

Is it really possible for people to change?

A Retrieved Reformation



What could the title of this story possibly mean? What is a "reformation"?

In this short story, a master safecracker has a difficult decision to make. Should he crack just one more safe and risk everything?

A Retrieved Reformation

By O. Henry

In part One, Jimmy retrieves his belongings and returns to his former ways.

STRATEGIES

Make Predictions

As you read, stop and make predictions about what you think will happen next. Then compare your predictions with what actually happens. Doing this will help you connect with the text.

Whenever you see this **STOP**, stop and make a prediction. Write what you think in the margin under the question.

Part One

A guard came to the prison shoe-shop, where Jimmy Valentine was assiduously **stitching uppers** and escorted him to the front office. There the warden handed Jimmy his pardon, which had been signed
5 that morning by the governor. Jimmy took it in a tired kind of way. He had served nearly ten months of a four-year sentence. He had expected to stay only about three months, at the longest.

“Now, Valentine,” said the warden, “you’ll go out in the morning. Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You’re not a bad fellow at heart.
10 Stop cracking safes, and live straight.”

“Me?” said Jimmy, in surprise. “Why, I never cracked a safe in my life.”
“Oh, no,” laughed the warden. “Of course not. Let’s see, now. How was it you happened to **get sent up** on that Springfield job? Was it because you wouldn’t prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in
15 extremely high-toned society? Or was it simply a case of a mean old jury that had it in for you? It’s always one or the other with you innocent victims.”

“Me?” said Jimmy, still blankly virtuous. “Why, warden, I never was in Springfield in my life!”

20 “Take him back, Cronin!” said the warden, “and fix him up with outgoing clothes. Unlock him at seven in the morning, and let him come to the **bullpen**. Better think over my advice, Valentine.”

to stitch uppers: (verb) to sew the tops of shoes.
to get sent up: (verb) to go to prison.

bullpen: (noun) a temporary holding area for prisoners.

At a quarter past seven on the next morning, Jimmy stood in the warden's outer office. He had on a suit of the villainously fitting,
25 ready-made clothes and a pair of the stiff, squeaky shoes that the state furnishes to its discharged compulsory guests.

The clerk handed him a railroad ticket and the five-dollar bill with which the law expected him to rehabilitate himself into good citizenship and prosperity. The warden gave him a cigar and shook hands.

30 Valentine, 9762, was chronicled on the books as "Pardoned by Governor," and Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine. STOP

Disregarding the song of the birds, the waving green trees and the smell of the flowers, Jimmy headed straight for a restaurant. There he tasted the first sweet joys of liberty in the shape of a broiled chicken
35 and a bottle of white wine – followed by a cigar a grade better than the one the warden had given him. From there he proceeded leisurely to the depot. He tossed a quarter into the hat of a blind man sitting by the door and boarded his train. Three hours later, he arrived in a little town near the state line. He went to the café of one Mike Dolan
40 and shook hands with Mike, who was alone behind the bar.

"Sorry we couldn't make it sooner, Jimmy, me boy," said Mike. "But we had that protest from Springfield to buck against, and the governor nearly balked. Feeling all right?"

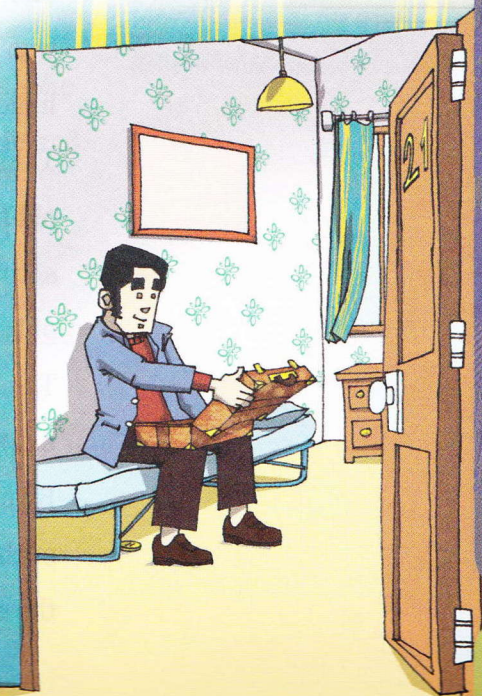
45 "Fine," said Jimmy. "Got my key?"

