

[Written for The Flag of our Union.]

The Sheriff's Story

By James Dabney

“EVERY one must die at some time, and I suppose it matters little in what form the end comes.”

So spoke John Gibson, one of a party of friends who were gathered around a genial fire in the rooms of our mutual friend, the sheriff of L—.

“I don't know,” said the sheriff, “but it always struck me that it *does* matter how the end comes.”

“If you must die,” said Gibson, “what is it to you, after a few brief minutes?”

“Very true,” responded the sheriff. “A man's life is easily taken, and all modes have the same result. But then, I think one ought to consider the amount of suffering or disgrace involved in the method.”

“Most persons, I suppose, would prefer to die in their beds,” said Gibson. “This I do not refer to, however—I speak of death by violence. If I were doomed to death, I would be careless, as to the means used.”

“You think so, now,” remarked the sheriff, “but if it should come to the scratch, I think you would shun a death that involved suffering.”

“Don't all the modes known, involve suffering?”

“The majority, but not all. For instance, being guillotined, would be far preferable to being burned at the stake. Indeed, the guillotine is really a humane mode of punishment. The knife drops, the victim feels a cold pressure on the neck, and then all is over.”

“You are quite eloquent,” said Gibson, laughing. “What do you think of the *garrote*?”

“I have been told that the method was not a torture,” was the reply. “Eminent physicians have informed me that, besides a slight choking sensation there is no pain in this method. The horrible contortion, and blackening of the face, has caused many to think the *garrote* a fearful torture; but these changes in the face are accounted for, upon the simplest and most credible grounds.”

“So much for these,” said Gibson, smiling. “Now tell us your favorite (if I may use the expression) mode of punishment.”

“But for the shame which attends it, I should prefer hanging,” replied the sheriff.

“Upon what grounds?”

“It is the easiest, and least painful method known.”

“How do you know this?”

“I once had a description of the whole affair from a man who was hung.”

The party burst out into a laugh, but the sheriff’s face did not relax a muscle.

“A joke’s a joke, Campbell,” exclaimed Gibson; “but this yarn is rather too much for our credulity.”

“Nevertheless, it is true,” replied the sheriff, “and if you want the matter explained, I may as well tell you the whole story.”

“Very good,” said Gibson. “Let’s have a good one, for it will take a tough yarn to sustain your assertion.”

The sheriff laughed, good-humoredly.

“Wait till you hear it,” he began. “Ten years ago, I was elected sheriff of this county. This was my first election, and I have been returned regularly ever since. My first attempt at opening court was made during an important trial. The criminal was a depraved, desperate wretch, who had been indicted for a brutal and atrocious murder. The fellow was greatly hardened, and seemed to care but little how the trial resulted—the evidence was strong against him, and when the case was submitted to the jury, they returned a verdict of ‘guilty,’ without leaving their seats.

“The execution was fixed for a day, two weeks after the trial. Of course, it was my duty, as sheriff, to put the rope around the fellow’s neck, and launch him into eternity. It was a distasteful duty, I assure you; for, though I knew full well the man deserved his death, I did not relish the idea of hanging him. I got through with it, however, and set him to dancing on air. He did not struggle much, and I thought he had an easy death. After hanging the usual time, and being pronounced dead, he was cut down, and his body given to his friends for interment. “I thought I had seen the last of the man, as the wagon containing the body drove out of the jail yard; but I was mistaken.”

“About four months after the execution, I happened to be passing my barn, when I saw a man sitting in the doorway, with his head resting on his hands. I did not like his looks, so I approached him, and asked him what he wanted there. He raised his head, and looked at me in silence. I am not given to superstition, and I don’t think I’m very timid, but I felt my blood grow icy cold, as I recognized in the man before me the person whose execution I had conducted. His face showed no traces of his violent end, and the only indication of it, now visible, was a slight disfigurement of the neck. I scarcely knew what to say or think, for I had seen him hung, and heard him pronounced dead, and had delivered his body to his friends for burial, and yet, after a lapse of four months, there he sat, looking at me with a face as white as a sheet. The terror that was exhibited in his countenance convinced me that he was no ghost, so I asked him, with as much coolness as I could command:

“ ‘Jack Larkins, do you know me?’

“ ‘You’re the man that hung me,’ he replied, doggedly at the same time moving away.

“I covered him with my pistol, and told him if he moved a foot I would shoot him.”

He paused, and looked at me, fixedly.

“ ‘What do you mean to do with me?’ he asked. ‘Do you mean to hang me again?’

“It was, strictly speaking, my duty to arrest the fellow, but I could not do it. The idea of having to hang him again was revolting, and I determined to let him escape. I told him if he would promise to leave the neighborhood, and never come back again, I would let him go. This he readily promised, and assured me that he would never cross my path again, as nothing but a mere chance had led him to encounter me this time.

“ ‘Before you go, Larkins,’ said I, ‘I would like to hear how you cheated the gallows.’

“ ‘You wont peach on any of them folks as helped me; will you?’ he asked.

“ ‘No,’ I replied; ‘I will not get them into any trouble. I simply wish to know how you felt while you were hanging, and, how you were resuscitated.’

“He hesitated for some time, but upon a renewal of my assurance that none of his friends should be molested told me the following story:

“When I put the rope around his neck, and left him on the gallows, he felt a faintness about the heart, caused by his realizing his fearful situation, for the first time; but before he had time to think, the trap was sprung, and he fell through the opening. The shock of the fall was rather startling than painful, and did not produce either insensibility or confusion. His thoughts were remarkably clear, and he seemed to have the power of seeing far above, below, and all around him. Everything assumed a bright vermilion hue, and a soft, dreamy languor gradually stole over him, until he became insensible. There was nothing painful or unpleasant in anything he had undergone. He seemed to be sinking gently into a delicious sleep, and all his thoughts were pleasant. The next thing he remembered, was being wrung by the most agonizing torture. The pains were not confined to any particular place, but extended through the whole body. His first thought was that he was in perdition, and was suffering the penalty of his crimes. The pains increased each moment, and at last, became so intense that he started to his feet with a scream of anguish, at the same time opening his eyes. Great was his surprise to find himself in his father’s house, in the midst of his friends and relatives. He fainted at once, and when he recovered, found himself in his own bed. As soon as it was thought safe to do so, his friends informed him that upon bringing his body home, they had determined to try to resuscitate it, although they feared it would be useless. They worked faithfully, and at last succeeded.

“ ‘But sir,’ said the man, in conclusion, ‘coming to life again was much worse than dying.’

“The man promised to leave the State, and try to do better. I had but little confidence in him, yet

I let him go. He kept his word, however, and, a short time ago, I heard he was a well-to-do farmer in one of the territories.

“This, gentlemen, is the manner in which I got my ideas about hanging, and I think you must admit their force.”

The Flag of our Union, January 6, 1866