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O. Henry's Masterpieces

Selected By O. Henry Himself as His Best Work

The Hiding of Black Bill

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A lean, strong, red-faced man with a Wellington belt and small, fiery eyes, emerged by flaxen lashes, sat on the station platform at Los Pinos swinging his legs to and fro. At his side sat another man, fat, melancholy, and seedy, who seemed to be his friend. They had appeared as a reversible costumed on both sides.

"Ain't seen you in about four years," said the seedy man. "Which way you been traveling?"

"Texas," said the red-faced man. "It was too cold in Alaska for me. And I found it warm in Texas. I'll tell you about one hot spell I went through here."

"One morning, I steps off the International at a water-tank and lets it go without me. It was a ranch country, and fuller of spite houses than New York City. Only out there they build on twenty miles away so you can't smell what they've got for dinner. Instead of running 'em up two inches from their neighbors' windows."

"There wasn't any roads in sight, so footed it 'cross country. The grass was shoe-top deep, and the mesquite timber looked just like a peach orchard. It was so much like a gentleman's private estate that every minute you expected a kennelful of bulldogs to run out and bite you. But I must have walked twenty miles before I came in sight of a ranch-house. It was a little place, about as big as an elevated railroad station."

"There was a little man in a white shirt and brown overalls and a pink handkerchief around his neck rolling cigarettes under a tree in front of the door."

"Greetings," says I. "Any refreshments, welcome, emoluments, or even work for a comparative stranger?"

"Oh, come in," says he, in a refined tone. "Sit down on that stool please. I didn't hear your horse coming."

"He isn't near enough yet," says I. "I walked. I don't want to be a burden, but I wonder if you have three or four gallons of water handy?"

"You look pretty dusty," says he, but your bathing arrangements—"

"It's a drink I want," says I. "Never mind the dust that's on the outside."

"He gets me a dipper of water out of a red jar hanging up, and then goes on."

"Do you want work?"

"For a time," says I. "This is a rather quiet section of the country, isn't it?"

"It is," says he. "Sometimes—so I have seen told—one sees no human being pass a month. I bought the ranch from an old settler who wanted to move further west."

"It suits me," says I. "Quiet and retirement are good for a man sometimes. And I need a job. I can tend bar, sell nines, lecture, float stock, do a little middle-weight slugging, and play the piano."

"Can you herd sheep?" asks the little ranchman.

"Do you mean have I heard sheep?" says I.

"Can you herd 'em—take charge of a flock of 'em?" says I.

"Oh," says I. "Now I understand. You mean chase 'em around and bark at 'em like cattle dogs. Well, I might. Says I, 'I've never exactly done any sheep-herding, but I've often seen 'em from car windows masticating and they don't look dangerous.'"

"I'm short a herder," says the ranchman. "You never can depend on the Mexicans. I've only got two flocks. You may take out my bunch of mutt—"

"Twelve dollars a month and your rations furnished. You camp in a tent on the prairie with your sheep. You do your own cooking, but wood and water are brought to your camp. It's an easy job."

"I'm on," says I. "I'll take the job. If I have to guard my brow and old on to a crook and wear a loose-fitting and play on a pipe like the shepherds do in pictures."

"So the next morning the little ranchman helps me drive the flock of mutt—"

"From the corral to about two miles out and let 'em graze on a little hillside in the prairie. He gives me a lot of instructions about not letting bunches of 'em stray off from the herd, and driving 'em down to a water hole to drink at noon."

"I'll bring out your tent and camping outfit and relations in the backboard before night," says he.

"Fine," says I. "And don't forget the rations. Nor the camping outfit. And be sure to bring the tent. Your name's Zolfero, ain't it?"

"My name," says he, "is Henry Ogden."

"All right, Mr. Ogden," says I. "Mine's Mr. Percival Saint Clair."

