



A Poet's Pay

Roger Lubeck

Charley took time to arrange the tree branches. Placed right, the branches gave the impression there were additional rifles in the bush. Putting on a black duster over his black suit, he picked up his 12-gauge. He debated loading the weapon, but he was a firm believer that violence begat violence. Hearing a familiar jingle and jangle, he placed a flour bag over his head and adjusted the eye and mouth holes.

He'd chosen a spot near the top of Pine Mountain Road. The steep grade meant the Cloverdale stage had to slow to a stop as it crested the ridge. Charley stepped into the rutted track just as the horses came into view. Standing ramrod straight, he raised the shotgun and commanded, "Stop or I'll shoot." The driver reined in the team. The horses came to a quick stop, as the coach and passengers rocked back and forth for a moment more.

"Boys, if this fellow tries to throw down on me, give him a full volley," said Charley, as he looked back at the bushes. "Now sir, if you please, surrender the strong box and the mail, and you can hit the trail." Charley gave the driver a hard look and raised the gun to his shoulder. The driver flung the strong box to the ground, followed by a bag of mail.

"You're him aren't you," a man in the coach shouted from the window. "You're Black Bart, the Po eight." The man got out of the coach with his wallet in hand followed by a young woman who offered Charley her purse. They were the only passengers.

"Please folks, keep your valuables. I mean you no harm. It's Wells Fargo I'm here to rob."

"That didn't rhyme," complained the man.

"What?" Said Charley.

"Your poem, it didn't rhyme.

"I mean no reproach, but return to the coach," said Charley between clenched teeth.

"Do another," said the woman, clapping her hands.

"Be on your way, less you rue the day."

The driver gave Charley a sour look and spit a wad of tobacco on the ground.

"Mighty weak," the driver said.

"Look, I'm not used to giving a recital. Usually I write out my poems." He thought for a moment. "Here's one.

The strong box remains.

Black Bart has spoken, away.

What is a life worth?"

"That weren't no poem," said the driver. "It didn't rhyme and the meter was all wrong!"

Charley pointed the shotgun at the driver wishing for once it was loaded.

"It was one of those Japan poems. Now, whip those horses, Sir, before my verse turns to lead. And you leave this earth with a hole in your head."

"That's better," said the driver. He released the brake and whipped the horses into action.

In the end, the robbery produced only one hundred and ninety dollars. Not much pay for a man who lived as Charley did, but more pay than he'd earn as a cowboy poet.

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After a career of business consulting and university teaching, Roger is focused on writing, photography, and publishing. He is the author of four novels and two business books. Roger published two anthologies and he has a story in the Redwood Writer's 2014 anthology, *Water*.

ABOVE

Charles "Black Bart" Bowles. Photograph taken before 1888.

RIGHT

The stagecoach Diligencia. Engraving by William Henry Bishop.

