

The Tombstone Stranger

By

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The year was 1881. I was 12 years old then. That was the year mah family moved out west to Tombstone, Arizona. Tombstone was a boomin' silver town back then an' my Pa thought that he could prospect an' make enough in a year or so for us to go back to Chicago an' start a family business.

It was early November, 1881. The town was still reeling from the big shoot out the week before between the Earp brothers an' the Cow-Boys. Yeah, *the* Gunfight at the OK Corral is what you know it as today. Back then it didn't have a fancy name. If they talked about it folks just referred to it as "The Shoot-Out." You can look up the facts yer self over who shot first or who started what, it's not important for this story.

Fact o'the matter is the town was on pins an' needles waitin' for the other shoe to drop. Everyone knew the Cow-Boys wasn't gonna take the killin' of anyone from their group without gettin' their revenge. Everyone in town knew it was comin' an' we was all waitin' for it, but no one knew when it was comin' or who would be bringin' it..

The tension in town is part of the reason why the day the Stranger came to town stands out in my mind til this day. I was waiting outside Dreysdales' General Store while Ma was inside picking up some flour and sugar. Pa's birthday was comin' up an' she wanted a nice birthday cake waitin' for 'im when he come back from weeks o' prospectin'. That's when I first saw the Stranger.

He come ridin' inta town on a beautiful black stallion. The Stranger was a big imposing man, dressed in black from head to toe in traditional western garb. He had thick black hair that went down jus' past his shoulders, an' he had a thick beard that looked like it hadn't been trimmed in weeks. He had a presence about 'im that commanded respect. He was a sight that a person wouldn't never forget had they seen him.

Not that strangers an' new comers was uncommon back then, in fact drifters, bandits, or even regular folk heading further west to Yuma an' beyond was near an everyday occurrence. But somethin' bout this Stranger was different. As he come on horseback down the center of Freemont Street everythin' hurried outta his way. An' I mean not just townfolk, everthin'.

Old Man Teters was moving a couple dozen head o' cattle up Fifth Street to the auction block 'bout the same time the Stranger was comin' up on the intersection at Fifth an' Freemont. Now wit' all the foot, horse an' stage coach traffic in town movin' cattle thru town ain't the easiest thin' ta do an' Old Man Teters was havin' a hard time keepin' the lot close ta'gether. One bull on tha right hand side decided he was gonna break off an' go his own way east down Freemont.

That bull was makin' straight for that Stranger an' it wasn't movin' for no man on horseback. Now normal folk would get out'tha way of a stray bull, but not the Stranger. He didn't even slow down much less stop. He kept ridin' straight on at that bull. An' when that bull realized that tha rider an' horse wasn't getting' out his way that bull let out

a big huff and dug his hoof into the ground a few times. Now I ain't been raised on no farm an' I ain't been livin' in the wild west but a few months and I know this bull is fixin' to charge the Stranger.

The Stranger kept movin' forward towards that bull like it was a kitten in the street an' that bull kept diggin' his hoof in for a charge. Old Man Teters was yellin' at the bull to come back; yellin' at the Stranger to get away.

Now what happen next I ain't n'ever seen nuthin' like it b'fore and I ain't seen nuthin' like it since. Seein' as how the Stranger wasn't takin' the warnin' the bull huffed an' charged. The Stranger cocked his head a bit to one side an' held out his right hand. Now I'm thinkin' tha Stranger is skinnin' his pistol to take aim, but there ain't nuhtin' in his hand. He waved his hand slowly from left ta right in front of himself an' that bull stopped dead in its' tracks an' reared up on his hind legs like he had a lasso 'round his neck that was tied to a buildin'.

Still holdin' his arm out tha Stranger let his hand fall limp at the wrist an' then he waved his hand up, just like you would shoo a dog of the chesterfield. That bull turned tail an' bolted right for tha rest of the herd. It 'bout knocked Charlie, one o' Old Man Teters hands, inta next week an' sent the rest o' the herd scatterin' all o'er town.

In all that mass of chaos an' confusion the Stranger just kept a ridin' turnin' slowly toward the General Store. Dismountin' his horse in front of the store the Stranger called out to me in an English accent, "You got a name boy?"

"Yessir. Henry sir."

