



Playing Safe in Piperock

by W. C. Tuttle

Author of "Alias Whispering White," "When Civic Pride Hits Piperock," etc.

"I have been in lots of places,
Fair as lilies in the dell.
Some of 'em I kinda favor,
Others I don't like so well.
There is one that's ever calling,
Come on back and hang your hat,
Tough old, rough old town of Piperock,
You're a danged good town, at that."

"Magpie," says I, "if my corns wasn't hurting —— out of me I'd have tears in my eyes from such sentiment. I'm all choked up— with alkali."

“You’ve got to admit that she rhymes,” says Magpie Simpkins, spitting out a mouthful of dust and lifting his canteen to his lips. “I done figured ’em all out of my own head, Ike.”

“You better leave off taking things out of your own head,” says I. “First thing you know, old-timer, you’ll be taking out what prompts you to chew your grub, and I’ll have to feed you with a stummick-pump.”

Then we pokes off the mountain and hits the trail toward Piperock. For you who ain’t never heard of Piperock, I’ll say this much: Piperock was the place the feller was thinking about when he wrote “Let sleeping dogs lie.”

Piperock looks like a siesta settlement, but she sure is deceiving. Few folks ever get killed in the town. The good old village usually invigorates ’em to a mile-a-minute clip, and we makes it a point never to shoot anybody in the back.

She ain’t the birthplace of nobody, and nothing much except horse-thieves are buried there. When it comes to law and order, we’ve got old Judge Steele. He’s got two law books and a copy of the Congressional Record for 1885, which about covers all the crimes that mankind is heir to, I reckon. Piperock ain’t on no map nor railroad and she ain’t never been sung in song or story, but if you don’t think she’s there, just get off the train at Paradise, ride north on Art Miller’s stage to where he unhitches his team, and then start something.

She’s there like sixty per cent dynamite and no questions answered. Me and that long-mustached, brainless, asinine arguer of a—well, me and Magpie have been away for two

months doing assessment work on some mining claims that nobody would jump if we moved 'em down to the railroad and offered to develop 'em free of charge. We sort of hankers for the bright lights of Piperock. Even kerosene dazzles after using candles for two months.

Magpie stops, sudden-like, and appears to be looking down at a little flat below us. I adds my gaze to his and gets astonished right away. There is "Half-Mile" Smith and "Yuma" Yates: Half-Mile is one of our own home folks, but Yuma is sort of *e pluribus unum* with me and Magpie.

Half-Mile has got his boots and vest off and is standing a little ways from Yuma, who is arguing with a gun in his hand.

"I don't *sabe* this play," says Magpie, wondering-like. "Appears to be a one-sided proposition with Half-Mile on the weak end, Ike."

Just then we sees Half-Mile make a break for liberty, and Yuma's gun whangs out loud and clear. If he hit Half-Mile he didn't get him in a vital place, 'cause he sure is hitting the high spots.

Magpie unhooks with his gun and I sees Yuma's hat spin off his head. By the time I gets into action Yuma is hived up behind a tree, and his first shot cuts three shells out of my belt. Magpie was a danged fool to miss his first shot, 'cause cover is mighty scarce on the side of that hill.

"Danged assassin!" yelps Magpie and spins lead past that tree so fast that Yuma don't dare to look out. "Shoot a unarmed man, will you?" And then his gun clicks on a empty shell.

“Give him ——, Ike!” yelps Magpie, but I wasn’t giving anything away right then. I was trying to get my head down behind a rock which only stuck three inches out of the ground.

Yuma must ‘a’ got excited, ‘cause his shots were all going high, and as soon as he shoots six times I breathes a sigh of relief. Just then a hunk of lead comes from another direction and knocks the plug of tobacco out of my hip pocket.

Then I hears Yuma yell:

“Get above ‘em, Half-Mile! They need to be teached a lesson.”

“Half-Mile, are you all right?” yelps Magpie.

“If you don’t think I am, hang on to yourself for a minute!” replies Half-Mile from above us.

“King’s X!” I whoops. “Mistake here!”

“Two mistakes,” yells Yuma. “Who in thunder are you fellers?”

“Magpie and Ike.”

“Oh!” says Yuma. “Sorry I missed.”

Then the four of us stands up and looks at each other.

