

FOUR DOLLARS AND FIFTY CENTS

By Eric Kimmel

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IT'S A TERRIBLE thing to call a cowboy a deadbeat, but in Shorty Long's case it was true. He owed everybody money, from Big Oscar the blacksmith to Widow Macrae, who ran the Silver Dollar Cafe and who everyone said baked the best biscuits west of the Rockies. It wasn't that Shorty was a bad sort; he just hated to pay for anything he thought he could get free.

"You'd best forget about that money Shorty owes you," Big Oscar told the widow one morning while he was having breakfast over at the Silver Dollar. "You got as much chance of collecting that four dollars and fifty cents as seeing Custer ride back from the Little Bighorn."

Widow Macrae picked up her rolling pin and looked Oscar in the eye. "Then tell General Custer to saddle up. I'm driving out to the Circle K this afternoon. If Shorty won't pay what he owes, I'll lay him out flatter'n the bottom of a skillet."



That afternoon, as soon as she finished putting away the lunch dishes, Widow Macrae harnessed her mule to the buckboard and drove out to the Circle K ranch. Duck Pooley saw her coming over the ridge. He rode back to the corral to warn Shorty.

"Widow Macrae's coming! She's got a rolling pin in her lap and a mean look in her eye. She'll be here in an hour. You better come up with that money, Shorty!"

"Boys, you gotta help me!" Shorty yelped.

"Why don't you just pay what you owe?"

"It ain't that simple. I got my reputation to think of. Sides, if word got out that I paid the widow back, everybody I owe money to'd expect the same. I'd end up broker'n a mess of eggs."

The Circle K boys couldn't argue with that. They figured they'd help Shorty out. Taking a few boards and a handful of nails, they knocked together a narrow wooden

box shaped like a coffin. When Widow Macrae drove up, she found Shorty lying in it with his hands folded across his chest and his eyes closed. He looked real peaceful. His bunkmates stood around, sniffing, blubbering, wiping their noses on their sleeves.

Widow Macrae got down from the buckboard. “What happened to Shorty?” she asked.

“He died this morning,” the Circle K boys told her. “A bronco threw him. Stepped on his head.”

Widow Macrae leaned over for a closer look. Shorty’s eyes were shut. He wasn’t breathing. He looked deader’n a Christmas tree in August. But Widow Macrae wasn’t completely sold. Far from it. She’d seen her share of cowboys carried feet first out of a corral, and Shorty’s mug looked a mite too regular for one that just had a bronco step on it. Even so, she kept her suspicions to herself.

“Poor Shorty,” the widow sighed. “He didn’t like to pay his bills, that’s for sure, but otherwise he wasn’t a bad sort. It genuinely hurts my heart to see him this way. Where did you boys say you were burying him?”

“Why ... uh ... right here on the ranch ... uh ... somewheres.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not right. You can’t bury this poor man out here amongst sagebrush and coyotes. Shorty deserves better than that. I know you don’t have time to spare, what with the spring roundup coming on. But I’m willing to take Shorty back to town and see that he gets a decent burial. I’m honored to do it. Shorty Long was my friend.”

That sure was news to Shorty, but seeing as he was supposed to be dead, he kept his mouth shut. As for the Circle K boys, they didn’t know what to say, either. It was an offer they could hardly tum down.

“It’s settled then. I’ll take him with me. Some of you boys load Shorty onto the buckboard. Try not to bounce him around.”

“I’ll nail the lid down,” Duck Pooley volunteered. Duck was enjoying this. Shorty owed him money, too.

“Not just yet,” said the widow. “I’d like to look at him one last time before I put him in the ground.”

Shorty would’ve liked to put Duck Pooley in the ground.

As soon as the coffin was loaded, Widow Macrae headed back toward town. Every time the buckboard hit a bump, she turned around quick, hoping to catch Shorty moving around. But Shorty Long was no fool. He figured she'd try something like that, so he lay perfectly still in his coffin, playing possum, looking deader'n a bear rug.

Just before they reached town, Widow Macrae turned off on the Boot Hill road. That's where they buried cowboys like Shorty who died with their boots on. It was a mighty rough road for a feller's last journey. Shorty's bones rattled around like marbles in a tin can, but he kept his eyes closed and his mouth shut.

Widow Macrae reined in at the top of the hill next to a freshly dug grave. She got down from the buckboard unharnessed her mule, and turned it loose to graze. Then she took hold of the foot end of the coffin and dragged it out of the wagon. Shorty saw stars when the head end hit the ground, but he was bound and determined not to pay that four dollars and fifty cents, so he didn't move.

Widow Macrae studied him hard. "Shorty, if you can hear me, listen good. I don't believe for five minutes that you're dead. I'll be sitting right here with my eye on you all night. If you haven't moved by morning, dead or alive, you're going into the ground."

Poor Shorty! Now he really was in a fix! His choice was pay up or be buried alive. And Shorty couldn't make up his mind which was worse. On the other hand, he still had time. The sun was going down. Something might tum up yet in the hours till dawn. In the meantime Widow Macrae fixed her eyes on him like a stamp to a letter. Shorty lay still in his coffin, not moving a muscle, waiting for something to happen.

On about midnight, something did.