The Stranger reached into his pocket an' pulled outta gold coin an' tossed it ta me, "Henry, take my horse to a water basin an' then put a feed bag on him. Keep whatever change is left for your self."

The coin felt heavy in mah hand. I looked down to see I was holdin' a \$10 gold piece. I lept over tha railin' of the store porch an' walked over to tha Strangers horse an' he handed me tha reins.

The Stranger made his way up the steps of the porch, "Go with Henry Triton."

Now I swear to ya, that horse nodded his head like he understood the Stranger. Ya won't believe me, but I swear it's the God honest truth.

Anywho, back to tha Stranger. It was always hard fer me ta judge man's height when he was on horseback an' while the Stranger looked like a large man it wasn't until I was up close to him that I realized just how big tha man was. The man actually had to duck his head goin' in the door of tha General Store.

I was standin' there jus in awe of the man when I felt Triton tuggin' on the reins. We made our way over ta Smittys' Stables an' Triton had a long drink before' I slipped a feed bag ont a him, just like the Stranger said. The Stranger mus' a been ridin' that horse pretty hard for days the way that Triton went at the water an' feed. Less than half an hour an' we was on our way back ta the General Store.

As we made our way back up Freemont Street I could see the Stranger sitting on the front porch of the General Store sippin' a cup a java. I wrapped Tritons' reins ont a the post an' walked up the steps. The Stranger mustta been jus' as hungry as that horse as he had two empty plates sitting on the table.

"Horse is all watered and fed sir, jus' as ya said."

"Thank you Henry."

"Uh, about the money sir."

The Stranger sipped at his coffee, "Yes?"

"Well sir, it's just that, the water n feed come only ta one dollar total, an ya give me a ten dollar piece, and well, it's jus' I don't think that it would be right a me ta take nine dollars for a pretty small chore."

The Stranger took another sip o' coffee, "Why do you think that?"

"Well ta be honest mister, my Pa will wail on me when he finds out I took more then a fair amount for the work."

The Stranger downed the last bit o' coffee an' set the cup down on the table, leaned forward an' took a good long stare at me. He had the darkest brown eyes I have ever seen. They were almost black.

I knew he was measurin' me up an' I stood up straight an' looked him dead in the eyes. My Pa always told me, look a man in the eyes an' let him know what kind o' man you are. I didn't know why at the time, but I knew I needed ta let the Stranger see what kind o' man I was.

A smile slowly crept ont a the Strangers face an' he leaned back in his chair, "Well Henry, I can see that you're a man of principles and that there is no changing your mind on this. Am I right?"

"Nossir, I mean yessir. No changin' mah mind."

"Then perhaps you will feel better about taking my money if you did a few more chores for me?"

I thought careful for a moment b'fore I spoke, "Yes. Yes sir, I think my Pa would be alright with the wages for a few more chores."

"Very well then Henry. Let's see. Do you know if Mr. Dreysdales' store here carry's and cigars?"

"Oh yes sir. My Pa likes ta have a smoke after a meal too,' I said lookin' at his empty plates.

"Would you go inside and purchase a dollars worth of cigars for me please."

"Right away!"

Once inside I run right past my momma an' Mrs. Dreysdale who was gossipin' over tea at one o'the tables and plunked down a dollar on the counter, "One dollars worth o' cigars please."

Mr. Dreysdale took one look at me an' then over to my momma, "Ma'am?"

"Henry, where ever did you get that money? And cigars?"

"Sorry momma, they ain't fer me, they're for the Stranger. He paid me to take his horse ta water n' feed an' to get the cigars for 'im."

"It's alright Mr. Dreysdale."

"Yes ma'am. Ok Henry. Here you go."

"Thank you," I said takin' the sack an' started back fer the porch.

Back outside the Stranger was tendin' ta Triton.

"One dollars worth of cigars sir," I said handin' him the sack.

"Thank you Henry," he said openin' up the sack, "Now. I have one more job for you."

"Yessir?"

The Stranger took three cigars out o' his sack. He put one in his mouth an' handed me the other two, "These are for your father. Tell him they are for teaching you to be a good honest man."

"Uh, thank you sir."

