

THE TANNER'S YARN

A tale of life after life

by Theodore J. Nottingham

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Winter had frozen the crust of the earth, stripped Nature of her emerald foliage, and merged land and heaven into an immense, delicate quilt of whiteness. It was the season of seclusion, quietude, and death. Families gathered around warm fireplaces and listened to tales of old. Grandfathers reminisced, teaching the young stories of unwritten history which heated the blood more intensely than the flickering hearths that beckoned them forth.

It was a time for homemade philosophers to find attentive disciples, for spinners of fantasies to enthrall spellbound audiences. Silent Nature cleared her chaotic stage and minds of all ages found enlightenment in the sanctuary of halted activities. Out of the icy depths of winter's tranquility came gentle poetry and lofty truths. It was a time for Jake Peters, leather tanner by trade and longtime storyteller, to speak his mind to the folks of the community.

Some twenty men, women, and children would gather at widow Kingburg's home, sip her spicy tea, and listen to the toothless country Socrates. The local preacher would sometimes join them to hide his envy at such undiluted attention and, perhaps, to learn a few things. On one particularly chilly evening, as a blizzard howled through the valley, old Jake told his listeners of a strange tale which he claimed to have personally experienced.

"I was a' sittin' on my front porch, listenin' to the song of happy bluejays, when this shadow fell over me. It was as cold and black as the heavens is tonight. My dog -- you all know my dog Mr. Demosthenes -- he started growlin' as though a coon had stole into the chicken coop. I says to him, Mr. Demosthenes, don't you worry yourself none, I been awaitin' for this here visitor a good long while. He's no welcome guest, but I ain't got no choice but to let him in. And I'll tell y' all right now, I didn't expect to be comin' back to talk about it neither!"

Even the preacher sat on the edge of his seat, forgetting all about the plate of delicious cookies he had made sure to sit by. The audience would not be disappointed this evening. Old Jake was to give them a tale the like of which no one had ever heard before. On that pleasant spring day, Jake felt his soul leave his carcass behind. He saw himself from high above, sitting on the porch next to Mr. Demosthenes who was sadly licking his limp, cold hand.

Then he saw the town and the townfolk in their homes readying for dinner. But the people he had known for a lifetime were not like he'd ever seen them before. They were made of light, he could see energies whirling in and around them, in the dance of billions of atoms

which made up the illusion of solid matter. That same light was in the trees and the rocks, as if the sun were shining from within as well as from above. Then he found himself in a void of blackness and soon realized that he was floating somewhere in the universe.

He could recognize the stars that he had studied every night for over seventy years and knew by name. Suddenly, in an instant, he was carried into the brilliant rainbows and floods of gold which scientists call the Milky Way. He felt himself as vast as the cosmos, infinite and unchained from that old wrinkled shell that weighed him down on the surface of planet Earth. He came upon a luminous world. It was another the dimension of the cosmos, the astral world, made of vibrations of light and color and populated by countless spiritual entities.

The astral beings could metamorphosize into any form and communicated with each other through telepathy, eliminating all the misunderstandings of the spoken word. Many disembodied spirits were arriving into this world along with Jake in great floods of colored light. Their astral bodies were the exact counterpart to their physical forms, resembling the figures of their youth. But they possessed three eyes, two of them partly closed with the third one wide open between the eyebrows and shimmering like a holographic jewel within the fluid shape of their heads. Jake could recognize old friends and family from his distant childhood. But it was the wondrous, ethereal music that captivated him most.

It seemed to tell him that the great goal of these individualized lightwaves of consciousness was, in some distant future, to merge into a cosmic ocean of eternal ecstasy. Then suddenly, for no rhyme or reason, he found himself back in his rickety body whose hand was still being licked by his loyal dog.

"It took me a long time to figure out what had happened," Jake said as he stared into the fireplace, "but I guess I still have a few things to do down here before settling into that world where we all belong."

A heavy silence filled the room as he sipped the tea offered to him by the window Kingsburg. Then he heard a chuckle. "Tell us another story," the preacher said, eager to hear more of the old man's wild fantasies. Jake the leather tanner looked at his audience and saw that not one of them had believed a word he had spoken. He wanted to tell them more, to express the wondrous reality resting so deep, so invisible and inconceivable within each one of them. But the faces staring at him were not interested. They wanted another colorful yarn to go along with the cookies and tea.