

God Can Change Anyone

by

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The stranger stepped wearily out of the saddle, wiping the worst of the sweat-muddied dust from his face with a large bandanna. He was still half-hitching the reigns to the rail when the hostler came out to take his horse. The traveler followed them back to the stable, where he personally rubbed the tired black down before inquiring about lodging for himself.

“If you like it rowdy, try the Paradise, two doors down on this side of the road. If you want good food, a hot bath and a clean bed, go to the Traveler’s Inn further down on the other side. Either way, this is Saturday, so the Hanging Noose boys will be hanging around. Steer clear of them if you don’t want trouble,” the hostler advised.

The stranger slipped his rifle from its scabbard, gathered up his saddlebags, and stumbled across the dirt ruts that served for a street. He registered as “A. Stranger” for a single night at the Traveler’s Inn, and went straight upstairs for a hot bath.

The huge old grandfather clock in the lobby was chiming the seventh hour of the evening as the refreshed stranger walked into the hotel dining room. He had deep set twinkling eyes, a wide jaw, and broad muscular shoulders. He dressed neatly and wore a well groomed beard. He wore no guns, and might have been a wrangler, with his sun-burned face and red neck; but he chose a seat near the rear door at the far end of the room and kept his back to the wall. He seemed at ease, but never took his eyes off the slowly changing crowd of diners for long.

A petite waitress was at his table in an instant. Her reserved demeanor, simple hairdo, and unpainted features complimented the delightfully feminine form that shaped her modest clothing perfectly. She poured his coffee without even asking. He ordered a simple meal, and had to consciously pull his eyes away from the girl to resume his careful appraisal of each person in the room as he sipped the hot strong liquid.

“Any church service in town tomorrow?” he asked when the pretty waitress brought his food.

“Used to have it in here from ten to eleven o’clock every Sunday,” she answered quietly, “but the Noose boys busted up the service and chased the minister out of town a couple of months ago. They said we didn’t need a church in this town, and most folks are probably afraid to come anymore. Dad says it isn’t their town, and he’ll have church any time we’ve got a preacher.”

"If your father is willing, ask him to spread the word that we'll have a short service at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. We'll keep it simple. No music to rile up the opposition, and I'll try to finish early enough to avoid a ruckus, if possible."

The girl was agreeing to the plan when a tall tough-looking wrangler strutted up and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her feet off the ground and hugging her crudely against his body. As quickly as it happened, the stranger's hand shot out, grabbing the cowpoke's wrist in a twisting grip that forced him to drop the girl to her feet. Not a word was spoken as the stranger continued twisting the offender's arm with a strange, almost detached expression on his face. Muscles rippled under the stranger's shirt and resistant sweat broke out on the cowboy's brow, but the arm continued twisting until the cowboy dropped to his knees as an audible pop resounded through the suddenly silent room.

Grabbing his injured arm with an oath, the cowboy swore a blue streak of vengeance. When he ran out of profanity, the stranger answered almost casually.

"Sorry about your arm, I didn't mean to hurt it; but you stay away from that girl!"

Then, nonchalantly picking up his fork, he lit in to his dinner as if nothing had happened while the injured cowboy slunk sullenly out the door cradling his injured arm in the other one.

The stranger had scarcely returned to his room when there was a firm knock at the door. He opened it to find a small dignified middle-aged visitor who introduced himself as Timothy Thomas, Jenny's father.

"I just came by to thank you for protecting Jenny tonight," he announced. "She's getting harassed more and more by the Noose boys lately, and there's little I can do to stop it, short of starting an all-out shooting war with their outfit."

"Jenny says you'd like to have a church service here in the morning," he continued. "I'm all for it, but you need to understand that they'll probably try to run you out of town. That was Rod Nero, son of the owner of the Noose outfit that you tangled with this evening, and the ole' Bull's pure poison. He brought a bunch of gunmen in here about ten years ago, and rustled all the Orton cattle away. The Ortons disappeared the night the renegades bragged that they had shot their son. Bull took over their place and brought their cattle back down from the hills where they had held them, with the Noose brand on 'em. Everyone could see that all they had to do was add a short upright to the top of the Orton 'O' to make the 'Noose,' but no one dared to challenge ole' Bull. They've swallowed up several smaller outfits since, and now they seem bent on taking over the town."

