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Story of Chester Lawrence

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Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Nephi Anderson

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-7411-6

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Story of Chester Lawrence



Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

Story of Chester Lawrence.

CHAPTER I.

It was raining when the ship was ready to sail; yet on the pier a large crowd of people stood under dripping umbrellas, waving and shouting farewells to their friends on board. The departing passengers, most of them protected by an upper deck, pressed four deep against the rail, and waved and shouted in return.

The belated passenger, struggling with heavy hand baggage, scrambled up the gang-plank. The last visitors were hustled ashore; amid noise and bustle, the plank was drawn away, and the ship was clear. A tremor ran through the vessel as the propeller began to move, and soon there was a strip of water between the pier and the ship. Then a tiny tug-boat came alongside, fastened itself to the steamer, and with calm assurance, guided its big brother safely into the harbor and down the bay. The people on shore merged into one dark object; the greetings became indistinct; the great city itself, back of the pier, melted into a gray mass as seen through the rain.

Chester Lawrence stood on the deck of the departing vessel and watched the interesting scene. He stood as one apart from the crowd, having no portion with either those on board or those left behind. He was a spectator only. Not a soul in that mass of humanity on the pier, not one in the big city, knew Chester Lawrence or had a thought for him. No one cared whether his voyage would be pleasant or otherwise. There were no tears for him, or fears that he would not return in safety. Of the hundreds of waving handkerchiefs, none was meant for him; but as a last show of good-fellowship and as a farewell greeting to his native land, Chester waved once with the rest.

The rain continued as the ship dropped down the bay and came safely into the open sea. Some of the passengers then hurried below, while others lingered on deck to see as long as possible the fast-receding land. Chester took his time. He had seen that his grips had

been safely stowed away in his state room, so he had no worries, as others seemed to have, regarding his belongings. The ship hands (sailors they cannot now be called) were busy clearing the deck and getting things into their proper places. The vessel pointed fairly into the vast eastern sea. The land became a dark, fast-thinning line on the western horizon, and then even that was swallowed up in the mist of rain.

"Well, good-by, old home, good-by thou goodly Land of Joseph," spoke Chester, half aloud, as he stood for one intense moment facing the west, then turned to go down into his room. The rain must at last have reached him for his eyes were so blurred that he bumped rather abruptly into an elderly man who was standing at his elbow.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Chester.

"It was nothing, sir. I, too, was just bidding farewell to the Land of Joseph, and I fear my sight was also rather dim."

Chester paused and looked at the man who had heard and repeated his remark. No one but a Latter-day Saint would call America the Land of Joseph. He was a pleasant-looking man, with hair and beard tinged with gray, clear blue eyes, a firm mouth, about which at that moment there played a faint smile. Apparently, he wished to make further acquaintance with Chester, for he asked:

"How far west were you looking just now?"

The question went deeper than Chester thought possible. He colored a trifle, but there was no time to reply, for the other continued:

"Mine was farther than that gray blot called New York, farther than the Alleghany mountains; in fact, it extended across the plains of the west to the Rocky Mountains—"

"So was mine!" exclaimed the younger man. "Let's shake hands upon it. My name is Chester Lawrence, and I'm a Mormon."

"My name is George Malby."

"Elder George Malby?"

"Yes; I am a Mormon elder going on a mission to Great Britain."

"I'm mighty glad to meet you, Elder Malby. I thought there wasn't a soul on board this vessel that I could approach as a friend; now I have a brother."

"Three of them," corrected the elder. "There are two more missionaries on board. Not a large party of us this time. Would you like to meet them?"

There was no more land to be seen now. The sea stretched all around, with clouds above, and the rain. There was more comfort below, so the two newly-made friends went down. Chester met the other elders who were younger men, one destined for Scandinavia, the other for the Netherlands. It did not take long for the four men to become acquainted. Presently the dinner gong sounded, and all became interested in the first meal on ship-board.

Practically every one sat down to that dinner, and did full justice to it. For many, that was the only meal eaten for days. Chester was not seated at the same table as his friends. At his right was a chatty old gentleman and at his left a demure lady who ate in silence. Strangeness, however, is soon worn off when a company of people must eat at the same table for a week; that is, if the dreaded seasickness does not interfere too much with the gathering together at meal-time.

Towards evening the rain ceased. As the darkness came on, the clouds billowed across the vast upper expanse. Chester and his new-made friends paced the deck and watched the night settle on the water, and enclose the ship in its folds. They talked of the strange new experience on ship-board, then they told somewhat of each other's personal history. The sea was rough, and the ship pitched more and more as it met the swells of the Atlantic. The question of sea-sickness came up.

