



SLIM SAM
MRS. DELESSE
AND THE MAGIC WALKING CANE

By J.E. Malone

Little Jake shoved the saw one-handed across the scrap two-by-six. The saw bit into his left hand where he was holding the plank, and he chocked back a gasp. But his grandpa, Mick, heard him anyway, and came deliberately, slowly to Little Jake's side.

"Hurt yourself, Jake?"

"A little," the child answered, chocking back a sob.

"Remember, wait 'till you know how to do something with both hands before you go one-handed, 'member?"

"Uh...yeah. I want to do it like you."

"Look at Ol' Muggles here. He's just a couple months beyond puppyhood." Grandpa patted Ol' Muggles where he lay beside Little Jake. "He can smell quail, but he still has to learn to stand on point and not chase 'em," Grandpa said. "Everybody starts out learnin' a little bit at a time."

Ol' Muggles rolled over on his back as Grandpa scratched his ear, then tummy. Ol' Muggles was a medium-sized, black and tan that—when on his feet—stood just above knee-high to Little Jake.

Little Jake's grandpa took the boy's injured hand and turned it gently so the cut faced up. Then Grandpa Mick got Little Jake's even more wide-eyed attention. He took a clean, very white bandana from a hip pocket and slowly folded into squares. Then he opened the last square half way and spit into the crease once, twice, and then again.

Granpa Mick took Little Jake's hand and turned it so the cut was face up again, running from his left thumb knuckle to his wrist. He swabbed the cut with the spitty handkerchief until most blood was gone. Then he swabbed once again with the spit-wet crease pushed into the cut.

Little Jake said nothing but breathed heavy until Grampa finished.

"You put spit into my cut!" Little Jake said, while trying to hold his breath to squelch any sobs.

"Tell your Mama about this, she'll skin me alive. But just between you and me, tell me, when you see an animal with a open sore, what does it do?"

"He licks it!"

"What about next time you see it?"

"The sore's gone!"

"Exactly. What does that tell you?"

Little Jake looked around and was about to say something, but just scrunched up his face. That, he hoped, would block his tears.

“Animals only got one kind’a first aid: spit,” Grandpa Mick said. “That’s what they use. Don’ work miracles, but more times than not, it helps the animal get movin’ again.

“Now, your Mama’ll clean that out with alcohol, then put Iodine on it.”

“Iodine?!”

“You just find somethin’ else to look at, that new litter o’ kitties maybe, laugh at ‘em, you won’t even be feeling it.”

Just minutes later, Grandpa Mick saw Little Jake trying to get a bit tight into a drill, but it kept wobbling out when Little Jake pushed it against a piece of scrap two by four.

“Jake! Could you come over here? There’s somethin’, a secret I’ve got to let you in on.”

Jake dropped the drill and slow-walked to his Grampa. He wiped his eyes to make sure the tears were gone.

“See Slim Sam over there?” his grandpa said in a low voice. “Well, he don’ want nobody to know it, but he can’t drive a straight nail. Somethin’ ‘bout bein’ dropped on his head as a baby. Don’ matter. Just remember, kind’a bothers him anybody finds out, so act like you don’ see it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Little Jake whispered, wide-eyed. “I won’ tell, I’ll just keep on practicin’ bein’ a carpenter.”

Grandpa watched Little Jake slowly walk toward the other side of the partly framed-in house where Slim Sam worked. Little Jake looked back, saw his Grandpa watching. Little Jake veered off to the roadside on his right, studying the ground as he went. Then he veered left, not going straight toward Slim Sam.

Like Grandpa Mick, Slim Sam was dressed in full-length coveralls. But Grandpa wore a white, once-upon-a-time dress shirt with the collar now frayed and his cuffs permanently rolled up, grimy gray despite many washings. His straw, medium wide-brimmed hat, looked like it was often sat upon even though he rarely removed it, except at bedtime.