“Howdy, Magpie. Howdy, Ike,” says Half-Mile. “Nice day today.”

“Great,” agrees Magpie. “Howdy, Yuma. How’s your folks?”

“If I had any they’d be tolable,” says Yuma. “Thanks just the same.”

“You spoiled the best start I ever had,” complains Half-Mile.

“No, he didn’t,” argues Yuma. “You beat the gun, Half-Mile.”

“Not understanding the event and wishful to be wiser,” says Magpie, “I asks would you elucidate the why and the wherefor of this peculiar conduct, Yuma?”

“Feet racin’,” says Half-Mile. “I’m practising. Getting pretty fast.”

“Uh-huh,” says Magpie. “You having any success in racing with a bullet?”

“Racing with ——!” He stares at Magpie. “Think I’m a danged fool?”

“All depends on your answer, Half-Mile.”

“Aw ——! When Yuma shoots the gun I runs as fast as I can, *sabe?*”

“How many times have you done it today?” I asks.

“Six, wasn’t it, Yuma?”

“Seven.”

“And you ain’t hit him yet? Let me try just once, Yuma.”

“Half-Mile,” says Yuma, “these shepherds don’t know nothing. Let’s go home.”

We didn’t try to stop ’em. We punched our burros into line and at the main road we meets “Scenery” Sims. Scenery beat Magpie for the sheriff’s office, and this is the first time we’ve met him in his official capacity. He’s my idea of nothing to see

nor hear, being as he never growed to man's estate and his voice sounds like rubbing a tin can over a rock.

"He, he, he! Was afraid maybe you hadn't heard about it," he squeaks.

"Fill our ears, Scenery," says Magpie, rolling a smoke.

"Biggest thing you ever heard about, Magpie. Believe me, I'm the party responsible for it all. Piperock needs you fellers."

"That's plenty for me," says I. "I'm going back the other way. I've been butchered to make a Piperock holiday, and any old time that Piperock needs me, I'm absent."

"Hear about it anyway, Ike," urges Magpie. "Go ahead, Scenery."

"Old Home Week," grins Scenery. "What do you think?"

"Go ahead—we'll bite," says I.

"Whatever it is it won't last no week" says Magpie, prophetic-like.

"The big celebration is all in one day. All the old-timers will be there; *sabe*? This is going to be a *hyiu* time, if you asks me, and she's going to be full of brotherly love and peace on earth, good will to all menkind."

"In Piperock?" I asks, and he nods.

"Brotherly love?" asks Magpie, and he nods again.

“Well,” says I, “if you was a big man, Scenery, or could pull a gun real fast, I’d say you’re mistaken, but being whom you are I’ll say you are either a danged fool or a liar.”

“Quit that now!” he squeaks. “Quit it! Dog-gone you, Ike, I’ve got a lot of power I didn’t used to have.”

“All the old-timers?” inquires Magpie.

“You heard me say it, didn’t you?”

“Hoss-thieves, et cettery?”

“Immune for a week, Magpie. I has issued my proclamation.”

Magpie looks at me sort of sad-like.

“What do you think, Ike?”

“When does the battle begin?”

“The celebration will be on Tuesday.”

“This is Sunday,” says I, “which gives one whole day to dig ourselves in and two whole nights to spend in prayer. Go ahead, Magpie, and may the Lord have mercy on the children ’cause there won’t be no old folks next year.”

Piperock ain’t changed none to speak about. As we pilgrims into the main street we sees “Tellurium” Woods gallop out of Buck’s place, and just as he skids into Pete Gonyer’s blacksmith shop we hears the bang of a gun. Then out of the saloon comes “Tombstone” Todd. He peers all around.

“Whyfor the salute, Tombstone?” asks Magpie.

“Salute ——! Think I’m shooting blanks? Tellurium argued that I ain’t eligible to stay here for Old Home Week. Said the only time I ever was here a delegation comes from Paradise, decorates me plentiful with tar and feathers and rides me off on a rail. Dang Tellurium’s hide!”

“Don’t you remember the incident, Tombstone?” asks Magpie.

“Don’t I? Sufferin’ snakes, I didn’t moult for two months! Scenery said I could stay here as long as I dwelt in harmony and brotherly love, and, by cripes, I’m going to foller the recipe if I has to decimate the whole danged village.”

