

The Forged Patent

A Western Reminiscence

The changes which the last twenty years have wrought in Illinois, would be incredible to any one who had not witnessed them. At that time the settlements were few, and the spirit of enterprise which now pervades every corner of the State had not awakened. The bluffs of the beautiful Illinois river had never sent back the echo of the steam engine. Without a market for their produce, the farmers confined their labors to the wants of their own families. Corn was nearly the only crop raised, and from the time it was "laid by," near the end of June, till "pulling time," in November, was a holiday, and the intervening period was passed in idleness, except Saturdays. On that day, duly as it arrived, the settlers, at the distillery, amused themselves with shooting at a mark, training nags, and too often, when the tin cup passed freely around, in fighting.

This is by no means a picture of all the settlements of that early period, but, that it is graphically true of many, none of the oldest settlers will deny.

One Saturday afternoon, in the year 1819, a young man was seen approaching, with slow and weary steps, the house, or, rather, distillery, of Squire Crosby, at Brent's Prairie, an obscure settlement on the Military Tract. As usual on that day, a large collection of people were amusing themselves at Crosby's, who owned the distillery in that region, and being a magistrate, was regarded by the settlers as rich, and consequently a great man.

The youth who now came up to the group was apparently about twenty-one years of age, and of slender form, fair and delicate complexion, with the air of one accustomed to good society, and it was evident at a glance that he was not inured to the hardships of frontier life, or labor of any kind. But his dress was in strange contrast with his appearance and manners. He wore a hunting coat of the coarsest linsey woolsey, a common straw hat, and a pair of doeskin moccasins. A large pack completed his equipment.

Every one gazed with curiosity upon the newcomer. In their eagerness to learn who he was, whence he came, and what was his business, the horse swap was left unfinished, the rifle laid aside, and even the busy tin cup had a temporary respite.

The young man approached Squire Crosby, whom even a stranger could distinguish as the principal person among them, and anxiously inquired for a house where he could be accommodated, saying that he was extremely ill, and felt all the symptoms of an approaching fever.

Crosby eyed him closely and suspiciously for a moment without muttering a word. Knaves and swindlers had been recently abroad, and the language of the youth betrayed that he was a Yankee, a name at that time associated in the minds of the ignorant with everything that is base. Mistaking the silence of Crosby for a fear of his inability to pay, the stranger smiled and said, "I am not without money;" and putting his hand to his pocket to give ocular proof of his assertion,

he was horror-struck to find that his pocket-book was gone. It contained every cent of his money, besides papers of great value to him.

Without a farthing, without even a paper or a letter to attest that his character was honorable, in a strange land, and sickness rapidly coming upon him, these feelings nearly drove him to despair.

The Squire who had prided himself on his sagacity in detecting villains, now found the use of his tongue. With a loud and sneering voice he said:

“Stranger, you are barking up the wrong tree if you think to catch me with that ere Yankee trick o’ yours.”

He proceeded in that inhuman strain, seconded by nearly every one present, for the “Squire” was powerful, and few dared to displease him. The youth felt keenly his desolate situation, and casting his eyes around the group, and in a tone of deep anxiety, inquired:

“Is there none who will receive me?”

“Yes, I will,” cried man among the crowd; “yes, poor, sick stranger. I will shelter you.” Then, in a lower tone, he added: “I know not whether you are deserving, but I do know that you are a fellow-being, and in sickness and in want; and for the sake of Him who died for the guilty, if not for your own sake, will I be kind to you, poor stranger.”

The man who stepped forth and proffered a home to the youth in the hour of his suffering, was Simon Davis, an elderly man who resided near Crosby, and the latter was his deadly enemy. Uncle Simon, as he was called, never retaliated, and bore many persecutions of his vindictive neighbor without complaint. His family consisted of himself and daughter, his only child, an affectionate girl of seventeen.

The youth heard the offer of Mr. Davis, and heard no more; for, overcome by his feelings and extreme illness, he sank insensible. He was conveyed to the house of his benefactor, and a physician called. Long was the struggle between life and death. Though unconscious, he called upon his mother and sister, almost constantly, to aid him. When the youth was laid upon her bed, and she heard him calling for his sister, Lucy Davis wept, and said to him, “Poor young man, your sister is far distant, but I will be to you a sister.” Well did this dark-eyed maiden keep her promise. Day and night she watched over him, except during the short intervals when she yielded her post at his side to her father.