He got his key and went upstairs, unlocking the door of a room at the rear. Everything was just as he had left it. There on the floor was still Ben Price's collar-button that had been torn from that eminent detective's shirt when
50 they had overpowered Jimmy to arrest him.



STOP

What do you think he will do first?



Pulling out from the wall a folding-bed, Jimmy slid back a panel in the wall and dragged out a dust-covered suitcase. He opened it and gazed fondly at the finest set of burglar's tools in the East. It was a complete set, made of specially tempered steel, the latest designs in drills, punches, braces and bits, jimmies, clamps and augers, with two or three novelties invented by Jimmy himself, in which he took pride. Over nine hundred dollars they had cost him to have made at —, a place where they make such things for the profession.

In half an hour, Jimmy went downstairs and through the café. He was now dressed in tasteful and well-fitting clothes and carried his dusted and cleaned suitcase in his hand.

“Got anything on?” asked Mike Dolan, genially.

“Me?” said Jimmy, in a puzzled tone. “I don't understand...”

A week after the release of Valentine, 9762, there was a neat job of safe-burglary done in Richmond, Indiana, with no clue to the author. A scant eight hundred dollars was all that was secured. Two weeks after that, a patented, improved, burglar-proof safe in Logansport was opened like a cheese to the tune of fifteen hundred dollars, securities and silver left untouched.

That began to interest the rogue-catchers. Then an old-fashioned bank-safe in Jefferson City became active and threw out of its crater an eruption of banknotes amounting to five thousand dollars. The losses were now high enough to bring the matter up into Ben Price's class of work.

By comparing notes, a remarkable similarity in the methods of the burglaries was noticed. Ben Price investigated the scenes of the robberies, and was heard to remark:




to open like a cheese: (expression) to open easily. rogue-catchers: (noun) the police.

“That’s Dandy Jim Valentine’s autograph. He’s resumed business.

80 Look at that combination knob – jerked out as easy as pulling up a radish in wet weather. He’s got the only clamps that can do it. And look how clean those **tumblers** were punched out! Jimmy never has to drill but one hole. Yes, I guess I want Mr. Valentine. He’ll do his bit next time without any short-time or clemency foolishness.”

85 Ben Price knew Jimmy’s habits. He had learned them while working on the Springfield case. Long jumps, quick get-aways, no **confederates** and a taste for good society. It was given out that Ben Price had taken up the trail of the elusive cracksman, and other people with burglar-proof safes felt more at ease.

90 One afternoon Jimmy Valentine and his suitcase climbed out of the **mail-hack** in Elmore, a little town in Arkansas. Jimmy, looking like an athletic young senior just home from college, went down the board sidewalk toward the hotel. 

Part Two

95 A young lady crossed the street, passed him at the corner and entered a door over which was the sign “The Elmore Bank.” Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was and became another man. She lowered her eyes and coloured slightly. Young men of Jimmy’s style and looks were **scarce** in Elmore.

100 Jimmy stopped a boy that was **loafing** on the steps of the bank as if he were one of the stockholders and began to ask him questions about the town, feeding him dimes at intervals. By and by, the young lady came out, looking royally unconscious of the young man with the suitcase and went her way.

tumbler: (*noun*) the part in a lock that releases the bolt when moved by a key.

confederate: (*noun*) an accomplice.

mail-hack: (*noun*) a horse and carriage used to deliver the mail.

scarce: (*adjective*) rare.

to loaf: (*verb*) to loiter, to hang out.



Why do you think he came to Elmore?

In part two, Jimmy changes his identity and becomes a reformed man.

105 “Isn’t that young lady Miss Polly Simpson?” asked Jimmy **with specious guile**.

“Naw,” said the boy. “She’s Annabel Adams. Her pa owns this bank. What’d you come to Elmore for? Is that a gold watch-chain?”