Slim Sam’s coveralls showed a hint of a potbelly and big but hard hips. His tall frame looked all sinew and muscle. He wore a frayed, long-sleeve tee-shirt that was more holes than cloth. Slim Sam was bare-headed with long, graying blond hair that kept falling in his eyes when he bent over.

Slim Sam called out “Hey, Little Jake, whatcha’ doin’?”

“Just learnin’.”

Slim Sam looked back to his work on the skeleton frame of the house being built. Little Jake was looking at an empty nail box, then at his Grandpa. Grandpa looked away, hiding a grin.

Slim Sam grabbed a box, with “Crooked Nails” scrawled over the label. He rattled it, making sure it was empty. He seemed to study the ground, kicking up a little dirt here and there.

“Ha!” Sam said softly, but loud enough for Little Jake to hear. Sam picked up a nail with a perfect U shape in the middle. He licked the tip just a little, then carefully placed it on the edge of a 2x4, taking care that the U pointed straight up.

He studied it for a minute, then tapped the U with his hammer, leaving the nail almost pretzeled straight. He picked up a 2x6 and balanced it, edge down on another fixed board, forming the beginning of a corner of the future house.

Slim Sam held the board-end tight, right-angled against a vertical 2x4, held the twisted nail it so looked as ready as possible for nailing, then tapped its head. He saw that the nail held, the point just hidden in the wood. One hammer stroke and the nail was half buried. The second stroke left nothing showing but the head.

Slim Sam scanned nearby grass tufts, then rattled his hand around inside the empty “Crooked Nail” box again.

“Hey, Granpa,” Slim Sam called. “I got to go to the lumber yard.”

“What for?”

“I’m outta crooked nails!”

Grandpa leaned on an upright shovel, holding still and swallowing a guffaw. “Don’t get cornered by Miz DeLesse! You won’t be back ‘till next week,” Grandpa said with a big grin.

Slim Sam took the road that ran in front of the house they were building, turning left. Block and a half later he was a step short of Courthouse Square.

Slim Sam had just reached the corner when he stopped and peeked around the red brick ends. A left turn onto the sidewalk lead to Douglas Hardware, the storefront entrance to the lumber yard. The street looked empty, so Slim Sam turned left toward the store only to see Mrs. DeLesse turning right from the thin alley that ran between the other side of Douglas Hardware and DeLesse Haberdashery.

She was wearing what had become known as Mrs. DeLesse’s uniform: long, fully flowered dress, broad at the keel, elsewhere thin despite being tightly fastened at the bodice. She wore a floppy straw hat that looked to be an attempt to match the dress.

Slim Sam stopped, looked at the sky, slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Looked like he just remembered he needed something at a store in the other direction. He hurried across to the next street forming Courthouse Square.

But then, a left turn onto the side of the courthouse facing away from the hardware store, and there was Mrs. DeLesse coming toward him. She had also reversed her heading. That also brought her to the other side of the square. Now slim Sam had no choice. Following protocol, as he came face to face with Mrs. DeLesse, as required, he asked, “How are you today, Mrs. DeLesse? You’re lookin’ very well.”

In the tone of a patient in pain, Mrs. DeLesse said, “Oh Sam, I’ve got the leans today. I just can’t seem to stand up straight. It’s a terrible condition, and there’s no cure. I read about it in last week’s Newly Discovered Diseases magazine.”

Sam looked hard at Mrs. DeLesse, then at the sky for a long minute. "Mrs. DeLesse, you look just as straight up as I am,"

"Oh my, Sam! You've got the leans too!"

Sam opened his mouth to reply but then thought better of it. After a few breaths, and looking very concerned, Sam said, "I did have 'em, ma'am, but I'm getting' better now. See? Got 'em almost cured."

Sam had tilted himself slightly to his right.

"Oh, Sam what did you do? I need help. This is scarin' me to death."

"I met a stranger over in the flea market in Pastorville. He just walked up to me and said maybe he could tell me how to make a cane that, when I used it and I walked for a while, it might help me get straightened up. Now you can see I'm much better. "

"Who is this man? How do I find him?" Mrs. DeLesse asked with an urgent whine in her voice.