At length the crisis of the disorder arrived—the day that was to decide the question of life or death. Lucy bent over him with intense anxiety, watching every expression of his features, hardly daring to breathe, so fearful was she of awakening him, from the only sound sleep he had enjoyed for nine long days and nights. At length he awoke and gazed up in the face of Lucy Davis, and faintly inquired, “Where am I?” There was intelligence in that look. Youth and a good constitution had obtained the mastery. Lucy felt that he was spared, and, bursting into tears, rushed out of the room.

It was two weeks more before he could sit up, even for a short time. He had already acquainted them with his name and residence, but they had no curiosity to learn anything further, and forbade him giving his story until he became stronger. His name was Charles Wilson, and his parental home Boston.

A few days afterward, when Mr. Davis was absent from home, and Lucy engaged about her household affairs, young Wilson saw close beside his head his pack, and, recollecting something that he wanted, opened it. The first thing that he saw was the identical pocket-book whose loss had excited so many regrets. He recollected having placed it there the morning before he reached Brent's Prairie, but in the confusion of the moment the circumstance was forgotten. He examined it, and found everything as he left it.

The discovery restored him to health; but he resolved at present to confine the secret to his own bosom. It was gratifying to him to witness the entire confidence they reposed in the honor and integrity of a stranger, and the pleasure with which they bestowed favors upon one whom they supposed could make no return but thanks.

Night came, and Mr. Davis did not return. Lucy passed a sleepless night. In the morning she watched hour after hour for his coming, and when sunset approached he was still absent. Terrified at his long and unusual stay, she was setting out to procure a neighbor to go in search of him, when her parent came in sight. She ran to meet him, and was bestowing upon him many endearing expressions of affection, when his haggard, woebegone countenance startled her.

He uttered not a word, and went into his house, and seated himself in silence. It was in vain that she attempted to cheer him. After a long pause, during which there was a powerful struggle going on in his feelings, he arose and took his daughter by the hand and led her into the room where Wilson was seated. "You must know all," he said; "I am ruined; I am a beggar. In a few days I must quit this house—the farm which I have so highly improved and thought my own."

He proceeded to state that, a few days before, Crosby, in a fit of ungovernable malice, taunted him with being a beggar, and told him that he was now in his power, and he would crush him under his feet. When Mr. Davis smiled at what he regarded as only an impotent threat, Crosby, to convince him, told him that the patent of his farm was a forged one, and that he, Crosby, knew the real owner of the land; had written to purchase it; and expected a deed in a few days, Mr. Davis immediately went home for his patent, and during his long absence had visited the land office. Crosby was right. The patent, beyond all dispute, was a forged one, and the claim of Davis to the farm was not worth a farthing.

It may be proper to observe that counterfeiting soldiers' patents was a regular business in some of the eastern cities, and hundreds had been duped.

"It is not for myself," said the old man, "that I grieve for this misfortune. I am advanced in life, and it matters little where or how I pass the remainder of my existence. I have a little home beyond the stars, where your mother has gone before me, and where I would have loved to protect her child, my own affectionate Lucy."

The weeping girl threw her arms around the neck of her father, and poured her tears upon his bosom. "We can be happy still," said she, "for I am young, and can easily support us both,"

A new scene followed, in which another individual was the principal actor. I shall leave the reader to form his own opinion of it, and barely remark that, at the close, the old man took the hands of Lucy and Charles Wilson, and then joining them, said: "My children, I cheerfully consent to your union. Though poor, with a good conscience you can be happy. I know, Charles, you will be kind to my daughter, for a few nights ago when you thought that no human ear could hear you, I heard you fervently implore the blessings of heaven upon my gray hairs, and that God would reward my child for all her kindness to you." Taking down his family Bible, the venerable old man added, "It is a season of affliction, but we are not forsaken. Let us look for support to Him who has promised to sustain us." He then opened the book and read:

"Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be on the vines, the labors of the olive shall fail, and the fields yield no meat, the flocks shall lie cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stall, yet will I joy in the God of my salvation."

Charles and Lucy knelt beside the venerable old man, and while he prayed they wept tears of grateful emotion. It was a sleepless but not unhappy night to the three inhabitants of the neat, cheerful dwelling they were about to leave, and go they knew not where.