Jimmy went to the Planters’ Hotel, registered as

110 Ralph D. Spencer and engaged a room. He leaned on the desk and conversed with the clerk. He said he had come to Elmore to go into business. How was the shoe business in the town? He had thought of the shoe business. Was there an opening?

115 The clerk was impressed by the clothes and manner of Jimmy, and he cordially gave out information.

Yes, there ought to be a good opening in the shoe line. There wasn’t an exclusive shoe-store in town. The general stores handled them. Business in all lines was fairly good. He hoped Mr. Spencer would
120 decide to locate in Elmore. He would find it a pleasant town to live in, and the people very sociable.

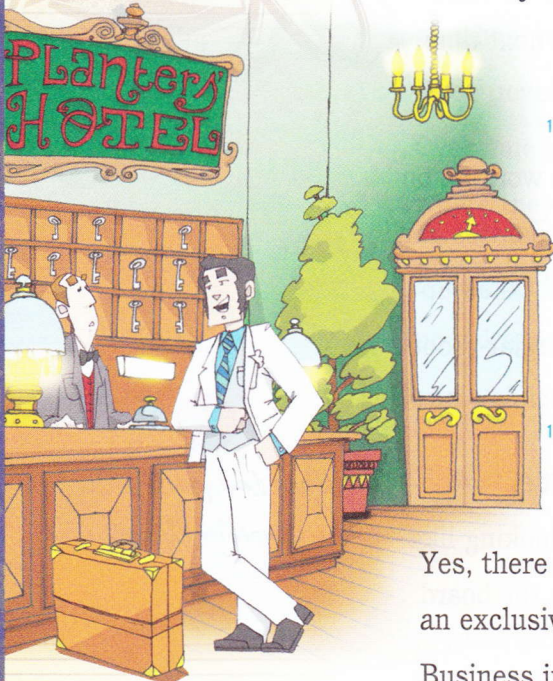
Mr. Spencer thought he would stop over in the town a few days and look over the situation. No, the clerk needn’t call the boy. He would carry up his suitcase himself; it was rather heavy.

125 Mr. Ralph Spencer, the **phoenix** that arose from Jimmy Valentine’s ashes – ashes left by the flame of a sudden and alterative attack of love – remained in Elmore and prospered. He opened a shoe-store and secured a good run of trade. **STOP**

Socially, he was also a success and made many friends. And he accom-
130 plished the wish of his heart. He met Miss Annabel Adams and became more and more captivated by her charms.

with specious guile: (*expression*) in a deceptive way.

phoenix: (*noun*) a mythological bird that consumed itself by fire, only to be reborn from its ashes.



STOP

Do you think he
will rob the bank?

STOP

At the end of a year, the situation of Mr. Ralph Spencer was this: he had won the respect of the community, his shoe-store was flourishing and he and Annabel were engaged to be married in two weeks.

135 Mr. Adams, the typical country banker, approved of Spencer. Annabel's pride in him almost equalled her affection. He was as much at home in the family of Mr. Adams and that of Annabel's married sister as if he were already a member.

One day Jimmy sat down in his room and wrote this letter, which
140 he mailed to the safe address of one of his old friends in St. Louis:

Dear Old Pal:

*I want you to be at Sullivan's place, in Little Rock, next Wednesday night, at nine o'clock. I want you to **wind up** some little matters for me. And, also, I want to make you a present of my kit of tools. I know you'll be glad to get
145 them—you couldn't duplicate the lot for a thousand dollars. Say, Billy, I've quit the old business—a year ago. I've got a nice store. I'm making an honest living, and I'm going to marry the finest girl on earth two weeks from now. It's the only life, Billy—the straight one. I wouldn't touch a dollar of
150 another man's money now for a million. After I get married I'm going to sell out and go West, where there won't be so much danger of having old scores brought up against me. I tell you, Billy, she's an angel. She believes in me; and I wouldn't do another **crooked** thing for the whole world. Be sure to be at Sully's, for I must see you. I'll bring along the tools with me.*

Your old friend, Jimmy.