"I didn't catch his name, if he said it," Sam said. "I never seen him before, and not since our meeting at the bridge, either. The Oak River bridge is where he had me meet him that night. Probably wouldn't recognize him again, that big, gray hat, pulled down down low, all I can remember.

"Anywho, Oak River bridge is where he showed me what I needed to make the cane."

"How strange," Mrs. DeLesse said, staring hard at Slim Sam. "Can I use your cane? Please let me give it a try. What do I have to lose? I'm just in so much pain."

"The man said two lame people can't use the same cane. Hit won't work that way."

"Well, what am I going to do? This condition is just miserable."

"Ol' Gray Hat---don' know what else to call him---showed me a little bit what I needed to make my cane," Sam said. "He pointed to different trees along the river. He said I was to use cuttings from those. I never heard of any magic in those trees, but figured, 'Why not give it a try?'

"Sure 'nuff, made me one of those canes like he said, and two or three days usin' it, I could tell I was gettin' better.

Slim looked around and said quietly, "I reckon I could make a new one."

"Please, please, please!"

Sam studied the sky and breathed deeply. "Ol' grey hat said to cut and strip each limb just enough to make the cane, had to be no bark, and that would make sure it was all right. Had to be a clear night so the moon's out. Never saw him again."

"You remember how you made your's, though, don't you?"

"Maybe. I'm thinkin' back now. He said don't use any glue at first, make 'em stick together just right with the sap. I think maybe---ain't makin' no promises---I could do it again."

"Oh Sam! I have to have one those canes," Mrs. DeLesse whined. "I am in such, such pain. I'm afraid I'm gonna fall if I don't get upright!"

“The time has to be just right, with a clear sky for the moon before midnight,” Sam explained in a conspiratorial whisper. He studied the horizon again. “I think in a day or two we should have a moonrise that’s just ‘bout the time to go and get good wood with the sap running just right.”

“Please, Sam. Won’t you do it for me? I’ll pay you.”

“No payment needed, Mrs. DeLesse. I’ll be happy if it just works for you.”

Later that Saturday afternoon, Sam lounged in his front porch rocker, deep in thought, until nearly sundown. Then Sam drove his beat-up, Chevy pickup across the Oak River bridge, to the head of a short trail leading down to the bridge abutment. Sam slid a small hatchet through a belt loop at the tip of one of his coverall pockets and ambled down the well-worn trail. Sam never walked fast, even if something might be chasing him.

The trail ended at a dusty, grassless spot almost underneath the bridge approach. Stands of trees—including Beach, Willows and Wild Fig trees—grew close, along the river bank, almost to the bridge abutment, where they had been cleared by roadworkers.

Sam found a Willow Oak with liquid still oozing from between its layers of bark. He took the little Willow in hand and hacked off a bark-covered length.

Soon, he had harvested lengths of Beech and Wild Fig the same way.

Sam began trimming his lengths of bark-covered limbs to fit in his burlap sack when a friendly, female voice called out to him from just under the bridge approach.

“Sam! What are you doin’ out here in the middle of the night?”

Sam recognized the voice of Elaine Hayman, a gigly, fifty-something known for the mouth-watering wafers she cooked and gave away to all visitors on any holiday.

“I’m cuttin’ me some wood for ahh...a little project...Hell, I started out playin’ a little joke and it kinda got outa hand. So, I need these tree limbs to put a quick end to it. Tomorrow early, if I hurry.”

“I’m smellin’ one of your practical jokes, here, Sam,” Elaine said in the slightly bemused tone of a teacher whose caught a little boy pulling sticky hands out of his backpack. Sam looked away.

“Somewhere In the silence,” Elaine asked, “do I detect that singsong voice of Mrs. DeLeese and one of her lif’threatin’ diseases of the week?”

“Well, “ Sam said, suppressing a laugh, “I ain’t gonna comment on that, Elaine. What I am gonna do is change the subject: What is a lady doin’ out here alone, in the dark?”