"They sound tough," the stranger replied, "But I'd like to have the service. God can change anyone—but how much damage are they likely to do to your dining room? Maybe we should have it somewhere else."

"We'll have it here," the inn keeper replied firmly.

"OK," the stranger answered, "But I don't want any guns in the room. They can't shoot an unarmed man in front of a bunch of witnesses." "And, Mr. Thomas," he added, "In case they try to make more trouble for Jenny, I want your family sitting right in front of me."

"OK," Jenny's father agreed. "Ten o'clock in the dining room tomorrow morning."

"Let's pray on it," the Stranger suggested.

The two men knelt together to ask God's protection on the congregation, His blessing on the town, and His control of the opposition. "...and Lord, we know you can change anyone," the stranger finished his prayer.

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Many of the old congregation arrived at the dining room promptly at ten o'clock the next morning. The tables were quickly shoved aside and the chairs arranged for the service. The stranger strode confidently up to the small home-made podium and started with a prayer. He held the congregation spellbound as he reviewed the life of the patriarch, Jacob. He likened Jacob's selfish conniving to obtain his brother's inheritance to the naturally selfish human heart; and proceeded to show how Jacob thought he was growing rich by his own cleverness, when it was really God that was blessing him. God wrestled with him, and eventually changed this self-centered man into true worshiper of God. The Stranger was just starting to explain how a person could be changed by being born again when about a half a dozen riders from the Noose outfit swaggered arrogantly through the door.

Four or five of the gunmen dragged out a table and pulled up chairs while the leader walked directly up to the front row to confront Mr. Thomas. "Tim," he growled as he slapped the smaller man viciously across the face, "didn't I tell you we weren't having no more church in this town?" Then, jerking Jenny out of her chair by the bodice of her dress, He commanded her to get coffee for the boys.

Before the bully could shove the girl towards the kitchen, the stranger stepped around the pulpit and grabbed him in a vice-like grip from behind, one hand across each shoulder. As the man let go of Jenny, the stranger commenced a slow-motion, almost rhythmic shaking of the big rancher's shoulders so powerfully that his head seemed to bounce slowly back and forth between his chest and his back. The gunmen at the table could not shoot without endangering their boss, and after the first jerk, there was little

resistance from the Bull. He couldn't control his hands to reach for his guns, and would have sunk to the floor except for the grip that held him up while delivering the rhythmic punishment.

A half a dozen horrific jerks later the stranger spun the Bull around like a tin soldier, grabbing him by the front of his shirt. Jerking his bloodied face close to his own, he commanded the dazed man, "Don't you or any of your men ever touch that woman again." Then, holding the sagging man at arm's length towards the awed cowpokes, he commanded them to come forward and carry their boss home.

No one really noticed him move, but the stranger was suddenly back at the pulpit calmly explaining that those who accepted God's accusation that they were hell-deserving sinners, and appropriated Christ's death on the cross as the payment for their sins, were born again--Changed into new creatures capable of living up to God's expectations. He closed the service with prayer, announced that he would be back the following Sunday, and was out of town before anyone realized that not one of them knew who he was.

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The Stranger was already in the same seat in the dining room the next Saturday evening when Jenny saw him. As she poured his coffee she blurted out, "Thanks to you, Sir, I am born again now. I've always hoped I was a Christian, but now I know I am. You explained it so clearly that I know that Jesus has taken my sins away."

Jenny thought she saw tears well up in his eyes as he exclaimed, "Thank God, Jenny! I knew you'd understand." She moved on with her duties to the other tables, but every time she glanced at the Stranger, he seemed to be looking right at her, and she liked it. She wished she knew his name, and maybe even his age, but she was far too reserved to ask.