It was then that young Wilson learned the real value of money. By means of it he could give shelter to those who had kindly received him when every other door was closed upon him.

All night long he had thought of the forged patent. There were a few words dropped by Mr. Davis which he could not dismiss from his mind— that Crosby had written to the real owner of the land, and had now obtained the promise of the deed.

It is now time for the reader to become fully acquainted with the history of the young stranger.

His father, Charles Wilson, senior, was a merchant in Boston, who had acquired an immense fortune. At the close of the war, when the soldiers received from the government their bounty of one hundred and sixty acres of land, many of them offered their patents to Mr. Wilson for sale. Finding that they were resolved to sell them, he determined to save them from the sacrifice of their hard earnings, and purchased at a fair price all that were offered. In three years no small portion of the Military Tract came into his possession. On the day that Charles became of age, he gave him a deed to the principal part of this land in Illinois, and insisted that he should go out and see it, and if he liked the country, settle there. Wishing him to become identified with the people, he recommended his son to lay aside his broadcloth, and dress like a backwoods-man

In compliance with this suggestion, the young man had assumed a rude and rustic dress, so inappropriate to his appearance and manners as to excite some suspicions that he had motives for concealing his real character.

On the morning of his son's departure, Mr. Wilson received a letter from a man in Illinois, who

had frequently written. He wished to purchase a certain section at government price, which Mr. Wilson promised he should have on these terms, provided he forwarded a certificate from the judge of the circuit court that the land was worth no more. The letter just received inclosed the certificate in question. Mr. Wilson had given this tract to Charles, and putting the letter and certificate into his hand, enjoined upon him to deed it to the writer, according to promise, upon his arrival in Illinois.

The remarks of Mr. Davis forcibly reminded young Wilson of this incident, and on the next morning after he had become acquainted with the plan of Crosby, with a trembling hand he examined the letter and certificate. It was written by Crosby, and the land he wished to purchase, was the identical farm of Davis.

Astonished that his friend, the Judge, should certify that the land was worth no more, Mr. Davis asked to see the certificate; and after a moment's examination, unhesitatingly pronounced its signature a forgery.

An explanation from the young man now became necessary, and calling Lucy into the room, he told them his story, and laid before them a pile of patents and bank notes, one after another till the sum reached thousands. It was a day of thankful happiness to Simon Davis and his daughter, and not less so to young Wilson.

Not long after this scene, Crosby entered.

His air was that of a man who has an enemy in his power, and intends to trample upon him. He scarcely noticed young Wilson, except with a look of contempt. After pouring out all his maledictions upon the family, the old man inquired if he would give nothing for improvements made. The answer was, "Not a cent."

"You certainly would not," said Wilson, "drive out this man and his daughter penniless into the world?"

"What's that to you?" replied Crosby, with a look of malice and contempt.

"I will answer that question," said Wilson, and he acquainted him with what the reader has already learned.

Crosby was at first petrified with astonishment, but when he saw that all his schemes of villainy were defeated, and proof of his having committed a forgery could be established, his assurance forsook him, and he threw himself upon his knees, and begged first the old man, then Lucy and Wilson to spare him.

Much as they pitied, it was impossible for them not to despise the meanness of this application.

Wilson told him that he deserved no mercy. That a moment since he would have driven the family of Davis from their home, without even means of temporary support. He would pay

Crosby a fair price for his property, and forbear prosecuting him on condition of his instantly quitting the country.

Crosby accepted the offer. The writings were made out on that day, and before morning he and his family were on their way to Texas.

Why should I spin out the narrative. Lucy and Charles were married, and though a splendid mansion soon rose upon the farm of Mr. Davis, both love far better the little room where she had so anxiously watched over the sick bed of the houseless stranger, Mr. Wilson was rich, but never forgot those who were in want.

Cheered by the kind and affectionate attention of his children, Simon Davis almost seemed to have renewed his existence.

He lived many years, and long enough to tell the bright-eyed son of Charles and Lucy the story of the forged deed. And when he told the listening boy how his father, when poor and friendless, was taken home and kindly treated, and in turn became their benefactor, he impressed upon the mind of his grandchild that even a cup of cold water, given from a good motive, shall not lose its reward.

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