

## **RIGHT WHERE THE SUN DON'T SHINE**

It wasn't a big thing that missing the eclipse was the upshot of my crime spree. Nope, the sun and the moon going slippery-slidy isn't any great shakes to me—I've had eighty-six years of seeing the both of them, and just because they do a little dance together once every fifty years or so, that doesn't mean that I have to pay any attention.

No, the thing that still chaps my hide is that the postmaster thought all along that he'd put one up on me, the old goat. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even if I was only six years old, I knew a tall sight more than some grumbling old postmaster.

I guess the best way to convince you is just to show you what happened and let you judge for yourself. Remember, though, you've got to look at the big picture and all. Sure, stealing and such might be a sin, but it's just a little one—particularly if you're

concerned with justice, which, in this case, was what I was trying to get at all along.

My brother George and I weren't just a couple of hayseeds. Back then, George was almost nine years old, and he'd been to Sacramento twice, once in a brand new truck owned by the Vesseys, a couple of farms over. Sacramento was over a hundred miles away, and in those days, not many of us folks that lived in the little hamlets northwards of there had ever been, even some of the adults. (And if that knothead postmaster had, he should have stayed there.)

George and I were both pretty regular kids, and we didn't mind a little fun now and then—what kid doesn't? Especially since we also did our fair share of work around the farm, even with me barely standing head-high to the shoulder of a cow. In fact, I did so much work around those cows, I kind of felt I was working for them, and not for my pop. It was hard to blame the cows for my scroungy allowance though—five cents every two weeks, no matter how much cow poop I'd trotted through during that period, and I usually trotted through plenty.

Anyway, it was a spring day like any other, and George and I were delivering the milk and eggs on the west side after school. We had a little four-wheeled pushcart that we used to push and pull over

what seemed like all of creation just to fetch our customers their goods, but really, we just moved around the neighborhood some. That wasn't to say there weren't some pretty good stretches of territory between houses out in our part of the county, but we only scraped the edge of town with our cart every now and then. The postmaster was one of our few town deliveries, so by the time we got to his house that day, we'd already covered a piece of ground, and I wasn't feeling particularly charitable of spirit.

We had various arrangements with people concerning how our deliveries were done—some of our regulars might be out in their fields or maybe visiting with the neighbors, so they'd leave the back door open and we could just put everything in the icebox. There probably weren't five families in the whole county that locked their doors anyhow. I guess they might have started thinking about it after word of my misdeeds made its way around town, but I'm jumping ahead.

On that day, we were out there, doing our honest end-of-day's work, and we made it to the postmaster's. He had one of the bigger houses in town, two stories and lots of ground and all, built on the side of a hill looking out over the river and our little valley dotted with farms. Our arrangement with him was that we'd tow the cart up the alley behind his

house and push through his unlocked back gate. We'd go through the back door into the kitchen, and we'd store his delivery in the icebox.

That bit of business had happened often enough that it seemed like one—two—three, but on this particular day the trouble began. I still don't know if that postmaster locked the gate just to heat my fanny or what, but locked it was. That meant we had to go back up the alley, around the corner, and back up the hill we'd just climbed. Remember, we were delivering milk and eggs here, not meringue for pies. We might as well have been pulling a cow up that hill, for what it felt like. I remember sharing my point of view with George:

"I can't believe it! All the way back up the hill. What if nobody's home and the door's locked? Maybe we should just leave it here in the alley by the gate."

George gave me his best big-brother look. "You know we can't do that, Jake. This stuff would spoil or some old dog would get his nose in it before the postmaster saw it. There's no way around it but up."

I stamped my foot and kicked the gate, and that probably helped me come up with my bright idea. "Well, why don't you just hoist me up on the gate and hand up a bottle, and we'll just do it that way, one quart at a time?" I gave him my best little-

brother look. I liked being a problem-solver; it was nearly as much fun as being a problem-maker.