That evening Mr. Thomas and the Stranger prayed long into the darkness. They were well aware that Mr. Thomas could lose his hotel, and lives could even be lost the next day, but both of them were resolved to hold the service again. They would even try some music from the little pump organ in the dining room

The service began promptly at ten, with even more people present than before. They sang a few well known hymns, accompanied by Jenny's capable playing on the organ. The Stranger's sermon was from the life of the Apostle Paul--How God changed a proud and arrogant self-righteous man into a humble servant of the church who looked at himself as the chief of sinners, because he had persecuted the church of Christ. Paul's

gospel of, "All have sinned and come short of the Glory of God," but, "Christ died for our sins," so, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," was stressed.

The service was just closing when the Noose boys crashed through the doors with drawn guns. "We want the preacher," they shouted as they rushed up to the pulpit. He attacked Bull from behind last week." they chided. "Now he's goin' ta git it!"

"You know I had to do that because he was bothering a woman," the Stranger countered. "But I'll go with you if you'll leave everyone else alone."

A large cowpuncher punched him mercilessly in the belly as they pigged his hands and led him out the door, where Bull waited for him. Some of the congregation came outside to side with him, but the Stranger asked them to go back and send the congregation home.

Two burly gunmen held the Stranger from behind while the Bull commenced raining wicked full-force blows on his unprotected face. He clamped his teeth together to help stabilize his jaws and teeth so they wouldn't break with the onslaught. Besides, it helped prevent him from accusing them of the cowardice they were practicing. "When He was reviled, He reviled not again," kept running through his reeling mind until blackness finally intervened and he felt nothing.

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When he came to the next morning, the Stranger was nearly blinded by his massively swollen eyelids. He hurt everywhere from the kicks and stomps the Noose gang had delivered to his unconscious form after he had fallen. He still hadn't moved a muscle when he felt a gentle kiss on his forehead. Sensing it was Jenny's he held out for second and third one. When he felt a tear spill on his face he could scarcely resist reaching up and pulling her to himself, but he didn't want to embarrass her by letting on that he knew she had kissed him.

When she stepped out of the room, he tried to sit up, and the involuntary groan that escaped his lips brought her right back. "Are you finally waking up?" she asked joyfully.

"I think so," he mumbled through pulpy lips.

"Anything I can get you?" she queried.

How about some cool cloths across my eyes?" he asked. "Maybe if I could get the swelling down a bit I could see the angel that's been caring for me."

“Hate to disappoint you, Mister,” she quipped, “but you aren’t in heaven. This is just your room in the Traveler’s Inn.”

“Still got my angel,” he answered, reaching out toward her voice. She took his outstretched hand and squeezed it gently for a precious moment before scurrying out to get the cloths.

The preacher was in extraordinary health, and was able to sit up painfully to eat the supper they brought to his room that evening. By morning he was able to wobble down the hall to the bath room, and by Wednesday he was eating in the dining room. The only thing he regretted was that he didn’t have Jenny so close to him anymore.

On Friday the Stranger slipped quietly to the livery and saddled the black. It felt good to be in the saddle again. He took the road south of town, but veered into a patch of trees some two miles out and cut back, keeping in the edge of the forest that circled the town to stay out of site. He made his way northward toward the Noose headquarters, and sat astride the horse in the edge of the trees on the hill above the buildings. He swatted the horseflies that lit on the black’s neck a long while as he studied the details of the place. A couple of men were butchering a hog near the barn. Someone else was decorating the front porch of the house. The Noose outfit was preparing for a celebration of some kind. After satisfying himself of the layout, he turned the black back the way they had come, and returned to town in time for supper.

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Mrs. Thomas rushed to meet the Stranger as he entered the Travelers Inn late in the afternoon.

“Sir,” she gasped, “Jenny’s missing. We think the Noose boys have kidnaped her. Their tracks went north toward the Noose headquarters as far as the trackers dared to go. The Sheriff won’t do anything, so Tim’s getting a citizens’ posse together. Most people thought you’d left town for good, but we were hoping you’d come back in time to lead the posse.”