155 On the Monday night after Jimmy wrote this letter, Ben Price arrived **unobtrusively** in Elmore. He **lounged about** town in his quiet way until he found out what he wanted to know. From the drugstore across the street from Spencer's shoe-store, he got a good look at Ralph D. Spencer.

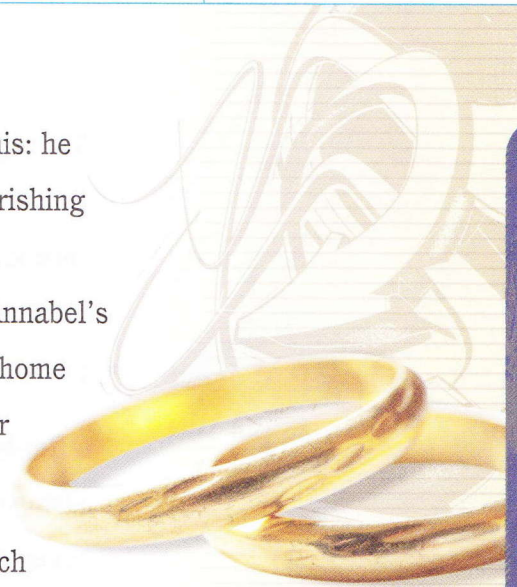
"Going to marry the banker's daughter are you, Jimmy?" said Ben
160 to himself, softly. "We'll see about that..."

to wind up: (verb) to conclude; to bring to an end.

crooked: (adjective) dishonest or illegal.

unobtrusively: (adverb) inconspicuously, without attracting attention.

to lounge (about): (verb) to bum around, to spend time.



VOCABULARY NOTE

The word "crooked" has two syllables. It is pronounced: "crook-ed."

The next morning Jimmy took breakfast with the Adams. He was going to Little Rock that day to order his wedding-suit and buy something nice for Annabel. That would be the first time he had left town since he came to Elmore. It had been more than a year now since those last
165 professional “jobs,” and he thought he could safely **venture out**.

After breakfast, Mr. Adams, Annabel, Jimmy, and Annabel’s married sister with her two little girls aged five and nine all went downtown together. They stopped by the hotel where Jimmy still boarded, and he ran up to his room and got his suitcase. Then they went on to the bank.
170 There stood Jimmy’s horse and buggy and Dolph Gibson, who was going to drive him over to railroad station.

The family all went inside the high, carved oak **railings** into the banking-room – Jimmy included, for Mr. Adams’s future son-in-law was welcome anywhere. The clerks were pleased to be greeted by the
175 good-looking, agreeable young man who was going to marry Miss Annabel. Jimmy set his suitcase down. Annabel, whose heart was bubbling with happiness and lively youth, put on Jimmy’s hat and picked up the suitcase. “Wouldn’t I make a nice **drummer**?”
said Annabel. “My! Ralph, how heavy it is. Feels like it is full
180 of gold bricks.”

“Lot of nickel-plated **shoehorns** in there,” said Jimmy, coolly, “that I’m going to return. Thought I’d save express charges by taking them up. I’m getting awfully economical.”

Part Three

185 The Elmore Bank had just put in a new safe and vault. Mr. Adams was very proud of it and insisted on an inspection by everyone. The vault was a small one, but it had a new, patented door. It fastened with three

to venture (out): (*verb*) to go out cautiously.

railings: (*noun*) the horizontal bars that separate the public part of the bank from the private part.

drummer: (*noun*) a travelling salesman.

shoehorn: (*noun*) a smooth curved instrument, often of plastic or metal, used to help put on a shoe.

*In Part Three,
Ben Price comes to
arrest Jimmy but
finds only Spencer,
a reformed man.*

solid steel bolts thrown simultaneously with a single handle, and it had a **time lock**. Mr. Adams **beamingly** explained how it worked to

190 Mr. Spencer, who showed a courteous but not too intelligent interest.

The two children, May and Agatha, were delighted by the shining metal and funny clock and knobs. **STOP**

While they were thus engaged, Ben Price **sauntered** in and leaned on his elbow, looking casually inside between the railings. He told the
195 teller that he didn't want anything; he was just waiting for a man he knew.