Me and Magpie nods and pilgrims on to our shack.

“Brotherly love seems to have come upon them,” says Magpie. “This town appears mild and full of loving thoughts. Next thing we know, Ike, these snake-hunters will be carrying autygraph albums and wish us to write—

If you love me as I love you

No knife can cut our love in two.

“And the bunk-house walls will be decorated with ‘Let Us Love Each Other’ mottoes. I wouldn’t be surprized to see ‘Hassayampa’ Harris kissing ‘Doughgod’ Smith.”

“That’s a fact,” I agrees. “She sure is a sweet-cider atmosphere. Next thing ye know they’ll be decorating horse-thieves’ graves. Do I seem to hear joy bells ringing, Magpie?”

“That’s ‘Dirty Shirt’ Jones, I’ll bet a dobie dollar,” says Magpie. “One, two, three! Nope, he ain’t drunk yet, Ike.”

Magpie was counting the clangs of a bell. Dirty Shirt uses that bell as a barometer. It hangs on the corner of the Mint Hall, about sixty yards from the door of Buck's place, and the bell is a little bigger than a cow-bell. Any time Dirty misses one out of three shots with his Colt he's drunk enough to quit. As long as he can ring her three times in a row he keeps on until he can't.

Me and Magpie don't no more than get settled when here comes old Judge Steele. The old pelican is full of enthusiasm mixed with a certain percentage of alcohol and he welcomes us home again.

"You gents sure came back for the crowning e-vent of our lives," says he. "We welcome you home and likely we can use you."

"Use Magpie," says I. "I'm out of order."

"Huh!" snorts the judge. "Ornery as ever, eh, Ike? You ain't got as much civic pride as a cat!"

"Maybe not," says I, "and I've got eight less lives. I may die when my time comes but I ain't rushing the e-vent. Piperock is always starting something that they can't finish without bloodshed and horror."

"We're progressive," explains the judge. "We sure are—to a startling degree, and the eyes of the world will e-ventually turn to Piperock."

"They will," says I, "and this is what they'll be saying: 'The words on that tombstone are appropriate: They Couldn't Let Well Enough Alone.'"

“This here celebration amounts to what?” asks Magpie.

“Mostly everything, Magpie. On Tuesday we has the celebration proper. There will be feet races, tugs-of-war, shooting matches, et cettery. Lot of the fellers are practising for the events and she bids fair to be a humdinger.

“We aims to put Piperock on the map, Magpie. Always our inhabitants has to go to Silver Bend to see the sights, such as a circus or a opery. If we can advertise Piperock sufficient-like we can get said attractions and keep our money and young men to home. You was pretty good as a ordinary sheriff, Magpie, but you ain’t got the get-up that our new sheriff has. Me and him got together on this and we deserves a lot of credit.”

“You’re welcome, judge,” says I, “and all that goes with it.”

Just then here comes old “Jay-Bird” Whittaker, who owns the Cross J cow outfit and two-thirds of the banks in Yaller Rock county. The judge ain’t partial to Jay-Bird, so he lopes off down-town.

Jay-Bird gets off his bronc and sets down with us.

“Look upon me,” says he sad-like. “Take a good look. Good! Do I look changed? Do I look haggard around the gills? Yeah? I deserve to—gol dingle danged if I don’t! Me and ‘Chuck’ Warner went to Silver Bend to see the sights. *Sabe?* We seen ’em. That gol-danged, horse-faced, prevaricating son-of-a-sea-cook and me got stewed! I don’t remember all of what passed but I seem to hear talk about Buffalo Bill, Antelope Doc, P. T. Barnum and Frontpaws.

“Well, I woke up with my feet sticking out over the top of a manger, and in my checkbook is a stub which shows that I, J. B. Whittaker, who ought to have at least enough sense to make me half-witted, had paid five hundred dollars for the sole ownership of Oswald’s Dog and Pony Show!”

“Bought it?” asks Magpie foolish-like.

“You hard of hearing, Magpie?” asks Jay-Bird.

“Is she a good show?”

“I never looked—gol dang it! Chuck said I ought to be thankful that I didn’t buy the Mastadon Carnival Company too, which has been showing there a couple of days. Maybe I’d a bought it if I’d a been seen by the owners. Dog and pony show! ——’s bells!”