An armed posse of about twenty men was quickly assembled. The Stranger addressed them before they rode out:

“Gentlemen, this is a hunt for a missing woman. There will be no shooting except in self-defense, unless I give the word. There will be no lynching. If they harm Jenny, they will be turned over to whatever sheriff this town appoints when we get back. Anyone not in

agreement with this policy should turn back now.” One-by-one each member of the posse voiced their acceptance of the Stranger’s leadership.

“Another thing,” The Stranger continued. “I went up in the hills for a secret look at the Noose headquarters this afternoon. They were preparing for a shindig of some kind. I suspect that they’re going to try to force Jenny to marry Rod Nero this evening. We’re going in from the hills behind the ranch and try to stop them. If they fire on us you may return the fire. Don’t miss!”

By dusk that evening the posse was bunched at the Stranger’s vantage point from earlier in the day. The home place was brilliantly lit with lamps inside and torches outside. It appeared that the outside dinner was over. As they watched, Jenny’s hands were tied behind her back and she was dragged inside the house, presumably for the ceremony.

“We’ll slip down as close as we can get on foot,” the Stranger ordered. “If we can capture those outside by surprise it will save a lot of lives. Tim and I are going inside. If you hear any shooting in there, those who are nearest should come in to help us. When we get Jenny free, her Dad will hustle her back here and head for town. A couple of men should accompany them. It’s every man for himself. Don’t let them kill you. Let’s go!”

The posse crept towards the buildings in the darkness. Tim and the Stranger broke off toward the back door and slipped into the house. They could hear a few isolated shots outside, but no major battle was taking place. The two men encountered a couple of drunken cowpokes in the hallway. Tim knocked the first one senseless with his gun barrel while the Stranger took the other out with a solid punch to the jaw.

Bursting into the parlor, the two men found a renegade priest trying to recite the wedding vows in a drunken slur. They heard Rod say, “I do.” Bull was twisting Jenny’s arm in an attempt to force her repeat, “I do,” after the priest. Jenny was refusing to speak, despite the pain.

Bull grabbed Jenny around the waist with his left hand when he saw the intruders. He swung her towards them as a human shield and crouched in an amateur gunslinger’s stance with his right hand hovering over his gun. The Stranger faced him from across the room with a practiced nonchalance, but his hands never moved far from his guns. He was as ready to draw as the Bull was, just not so obtrusive.

“Wonderful,” the Bull exclaimed sarcastically. “The bride’s Daddy has come to give her away, and the Preacher’s come to witness the ceremony. Say, ‘I do,’ you little prissy.”

“Bull,” the Stranger interrupted authoritatively, “Don’t force me to shoot you. Let her go!”

“You draw and you’re buzzard bait,” the Bull replied savagely.

“Careful, Dad!” Rod suddenly urged. “I just recognized who this is. He’s the Crusader. I saw him kill Quicksilver up in the Unitas. He’s won more than twenty gun fights, every one of ‘em fair and even. No one here stands a chance against him.”

“I got the girl ta shield me,” the Bull gloated, suddenly going for his gun.

The Crusader’s hand blurred, and Bull’s gun was shot from his hand before it had cleared leather. Howling with pain and rage, he shoved the girl to one side and hurled himself at the legendary gunfighter.

The Crusader easily sidestepped the rush of the insane man, grabbing his shoulders from behind as he rushed by. A couple of strong jerks later the man was on the floor holding his neck in a daze of agony.

“Rod, get me a piece of paper and a pen,” the Stranger ordered. Grabbing the Bull by his shirt collar and belt, he lifted all two-hundred and fifty pounds of him off the floor and slammed him into a chair. “Start writing,” he dictated as he shoved the pen in his hand.

“I..., Bull Nero..., do hereby deed..., all the Hanging Noose cattle..., back over to Hugh Orton..., who I stole them from.” “Now sign it!” he commanded as the thoroughly whipped outlaw finished writing.

Pocketing the paper, the Stranger turned to Rod. “You have your Dad off this place by noon tomorrow. You can take two saddle horses and two draft horses with a wagon for your personal stuff with you. Don’t ever set foot on this ranch again.”