The mule heard it first and let out a commotious braying from the far end of the graveyard. Widow Macrae stood up. Riders! She heard them coming up the Boot Hill road. Quickly she ducked behind a tall tombstone. Widow Macrae wasn't one to believe in ghosts, but in dark and lonely parts it's best to get a good look at strangers before letting them get a look at you. As for Shorty, he was sure his time had come. At any moment he expected to see a posse of dead cowboys riding back from the grave for one last roundup. He lay in his coffin, stiff as sun-dried rawhide, hoping that with all the graves on Boot Hill, they wouldn't notice one extra corpse.

The riders reined in at the top of the hill and dismounted. One lit a lantern. They were three rough-looking hombres, big as bears, with knives and pistols stuck in their

belts. Two of them lugged an iron box over to the open grave. Widow Macrae recognized them at once: Big Nose George Parrott and two of his gang, Smiley Dunlap and the Oregon Kid. The outlaws began talking about a train they had robbed that afternoon just north of Fossil Junction. They'd brought the loot here to divide it up. Boot Hill was the last place anyone would think of looking for outlaws—live ones, anyway.

Poor Shorty! If Big Nose George caught him, he wouldn't have to worry about being a fake corpse. He was so scared his goose bumps had goose bumps. By now he almost wished he'd paid that four dollars and fifty cents. He lay completely still and did the only thing he could do, which was nothing.

“Stand back, boys! I'll settle this business!”

Big Nose George fired three shots into the strongbox padlock. Poor Shorty nearly gave up the ghost. He thought those bullets were meant for him.

“Yahoo! We struck it rich!”

The Oregon Kid kicked open the lid. He and Smiley reached inside and began pulling out handfuls of hundred dollar bills and throwing them in the air. That got Big Nose George real upset. He fired his pistol again.

“Quit that clowning! This ain't the circus! Now you boys pick up them greenbacks and put 'em back in the box where you found 'em!”

“Aw, George!” (Nobody dared call him Big Nose.)

“Aw, George, nothing! We're gonna divvy it up business-like. No grabbing.”

The Kid and Smiley reluctantly picked up the money. One of the bills had landed on Shorty's nose. Smiley found it first.

“Holy Hannah! What's this? There's a dead 'un here!”

“Don't drop your britches, Smiley. Dead 'uns don't bite,” Big Nose George laughed. He put away his pistol and came over for a closer look. “Why, it's some pore cowpoke whose burying had to wait till morning. They should've covered him up, though. It ain't decent leaving him there like that where the buzzards can get at him. But that ain't none of our worry. Bring me them bills, boys, and let's get started.”

Shorty almost flinched when Smiley snatched the bill off his nose. Big Nose George began counting out the loot. He'd never got past the third grade, so he counted real slow. It took a long time.

“One for the Kid . . . one for Smiley . . . one for me. One for the Kid . . . one for Smiley . . . one for me. One for the Kid . . . one for Smiley . . .”

At last the strongbox was empty except for one bag of gold dust.

“How’re we gonna divvy that up?” Smiley asked. “We didn’t bring no measuring scales.”

“Easy! I’ll take it,” the Kid said. He meant it, too.

Lucky for him Big Nose George thought he was fooling. “Naw, we got to do this businesslike. I know! Let’s play daresies. Last one to back down gets the gold.”

“Good idea!” said Smiley. “Kid, you start.”

“O. K.,” the Kid began. “Smiley, I dare you to pinch that dead ’un as hard as you can.”

Smiley came over to the coffin, grabbed a piece of Shorty’s arm, and pinched so hard he almost tore it off. Shorty clenched his teeth to keep from yelling.

Smiley turned to the Kid. “There! I done it! Now I dare you to twist his ear.”

“That’s easy,” said the Kid. He walked over to Shorty’s coffin, grabbed hold of his left ear, and twisted it around so hard he almost turned it the other way. Shorty didn’t know how he kept from yelling that time. All he knew was that if he did, he was a goner.

Now it was Big Nose George’s turn. The Kid and Smiley laughed and said, “Let’s see you twist his nose.”

Big Nose George drew his bowie knife. “I’ll do you one better. “I’ll cut the dang thing off!”

That was enough for Shorty. He sat up in his coffin and hollered, “Now hold on, boys! I ain’t that dead!”

Big Nose George nearly dropped his teeth. He and his gang shot out of that graveyard faster than fireworks. As for Widow Macrae, she laughed fit to bust. When she was all laughed out, she came around from behind that tombstone and gave Shorty the scolding of his life .

“Why, you rascal! You nearly got your nose cut off for four dollars and fifty cents.”

Poor Shorty was too embarrassed to say anything. He helped the widow gather up the money the outlaws had left behind. In the morning they took it to the railroad agent in town. He gave them a five-hundred dollar reward to divide between them.

Shorty breathed a deep sigh of relief. "I reckon we're even now."

"Not quite," said Widow Macrae. "You still owe me four dollars and fifty cents."

Shorty stared glumly at his pile of fifty dollar bills. "I don't have no change. How about if I come by tomorrow and settle up?"

"I'll be expecting you," said Widow Macrae.

But as far as anyone knows, he hasn't paid her yet.