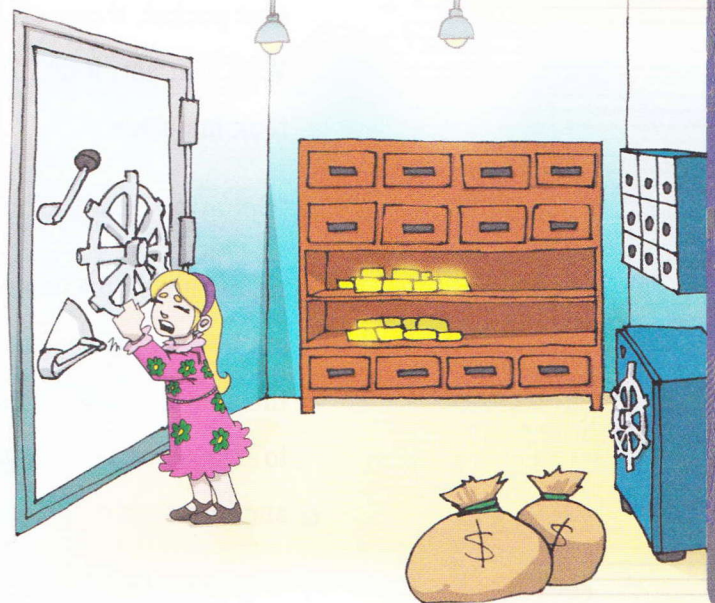
Suddenly, there was a scream or two from the women and a commotion. Unperceived by the elders, May, the nine-year-old girl, in a spirit of play, had shut Agatha in the vault. She had then shot the bolts and
200 turned the knob of the combination as she had seen Mr. Adams do.

The old banker sprang to the handle and tugged at it for a moment. "The door can't be opened," he groaned.

"The clock hasn't been wound nor the combination set."

Agatha's mother screamed again, hysterically.

205 "Hush!" said Mr. Adams, raising his trembling hand. "All be quite for a moment. Agatha!" he called as loudly as he could. "Listen to me." During the following silence they could just hear the faint sound
210 of the child wildly **shrieking** in the dark vault in a panic of terror.



STOP

What do you think will happen next?

time lock: (*verb*) a lock, as for a bank vault, containing a mechanism that prevents its being opened before a fixed time.

beamingly: (*adverb*) radiantly and with pride.

to saunter (in): (*verb*) to walk in a casual manner.

shrieking: (*present participle*) screaming.

“My precious darling!” **wailed** the mother. “She will die of fright! Open the door! Oh, break it open! Can’t you men do something?”

“There isn’t a man nearer than Little Rock who can open that door,”
 215 said Mr. Adams, in a shaky voice. “My God! Spencer, what shall we do? That child – she can’t stand it long in there. There isn’t enough air, and besides, she’ll go into convulsions from fright.”

Agatha’s mother, frantic now, beat the door of the vault with her hands. Somebody wildly suggested dynamite. Annabel turned to Jimmy, her
 220 large eyes full of **anguish**, but not yet **despairing**. To a woman nothing seems quite impossible to the powers of the man she **worships**.

“Can’t you do something, Ralph – try, won’t you?” **STOP**

He looked at her with a queer, soft smile on his lips and in his **keen** eyes.

“Annabel,” he said, “Give me that rose you are wearing, will you?”

225 Hardly believing that she heard him correctly, she unpinned the bud from her dress and placed it in his hand. Jimmy stuffed it into his vest-pocket, threw off his coat and pushed up his shirtsleeves. With that act, Ralph D. Spencer passed away, and Jimmy Valentine took his place.

230 “Get away from the door, all of you,” he commanded, **shortly**.