We all rolls smokes and just about that time here comes Hassayampa Harris of Curlew, who owns the banks that Jay-Bird don’t. Him and Jay-Bird is what you’d call business rivals. Hassayampa squints down at Jay-Bird and shoves his hat off a heated forehead.

“Think you’re smart, eh?” he grunts sarcastic-like. “Buying things, eh? Going to put yourself up as another Buffaler Bill, eh? Going to start a Wild West Show, eh? Well, I spiked one of your wheels, old-timer.”

“Yeah?” says Jay-Bird. “Who told you?”

“Chuck.” Hassayampa grinned from ear to ear. “I got him loaded and he spilled it all to me. Don’t blame Chuck, Jay-Bird, ’cause he was too full to think what he was doing. *Sabe?*”

He told me all about what you bought and why you came home after more money.”

“Oh!” grunts Jay-Bird. “He told you, did he? What did he say I came here after more money for, Hassayampa Harris?”

“Haw! Haw! Haw! For why, eh? Haw! Haw! Haw! I beat you to it, J. B. I bought the Mastadon Carnival outfit myself.”

Jay-Bird looks at Hassayampa for a moment, and then falls right off the steps.

“Some shock, eh?” grins Hassayampa. “Maybe I should have told him more easy-like.”

We turned Jay-Bird over on his back and he’s laughing so danged hard that his jaws are almost locked. He ain’t able to talk for some time. After a while he shuts off the tears and looks at Hassayampa.

“Chuck told you that? Haw! Haw! Haw!”

Hassayampa sets there, fooling with his six-shooter and staring at Jay-Bird’s tears; then he swings his bronc around, abrupt-like.

“Where you—Haw! Haw! Haw!—going?” asks Jay-Bird.

“I’m going to kill Chuck Warner. He lied to me!”

“Kill him a few times for me, Hassayampa,” yells Jay-Bird. “He never told me the truth in his life.”

Clang! goes a bell. Bang! Bang!

“Dirty Shirt is drunk,” opines Magpie.

“As usual,” nods Jay-Bird. “Are you going to be active in the celebration Tuesday, Magpie?”

“Ain’t decided yet. I’m going to let Ike help ‘em out. Feel it’s my patriotic duty to let ‘em have a little assistance.”

“Magpie Simpkins,” says I, “me and you are pardners in material things, but when it comes to my soul you don’t own a share of stock. You ain’t going to loan me and I ain’t going to have no hand in anything. *Sabe?* I’m going down-town right now, and if you hear my old .41 talking out loud you’ll know that brotherly love has snuck up on me and I’m playing safe. Good-by!”

If we had a newspaper in Piperock, you’d likely see something like this:

The follering guests registered at Holt’s hotel today:

“Piegan” Peters, “Tombstone” Todd, “Ace-High” Anderson, “Dynamite” Davidson, “Calamity” Calkins, “Sad” Samuels, “Windy” Wilson, “Shiner” Seeley, “Slow-Elk” Sloan, “Ornery” Olsen, “Hip-Shot” Harris and others too ornery to mention.

Every danged one of them are practising horse-thieves. Brotherly love don’t mean nothing to that bunch, unless the brother owns some middling good stock.

Then I meets Dirty Shirt. He’s about six and seven-eighths drunk and he greets me more with his eyes than his tongue. He squints one eye at me and then holds out his six-shooter for me to shake hands with.

“Comp’ments of the sheason to the Harper twins,” says he serious-like. “By cripes, Ike, your brother looks more like you than you do. Fact.”

“Which one, Dirty?” I asks and he rubs his eyes.

“Ex-coosh me! My mishtake, I’m sure. You folks goin’ to shelebrashun? If so—why not? All three nods together. Good!”

“Anything going on up-town, Dirty?”

“Naw! Pete Gonyer and ‘Slim’ Hawkins are up in Holt’s hay-mow nursing a pair of Winchesters, while they makes out schpecifications for tug-of-war.

“‘Mush be amachoor,’ says Slim. ‘Stric’ly amachoor.’

“‘Amachoor what?’ asks Calamity. ‘Horsh-thieves,’ says Slim.