The Stranger struck up a match he dug outta his pocket an' lit up his cigar. The smoke rose up from him like a chimney, spreadin' out from under his cowboy hat and into the sky. He took a couple o' deep drags to get it lit and then shook the match out.

"Have you lived in town long Henry?"

"Since Feberary sir."

"Is there a certain part of town that your parents have warned you to stay away from? A part of town that maybe decent folk frown upon?"

"Yessir there is. A few blocks down, between Second and Third Street is Hop Town."

"What's Hop Town Henry?"

"It's the Chinese Quarter o'town. I've over heard my folks talkin' about Cow-Boys goin there fer laudlum and ladies fer hire. That the kind o'place ya meaning?"

"Perhaps. The Marshall make is way there often?"

"No sir. Can't say I have ever seen or heard about the Marshall goin' in Hop Town."

"Sounds like a good place for a man running from the law to hide out. That's the place I'm looking for."

I swallowed a huge lump that appeared in mah throat, "Are you runnin' from the law? My Pa won't want me takin' jobs from a man runnin from the law."

"The Stranger looked at me and grinned, "You're right Henry, I expect he would frown on that. No, I'm not running from the law, I'm looking for someone running from the law."

"You a lawman?"

"Something like that," he said reaching into his saddle bag. He pulled out a wanted poster an' handed it ta me, "Seen this man around town?"

I recognized he face straight away. I'd seen the feller in town more then a few times. I read over the poster. WANTED for MURDER: COLE MITCHELL \$5,000. DEAD or ALIVE.

"Wanted for murder," the lump returned to mah throat.

"Am I in the right place Henry?"

"Yessir. I've seen this man in town."

“Recently?”

“Jus’ a few days ago. Momma sent me to Doc Sampson’s ta pick up sum ointment for my sisters’ prickly heat.”

“Was he alone?”

“No sir, he was wit’ at least four others last time I saw him. One of em, Charlie Haskers, I’ve heard my Pa talk about him. He runs a house o’ girls in Hop Town. Had a run in with Marshall Earp not too long ago.”

“Earp? Wyatt Earp?”

“That’s the Marshall’s brother. Marshall is Virgil Earp.”

“You a friend of the Earps sir?”

“We’ve met.”

“You gonna want their help with this feller?”

“No Henry, that won’t be necessary. In fact I’d like you to keep it to your self that I’m looking for Cole. Can you do that?”

“Yessir.”

“You’re a good man Henry. You do your folks proud.”

“Thank you sir.”

“You stay here and mind Triton for a bit, I’m gonna talk a walk over to Hop Town and have a look around.” He patted the horse on the neck, “Keep an eye on the boy Triton.”

Again, I swear the horse understood the Stranger an’ nodded a yes.

I watched the Stranger make his way down Freemont Street an’ disappear into Hop Town. My folks had always been very stern in regards to keepin’ clear o’ Hop Town. I was never sure if tha stories my Pa told me about tha place were’ true or not, but if they was even half true I can’t imagine goin’ in there alone, especially lookin’ fer a murderer.

About ten minutes had gone by when tha sound o’ gun shots broke the afternoon quiet. Can’t right say how many shots I heard, but it sounded like at least half a dozen six shooters had been emptied in less then a minute.

Porches along both sides of Freemont Street filled wit’ folks shortly after the sound of tha shots faded an’ the silence returned.

The Stranger come outta Hop Town an' slowly made his way back towards Dreysdales. The sun mus' a been playin' tricks on me cuz it shore looked like there was a bright light surroundin' the Stranger. Like he was glowin'. I couldn't see his face yet as he was almost lookin' at the ground as he walked. Somethin' told me he had ta do wit' all the shootin' an' I wondered if he had been hurt.

The sound o' the shootin' brought Marshall Earp, arm in a sling n'all out from his office near Schieffelin Hall. Lookin' out towards Hop Town he spotted the Stranger an' made his way out to tha middle o' Freemont Street an' waited fer the Stranger. The Marshall tucked his overcoat back behind his side arm in case he needed to make a quick draw.

Them porches quickly emptied again in anticipation of another shoot out. The glowin' around the Stranger faded as he neared the Marshall.

"I can't say I thought I would ever see you again Marcus," the Marshall said.

