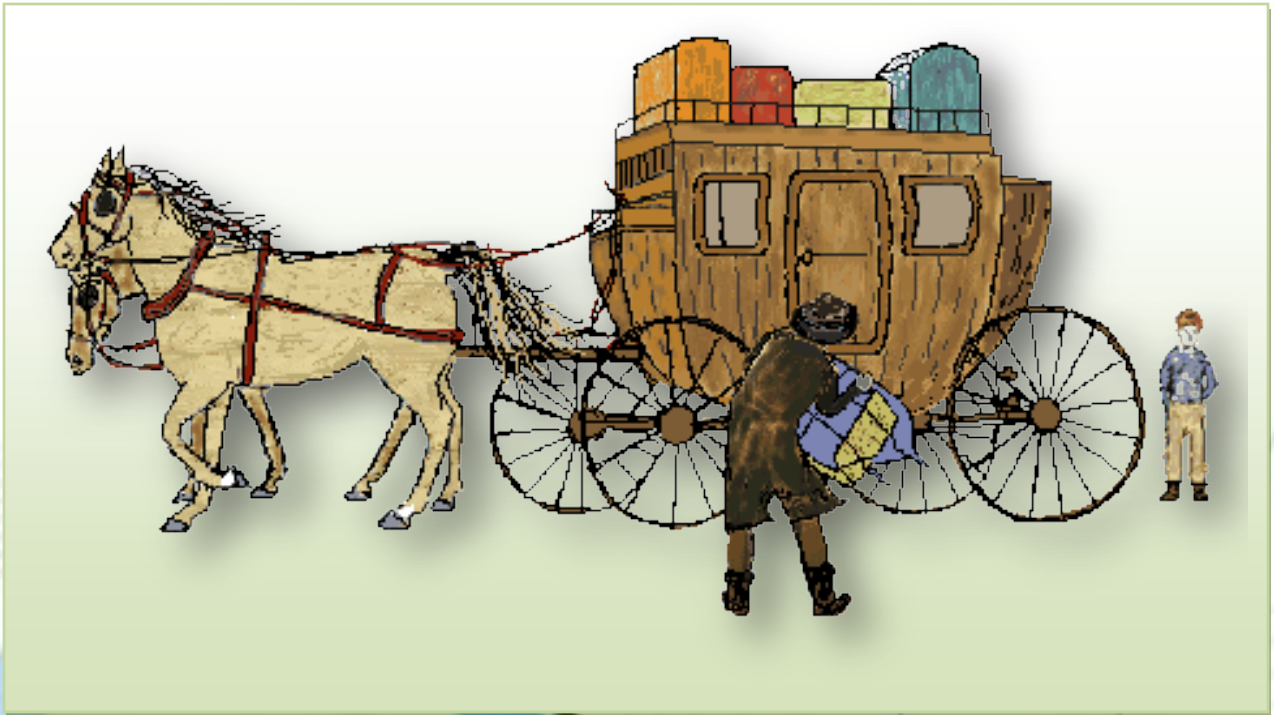




PERFORM
English Club



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Sliver Pete

Carol Moore

I've never told this story before, but just the same I'm telling you now.

I was a boy of 8 in 1885 and I lived in a small town out west with my baby sister and my folks who ran the local delivery stable. It might not have been such a bad place except for one man.

His name was Sliver Pete and we thought him the meanest, ugliest, most cussed hombre that ever packed a gun and it was well known he carried a Colt 45. He didn't much like to work, was a cowpoke a few months out of the year and the rest of the time he played and cheated at cards and killed anybody who called him on it. Then for recreation or just pure spite he killed every sheriff that ever tried to arrest him. There wasn't a soul that didn't fear Sliver Pete, even my Father.

The townspeople ended up offering a reward of \$20,000 to anyone who could either run Sliver Pete out of town or put him in his grave. Mind you, that was a fortune in those days but when Sliver Pete heard there was a price on his head he just laughed and shot up the saloon and then the bakery. He said he was worth much more money than that. And when stranger after stranger came to collect the reward they came to stay because Sliver Pete put them in the town cemetery.

