his friends, I suppose, in the marble stone he had carved and placed at his little front yard gate, fronting on the little street that angled off from the main east-west road, which later became U.S. Highway 68. There was a cement horseblock at the gate, and the stone, on which one stepped as he passed through the gate under the maple tree shade, had this carved on it:

E. M. 306

My Motto

Limit your family.

In the brief day time of life, love

In the long night of death, oblivion

E. W. Jameson

This motto so shocked the mores of the community that the man who bought the house after the Jamesons were gone turned the slab over so that the inscription could no longer be seen.

One wonders if Whit Jameson and old man Jackson ever discussed the irony of the Civil War, fought by Christians on both sides who sought each other's blood. On a little hilltop cemetery across the highway to the north from Golden Pond, and hidden in the oak timber that grows on the hills around the townsite, what is left of old Jackson rests today, and alongside his remains lies the body of his younger brother, who was hanged as a Confederate guerrilla by Union irregulars in 1864, before he was twenty. They mistook him for his older brother, who really was a guerrilla leader. Young Jackson was innocent, but he died just the same, and his mother had to bring the body home.

One imagines her fearful journey of five miles to the west, to the Tennessee River, looking for news of the son who had not come home from Aurora, the tiny village across the river. One sees her stopping the mules and getting out of the wagon to go down the bank to ask the men loading crossties on a small river boat about her boy. She grasps a small tree for support on the bank's incline, and, as she leans forward and shouts her question, Aaron Stark looks up and braces himself under a tie he is getting ready to load.

Stark looks at Job Weaver, who looks away. He wants someone else to speak, but the three or four blacks look away, too, their eyes rolling. Stark looks as if it is choking him to get it out, but he manages: "I'm sorry, Miz Jackson, but the bushwhackers have killed your boy. His body's hanging in a big tree the other side of Aurora." He steps on that boat and throws the tie down. "I'll hep you get him."

Old Mrs. Jackson is trembling so terribly that the sapling she is holding to is snapping violently. The men look away.

Whit Jameson had the stone before his gate put down in 1906. He dated time from 1600, which he considered the beginning of the Era of Man. So 1906 was E. M. 306. I suppose that he used 1600 as an approximate date because of the intellectual discoveries and theories formulated about that time which laid the foundations for modern science. It was about that time that Tycho Brahe passed his astronomical observations on to Kepler, whose theories were the catalyst for Isaac Newton's discoveries about our universe.

Kepler, of course, was a contemporary of Galileo, and both were influenced by the discoveries of Copernicus in the preceding century. Galileo's discoveries with the telescope--the mountainous surface of the moon, new stars, Jupiter's satellites, and the rings of Saturn--made him well known in Europe by 1610. And Sir Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*, in which he insisted on the utility of man's reason in the discovery of truth, was published in 1605.

I would surmise that the writings of Robert G. Ingersoll, the famed agnostic of Illinois, were probably the source of much of Whit Jameson's information. In a lecture of 1877, Ingersoll used the period of the previous three hundred years to approximate the date of the beginning of man's rational triumph over superstition. Ingersoll celebrated Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, and Bacon as liberators of the human mind, and of Kepler, he said, in a lecture delivered in 1884, that the birth of science could be said virtually to have its beginnings in 1609, when Kepler discovered his first law. Ingersoll also celebrated Newton, Voltaire, and Paine, the latter two known to be favorites of Whit Jameson.

But perhaps Jameson used 1600 as the date which marked the triumph of reason over religious tyranny because he revered Giordano Bruno, as Ingersoll did. Bruno died at the stake on February 17, 1600,

rather than recant his various "heresies," including his belief in the primacy of man's intellect. He has long been considered a martyr in the cause of man's intellectual freedom.

Whit Jameson and his wife fulfilled his motto by limiting their family to one child, a son whom he named Darwin, in honor of the scientist who limited man's origin to matter, and stripped him of his claim to a spark of divinity. Like Ingersoll, Jameson, though an "infidel," believed in man's goodness, and he and his wife, again like Ingersoll, saw the family as the center of life. So they lavished their love on their son. And Whit, who was dedicated to beauty, also lavished his love on the many varieties of roses he cultivated in his yard.