The Stranger didn't look up as he stopped in front o' the Marshall, "Afternoon Virgil."

"You know anything about all that racket I just heard?"

The Stranger didn't answer right off, he jus' slowly looked up at the Marshall, an' that's when I saw; them eyes. Golden glowing eyes. An' I mean the whole eye, it was nuthin' but gold light. I rubbed my own eyes an' did a double take. I ain't never seen eyes like that. I had ta be fifty feet away an' there was no doubt. His eyes was like divine light.

The Marshall took off his hat an' wiped his forehead with his sleeve, "I've seen that look in yer eyes before Marcus."

"Then you know to stay out of my way Virgil."

The Marshall looked around an' took in a deep breath an' exhaled, "I'll keep the towns folk out of your way, but you make it quick. Not like Kansas."

"No, not like Kansas. This time it's just one. I'll be gone by morning," the Stranger said, tippin' his hat.

The Marshall returned the gesture and headed towards Hop Town.

The Stranger made his way back to where Triton an' me was at. I went to ask him what happened in Hop Town, but seeing him up close made me swallow mah words. There was a bullet hole in his coat three or four inches under his left shoulder.

I thought ta mah self *This man should be dead.*

"Mister, you been shot. Let me take ya to the doc."

The Stranger looked down at the bullet hole, like he didn't even know it was there an' he let out a small laugh, "No doctor is necessary Henry."

I started ta panic, an' if I wasn't holdin' onta Triton's reins I woulda been runnin' round yellin' for the doc.

The Stranger looked at me, his glowing eyes slowly dimmin' and fadin' back to normal. He put his hand on mah shoulder, "Calm your self Henry. I'm all right. See."

He lifted his over coat an' showed me his chest. No wound. No blood. Nuthin' but a hole in his shirt an' pale white skin underneath.

Ah just shook mah head in disbelief, "But how can that be? And the light an' your eyes?"

"I'm not quite what I seem to be Henry. I don't have time to explain it right now, I found out Mitchell is staying with a lady at a house on Toughnut Street. I need to find him before he goes on the run again. Just keep this to your self for now and I'll explain everything to you later. Deal?"

I'm not sure if it was his accent or his hand on mah shoulder, but as he spoke ta me I felt a sense of calm came over me. What else could I say but, "Deal."

He took mah right hand an' pressed a \$10 piece into it, "Put Triton up in the stable for me."

"Yessir."

With that the Stranger headed off towards Toughnut Street an' Triton an' I made our way to the stables. I wasn't sure what ta do then, so I just waited with Triton. That horse sure did like a good brushin' an' it took mah mind offa everythin' I had jus' seen.

It started getting' dark out an' the Stranger hadn't come back yet. I wanted ta wait, but I had to be getting' home, "I gotta be getting' home Triton."

Just like with the Stranger Triton nodded his head like he understood every word.

Back home I ate dinner in silence, a rarity in those days, an' after helpin' with dishes I made my way out ta the front porch. I sat there for an hour thinkin' about the events of the day. Watchin'. Waitin. But no Stranger. I started ta doze off when I heard the faint sound of horse hooves an' footsteps in the rocky dirt road.

Peerin' out into the darkness the figure of a man an' horse slowly emerged. The glow was gone, but it was the Stranger and Triton.

“Good evening Henry.”

“Evenin’ sir,” I said comin’ off the porch ta meet him.

“Triton wanted me to thank you for the brushing.”

The idea that the horse talked back to him wasn’t even a surprise, ‘You’re welcome boy,” I said pettin’ his neck, “Did ya get yer man?”

“Yes. I always get my man, eventually,” he took a seat on the steps, “Now, you have questions I assume?”

“Yes please. What did Marshall Earp mean ‘bout ‘Not like Kansas?’”

The Stranger took a deep breath before speakin’, “I was after three brothers. Really bad men. There was a lot of blood shed before I could bring all three to justice.”

“Was I seein’ things or were you really shinin’ like a candle comin’ outta Hop Town?”

He laughed an’ shook his head, “No you weren’t seeing things.”

“An’ your eyes?”

“It’s Divine Light Henry. Whenever I’m doing His work.”

“You mean God?”

“Yes.”

“You an angel?”