"I'll herd sheep for five days on the Rancho Chiquito," and then the wool

entered my soul. That getting next to you pay me is enough. I need a rest, and I can save up until I get enough to pay my fare to Texarkana, where my widowed mother lives. If Black Bill, I'll go on, looking significantly at Ogden, "was to have come down this way, say, a month ago—and bought a little sheep-ranch and—"

"Stop," says Ogden, getting out of his chair and looking pretty vicious. "Do you mean to insinuate—"

"Nothing," says I, "no insinuations. I'm stating a hypodermical case. I say, if Black Bill had come down here and bought a sheep-ranch and hired me to be a Little-Boy-Blue 'em and treated me square and friendly, as you've done, he'd never have anything to fear from me. A man is a man, regardless of any complications he may have with sheep or lions tailed rats. Now you know where I stand."

"Ogden looks black as camp-coffee for nine seconds, and then he laughs amused."

"You'll do, Saint Clair," says he. "If I was Black Bill I wouldn't be afraid to trust you. Let's have a game of two of seven-up tonight. That is, if you don't mind playing with a train-robber."

"I've told you," says I, "my oral sentiments, and there's no strings to 'em."

"While I was shuffling after the first hand, I asked Ogden, as if the idea was a kind of casualty, where he was from."

"Oh," says he, "from the Mississippi Valley."

"That's a nice little place," says I. "I've often stopped over there. But didn't you find the sheets a little damp and the food poor? Now, I hail," says I, "from the Pacific slope. Ever put up there?"

"Too draughty," says Ogden. "But if you're in the Middle West just mention my name, and you'll get foot-warmers and dripped coffee."

"Well," says I, "I wasn't exactly fishing for your private telephone number and the middle name of your aunt that carried off the Cumberland Presbyterian minister. It don't matter, I just want you to know you are safe in the hands of your shepherd. Now, don't put hearts on spades, and don't get nervous."

"Still harping," says Ogden, laughing again. "Don't you suppose that if I was Black Bill and thought you suspected me, I'd put a Winchester bullet into your back?"

"Not any," says I. "A man who's got the nerve to hold up a train single-handed wouldn't do a trick like that. I've knocked about enough to know that there are the kind of men who put a value on a friend. Not that I can claim being a friend of yours, Mr. Ogden, says I, 'being only your sheep-herder; but under some circumstances—'

"By-and-by Ogden gets out a decenter of Bourbon, and then there is a total eclipse of sheep."

"Do you remember reading in the papers, about a month ago," says he, "about a train hold-up on the M. & T.?"

"The express agent was shot through the shoulder, and about \$15,000 currency taken off."

"It's said that only one man did the job."

"Seems to me I do," says I. "But such things happen so often they don't linger long in the human Texas mind. Did they overtake, overhaul, seize, or lay hands on the depollor?"

"He escaped," says Ogden. "And I was just reading in the paper today that the officers have tracked him down into this part of the country. It seems the bills the robber got were all the first issue of currency to the Second National Bank of Espinosa City."

"And so they've followed the trail where they've been spent, and it leads this way."

"Ogden pours out some more Bourbon, and shoves me the bottle."

"I imagine," says I, after ingurgitating another modicum of the royal booze, "that it wouldn't be at all a disingenuous idea for a train robber to run down this part of the country to hide for a spell. A sheep-ranch, now, says I, 'would be the finest kind of a place. Who'd ever expect to find such a desperate character among these sheep and mutt and wild flowers?'"

"And, by the way," says I, "kind of looking H. Ogden over, 'was there any description mentioned of this single-handed terror? Was his lineaments or night and thickness or teeth fillings or style of habiliments set forth in print?"

"Why no," says Ogden, "they say no body got a good sight of him because he wore a mask. But they know it was a train-robber called Black Bill, because he always works alone and because he dropped a handkerchief in the express car that had his name on it."

"All right," says I. "I approve of Black Bill's retreat to the sheep-ranch. I guess they won't find him."

"Ogden's one thousand dollars reward for his capture," says Ogden.