“You can’t get away with this,” Rod replied spunkily. “We own this place.”

“Actually,” the Stranger replied, “Mr. Orton has the original deed to this whole place; and he’ll be here on tomorrow’s stage to retake possession of the property your Dad stole from him.”

“That’s right, Rod,” Mr. Thomas put in. “Your Dad shot the Orton’s thirteen-year-old son, and ran them off this place ten years ago. He’s whipped now, and you’d best have him out of here before all the folks he’s robbed and lorded it over gang up and come after him.”

None of the Hanging Noose hands had been seriously injured by the posse. All of them were handed their belongings and provisions for the trail, and sent packing the following morning. The old sheriff voluntarily resigned.

Mr. Orton and a few salty no-nonsense ranch hands arrived on the Saturday stage as planned. The Orton deed was verified by the official recorder and exhibited to the local bankers before the Stranger rode out with the new arrivals to occupy the vacated ranch.

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Sunday's service started promptly at ten, with most of the town in attendance. The Stranger moved humbly to the podium after the music was finished.

"Friends," he spoke with earnestness. "God can change anyone!"

"I was born and raised in ranch country just like this. When I was a teenager I was shot and left for dead in a gully on our ranch. My Mom and Dad found me alive late that night, and carried me bodily over the mountain to an old trapper's cabin under cover of darkness. He took us in until I was well enough to travel."

"Mom never wanted to come back, and Dad was willing to let well-enough alone for her sake; but as I grew into manhood, I wanted revenge! I lifted weights, wrestled, boxed, and struggled to prepare myself to come back and kill the man that shot me and stole my parents' ranch. Dad sent me to school, but I ran away to the Unita Mountains, where I trapped winters and mined summers."

"I never killed a man unjustly or even unfairly, it's just the hateful vengeance that was behind it. When thieves stole my horse I chased them down and shot it out with them and came home with my horse and theirs too. Over time I killed approximately twenty bad men who had tried to do me or someone I knew in. I hated injustice, and often took the law into my own hands to avenge it."

"One day I happened on two men trying to rob an old man along the trail. I shot them both and helped the battered old man back to his camp. He turned out to be a faithful old minister of the gospel. When I told him I had killed his assailants, he looked me right in the eye and told me I had no business killing men unnecessarily. I should have just run them off."

"I resisted that old preacher for days, but God was laying hold of my soul, and I knew that I shouldn't have killed those folks. If Christ died for their sins against God, how could I justify killing them for their sins against me? I finally gave myself to the Lord, and all the guilt of all I'd done was washed completely away in the blood of Jesus."

"As the Apostle Paul said, 'Such were some of you: but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.' I put the hate out of my heart, went back to my folks, and studied to become a preacher."

"If you haven't guessed by now, my name is Carl Orton. They called me 'Crew,' because I always wanted to ride with the crew. I've changed so much outwardly over the last ten

years that none of you recognized who I am. Yes, I was known as 'The Crusader' for a time; but God has changed me even more on the inside."

"My Mother died recently, and my grieving Father decided to come back and reclaim his ranch. I thought I'd better come along and help him evict the outlaws, only this time with a proper respect for human life."

"Jenny," he blurted out spontaneously as his eyes fell on her, "You and I used to play man and wife when we were kids. As we entered our teens, we swore that neither of us would ever marry anyone else. Will you be my wife?"

The crowd sat breathlessly while Jenny rose from her seat by the organ and walked over to face the Stranger.

"Crew," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "My heart died when they told me you were dead. I never looked twice at another man until you came along. I didn't know why I was so attracted to you, but I knew you were my man from the first moment I set eyes on you. I've always wanted to be your wife. I want to serve your God, and go where you go, and feel what you feel till death do us part."

Crew wrapped her into his arms and kissed her shamelessly, while the whole congregation clapped and cheered; and she returned his kiss with a matching passion.

"We need preacher to marry us," he murmured as he pulled away.