George cupped his hands and I pushed one foot up off of him and balanced the other on the gate, which I was able to scramble up and perch atop. He handed me a cool quart bottle of milk and I turned with it in one hand to descend into the backyard. Problem was, I caught the bottom of the bottle on the edge of the gate, and the milk bottle pitched down onto a rock below and shattered to dribbling white bits in the yard. Well, that really lit my torch.

“Dang it! Whole thing’s busted up everywhere! What are we going to do now?” I said.

George frowned and said, “There’s no way around it. We’re going to have to go up the hill, and that’s that. We can’t be bustin’ up all of the postmaster’s bottles and you know it.”

Older brothers do have a way of putting a burdensome idea right back in your face, but I didn’t want to risk another bottle either, so I climbed down and we trudged up the hill. My mood hadn’t improved much by the time we got to the front of the postmaster’s house. I grabbed two bottles of milk and walked through the empty house back to the kitchen.

We’d loaded the milk into the box, and George had gone back out to the cart for the eggs. I was standing there looking in the postmaster’s icebox,

and my dander still hadn't gone down, because my eyes lit on a nice little pitcher of cream sitting in that icebox, and they just wouldn't let go. I figured, one good bottle for another, and I grabbed that pitcher and slurped down every drop of that sweet cream and put the pitcher right back in the box just as George walked back in.

“Only two more houses, Jake. I think we'll just short Mrs. Wiggins a bottle, rather than the postmaster, since he's got a bit of a temper anyhow. Let's mosey.”

We finished our rounds with me smacking my lips in gratification. I wasn't completely satisfied that the postmaster had learned his lesson, but I guessed that another round of learning lay ahead. Next week, sure enough, same delivery, same locked gate, same buzzing of bees in my head. That postmaster was a stubborn old coot, but I could pluck his feathers! I let George rest by the cart after we'd wheezed up the hill and I marched back to the kitchen from the front door with the milk bottles, alone in the house except for my crafty notions.

There wasn't any cream to plunder, but there was a fat pound of butter in that icebox, and it went in a second from plain sight to the dark confines of my shirt. I let George amble on ahead a ways with the cart, and then pitched the butter onto the hot

pavement behind us. I figured that dry toast would suit that dried-up postmaster just fine. I was beginning to think that a life of crime was just the ticket for a hardened tough like me.

I was so eager to make next week's delivery that George was complaining as we arrived at the postmaster's gate.

"What in blue blazes has gotten into you, Jake? You're trotting ahead like a banty with a bee in its butt—you've probably turned this cream into butter by pushing that cart that fast!"

"I'm sorry, George. I just figured that if we got home in time we might be able to jump in the creek for a little swim."

The day had warmed up considerably, but I was burning with an inner fire. And the fact that this time we were able to push open the back gate free and easy didn't deter me in the least. I thought that the postmaster might be messing with us a little, but I wasn't going to waste my time speculating, no sir. I wasn't certain how I was going to get even this time, but get even I would.

Well, there wasn't anything between me and inspired vengeance but that icebox door: as soon as I opened it up to put in the milk, I spied a tall stick with a tiny monkey on top, attached by a string. I paused just for the briefest of moments. The matter

of why and wherefore a little monkey on a string got into that icebox wasn't mine to determine—this was a vast opportunity, and a boy has to act.

I picked up the stick monkey and pulled his string and he scooted to the top of the pole and then did a clever little hippity-hop dance back down. I knew that monkey was meant to be mine; it was a matter of justice, as I was trying to explain earlier. I didn't take it upon myself to ponder exactly why a stick monkey was in the icebox—that was a question for the philosophers. My question was, how was I to get this monkey in a position so I could claim it as my own? When I heard George coming it behind me, I tucked that monkey into my shirt and decided to improvise.

“Well, for a fella that's wanting to go swimming, you're taking your sweet time in here,” George said.

“Ah, I was just making sure that the postmaster's milk wouldn't spill against anything in that icebox. It's packed full. Let's get on to the creek!”