“Lady? Slim Sam, you grew up with me babysitin’ you next door. Ain’t no lady ever changed diapers that looked like they came from a horse!” Elaine’s laugh came straight from the belly, no excuses.

“Anyway, I like to come down here most evenin’s just before the sun sets to hear the birds lookin’ for a roost, and the river passin’ me by, an’ most ever’ day a cool breeze comes down the river between all those trees. Today, I just got starin’ at the water and lollygaggin’ ‘till ‘for I knowed it, the sun was down and I heard some fool hackin’ at a tree in the dark!”

Sam looked at the ground, hiding a laugh.

“Awright,” Sam finally replied. “You ought not be out here all alone in the night. My pickup’s parked up the head of the trail. I’ll be along in jus’ a little, if you’ll go ahead and wait a few. There’s some refreshments between the front seats,” Sam added with a tiny, Sam smile. “Have what you want, but check your pulse before for takin’ too much.”

Elaine nodded, “Okay,” and walked past Sam, her skirt swishing even though there wasn’t any wind. Seemed to Sam that Elaine had aged very little. She still had wavy brown hair, with just a hint of gray, falling freely over her shoulders. She was still trim and not hard to look at.

“Sam, did you see that man standing up river from me? Don’t think I ever seen him b’fore,” Elaine asked, stopping and looking back.

“No, didn’t see nobody. What he look like?”

“Couldn’t tell much. Tall, dark gray suit...nothin’ eye-catchi’...preacher, like..., big, gray hat pulled down low. Couldn’t see no face. Maybe he’s lost and don’t know it.”

Elaine continued up the trail as Sam pushed through the brush and gathered the cuttings. Catching his breath, Sam studied the river’s opposite bank. In the gathering darkness, he could see only the face of the forest and a lone row boat, half sunk, half dragged up the muddy bank. Nothing more.

“Better not be nobody there,” Sam half whispered to himself. “I made him up for Mizz DeLeese. Ain’t nowhere but in my mind. Don’ need no livin’ shadows.”

Sam arrived at his pickup with the cut branches in a the nap sack he threw into the back, trying not to notice Elain’s smiling stare.

“I know you’re up to something Sam. Tell me!”

“Just a little game I’m making up for the children.”

‘You ain’t got no children Sam! This has gotta have somthin’ to do with the disease of the week”

Sam stared hard at the ground, trying not show his slightly panicky grimace.

Sam climbed into the pickup and took a long draw on the “refreshment” bottle and drove to Elain’s front gate.

Sam had competed with his best friend and high school football team-mate, Buddy Hightower, for Elaine’s attention. Elaine married Buddy, who died ten years later from an undiagnosed heart blockage.

Buddy had been the quarterback, known to opponents by a wide collection of unprintable names. Sam, Buddy’s favorite wide receiver, was called “Ghost.” Opponents thought they had him well covered in their backfield when “Ghost” would appear in an open spot just as Buddy’s pass whizzed in.

They also called Sam “Rubberman” because—no matter how hard or from what angle they tackled him, he always bounced up and—with a slight smile—trotted back to his huddle. They said he “bent but never broke.”

“Now, here you are,” Sam said, pulling up to a gate at the top of the little hill overlooking the river. “But Elaine, promise me you’ll be careful about going down to the river after dark.”

“I’ll be a good girl, Sam,” she said with her sunniest smile, paused a moment before opening her door, then walked through her gate, looked back at Sam and waved. She smiled again before closing the gate and walked to the front door, her skirt swishing again from a non-existent breeze. She opened the front door so the light shown out, then almost closed it but left a crack large enough for the light to shine through.

Sam drove slowly away, muttering softly to himself, “Sam, you are a friggin’ idiot.”

That night in his cabin, Sam stripped the bark off his wood pieces and fitted them together with sap drooling out where he had stripped the bark, with the “innards” facing each other. It began to look like a cane but without a handle. The wood was obviously fresh-cut. He parked it against a chairback in front of a space heater, and had some warmed over supper while he waited.

