

Burying the Wrong Man
by Judge Clark

“There’s no better fellow than Bob Lindsay,” was the universal voice of his neighbors,—“but for his one failing,” they felt in conscious bound to add.

His one failing, a proneness to indulge in strong drink, had been sufficient to counterbalance all Bob’s good qualities. Active, industrious and energetic, he was a man gifted to make his way in the world. Indeed, many times success seemed within his grasp. But just at the critical moment, and while his friends were hopefully saying, “If he’ll only hold out!”—a sudden relapse would come, and a week’s dissipation would squander the fruits of a month of sober industry.

It was a sore trial to Mary Lindsay to see her husband the slave of a loathsome appetite. Hers was a proud as well as a loving heart; and it stung her to note the look of suppressed triumph visible on the faces of certain friends, in opposition to whose counsels she had married handsome Bob Lindsay, in preference to rich, old and ugly Didymus Dodd.

Whatever of Bob’s earnings had escaped the rumseller’s gripe, had gone to buy a neat little home, which would have been a very happy one but for the one great drawback.

Bob had given a mortgage for a portion of the purchase-money, and several times he had raked together enough to pay it; but just then his besetting temptation would overcome him, and the money, instead of going to cancel the debt which lay like a load on Mary’s heart, and hung like a shadow over her home, would be worse than wasted.

In the course of time and business this mortgage came into the hands of Didymus Dodd. From him Bob knew it would be useless to seek indulgence, even had he felt free to ask a favor of Didymus Dodd—a humiliation at which his own, as well as Mary’s, pride revolted.

With that will and earnestness which had so often before carried Bob to the verge of success, and needed only perseverance to assure it, the required sum was once more accumulated.

“You must trust me *this* time, Mary,” said Bob, with a parting kiss, the morning he started to town to carry the money to Didymus Dodd’s lawyer, who had possession of the mortgage.

With a fervent prayer that he might not be led into temptation, Mary returned her husband’s kiss, and went about her daily cares, filled with anxiety for what the day might bring forth.

Bob felt brave and strong till he came in sight of the cross-roads tavern. Old Roan, from the force of habit, turned his head toward his accustomed hitching-place. Bob urged him on, and in a moment more would have been out of danger. But just then the demon of irresolution took possession of his soul.

“It’s a sultry day,” Bob soliloquized, “and a glass of something cool—just *one*—can do no harm.”

Old Roan, given his head, was soon rubbing his nose, in friendly recognition, against the signpost, while his master was exchanging salutations with the host within.

“A cold whiskey-toddy, Mr. Spigott,” said Bob; “a *pair* of ‘em, I mean, for I hope you’ll do me the honor of your company; and you, friend,” turning to a seedy-looking stranger in the corner, “won’t you join us?”

He of the seedy looks “didn’t care if he did,” and stepped forward into line without more words.

The toddies appeared and disappeared in a twinkling. Then a three-handed chat was struck up, and the toddies were several times repeated—all at Bob’s expense, for there wasn’t a stingy drop in his blood.

The seedy stranger made himself so pleasant, that Bob was glad to learn they were going the same road. He even offered to share old Roan with his new friend on the old-fashioned plan of “*ride and tie*,” but the latter declined politely, saying as they were only going a short way together, he would manage to keep up afoot if Bob didn’t ride too fast. Another round of drinks, and Bob and the stranger took their departure in “right merrie” humor.

“Here,” said the latter, when they had reached the heart of the forest, where a foot-path branched from the main road, “we must part, for my way is by this path.”

Bob expressed his regret at the enforced separation, and was on the point of reluctantly resuming his journey, when the stranger begged him to alight for a short rest.

“Here’s a nice cool place among the bushes,” added the stranger; “and here’s a little something for refreshment,” producing a flat bottle from his pocket; “our chat has been so pleasant that I’d like to enjoy half an hour more of it.”

Bob was in no mood to be unsociable, and he and his companion were soon seated side by side on a log, as cosily as General Marion and the British officer the day they dined on sweet potatoes served on a piece of bark.

The stranger uncorked the bottle and handed it to Bob.

“What is it?” inquired the latter.

“Brandy,” the other answered.

“Health and happiness!” said Bob, by way of preface to a good gulp.

A gurgling groan escaped him. The flask dropped from his hand. His throat burned as though scorched with fire. His temples throbbed. A confused buzzing filled his ears. A sense of numbness pervaded his brain, and he fell to the ground unconscious.

In a trice, the stranger dragged him into a thicket, and stripping him of his outer garments, replaced his own therewith, and mounting Roan, rode off into the woods with Bob's clothes and money.

The robber was afraid to venture far till night set in. Then, under cover of the darkness, he hurried forward, hoping, before day-light, to be well out of reach.

Soon a river intercepted his flight. It was swollen by recent rains, and the rapid current made its passage dangerous to those unaccustomed to the ford.

"Surely, this must be the right place," muttered the robber; "I observed it closely yesterday; yes, this is the spot."

Poor Roan recoiled and shied, but his rider spurred him on.

A headlong plunge buried horse and rider beneath the surging waters. The two came up again, but separated. With a violent struggle the horse clambered up the bank; but the man was swept swiftly down, vainly contending against the dark and angry flood!

Days after, the body of a drowned man was found where it had been borne by the current. The features were past recognition, but it was identified by the garments as that of poor Bob Lindsay.

Poor Mary was heart-broken. With all Bob's faults—or rather in spite of his one fault—she loved him dearly. And when the funeral was over, she sat down in her desolate home and mourned and would not be comforted.

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When Bob awoke from his stupor, and discovered the plight he was in—money, horse, and raiment, all gone—it is impossible to describe his remorse and shame.

"I can never look Mary in the face, again," he exclaimed. "Dodd will be pitiless. Her home, which she loves so well, will be sold over her head. No! I can never look her in the face again!"

Clothing himself, perforce, in the rags left by the robber, he wandered on aimlessly, and for many days lived like any other tramp.

But at last a change came over his spirit. It was cowardly to desert Mary thus. He would go back and bear his share of the trouble, and as much of hers as he could. Once for all, he would be a *man*, and this time there should be no slip.

And he turned again toward his home. At length he reached the river, and as he walked along the margin to find the ford, which lay some way above, his eyes fell on an object partly imbedded in the mud. He caught it up eagerly and examined it. An exclamation of joy burst from his lips, and he pressed forward with redoubled speed. He soon reached the ford which he passed without difficulty, (for the water had fallen considerably,) and at night-fall was at his own door. At the sound of words within, he paused on the threshold.

“If I could ever love another after poor Bob,” said Mary’s broken voice, “it would never be *you*, Didymus Dodd, who ought to be ashamed to choose my hour of sorrow to insult me!”

“*You shall either marry me or leave this house!*” returned the harsh tones of Didymus Dodd.

“She’ll do neither, villain!” thundered Bob, bursting in like a shot.

Didymus started as at the sight of a ghost; but in an instant Mary’s arms were about Bob’s neck.

“Oh, Bob! Bob!” she cried, “I thought you were dead and buried. First, Old Roan came home without you; then they found a man drowned in your clothes, and we buried him for you.”

Bob’s story soon dispelled the mystery.

Didymus Dodd ground his teeth with fury.

“I’ll sell you out all the same,” he growled, spitefully.

“Not so fast,” answered Bob; “I’ve got the money to pay your paltry mortgage.”

“Why, I thought you were robbed?”

“So I was, but I found my pocket-book all right today where it was washed from the thief’s pocket.”

Bob paid off the mortgage and never drank again; and now he and Mary are the happiest couple, and one of the best to-do in all that country.

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