One very windy day the stagecoach arrived in town with an unusual passenger. I was there to witness it because it was my duty to water the stagecoach horses. The stagecoach door swung open and a single man, tall and gaunt and dressed in a brown/black coat and hat, with a white collar, stepped out. I had seen pictures of Abraham Lincoln and that is who this man reminded me of, although I knew Abraham Lincoln would not have been wearing a preacher's clothes. He waved the coachman away as he reached for his own trunk off the roof of the coach. The trunk was wrapped in a blue cloth that flapped in the wind although partially tied with a rope. Just as he got it to the ground a gust tore at the material and I clearly saw the writing on its side. He grabbed the cloth and stuffed it back into place, glancing straight at me. Then he smiled a slow smile, winked, and put his index finger to his mouth as if to say we shared a secret. That's the only incident I saw

myself and all the rest I heard secondhand through either my folks or my friends.

The man called himself Preacher Dan. He said he hadn't come to stay but he was in our town on the Lord's business to get money to build a church. He'd already acquired most of it, but people were surprised when he said he planned on making the remainder by playing cards and that God had told him he would win the rest that he needed in just one night. Although such behavior was improper for a preacher nobody questioned it. He had a quiet manner and quick smile and, anyway, strangers never stayed too long.

That afternoon the card game started early. Among the four players around the table was Sliver Pete. Sliver Pete was his mean self, slouched in his chair with a whisky at his elbow. I was told Preacher Dan didn't say a word the first hour although he smiled readily enough if anyone caught his eye.

The first two games were won by Mike McGrew and Tom Eider, town regulars. The purse was small. There was static in the air like just before an electric storm. The third game the purse grew bigger and Sliver Pete won this round. He smiled for the first time and Preacher Dan smiled back.

"Nice going," the Preacher said. "I see the Lord's in need of help tonight."

Sliver Pete smirked.

But Preacher Dan wasn't finished. "I been eyeing that gun of yours. May I see it?"

The room grew suddenly quiet as Sliver Pete's smile vanished as quick as a Bluetail fly beneath a horse's tail swat. "No man touches my gun but me."

"Oh. I didn't mean anything by it," the Preacher grinned. "You know I'm not a man. Just a messenger of God. Don't usually cotton to guns

either, but I hear you're right handy with one and I sure wanted to see the smoker that's done the damage."

Perhaps it was the hint of admiration in his voice, or maybe God intervened to soften Sliver's mood, but to everyone's surprise, Sliver Pete unholstered his Colt 45 and put it on the table. His eyes glowered about the room as if daring anybody to disapprove.

Preacher Dan calmly retrieved the gun and examined it thoroughly, looking up the barrel and bouncing it gently in his hand to weigh it. Suddenly, unaccountably it slipped from his fingers onto the floor. Kerplunk...

Sliver Pete jumped to his feet, sliding his chair back with a squeal. But just as quick the Preacher leaned over and retrieved the gun, wiping it with his jacket hem and sleeve. "Sorry 'bout that," he said, handing it back.

"Better sorry than dead," growled Sliver Pete. But there was a noticeable sigh of relief from the room as he holstered the 45 and sat back down.

After that things seemed to pick up speed as the bets got bigger. Mike McGrew pushed away from the table. "Too rich for my blood," he said. Now there were three left at the table, including Sliver and the Preacher, and Sliver Pete was winning big time. He had a small mountain of bills and coins and, recklessly, was playing for bigger and bigger stakes.

If Preacher Dan felt pressure he didn't show it although all his Church money was fast going to Sliver Pete. At last, just before dusk, the last call of cards came and Sliver had won it all. He wrapped his burly arms about the pot and began drawing it to him.

"Just a moment." The voice was soft and deadly and a startled Sliver didn't at first realize it came from the Preacher who added, "You been

cheating all night and if you take that money now you can add thievery to the deed."

Sliver's hand went to his gun, but knowing the Preacher didn't carry a gun he held it there like a threat. "I don't cheat and I don't let no one call me one neither. Not even a preacher."

"Is that so? Let the Lord decide. That is, if you care to take your fight to the street where it's right and proper and you're not afraid to meet your maker," said the Preacher.

"Why, you don't even own a gun," sneered Sliver, "And you wouldn't know to shoot one anyhow." He literally spit out the words.

"I'm no match, that fact's assured. But God said I'd have that money tonight and you won't make him a liar." The Preacher's eyes narrowed with serious intent. "So long as someone here sees fit to loan me his gun, whomever remains standing will have spoke the truth."

Because Sliver Pete had never turned down a gunfight in his life and the Preacher was handed a gunbelt with two guns by the bartender, they ended up outside at opposite ends of the street. A small crowd gathered, not so much to witness Sliver Pete kill another man, but in sympathetic support of a foolish preacher who was about to die for the sake of his church.