"I don't need that kind of money," says I, looking Mr. Sheepman straight in the eye. "The twelve dollars a month deal"

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There's a Train-robber Called Black Bill Supposed to Be Somewhere in These Parts," Says the Count

"After indulging himself in a lot more non-communicative information and two-thirds of my dinner, the deputy rides away."

"That night I mentions the matter to Ogden."

"They're drawing the tendrils of the octopus around Black Bill," says I. "And then I told him about the deputy sheriff, and how I'd described him to the deputy, and what the deputy said about the matter."

"Oh, well," says Ogden, "let's don't borrow any of Black Bill's troubles. We've a few of our own. Get the Bourbon out of the cupboard and we'll drink to his health—unless," says he, "with his little cackling laugh, 'you're prejudiced against train-robbers.'"

"I'll drink," says I, "to any man who's a friend to a friend. And I believe that Black Bill, the man that held up the Katy for \$15,000 in May. We are searching the ranches and everybody on 'em. What is your name, and what do you do on this ranch?"

"Captain," says I. "Percival Saint Clair is my occupation, and my name is sheep-herder. I've got my flock of mutt, mutt—penned here tonight. The shepherds are coming tomorrow to give them a hair-cut—with haa-a-rum, I suppose."

"Where's the boss of this ranch?" the captain of the gang asked me.

"Wait just a minute, cap'n," says I. "Wasn't there a kind of reward offered for the capture of this desperate character who has referred to in your preamble?"

"There's a thousand dollars reward offered," says the captain, "but it's for his capture and conviction. There don't seem to be no provision made for an informer."

"It looks like it might rain in a day or so," says I in a tired way, looking up at the cerulean blue sky.

"If you know anything about the locality, disposition, or secretiveness of this here Black Bill," says he, in a severe dialect, "you are amiable to the law in not reporting it."

"I heard a fence-rider says," says I, in a desultory kind of voice, "that a Mexican told a cowboy named Jake over at Pidge's place on the Nueces that he heard that Black Bill had been seen in Matamoros by a sheepman's cousin two weeks ago."

"After I'd smoked a few, and listened to the sartorial breathing of H. O., I happened to look out of the window toward the shearing-pens, where there was a kind of a road coming up from a kind of a road across a kind of a creek further away."

"I saw five men riding up to the house. All of 'em carried guns across their saddles, and among 'em was the deputy that had talked to me at my camp."

"I rode up careful in open formation, with their guns ready. I set apart with my eye on the one I opinedated to be the boss muck-raker of this law-and-order cavalry."

"Good evening, gent's," says I. "Won't you light and tie your horses?"

"The boss rides up close, and swings his gun over till the opening in it seems to cover my whole front elevation."

"Don't you move your hands now," says he, "till you and me ladle in an adequate amount of necessary conversation."

"I will not," says I. "I am no defendant, and therefore will not have to disobey your injunctions in replying."

"We are on the lookout," says he, "for Black Bill, the man that held up the Katy for \$15,000 in May. We are searching the ranches and everybody on 'em. What is your name, and what do you do on this ranch?"

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"Tell you what I'll do, Tight Mouth," says the captain, after looking me over for bargains. "If you put us on so we can scoop Black Bill, I'll pay you a hundred dollars out of my own—out of our own—pockets. That's liberal," says he. "You ain't entitled to anything now, what do you say?"

"Cash down now?" I asks.

"The captain has a sort of discussion with his lieutenants, and they all produce the contents of their pockets for analysis. Out of the general results they figured up \$102.30 in cash and \$81 worth of plug tobacco."

"Come nearer, captain meco," says I, "and listen." He so did.

"I am mighty poor and low down in the world," says I. "I am working for twelve dollars a month trying to keep a lot of animals together whose only thought seems to be to get assunder. Although," says I, "I regard myself as some better than the State of South Dakota, it's a come-down to a man who has heretofore regarded sheep only in the form of chops. I'm pretty far reduced in the world on account of folled ambitions and run and a kind of cock-hall they make along the P. R. R. all the way from Scranton to Cincinnati—dry."

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