

A Fatal Mistake

There dwelt in California, some years ago, three friends, wild enough, who had seemingly linked their fortunes for better or for worse, and who, whatever their luck, were constantly in each other's company.

The young men were Charles Chester, Harry Bray and Edward Warren. They were more brotherly than many brothers, more akin than any kinsmen. True to each other, even when women and money were between them. Damon and Pythias, with a twin Damon added. For a long while they had been very poor; at last fortune favored them. Each had a certain sum, by no means contemptible, stowed away in the leathern belt he wore about his waist. Each carried a gold watch, and each wore a suit of clothes, supposed by himself to be the latest style, and choicest fashion. Moreover, their revolvers were perfect, silver-mounted, and rejoicing in a multiplicity of barrels; for without these it would be quite impossible to maintain a position in this quarter of the world in any society.

How they came by these possessions, we will not inquire to particularly. They were neither burglars nor highwaymen, but dice and betting may have helped them to the winning of their little [fortunes]. They were not over scrupulous; but they would have knocked any man down who had neglected to address them as gentlemen, and used those wonderful revolvers promptly on any "stranger" who objected to drinking with them; and, consequently, stood rather high in the community. Certainly, in their conduct to each other they were faultlessly honorable and miraculously generous.

One day soon after "luck" had come to its best, a letter directed in a tremulous woman's hand to "Charles Chester," was handed to that member of the trio, in the presence of the other two. The young fellow seized it eagerly, tore it open, read it through, and tearing off his belt, spread its contents before him upon the table and counted it over. Having done so, he burst into tears, and very unwisely and profanely cursed himself for extravagance, and requested for himself all sorts of uncomfortable things here and hereafter, a proceeding which seems to relieve some men extremely, though why, it would puzzle the unenlightened to declare. The cause of all this, as his comrades soon discovered, was that his mother had written to him from her little farm in a Southern State to tell him a doleful tale of sickness, death amongst the stock, etc., and a final crash. A mortgage was almost due, and as the old people would find it impossible to meet it, they would be sold out and left homeless in their age. "It will kill your father," wrote the mother, "and I will die with him."

"I did it all," said the young fellow, sobbing openly. "My debts and my wild ways encumbered them at first, and now look."

And he pointed to the gold upon the table, and began his profane litany again. The mortgage was three thousand dollars and he had but two thousand.

"Is that all?" cried Ned Warren, hauling at his belt.

“Good Heaven! What does he take me for?” cried Harry Bray furiously. “Five hundred dollars apiece and the expenses of the journey is about the figure. There, go to the old folks. We’ll see about your horse while you pack your bag.”

This set the other at his oaths again; but in joyful style this time. They were trumps and bricks, and by everything he could think of he’d do for them if they were in any need of it.

“He’d pay them back if he lived, and he’d—he’d—bless them;” and so choked off into sobs again, at which they left him to recover. They returned with a horse a well filled pocket-flask, and saw him set forth upon his mission as though the “old folks” had been their old folks also.

They waited for news from him, but none came. They waited quietly at first, then impatiently; at last they heard this: He had never been seen at home, or by anyone who knew him, since the day on which they had shook hands with him. — Some terrible fate had befallen him in the lonely places over which he had journeyed. To doubt him never entered their minds. That he was true to them as they were to him they well knew; and one thought filled each mind. They must discover his fate, and if it were what they supposed, avenge him.

So one bright morning, well mounted, well armed, and followed by a favorite dog, a hound who would, by no means, be left behind, the two set forth in search of their lost comrade. They took the road he must have taken, and asked at every cabin and tavern for news of him. One old man remembered him well; another man had pointed out the dangerous place in the road leading past a precipice to a man of their lost friend’s description, but at that point the clue was lost. After much travel and many inquiries our comrades began to fear that they should have paused to examine the rocks and ravines at the foot of the precipice alluded to, ere they proceeded further, and determined to turn back and do so. They came to this resolution about nightfall, and just as they reached the borders of a little farm which bore evidence of careful tillage. Upon this land stood also a farm house; from the crevices in the shutters of which streamed long bars of ruddy lamp-light, and whence the sound of music was plainly heard. It was the only dwelling within sight.

“We will stay here,” said one friend to another, “until dawn comes and then return.”

That the house was not an inn did not matter to either of them. Hospitality was never refused in the land at that day.

They rode boldly up to the gate and gave a loud hallo. In an instant the door opened and they could see within a sudden panic in a lively dance, as all heads turned to see what had caused this interruption.

“Can you let us sleep here, tonight?” inquired one of the friends, as one asks who fears no refusal.

“Certainly, gentlemen,” said a pleasant voice. “You’re welcome. You’ll find a stable there, and corn for your horses. Our man Jack is on the floor tonight; but here’s a lantern, if you’ll tend to the horses yourselves.”

“All right, stranger,” said Harry, “and thank you too.”

And the two men led their horses into a stable, already full. Ned watered them, and secured them for the night, and would have left the place at once, but that one of the animals attracted Harry’s attention. He turned back to look at him, examined him from head to foot, turned red and pale, suddenly clutched Ned’s arm.