“Now everybody’s sore, Ike, ‘cause they’re all professionals. Why, there ain’t ‘nough amachoor horsh-thieves around here to tug the hat off your head.”

Just then Magpie shows up with two saddle-broncs and a hurry-up expression on his face.

“Get on, Ike,” says he. “Hurry up!”

I gets on that horse and follers him. That’s the trouble with me; I’m a born follerer and no questions asked. We thunders through Paradise like Paul Revere advertising a flood, and I don’t overhaul Magpie until his bronc begins to miss a step here and there.

“Magpie,” says I, “let’s stop and fight.”

He yanks up his tired bronc and stares at me.

“Stop and fight?”

“Uh-huh. I’m just as big a coward as you are, Magpie, but I won’t run no further.”

“There ain’t nothing to fight, Ike.”

“You didn’t think I’d stop if I thought there was, did you? What in the devil are we killing our broncs for, I’d lower myself to ask?”

Magpie rolls a smoke and loops one long leg around the horn of his saddle. When Magpie appears to get confidential I feels that life is but a fleeting flower.

“Ike, me and you has scabbled mighty hard for existence, ain’t we? We’ve punched cows for forty a month, prospected everywhere and found nothing much, and we run the sheriff’s office with a gun in one hand and our life in the other, ain’t we? What have we got? I asks you as man to man, what have we got?”

“We’ve got between five and six hundred dollars in the Silver Bend bank,” I replies.

“We did have, Ike. We did have a measly amount like that. How far will a amount like that go, I asks you? As old age sneaks upon us, Ike, and our hands lose their cunning we need to be upholstered in worldly goods or go to the bone-yard.”

“Has somebody robbed that danged bank?” I gasps.

“I hope not, Ike. I wrote a check for five hundred and gave it to Jay-Bird, so I ain’t worrying.”

“The — you did! What for, Magpie?”

“For the complete and entire ownership of Oswald’s Dog and Pony Show, which will be knowed in the future as Simpkins’ Stupendous Shows Combined.”

“Combined with what?” I whispers.

“I don’t know yet.”

I don’t say nothing more. I look at him—that’s all. I hope to die if I didn’t want to kill my pardner. I swallers hard and scratches the butt of my six-gun.

“I knowed you’d choke up with e-motion, Ike,” says he, reaching over to pat me on the back. “It’s a thing that only comes once in a man’s life, and I knowed it would make you happy. Opportunity knocked and I sure let her in. Come on, Ike, and we’ll make P. T. Barnum’s outfit look like a medicine show. Why, dog-gone it, Ike, we can run that outfit one season and clean up enough to let us loaf the rest of our lives.”

“Barnum was right,” I whispers. “He sure was.”

“You danged know he was,” nods Magpie. “He knew.”

“One every minute, Magpie, and no stop-watches on earth.”

I don’t know nothing about circuses. My folks got all their money honestly, and I don’t know a blood-sweating Behemoth from a ant-eater, but it don’t need zoological wisdom to see that me and Magpie owns a lot of undesirables.

First on the list cometh Cleopatra. Magpie has a book which I read once, and it says that Cleopatra showed up on the Egyptian range about one hundred and seventeen years before Christ, but after I looks her over I comes to the conclusion she ain't that young.

Cleopatra is a man-eating tiger, but from the looks of her ribs I'd say that she ain't mixed with men folks for a long, long time. Her teeth look like she'd been trying to get sustenance from stones. She might pinch but I'll be danged if she could bite.

Then comes Allah. He looks like a antique rug that the moths had been living in. They say a camel can go eight days without drinking, but I'm betting Allah can go longer than that without eating. He's what I'd call a shipwreck of the desert.

Then comes Alcibiades. This critter might 'a' been a elephant years ago, but right now he ain't much but a mass of rubber wrinkles and a pair of mean little eyes. Alcibiades sure needed washing and ironing.

The pony end of the outfit consists of four little pinto ponies, and the dogs tally about six mongrels, one mixed breed and one just dog. There's two monkeys which scratch like lumberjacks. There's a dirty tent, two painted wagons, a bass drum, a bale of hay and a set of harness.

With these few words I have proclaimed what we own for five hundred dollars. Oh, I forgot to mention a water-bucket minus the bail. I'm looking over our loss when Magpie comes back, grinning like a fool.

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