

Lynch Law—A Story of the Lead Mines

In the year 183—, a small stern-wheel steamer left the broad track of the Mississippi which it had been plowing all the way from St. Louis, and entered the Bevre River, to pick its way up the tortuous windings of that stream, finally running its prow into the mud at the Galena landing.

On board were the usual complement of officers and men, together with eight or ten strangers from below, who were going to the lead mines. They were already engaged, with one exception, a young man of about twenty five years of age, whose name upon the boat's register appeared as Richard Smalley.

He was evidently unused to work, yet he had but little money, so could not possibly be a speculator; and he was very reticent regarding his business. The facts were, he was a gambler, who had conceived the idea of going to the lead mines for the purpose of replenishing his exhausted exchequer from the hard earned wages of the miners.

He received no welcome from the crowd who had been waiting for half an hour for the boat to come; but he did not notice that. He took his carpet-bag in hand and went ashore with the rest, with whom he had become acquainted and who introduced him to the "boss", as a man who desired a job. The question of wages was soon settled, and he in company with the rest, started for the "diggings."

Soon he exhibited an evident dislike for the work, and would have been discharged from the mines, but he went to the "boss" and begged to be retained; and for a while he did better.

From the log house which was their boarding house, many articles of value, such as clothing, watches and money, had been stolen, since the coming of Smalley; and no clue could be obtained of the missing articles.

As such a thing as stealing had been unknown previous to his coming, and considering the proverbial honesty of the regular Welsh and Cornish miners, suspicion was quite naturally directed to Smalley as the perpetrator of the theft.

A close watch was kept upon his movements, which resulted in nothing but a loss of sleep to his watchers, for a long time, until one night about twelve o'clock he was seen to dress himself and proceed to the chest of a comrade, from which he abstracted a watch and a small amount of money. Immediately the detective awoke the "boss" and Smalley was taken in charge and securely bound. Nothing was done with the prisoner until morning, when the "boss" opened his court, and called his gang of miners to act as jurymen.

The stolen goods being found upon his person was sufficient evidence of his guilt, and the question was not whether he should be punished, but what the nature of the punishment should be.

“I propose,” said the “boss,” after he had explained the nature of the case, “that we flog him, and I, therefore, order that he shall receive fifty blows upon the bare back, from a hazel-brush cat-o-nine tails, well laid on by the man whose property was stolen.”

The sentence was received with cheers by the miners; in silence by the culprit.

He was stripped to the waist, and tied to a tree, while the men who had been sent for whips soon returned, and everything was in readiness. The man who had been selected to do the whipping came forward, and taking one of the bundles of rods, began laying on with a will.

Smalley stood it very well until the twentieth blow had been administered, when he began to cry “enough,” and begged to be let off with what he had received.

“No you don’t,” said the leader, “taint every day we catch a bird like you, and we are bound to get the worth of our money!” Amid cries of rage and pain and angry imprecations, the remaining thirty blows were given and the “majesty of the law” was vindicated.

In those days of no law, the laws of Illinois were better than they are at present, for it must be admitted that this State had enacted some of the most ridiculous laws extant.

After Smalley had been released and was again clothed, he entered the house, and presently appeared with his carpet-bag. Outside he paused a moment and said the “boss.”

“I will kill you for your share in this work! I swear it, and as true as God lets me live, I will do it.”

“O, get along out of this,” replied the boss, “and if I ever catch you sneaking around here I’ll give you another flogging.”

Smalley walked away and was soon out of sight. It was ascertained that he took the first boat down the river, and in time new miners came, and the circumstance was forgotten. It would have been better for some of them if it had been remembered.

Nearly nine years had passed away; yet the superintendent was the same old “boss.” He had married, and a family of children had sprung up around him, making his home happy. About this time one of the children returned from school one night, and rushed into the house, asked, “Where is sister Ellie?”

“Why, you ought to know,” replied his mother; “she went with you to school this morning.”

“Yes, I know. But just after school was called this afternoon a gentleman called in a carriage and asked for her. I heard him tell the teacher that you had sent him after Allie. So she went with him, and I supposed she was at home. O, dear, where can she be?”

The mother now became alarmed and going to the door she took the tin horn, used to call the workmen to their meals, and blew a blast both long and shrill; and soon had the satisfaction of

seeing her husband running toward the house. She soon acquainted him with the situation of affairs, and he waited not for questions, but rushed down the road to the school house, where he was fortunate enough to find the teacher. "What kind of a man was it that came for Allie?" he asked. "A tall, dark-complexioned man, with heavy black whiskers," replied the teacher. "I should not have let her go," she continued, "but he said your wife had sent for her."

"What sort of a horse did he drive?"

"A large gray one. I have seen him often, and believe he is owned by some man in the village."

Then away to Galena the father posted off with all possible speed. Upon finding the man who owned the horse, he inquired if he had let him to any stranger that day.

"Yes, I did; and he agreed to be back by three o'clock, and now it is almost six. He said he was going out to your house, so I thought it was all right; but why do you ask?"

The "boss" proceeded to relate what is already known.