He set his suitcase on the table and opened it out flat. From that time on, he seemed unconscious of the presence of anyone else. He laid out the shining, queer **implements** swiftly and orderly, whistling softly to himself as he always did when at work. In a deep silence
 235 and immovable, the others watched him as if under a spell.

to wail: *(verb)* to cry out.

anguish: *(noun)* extreme pain or distress from worrying.

to despair: *(verb)* to lose hope.

to worship: *(verb)* to idolize or adore.

keen: *(adjective)* piercing.

shortly: *(adverb)* abruptly.

implements: *(noun)* tools.




*What do you think
 Spencer will do?*

In a minute, Jimmy's pet drill was biting smoothly into the steel door. In ten minutes – breaking his own burglarious record – he threw back the bolts and opened the door.

Agatha, almost collapsed, but safe, was gathered into her mother's arms.

240 Jimmy Valentine put on his coat and walked outside the railings toward the front door. As he went, he thought he heard a far-away voice that he once knew call "Ralph!" But he never hesitated.

At the door, a big man stood somewhat in his way. 

"Hello, Ben!" said Jimmy, still with his strange smile. "Got around
245 at last, have you? Well, let's go. I don't know that it makes much difference now."

And then Ben Price acted rather strangely.

"Guess you're mistaken, Mr. Spencer," he said. "Don't believe I recognize you. Your buggy's waiting for you, isn't it?"

250 And Ben Price turned and strolled down the street.

O. Henry. "A Retrieved Reformation," *Roads of Destiny*, 1909.
Slightly adapted by Judith Rohlf



 STOP

*Who is this man
and what do you
think he will do?*

About the Author...



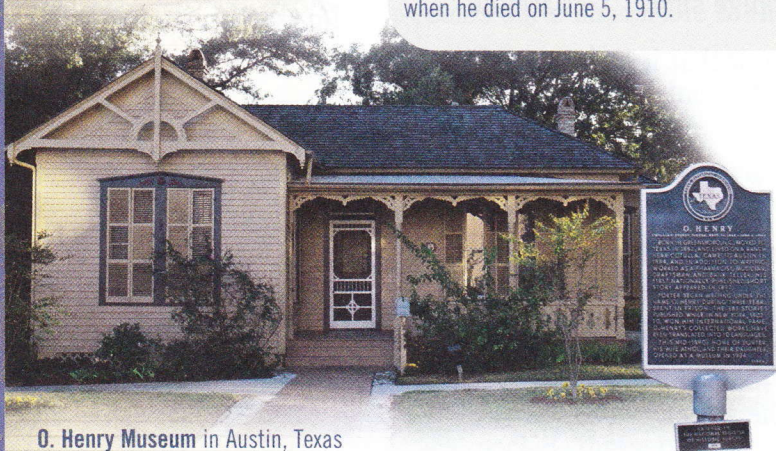
O. Henry (1862–1910)

O. Henry is one of America's most famous short-story writers. His real name was William Sydney Porter. Porter was born on a plantation in North Carolina on September 11, 1862. He moved to Texas when he was 20 years old. He was a good singer and musician and led an active social life.

Porter held various jobs including that of pharmacist, bank teller, bookkeeper and journalist. In 1887, he married Athol Estes and they had two children.

In 1894, Porter was accused of **embezzling** money from an Austin bank, a crime for which he later served three years in prison in Ohio. It was there that he began writing short stories and took the pen name O. Henry.

O. Henry moved to New York City in 1902, where he spent the remainder of his life. An alcoholic, he suffered from several health problems and great financial difficulties, and was nearly broke when he died on June 5, 1910.



O. Henry Museum in Austin, Texas

DID YOU KNOW...?

- ➔ The main character in "A Retrieved Reformation" is based on a real person O. Henry met while in prison.
- ➔ O. Henry developed his storytelling skills in a game with his sister, Evelyn. She would begin telling a story and he would finish it.
- ➔ O. Henry wrote and published over 250 short stories between 1903 and 1910.
- ➔ O. Henry's short stories are famous for their surprise endings.
- ➔ The O. Henry Award, named in his honour, is given out annually in recognition of the year's outstanding short stories.



to embezzle: (verb) to take dishonestly, to steal.