“You remember the horse we bought for Charles Chester?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Ned.

“Look at the fellow,” said Harry. “Yes, the very one. The star on his forehead, the [scar] on his foreleg, the color, the height. Ned, it’s Charley’s horse!” “It is the horse,” said Ned, slowly. “Harry, if Charley had lived to go, his horse would have gone with him.”

“The owner of this animal may know all we need to hear,” said Harry. “It won’t be good news, Ned.”

Ned shook his head, and sadly and slowly the men went toward the house. They found the dancing at its height, and that this was the homecoming of the farmer’s bride, a pretty young woman with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, of whom the stalwart bridegroom seemed very fond and proud.

“Sit down, strangers,” said an old man near the door. “You’ve come at a merry time, and don’t get much attention. My son is just the happiest fellow out, I believe—got no eyes for anybody but that gal. You see they’ve been waitin’ quite a spell, and he had got no luck, none at all, and it seemed he’d got to give it up; but six months back he had a streak. Wonderful!—explained it, but I don’t remember, so he sends for her and me from Connecticut. She’s an orphan gal, and as soon as her school term was over—she was teaching, ye know—she come. This is their house warming, and them’s the neighbors. They all like Ike. Ike’s a good fellow—a real good fellow, though I do say it. Take a nip, stranger—don’t be afraid of the jug. I’ll fill it again. Why, what ails your dog?”

The dog left outside was howling rather fearfully.

“Wants to come in, perhaps,” replied Ned, “but it mightn’t be agreeable to the ladies.”

“Bring him in,” said the old man, but the dog wouldn’t come.

He stood beside a patch of grass in the garden, howling woefully, and scratching and tearing with all his might. Leave the spot, he would not, and the friends, as they saw him, and remembered the horse in the stable, felt the blood curdle in their veins.

“Whose horse is that with a white star on the forehead and a scar on his fore leg, a handsome brown horse, with wonderful eyes?” whispered Harry to the old man.

“That’s my son’s horse,” said the old man.

“Where did he buy it?” asked the other.

“Don’t know,” said the old man laughing childishly. “Come to him with the rest of his good luck, six months ago.”

Again the dog outside began to howl. Again the friends felt cold chills creep over them.

“Where are we to sleep?” asked Edward of the old man. “We don’t want supper—we need rest.”

“I’ll show you,” said the old man. “The house will be full tonight, but you’ll not mind roughing it.”

And he led the way to an upper room, where a rude bed was already spread.

“Just lie down here, strangers,” he said. “There’s a blanket, if you’re cold, and there’s a candle. Good night.”

And he left them. But not to sleep. The two men had sought solitude, that they might commune with each other. Yet now they could only say, “What does this mean?” They had said it in as many ways a dozen times, when Harry, by accident, lifted his eyes to a peg in the rough wall. On it hung something which riveted his gaze with horror. Yet it was an object quite common and innocent in itself—only a pair of brown saddle bags, rather new in appearance, and with the letters “C.C” on the side.

“Look!” he cried. “Look, Edward!”

The other, in turn, stood mute for a time, then gave a spring towards the peg, tore the bags down and opened them. Within they found garments they knew their friend had worn, an empty belt, and the daguerreotype of a young girl of whom they had known him to be very fond.

“His horse in the stable, his saddle bags and belt here, the dog howling on the turf without—what does it all mean?” cried Harry, again.

And Ned answered, “We shall soon see,” and strode into the great room where the dancing was going on, and up to the bridegroom, standing at the head of a Virginia reel, with his bride’s hand in his own.

“Stop a bit,” cried Ned furiously. “We have a question to ask. Whose horse is that in the stable—the brown one with a star on the forehead?”

“Mine,” said the farmer, turning deadly white.

“And the saddle bags upstairs, marked C.C?”

The farmer turned paler.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “wait until morning, and I will explain everything.”

“We choose to learn the truth for ourselves,” said the young man, fiercely.

“You had a mysterious streak of luck, six months ago, I understand from the old man there,” said Harry Bray.

“Not very mysterious,” said the farmer. “I went to the diggings, and fell in with a nugget. As for the horse, I found him, and the saddle bags, too. If you know to whom they belong, he’s welcome to them.”

“They belong to the man you murdered for his money, and buried in the ground yonder, where the dog stands howling.” cried Harry Bray. “We are going to dig here, and Heaven help any man who hinders us.”

“Dig where you choose,” said the farmer. “I am too well-known here to be afraid of two madmen. I murder a man—I! There. I’m a fool to care for such words! Dig, confound you! Many a horse strays in the wood, many a man has found one, as well as I. Come, neighbors, set the fiddles going, and let these madmen dig.”

And the spades sank into the turf, and the terrified guests gathered around, and the bride clung to her husband’s arm, and the music was dumb, and the dog’s long, melancholy wail filled the air; and, at last, just as the rising moon flung her yellow beams upon the new dug earth. Ned Warren cried, in an awful voice, “He is here!” And the two friends lifted from the grave that which had been a man, with long death-grown black hair falling down over his shoulders.