He sat back an stared at the sky, “No. I’m not an angel. I’m...something else. I was just a man once, but that was a long time ago.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Have your ever heard the saying that God has a plan for everyone?”

“Yessir.”

“Well that’s true to an extent. It’s more like...God gives people different paths they can choose to go down. Not everyone follows Gods’ plan for them. He gave us too much free will. Sometimes people take a different path then what God envisioned for them. Sometimes, that’s alright, people still choose a good path. Then there’s the Devil. He offers people paths too. Sometimes the person chooses the Devils’ path over Gods’ path.

The path they choose corrupts their soul. When that happens it's up to me, or someone like me to find them and stop them."

"An' that's what you did today?"

"Yes."

"Why you?"

He hung his head an' his voice went soft, "My wife and children were...murdered. I wanted the man brought to justice. I prayed to God for the power to find the man and bring him to justice. An angel appeared to me and offered me a path. I gave up my normal life and became one of God's Arma Vindicare. Roughly translated from Latin that means God's Arm of Vengeance."

"Vengeance is mine..." I uttered.

The Stranger stood, "...I will repay, saith the Lord. What verse Henry?"

"Romans I think."

"Romans Chapter 12 Verse 19."

He extended his hand to me, "Thank you again for all your help Henry."

I stood an' shook his hand before he mounted Triton, "Will I ever see you again sir?"

"You can call me Marcus, and no, I don't think you will see me again."

"Then goodbye Marcus. Bye Triton."

Triton nodded his head an' huffed a goodbye.

"One more thing Henry, When is your father due back from prospecting?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"When he gets back you and him go see Marshall Earp. Virgil will have something for you."

"Have what?"

"A thank you for your help. Remember Henry, God presents paths to all of us, but you can choose which one to take. Goodbye."

"I'll remember. Goodbye."

With that the Stranger rode off into the night and true to his word, I never saw him again.

Two days later Pa came back from prospecting and we celebrated his birthday and I told him about the Stranger. I think he thought I embellished a few parts of the story, but he was proud that I insisted on a fair wage for the work I did for Marcus.

The next day he took me to see Marshall Earp. When we got there we were told the Marshall was out, but that he would be right back. I waited there while Pa made for the outhouse. Wasn't a minute later that Marshall Earp walked in.

"Hello Henry. I've been expecting you."

"Hi Marshall. Pa is out back."

"Ok Henry," he said as he sat down at his desk.

"Marshall, is Marcus really what he says he is?"

"Lord I hope so Henry," he whispered, "I saw that man shot twice in the gut once. Wounds would have killed any man, but nothing to him. I sleep a bit easier at night knowing he is out there."

Pa came back in from outside, "Hello Virgil. What've ya got for the boy?"

"Welcome back Hank. Working on it right now. Any luck out there?"

"Not enough to move us back home yet."

"I have a feeling this might help," the Marshall put a piece of paper on the desk, "Sign this here at the bottom Henry, and Hank right under his."

Pa picked the paper up, "What's this?"

"It's the arrest report and reward claim for Cole Mitchell."

"This says the reward is \$5000.00," Pa shouted.

"Yup."

"Why is Henry's name on this? Arresting party?"

"Well our friend Marcus had me list Henry as the person responsible for Cole's capture. Says the boy was a big help to him."

"But we can't take this."

The Marshall gave me a wink, “It’s all legal Hank. The reward belongs to the boy.”

“Pa, can we keep it. Isn’t that enough to start a business back home?”

Pa looked like he could cry, “Yes Henry, this is plenty. Thank you Virgil.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank the boy. I know Marcus pretty well. He can spot a good soul a mile a way.”

I just stared at that arrest report with my name on it and smiled, “I see the path Marcus.”

With that money we moved back to Chicago and Pa opened a restaurant serving Southwestern fare. I worked there for Pa until I was old enough to join the Chicago Police Force. Like I said, I saw the path. My name appeared on hundreds of arrest reports over the years. I did mah 20 years for CPD an’ I retired as a Captain. After that I moved out west with my wife.

I worked another 5 years for the Cochise County, most of that time I spent in or around Tombstone. I never saw Marcus again, but I never forgot the day the Stranger walked into town and changed my life.

The End