

A Hanged Man's Story
by "Delta"

There are few routes on which the pleasure-seeking tourist can meet with grander and more picturesque scenery than in the trans-continental trip from New York to San Francisco. So varied is the landscape, that every taste may be gratified; and the constant alternation and great diversity of the different views, add to the many charms of the journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast.

The train one day was late, for it had been snowed up in the Rocky Mountains, and was pushing forward at a great speed to make up for lost time. The passengers—a curious medley—formed a merry party, and were passing the hours pleasantly in various ways. Though recent acquaintances, they were as sociable as if they had known each other for years. Conspicuous among them were a week-old bride and a good-natured seafaring man—somewhat of a character—who went under the *sobriquet* of "Captain."

As the cars wound round the lofty slope called "Cape Horn," a dissipated-looking individual, who had been in a state of chronic intoxication ever since he boarded the train, gave a yell, and before [anyone] could divine his purpose or prevent its execution, suddenly sprang from the platform, alighted on the edge of the track, and rolled from thence over the steep, and was speedily out of sight in the deep valley below.

The train was stopped, and a party returned to find the missing man or his body; but no trace was seen. The slope was too dangerous to descend hurriedly, and there was no near route. So, after dispatching a messenger to the nearest station to have him looked after from below, the train moved on. The accident was a fresh topic of conversation.

"Poor fellow! He's certain to be killed—is he not, Captain?" asked the bride.

"I'm not so sure of that," said the captain. "I've had greater escapes myself. You wouldn't pity him if you knew him."

"So you know him?"

"Yes, the greatest rascal under the sun. Such a death is too good for him. You could scarcely expect me to have much affection for a man who did his best to hang me. You may laugh incredulously, but it's true. I was once hung. But, don't be afraid of me. I was perfectly innocent of the crime of which I was accused. Sit down, and—if you like—I'll tell you the marvelous story.

"Well," continued the captain, when we had closed up and seated ourselves near him, "I married and settled in San Francisco many years ago, when it was quite a little place, and had fair success as a waterman. But when my wife died, three years after, I got restless and went off to the Sacramento diggings with a partner—Phil. Haggerty—the very fellow who just now jumped over the cliff, but whom I then considered my friend.

“I took my two-year-old girl with me. We went away up the valley to the furthest diggings, and secured what was considered a good claim, among a score of miners, all more or less successful. At the end of the month, however, we had barely made enough to cover expenses. Haggerty and my little daughter occupied the tent with me close to our claim, and at a moderate distance from the scattered tents of our fellow miners.

“One morning there was great consternation in the camp. One of the oldest miners was found dead—evidently murdered by a stab in his left breast. His pile, known to be a heavy one, was gone.

“We were puzzled to know who had done this. Was it an outsider, or one of ourselves? There were no claims within several miles of ours, and on none of these had we any acquaintances, There were only twenty of ourselves, and, apparently, every one could look his neighbor in the face.

“By mutual consent we searched each other’s tents, but discovered neither the stolen gold-dust, nor any [clue] to the mystery. Towards evening, however, after we had given up work for the day, one man, when taking a stroll picked up a blood-stained bowie knife which corresponded in shape with that of the wound.

“My initials were carved on the haft. The knife was mine!

“The gold-dust was not found, but my comrades thought the evidence of my guilt complete—not a mere suspicion, but a certainty. They never seemed to doubt that I was the murderer, and called me a canting hypocrite for saying my prayers and reading my Bible.

“I was immediately seized; nor would they listen to what I had to say in my defence. I begged of them to hear me; but in vain. They surrounded me in a body, hurried for a rope, and led me off for execution.

“I looked at my special comrade, but he could not return my gaze. In my agony I prayed him to testify that I had slept in my own tent all night, and could not be the guilty one. Still, there was the corpse, the fatal wound, and my tell-tale knife. How came the latter to be where it was found, and bloody? I could not explain it.

“The recollection of what seemed a dream suddenly flashed on me. In my sleep I had fancied that I heard my partner get up in the middle of the night and go out. In stepping over he accidentally kicked my arm slightly, and partly woke me. I told my comrades of this, but they only sneered. I appealed to Haggerty, but how could I expect him to acknowledge what might tend to criminate himself. I had not the slightest doubt that he was the culprit, and that he had used my knife solely to make me his scape-goat.

“They hurried me to the edge of a wood over the brow of the hill, selected a tree, put the rope that was to hang me over a suitable branch, and adjusted the noose round my bared neck.

“ ‘Ba-ars, ba-ars, look out chums!’ cried one of them suddenly.

“This created a panic, for the miners were unarmed. A bevy of huge grizzlies were close at hand. There was no help for it but to quickly beat an ignominious retreat.