He had been shot in the head and through the heart, and there was no doubt in either mind that it was the body of their lost friend. The farmer seemed petrified with horror. The bride fell into a death-like swoon, the guests fell away from their host and looked at him askance. The old father tore his hair and [pled] for mercy. But there was no mercy in any heart there. The avengers were all-powerful. The great room adorned for festival and mirth was turned into a court-room. The women were thrust from it, the men remained. On the raised stand where the fiddlers had been seated, Harry Bray now took his seat in the character of Judge Lynch. The jury was named, the mock trial hurried on, the accused called upon her to answer. He pleaded not guilty. He denied any knowledge of the fact that a grave lay so near his home. He persisted in the repetition of the statement that he had found the horse and saddle-bags, but he admitted that there had been money in the latter.

He stood before them looking very unlike a murderer, calling on them for justice—calling on God to witness the truth of his words; speaking of his young wife and his old father; bidding his neighbors remembered that the had never done them any wrong.

But Judge Lynch [had] no mercy, no compassion, no belief in the possibility of false accusation;

and this Judge Lynch was an avenger of blood. The end was what the end of such a trial generally is; the sentence, the awful one of death; and in less than three hours from the moment on which they first saw the bridegroom happy and [blithe], standing with his bride at the head of the gay country dance, his body dangled, a horrible sight to look upon, from the branch of the tree that shadowed what all believed to be his victim's grave.

When all was over they found the old father dead in his chair, beside the fireplace, and found among the women a hopeless, gibbering maniac, whom they would hardly have known for the rosy cheeked young bride.

They were revenged, but at what cost? The two men returned to their home, saddened and altered, yet not remorseful, for they had but revenged their comrade; and this, to them, seemed common justice. The legal code of border life had been adhered to; but for the last look at the mad bride they could scarcely have recognized how awful all this had been. They lived on friends together still, speaking often of poor Charley, and fancying that in some other world he might even know how well they have revenged themselves upon his murderer.

And so five years passed and one day the two men went together into a coffee room kept by an old Frenchman in the city of San Francisco, and being in low spirits and out of luck, and with slender purses, were sitting disconsolate over their meal, when a hand came down on each shoulder, and a voice cried, "Found at last! I've searched the city for you. Heaven bless you, dear boys."

It was Charles Chester, handsome and cheerful, well dressed, and well-to-do-looking; Charles Chester, whose murderer they believed themselves to have lynched years before.

And this was the story he told them, wondering at their pallid looks and awestruck silence the while. "The money he had with him being in gold, and heavy for his belt, he placed it in his saddle bags, and had completed many miles of his journey, when near a new but apparently deserted dwelling, he saw a man lying groaning terribly. Dismounting he assisted him, and found that he was a traveler who had been set upon by ruffians, and robbed and wounded. He had crawled to this house for assistance, but found it empty, and now lay dying in the road. — Charles Chester had done his best for the poor fellow but without avail. He died in his arms just as the sun went down, and by its fading light, he had dug a grave on the turf before the empty house, and there buried him. There was no one in sight, and his fears of an attack upon himself warned him to hurry on; but when the last rites were performed, and he turned to remount his horse it was gone. The animal had escaped into the woods, and with night coming on, all search seemed hopeless. The money in the saddle bags rendered the loss a maddening one. He threaded his way through the underbrush, calling his steed by name, until darkness hid all objects; and at last, striking his head against a tree, he fell to the ground insensible. When he came to himself, he was lying in a wagon, to which he had been conveyed by a kindly German who could speak no English. In falling, he had broken his arm, and was very weak and ill. Before he was able to communicate his story to any one, all hope of recovering either horse or money had deserted him. He was in despair. He could not assist his parents. To return to his friends would be to cast himself upon their bounty. This he would not do; and his struggles had been great at first, but they were over now. He had done well by the old folks, and had returned to pay his debts and

resume friendship with his old friends.”

He was with them—he lived. The farmer had doubtless told the truth. He did not even know why the turf had grown so green in the little yard, and he had found the horse at large in the woods, and knew nothing of the rider; but the thing had been done and could not be undone—the dead brought to life, or the maniac’s mind restored, or the blood washed from the murderer’s hands.

Of course they told their story, and of course they believed their friendship as warm as ever; but it was not so. They never would meet each other again as of yore. The two could not forget the man they had lynched to avenge their friend, and doubted the propriety of his returning alive and merry to trouble their consciences, which were quiet enough as long as he seemed dead. As for Charles Chester, he cleared the murdered man’s memory among his neighbors, and saw the wild-eyed, white-faced woman, who only shook her head, and moaned and muttered when he spoke to her; and then he too was content to say good-bye to those who had done the deed—albeit for his sake.

So the three parted, each going his own way, for thus it seemed easier to forget the deed done by Judge Lynch and his court on the day of the bride’s coming home.

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