Of course, we had two more deliveries to make, and that's where I again let George move on ahead a bit. As soon as he had rounded the corner to the Wiggins's, I propped that monkey up on an inner branch of a thick sagebrush, where it wasn't too easy to see him sitting there smiling on his stick. I waved a



little goodbye to the monkey, knowing that I'd come up with some way of getting him back as soon as I could. We finished up the deliveries and headed on to the creek. Another day, another infraction—it was getting to be a habit.

I conjured up my plan at monkey retrieval to coincide with our walk home from Sunday school—that way, I could start off the week with a clean conscience and go from there. As we sauntered by the sagebrush I let out a whoop, “George, look! There’s some kind of neat toy caught up in that sage!”

He cooperated just like a big brother should (most of the time they don’t, if you didn’t already know), admiring my demonstration of the monkey’s pole antics. “Well if that don’t beat all! What’s a keen toy like that doing in the bushes? Look at that monkey go!”

It didn’t take long for our happiness to dry up like a melon in the sun, though, because Mr. Postmaster himself had been watching from one of his windows up above, and he’d obviously been doing some planning of his own.

“Hello, boys,” he called out to us, “I see you’ve come across my little monkey. I’d like all three of you to come into the house; we have something to discuss.”

George grumbled a bit and walked on in. My first thought was that I could light out for Mexico, but I knew that I didn't like spicy food all that much. I just slumped my head and went on in. It only got worse when we were set down in the postmaster's parlor; we all knew my father would be walking up the road from church, and we could see the postmaster looking out the same window from which he'd hailed us. I figured that since I was probably going to be executed for these crimes, I should apologize to George for all the bad things I done to him over the years. I was feeling very solemn indeed.

After the postmaster beckoned my father in, they—with us within earshot—discussed the entire crime spree, which the postmaster had apparently been keeping close tabs on since the broken milk bottle. When George started staring at me during their discussion, I felt like I was getting to be the smallest six-year-old boy you could ever see.

“No brother of mine would be filching cream and butter, even from a postmaster!” he hissed at me.

“Aw, George, it was an accident, sort of. A little bit ....” I kind of trailed off, and then I overheard my father and the postmaster discussing possible punishments; their conversation ranged over teachers, suspensions, judges, courtrooms, police, and jails—I figured I'd never swim in the creek again until I was a

very old man. Well, I had thought the sky was falling, but it ended up more like a basket of acorns: they decided to impose the strict penalty that George and I would have to wash and dry the family dishes for a week. I guess my conscience was supposed to be cleaned along with those dishes.

You might be wondering how this big tale of small woe would make its way to an eclipse of the sun, and I'm glad you stuck around to see. Well, some weeks after the culmination of my crime spree and my quick comeuppance, enough time for a boy like me to think that that might have been some other boy, maybe one I'd read about, that did those terrible things, there was an announcement at school. We were told that we could witness a very rare event: the sun's full shading by the ball of the moon in bright day—a total solar eclipse!

Even at six years old, I knew this was probably as big a thing as when Sim Tracher's hog fell into the well and had to be brought out by the volunteer fire department. I was eager to see this event. Better yet, we got to go outside during class time. We were told to line up outside and receive these special pieces of smoked glass to protect our young eyes from that celestial glory.

I went outside in nervous expectation with all the rest of the class, but what do I see when I get to

the table where the glass is being passed out but the postmaster doing the distribution! That was a hot hornet in my hair—the whole account of those locked gates and that postmaster tricking me with that monkey came right back square into the present. With a sour look on my face, I took my piece of glass from the postmaster and lined up with the others.

But I wasn't about to give that postmaster the satisfaction of seeing me bend to him, nope, not a bit. It got dark and strange all around us, and the kids were shouting out in excitement, but I didn't look up from the ground, not once, not for the full passing of those bodies in the sky, not so that postmaster could win again. Sure, it was the only eclipse in all of my eighty-six years, but that's not the point. If that postmaster approached me today, even the time of day would be safe in my hands. Even at six years old, I knew he needed to be taught a lesson. I hear the next eclipse is going to be better anyway.