The two men stood there a seeming eternity, each with their gun hand poised and ready. Then gun fire rang out and the look and smell of gun smoke filled the air. Sliver Pete blew away the smoke at end of his gun barrel as he saw the tall figure of Preacher Dan hit the dirt. Cries of anguish came from womenfolk in the crowd.

But Sliver Pete was unconcerned and made it a point to look bored. He had holstered his gun and started his walk back to the saloon when he noticed the body of the Preacher begin to move. Now Sliver Pete had never failed to kill with his first shot and he watched, fascinated, as the Preacher stood up and again pointed his borrowed gun. So Sliver Pete had to shoot him again, actually two shots just to be sure. The Preacher fell like a cut tree, straight down with his face in the dirt.

Sliver wiped his forehead with his gun hand still holding the gun and his eyes steady on the body of the Preacher. But what he hadn't expected to happen happened yet again. The crowd gasped as they saw the Preacher struggle once more to his feet.

This time Sliver Pete didn't even give the Preacher a chance to aim. For the first time in his life there was fear in his expression. Two gun shots rang out and the Preacher pitched over.

The crowd edged back from the street. There was something decidedly unnerving and otherworldly about this gunfight when a man wouldn't stay dead. It occurred to them maybe the Preacher had spoke the truth about his conversation with God. The same thing had occurred to Sliver Pete, because with a pale face he very slowly approached the body. He was 20 feet away when the Preacher again struggled to his knees and then his feet, this time holding out his hand palm up as if to say, "You owe me that money". The Preacher's black eyes bored into and through Sliver Pete and understandably Sliver responded with panic, this time aiming at the Preacher's head. It was his last bullet.

As the shot rang out Preacher Dan's hand slapped his forehead and his body swung a complete circle before falling face down into the dirt. Nobody and nothing moved except a corner of the Preacher's black jacket caught by a gust of wind. Sliver Pete was shaking so bad he simply couldn't tear his gaze off that body and the crowd looked from him to it and didn't know which was more incredible. They'd never seen Sliver Pete so afraid nor witnessed a dead man come back to life before.

Then there was a small movement just at the waist. A bird, a white dove, struggled free from beneath the body and with a gentle "coo, coo," flapped its wings and flew up into a cloudy sky and disappeared from sight.

Now I don't know what you would make of that, but the townsfolk and Sliver Pete both saw it as a sign from God. Truly this had been God's messenger and Sliver Pete had just killed the messenger. Unnerved he

began backing away and had gotten 10 steps when the Preacher's body twitched and slowly pulled itself upwards to a standing position.

"Where are you going?" it boomed in a deep, sepulcher voice from the grave. "You owe me the Lord's money."

Sliver Pete simply fell apart. He gave a strangled squeak of terror, dropped his gun, whirled on his heels and ran up the street until he was out of sight. The stunned crowd watched him go before setting their fearful gaze back on the Preacher. Standing straight he flashed them a wide, friendly smile and suddenly didn't look so dead. True, there was blood on his forehead but with one sweep of his sleeve it mysteriously disappeared.

"That's one problem you won't see again," he said in a voice again friendly. "And don't worry yourselves 'bout me. Except, that is, unless you don't want to make good on your promise of a reward for getting rid of that snake Sliver Pete." He winked.

The townsfolk were happy to give Preacher Dan the reward. He didn't even collect all of it, only half, leaving the rest for the town church. Nobody ever heard from Sliver Pete again, although it was rumored he hadn't stopped running 'til he'd got to New Mexico, married and become a farmer, never to touch a gun again. People couldn't stop talking about how a man could be shot six times and rise up as if he hadn't been shot at all. But no one dared ask Preacher Dan to explain it and he left town so it remained a mystery to everyone except me.

You see, I remembered the day I saw the writing on the side of his trunk revealed by a pesky wind. It had said, "Dan the Magnificent. Magician's Illusions Great and Small." So Preacher Dan was not a preacher, but a gifted magician. I figure when he dropped Sliver Pete's gun at the card table he switched it for one with blanks. The white dove had just been for effect. Here was a man schooled in the ways of human nature and he had done us a great favor while being paid for his services. I thought at that time far be it for me to give away his secrets.

Some say it wasn't a preacher or even a dead man that got up off that dusty road, but an angel of the Lord himself, and in a manner of speaking that might be so.

But only God, Dan the Magnificent, and me -- and now you -- really knows the truth of what happened on that windy day in 1885.