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A Flatboatman's Honor

By THOMAS R. DUNN

Early in the nineteenth century the means of communication between northern cities and New Orleans was by flatboat on the Mississippi river. The flatboat was a lumber yard loosely put together and derived its name from the fact that its bottom was flat instead of being the usual shape of a boat. These boats were supposed to drift with the current of the big river, though their momentum was occasionally added to by enormous sweeps worked by men on the roof or deck and were always steered by a sweep. On reaching New Orleans they were broken up and sold for the lumber there was in them.

The flatboatman was a crude being not unlike the plainsman of some forty or fifty years later. A crude code of honor existed in both. There were a great many things that they would not scruple to do that we in a more civilized community would consider very wrong, but when their sense of honor was at stake they would fight hard to do what they felt was right.

Roger Dixon was a flatboatman in the early thirties. The boat he was on having tied up in a creek on the Louisiana shore, he went up on to the bank, where he found a gambling den, and there he proceeded to lose all the money he had, but, being convinced that he had been cheated, used a long knife he carried hung between his shoulder blades on the manipulator of the gambling outfit, leaving a considerable wound. Dixon was arrested and put in jail. The flatboat went on south with the current, leaving him devoid of funds and without even his liberty.

The arrest and imprisonment of the culprit occurred just as the court was adjourning for the season and would not be held again for several months. Dixon, having no money, was unable to get bail, which was allowed in his case since the wound he had inflicted was not mortal. He therefore had the prospect of languishing in jail during a hot summer, with the further prospect of being sent to state prison for felonious assault for two or three years longer when the court came together.

The prisoner, being remanded to jail in default of bail, stood before the judge a melancholy sight. He was about to be led away when a planter dressed in the costume of the time—tight trousers strapped over his boots, a coat with a flaring skirt, a ruffled shirt and a bell crowned beaver hat—said to the court:

"Yo' honnah, what's the amount on the bail in this case?"

"Five thousand dollars, colonel."

"I'll go it fo' this man, sub."

"Yo' bettah not, sub. You'll lose yo' money."

The colonel asked the prisoner if he would come back certain sho' if he furnished the bail, and, though the reply was simply "Reckon," Colonel Armstrong was convinced, the bond was executed, and Dixon went free. The trial was fixed for the 4th of November, four months later.

Dixon was a Tennessean, whose domicile, where lived his wife and children, was on the banks of the Tennessee river, near the site of the present city of Chattanooga. There was no means of getting there by the way he had come, for boats in those days never went upstream, so Dixon cut across country on foot. As he left the place of his misfortune one of a knot of men who stood looking after him said, "There goes your \$5,000, colonel."

When the 1st of November came round Colonel Armstrong had not heard a word from the man he had befriended. The kind hearted colonel was an object of sympathy on the part of the inhabitants of the locality, for no one expected that a man was coming away from Tennessee for the purpose of being sent to state prison when he could get off by staying at home. The second and third days of the month passed, and on the morning of the fourth the court came together for the purpose of trying Dixon, but there was no Dixon present. Out of sympathy for Colonel Armstrong the judge delayed matters as long as possible.

Suddenly there was a sound of heavy boots on the courthouse steps, and the culprit rushed wildly into court and said:

"Reckon I ain't too late, Judge, am I?"

The bail furnisher embraced the newcomer, while those present cheered.

Then Dixon was asked to tell how he had come. He had made his way down the Tennessee river in a dugout to its mouth, where he expected to be picked up by a flatboat on which he might work his way down the Mississippi river. Having waited several days in vain for one, he continued on in his dugout, over the rest of the way from Cairo, a distance of many hundred miles, to his destination. When the story had been told the prosecuting attorney, considering that the gambler who had been stabbed had recovered and had since been killed by another person he had fled, requested the case be dropped, and the prisoner was discharged. Again he set out on his homeward journey through a wild country. He was offered money by the kind hearted planter who had befriended him, but he declined it, saying:

"I might not hev it to send, and if I hev it I mought not get it yere without bringin' it myself."

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