Along in 1910, a young man came to the little village to keep school. Let's call him Will Littlefield. Littlefield was attending the Normal School at Bowling Green, Kentucky, and he taught school in Golden Pond for two years before going back home to central Kentucky to spend the rest of his life. Jameson and his wife took a liking to the young man and Jameson opened up quite a bit to him. Littlefield told me in 1976, as we sat on his porch in Liberty, Kentucky, that he supposed Jameson liked him partly because, as an educated person, he could "talk his language" and discuss Paine and Voltaire with him.

The Jamesons often had the young man over to visit and to eat, and he observed the happiness and love in their family. Jameson told him that he planned to give his young son--then about ten years old--a fine education, then turn the store over to him and see him properly started in life. Then Jameson, who had married late in life, could sit on the porch, enjoy his roses with his wife, and wait for sundown.

On that lovely day in May, with some early roses blooming in his own yard, Mr. Will Littlefield, retired superintendent of schools, whose nearly four generations as the tender guide of his county's school children had made him the community's best-loved citizen, looked back nearly three-quarters of a century into the past to a remote little West Kentucky village. Golden Pond, he told me, in 1910 was extremely isolated, placed as it was between two large rivers, the Cumberland and the Tennessee, with ferries the only means of crossing the rivers. There were few cars in that section then, either, and the one main road, which ran east-west, was none too good.

"Mr. Will" told me that he had heard the rest of the Jameson story through friends from Golden Pond who kept in touch with him after his sojourn there ended in 1912. The Jamesons had taken Darwin to Cadiz, the county seat to the east of the Cumberland River, when he was old enough for high school. They wanted a progressive school for him, not just a one-room country school with people of all grades thrown together.

The doting parents checked carefully on the reputations of the various families which kept boarding houses in Cadiz, and selected the most respectable establishment for their son. Then they went home.

But some time after these arrangements for Darwin's future success had been made, tragedy struck. I do not know how long it was, whether soon after he was taken to Cadiz, or a couple of years or so afterwards. Darwin became ill and his parents frantically sought medical help as his condition worsened. It was tuberculosis, an unbelievably deadly scourge in those days in the low-lying river country of Mid America. The Jamesons took their son to a sanitarium in Dawson Springs, but in vain. Whit and his wife were in agony. Whit, if possible, suffered even more than his wife. And Darwin, it is said, rebuked him:

"You aren't living up to what you have always taught me. If what you have taught me is true, this doesn't matter one way or the other."

Not long afterwards, the boy died. Whit followed him in 1927; then his wife moved West. I have seen Whit's will in the Trigg County Court House, and the request for cremation--"if possible"--seems a pathetic footnote to his history. I suppose his wife took his ashes West with her--and Darwin's, too.

Sitting there on Mr. Littlefield's porch, I thought of Darwin's upbraiding of his father and was reminded of the local legend about the death of old man Jackson. He was said to have gone wild, screaming, and foaming, and raving about the flames of Hell flickering around his bed. His sons and neighbors had to hold him down. One of his sons whom he had taught his unbelief to, is said to have told him,

"Damn you! You have always lived by your beliefs. Now...die by them!"

After old Jackson died, they cremated him, and his son kept "Old Pappy's" ashes in a little vase on the mantel piece over the fireplace for many years. Visitors were afraid to get near the mantel for fear they would spill the old man on the floor, but they said Jackson's son shoved him around without ceremony when he was looking for his plug of tobacco or his spectacles.

Mr. Littlefield's voice brought me back to the balmy spring of 1976, and he told me, "Honey"--his habitual form of address after years of school teaching--"they tell me that after Darwin's illness was diagnosed as fatal, Whit Jameson's neighbors woke up one morning to find every rose bush he had, cut down to the ground! One of my old students tells me Whit told the neighbor who ran the hotel, the old Tennessee House, that he had to cut the bushes down because he saw the Devil peeping at him from amongst the flowers. He couldn't stand it. Darwin died not long after that."

I learned forward to look at a bee coming to one of the roses. I had heard this story before. One respected family who lived next door to the Jamesons emphatically denied the tale, saying it was ridiculous, because

Whit Jameson was too level-headed and rational a man ever to do or say such a thing. But this story was part of the legend. It was also said that Mrs. Jameson rebuked her husband, as their son had, for wavering in his beliefs. She said *she* would be ashamed of such weakness.