"It may be a trick of one of these rascally horse-thieves up the river, and if so he had probably struck for the Mississippi. That we can probably ascertain by enquiring along the road—but you say he took your oldest girl?! What could he possibly want of her?"

"Oh, I do not know! Neither can I imagine who he can be. But come, mount a horse, and let us see if we can get track of him," said the agonized father.

"All right," replied the stable-keeper. "Wait till I get my shooting irons, so that if we meet him I can give him justice without a trial."

At a farm house, a few miles away, they made inquiry, and learned that such a horse had passed there about two o'clock in the afternoon, with a tall, well dressed man driving, and that he was accompanied by a little girl who appeared to be weeping.

All the way along the route similar answers were given to their inquiries, until the fact was established that the stranger was making for the Mississippi; and forcing their horses to their utmost speed, they pushed on. *But they were too late!*

Arriving at the river they found the horse tied to a tree, while upon the seat of the carriage, was the following letter, addressed to the owner of the horse:

"DEAR SIR: I am sorry to put you to so much trouble in coming after your horse, but perhaps the enclosed bank note will pay you for your anxiety and your journey here. Please tell John Emerson, the "boss" at the mines, that I have not forgotten my oath, and that after I have destroyed his family one at a time I will kill him as I have sworn to do.

RICHARD SMALLEY"

Then the boss knew who had his child, and why she had been stolen; but, unremitting as was his search, no trace of her could be found.

Another year went past, and another child, who had been sent after the cows, was missing.

The hills were searched, and old mineral holes were explored with the expectation of finding her there; while the poor father was nearly frantic. He feared the worst, and believed it to be the work of Smalley. To confirm his belief, he received a letter from Smalley, again reminding him of his oath. In fear and trembling the time passed away. Every care was taken of the remaining child, and the father was never out of sight of his house.

One day the stable-keeper from Galena called and said: "I have some news for you. The fellow who ran away with my horse and your daughter is in Galena. He came on the boat this morning, and I recognized him and had him arrested. You must come to town to appear against him."

In the morning Mr. Emerson went to the village, and soon was face to face with the villain Smalley.

"For God's sake, tell me what you have done with my girls!" exclaimed the father.

"Ha! ha! Don't you wish you knew? Just wait until I get out of here, and I'll show you a trick you will not soon forget!"

Entreaties were of no avail—the hard-hearted wretch could not be prevailed upon to make known the whereabouts of the missing girls. A few hours later he was taken to the court room, which was crowded to its fullest capacity, and there arraigned for the crime of abduction.

In answer to the charge he replied: "Well, I own up; and now what are you going to do about it?"

This was a question more easily asked than answered; however, after a consultation with Emerson, the Judge replied: "I will tell you. If you will restore the children to their father, and promise never to molest him again, you can go free."

"And what if I won't?"

"Then you must suffer the penalty of your crime!"

The Judge had hoped that the prisoner might be induced to give up the girls; but this hope failed him. Thinking that another night's confinement would bring the prisoner to terms, the Judge remanded him to jail to remain until the following day. But he did not remain.

In the middle of the night the jailor was seized, bound and gagged; the jail broken open, and the prisoner removed.

Half an hour afterward a crowd of men appeared at the house of Mr. Emerson, with the prisoner in charge.

“You see, we thought we would take the law into our own hands; so we’ve brought him out here, and intend to hang him.”

“But if you do that I shall never find my children,” said Mr. Emerson.

“Yes you will, too! Just wait and see if we don’t make him confess. Give us a rope and we’ll show you.”

A long rope was procured, and, tying an end to each of the prisoner’s thumbs, it was thrown over the limb of a small burr-oak near by, and stretched up until nearly all his whole weight rested upon his thumbs.

The torture was excruciating, and he begged to be let down.

“Now will you tell?” demanded the leader.

Still the prisoner would not, and he was again suspended, and it was not until he had promised that he was let down. Then he gave all the particulars and told where the girl[s] could be found, adding: “After you get them you’ll let me go, I suppose.”

Swift messengers were immediately dispatched for the stolen girls, and returned with them early in the day. The prisoner in the meantime had been securely bound and concealed in a mineral hole, and his captors returned to Galena before daylight.

Great consternation was manifested when the jailor was discovered, and it was learned that the bird had flown. And the wonder did not cease when it was ascertained that the missing girls had been returned.

That night the party who had removed the prisoner again took him in hand, but this time the rope was around his neck instead of his thumbs.

“What are you going to do?” he asked in dismay.

“Hang you,” was the reply.

Then he became frightened, and calling to Mr. Emerson, he said, “I will tell you where you can find the money and watches I stole when I worked here, if you will set me free; and I’ll promise never to molest you again.”

Judge Lynch and the jury heard the proposals as well as Mr. Emerson, and by sundry pulls upon the rope made him confess where the property was buried.

While Mr. Emerson and several others went in search of it, Judge Lynch said, “now is a good time to end this trial; string him up!”

When the miner and his party returned, there hung the prisoner—dead. Judge Lynch and his party were out of sight, and never more seen in Galena.—*Galena Gazette*.

Burlington Hawk Eye, January 15, 1874