“ ‘Sway away—sway away!’ cried several. ‘We must finish him first.’

“I remember no more, and must have fainted when about to be hoisted up. When my senses returned, I felt a choking sensation, and a fullness as if my head would burst. I could scarcely breathe. I seemed to awake from a dream; the whole affair rushed back in my memory; I realized my perilous position, and instinctively put my hands up to free my neck from the strangling cord, for in their hurry they had forgotten to tie them.

“Fortunately they were inexpert hangmen, for when I fainted the noose must have slipped up over my jaw. It neither compressed my windpipe nor the large blood-vessels of my neck, so that it would have been some time till I became fully choked or apoplexied. I managed to get hold of the rope by which I was suspended, and thereby hauled myself up till I caught the branch from which I dangled. Then I loosened the noose, slipped it over my head and was free. Thank God[!] I was innocent besides. The bears had gone. Probably they were as scared as my comrades, who were nowhere to be seen, having returned to the camp, convinced, no doubt, that they had avenged the murder and satisfied the majesty of miners’ justice—that is, by lynch-law. Hanging is not a pleasant experience, and I wouldn’t advise any one to make the experiment.

“Seeing that the coast was clear, I descended from the tree-gibbet, and made off as fast as my feet could carry me, and as far as I possibly could from that scene of horror. I dared not go back for my little girl, and had to leave her to the care of Providence. Had they caught me they would have strung me up again without compunction. And I saw no possibility of redress. I could not expect strangers to believe my story. They would sooner have thought me guilty than innocent. So that I made the best of my way to San Francisco, and as I did not feel safe even there, I again embraced my old profession—that of a sailor—shipped for Australia, where I traded for some years and ultimately made a competency.

“At last I longed to visit California again, and came by way of Europe. Though much altered, I knew Haggerty the moment he stepped on the train at Chicago. He did not recognize me, for I spoke to him. Time and grief have altered my appearance much.”

“And what of your daughter?” asked the bride.

“I accidentally overheard—for the story of the murder and my punishment was in everybody’s mouth—that she died shortly after I left. Here is her likeness,” said the captain, taking out a photograph from his pocket and passing it round. “She had a curiously shaped right ear, which had no lobe. The cross you see round her neck was also a singular one.”

To our great surprise the bride uttered a hysterical shriek.

“Was the cross anything like this?” she asked, taking one from her neck.

“Yes, it looks the same, only this is older and more worn. Stay—it is the very cross. How came you by it—may I ask?”

“It has never left my neck since you put it there. Look at this ear. My features, too, resemble those of your photograph. The story of your daughter’s death was untrue. My maiden name was Eva Croall.”

“That is my surname. Good heavens! and you are my daughter!” said the captain, folding his long-lost child to his breast. This was a very unexpected but pleasantly affecting denouement to his singular story.

“Tell me where you have been all these years,” he asked presently.

“I remember little about my infancy. They told me my father was a bad man, and dead; but would not enlighten me further. I lived with a Mr. Giles, who was very kind to me, and died in San Francisco. He was very well off. His sons and daughters are still alive.”

“Giles was one of our gang at Sacramento—in fact, the leader and the most determined of my executioners. I suppose he took compassion and adopted you. I remember he had a fancy for you.”

Haggerty’s suicidal mania was thus the means of making Captain Croall meet with his long-lost daughter, a result on which we heartily congratulated him. The interesting episode made his singular story all the more romantic. Both were great lions for the remainder of the journey.

His narrative redoubled our interest in Haggerty’s fate; and we anxiously awaited intelligence about him. Ere we reached San Francisco, a telegram informed us that he had been found at the foot of a precipice. His body was terribly bruised and many bones were broken, so that he was not expected to recover.

He was interrogated about Captain Croall’s execution and the robbery; and told that Croall was still alive, and in the train when he attempted suicide. This elicited a dying confession that he, and not Croall, was the culprit who stole the old miner’s money, and murdered him to escape detection—the victim having awoke and caught him in the act. Croall wished to confront him, but death came too rapidly.

Fresh congratulations pressed in on Captain Croall, who thus not only had his innocence established, but had found a son and daughter to cheer his old age. In San Francisco he met several of the miners who had formerly helped to hang him. They were wealthy, and of course regretted much having acted so hastily on purely circumstantial evidence.

The captain invited his fellow-passengers to dinner shortly after arrival. The affair was a success. His health and long life and his daughter’s welfare were enthusiastically toasted. He subsequently settled for good in the Californian capital, where his daughter resides, and every year they make a pilgrimage to the never-to-be-forgotten tree and the scene of the execution from which he had so narrow an escape.

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