When I asked Mr. Littlefield if he knew what happened to Mrs. Jameson after she left Golden Pond, he sighed sadly and said, "Well, I heard from Mrs. Jameson a few times. She wound up in California, where she bought a ranch which she named 'Rhodesia.' After Darwin died, Whit had tried to go on, but he soon grieved himself to death. When he died, I guess Mrs. Jameson couldn't stand to be in that little town any more. And son, one of the saddest parts of this story is that Mrs. Jameson wrote to me a few years later, telling me how lonely she was and begging me to come out there and let her adopt me as her son. She had always thought it best to limit her family but now it seemed too hard to be alone. But I didn't go. I had my own life to live here, in Liberty."

I sat there in the sun, pondering what Mr. Littlefield had said. A ranch named "Rhodesia." That fitted, because Cecil Rhodes was an agnostic too, but an ardent believer in human perfectibility, in what could be called the religion of mankind. His will, published at his death in 1902, had provided for an expenditure of part of his enormous wealth for scholarships for worthy students from the Empire and from America to study at Oxford. He had believed that education would regenerate mankind.

I wondered what Whit Jameson thought in the years from E.M. 314-318, when the nations of the so-called civilized world ripped one another apart in the greatest war, to that date, of all time? Would he--or Cecil Rhodes, had he been living--have seen this war as a sign of a failure of human reason?

Then, as I stood up, seeing in my mind's eye a man, face wrenched with desperation and glistening with cold sweat, slashing his rose bushes to the ground, Mr. Littlefield stopped me and gave me one more piece of the puzzle, perhaps the key. Then we said good-bye. Considering his age, I knew I looked on a face shortly to disappear behind the veil, and he gave me a parting admonition to guide me in my life: "Son, you can't change the past. So don't look back. Don't regret it. Go forward. That's the only way to live."

On the road home to Murray, I pondered the key to the Jameson story Mr. Littlefield had given me. His words brought to my mind images of a cluttered house and of a woman frantic with work and too many children, and of a drunken husband beating her. Now I understood why part of Whit Jameson's motto was "Limit your family."

Hours later, when I crossed the Cumberland River bridge on Highway 68, I decided to stop at the former site of Golden Pond. I pulled my car off the road and looked at the concrete horseblock which still marked the house site. It was placed approximately where the front fence had been.

In the early dusk, with the fireflies winking across the grassy plot which the TVA kept mowed around the tourist picnic tables placed there, I thought of the love and pain which had been enacted here.

Mr. Littlefield's words still hung in my mind. He had said: "Honey--in 1912, not long before I left Golden Pond for the last time, Mr. Whit Jameson confided something to me. I don't know why he felt he could tell me, but he did. He told me, 'Son, I want to tell you something I've never told anyone else but my wife. When I was just a boy I came home once to find my drunken father beating my mother, as he had done many times before. I couldn't bear it any more, so I killed him. I felt I had to. I'm sorry to say it, but I would do it again if the same circumstances presented themselves.'"

Afterwards, I asked an old citizen of the Golden Pond community, an old man in his eighties, if he had ever heard this story. He looked startled, and boomed out, "No! Never did. But I heard my daddy say that one of those Jamesons, an older brother to Whit, killed his father for abusing his mother. They had a trial but they acquitted him. That was before Whit ever came down here to Golden Pond. They still lived up in the Ironton community, over on the Tennessee River, a long ways from here."

So, later on that day, I found that an older brother had taken the rap for Whit, but had gotten off. But on this night, I started my car, and pulled out on Highway 68, leaving the little ghost town "over which," Ed Huddleston had written in 1957, "the star of destiny is shining so brightly today." Not yet knowing that TVA's lust for power would make a peopled community a wilderness, Huddleston had predicted, "Golden Pond will be the center of a great vacation land. She'll be the lucky empress--town of a long green inland peninsula." As I moved out on the highway, I thought of the ghosts who inhabited the area--of the invisible village on my left and of the graves on the hill to my right. Up on the hill my car moved past were the hanged boy and the ashes of the old infidel who screamed at the hellfire licking around his bed. His ashes were buried in his son's grave. Old Jackson's grandson was buried there too. So were about a dozen of their friends and neighbors. All the graves were laid out facing the East. I drove on to Murray.