When the sap began to get almost dry, and with the slender wood pieces sticking together, Sam added tiny amounts of carpenter’ glue at strategic spots before adding clamps. Then he let the heater take over again while he sat back, satisfied that this strange stick was obviously made of different kinds of wood, but it was hard to see where one ended and the other began.

He brewed some coffee and walked a mile round trip to keep his circulation going. When he got back, checked his work and was satisfied the thing was dry and the joints between the wood pieces were less than a hairline thin, he applied his first coat of diluted shellac, then dried them more. Sam repeated this several times, drying after each coat with the space heater.

Over the years, for no conscious reason, Sam had collected drawers full of cane handles and rubber cane tips. He picked out a handle with a tiny, roaring lion’s head at the front end of the grip, then glued the opening to the top end of the cane. One of the rubber feet fit onto the tip at the heavier end. He rested while the cane dried. He was satisfied his work looked like his description to Mrs. DeLeese.

Admiring his work, he figured it looked both good enough and strange enough to have magic powers, and pretty enough to be admired.

Sam indulged in a long exhale and said to himself, “Sam, you’re almost finished with this nightmare.”

Well before dawn, Sam parked his truck in a wooded tract behind the lumber yard and the building where Mrs. DeLeese and her husband lived on the second floor. He carried the magical-looking cane through the alley toward the street, then climbed the outdoor stairway to the DeLeese’s apartment door landing. He carefully stepped on the visible nailheads at the outside end of each step so as not to give the middle of the wooden steps a chance to make creaking noises in the night.

He stopped at the small window beside the DeLeese’s door. Instead of knocking on the door, he made what he hoped was an almost inaudible scratching sound with his fingernails on the window pane, then propped the cane up just far enough outside the door that it wouldn’t hit the cane when it was opened.

Soon enough the door did open and he heard a sharp inhalation of breath, or maybe it was a gasp. Then a hand shot out, grabbed the cane and the door closed very quietly.

Sam pressed his back against the wall and listened. Moments later he heard someone lift the earpiece out of its cradle on the wall-mounted telephone.

“Myrtle,” he heard Mrs. DeLeese say in a firm tone after lifting the phone off its cradle. Myrtle was the town switchboard operator.

“Ring up Gladys. Yes, I know its early, but this is very important and she needs to know what’s happening. Now don’t you listen in, you hear? This is very confidential, nobody else needs to know.”

Then, “Gladys? Yes, I know it’s early, but this is very, very important. And it has to be kept secret, just between you and me, alright? I’m feeling lots better this morning. I’m going to tell you how, but remember it’s a total secret.

“I have a cane. Yes a CANE! It’s curing my leans, can you believe it?”

Sam tried so hard to stifle his laugh that it hurt his stomach. He crept down the stairs, again just stepping on the nail heads for silence. At the foot of the stairs, he turned back through the alley toward the woods where his pickup was parked.

As he climbed up on the running board, with a glance across the hood he saw a lone figure standing about a hundred yards down the road, partly obscured by tree overhangs. The figure was dressed in night-cloud gray, a wide-brimmed, even darker hat pulled low, obscuring the eyes.

“DAMMIT!” Sam yelled at the figure. Sam slid quickly through the open driver’s side door and behind the steering wheel. He glanced toward the figure again, but wasn’t sure whether he was still there.

“I made you up, I can make you go away!” Sam yelled, as he slid his key into the ignition, turned it until the engine cranked.

Sam took a deep breath, turned and saw a cloud-like outline of someone walking back, into the predawn forest.

“I’m going home, have a little breakfast and a long nap,” Sam said to himself.

Sam already thought he could see the tip of the coming evening’s sunset, when he would drive back down the trail leading to the Oak Tree Bridge underpass. He would find Elaine there and gave her a ride back to her house.

Elaine would stop before opening her gate again, looking back with her sunny smile before walking, skirt swishing, on the sidewalk to her house where she would look back, smile again and once inside, leave the front door open a crack with a sliver of the light left on.