"I have crossed the ocean three times," remarked Elder Malby, "and escaped the sickness each time. I hope for as good luck now."

"It is a matter of luck, I understand," said Chester. "Sea-sickness is no respecter of persons, times, or so-called preventatives. The weak sometimes escape, while the strong are laid low. *I feel all right yet.*"

The two younger men were fighting bravely, but it was not long before they excused themselves hurriedly, and went below, and to

bed. Chester and Elder Malby displayed splendid sea-legs, so they walked until they were tired, then took possession of some chairs in a sheltered corner, wrapping their coats well around them.

"I wish I were going on a mission, as you are," Chester was saying. "My trip is somewhat aimless, I fear. For a year or more I have had a notion that I ought to see Europe. I have seen a good deal of America, both East and West. I lived for some time in Salt Lake City, though I became a Church member in Chicago. But about Europe," he continued as if he did not then wish to speak of his Western experiences, "you know, one must have seen somewhat of the Old World to have the proper 'culture,'—must have seen Europe's pictures, old castles, and historic places. I know little and care less about the culture, but I have always had a desire to see England, and some of France and Germany, and the Alps—yes, I want to see the Alps and compare them with our Rockies. Rome, and other Italian cities, are interesting, too, but I may not get to them this time. I do hope some good will come of all this—somehow I think it will not be wholly in vain."

The older man let him talk without interruption. There was something uncommon in the life of this young man, but it would not do to show undue haste in wishing to know it. It was easily to be seen that Chester was helped in this opportunity to talk to a friend that could understand and be trusted. They sat late that night. The sea roared about them in the darkness. There was a fascination about this thing of seeming life—the ship—forcing itself against wind and wave into the darkness, and bearing safely with it in light and comfort a thousand precious souls.

Chester slept fairly well, and was awake next morning at daylight. Though the ship was pitching and rocking, he felt no indications of sea-sickness. He gazed out of the port-hole at the racing waves. Some of them rose to his window, and he looked into a bank of green water. He got up and dressed. It was good to think he would not be sick. Very few were stirring. A number who were, like himself, immune, were briskly pacing the deck. Chester joined them and looked about. This surely must be a storm, thought he. He had often wished to witness one, from a safe position, of course, and here was one. As far as he could see in every direction, the ocean

was one mass of rolling, seething water. At a distance it looked like a boiling pot, but nearer the waves rose higher, the ship's prow cutting them like a knife.

"Quite a storm," said Chester to a man washing the deck.

"Storm? Oh, no, sir; just a bit of a blow."

No one seemed to have any concern regarding the safety of the ship, so Chester concluded that there was no danger, that this was no storm at all, which conclusion was right, as he had later to acknowledge. The sun came up through a wild sea into a wild sky, casting patches of shifting light on the waters to the east. Chester kept a lookout for his friends, the elders. When the breakfast gong sounded, Elder Malby appeared.

"Where are the others?" asked Chester.

"They'll not get up today; perhaps not tomorrow. I see you are all right. You're lucky. Come, let us go to breakfast."

Most of the seats were vacant at the table that morning. A few smilingly looked around, secure in their superior strength. Others were bravely trying to do the right thing by sitting down to a morning meal; but a number of these failed, some leaving quietly and deliberately, others rushing away in unceremonial haste. Chester was quite alone on his side of the table. If there had been a trifle of "sinking emptiness" in him before, the meal braced him up wonderfully. In this he thought he had discovered a sure cure for seasickness. One day later he imparted this information to a lady voyager, who received it with the exclamation, "Oh, horrors!"

All that day the wind was strong, and the sea rough. Even an officer acknowledged that if this weather kept up, the "blow" might grow into a storm. From the upper deck Chester and Elder Malby looked out on the sublime spectacle. Like great, green, white-crested hills, the waves raced along the vast expanse. Towards the afternoon the ship and the wind had shifted their course so that the waves dashed with thunderous roar against the iron sides of the vessel which only heaved and dipped and went steadily on its way.

A number of ladies crowded on deck, and, aided by the stewards, were safely tucked into chairs in places protected from wind and

spray. The deck stewards tempted them with broth, but they only sipped it indifferently. These same ladies, just the day before had carried their feather-tipped heads ever so stately. Now, alas, how had the mighty leveler laid them low! They did not now care how their gowns fitted, or whether their hats were on straight. Any common person, not afflicted with sea-sickness, could have criticised their attitude in the chairs. One became so indifferent to correct appearances that she slid from her chair on to the deck, where she undignifiedly sprawled. The deck steward had to tuck her shawls about her and assist her to a more lady-like position.

"That's pretty tough," remarked Chester.

"All the wits have tried their skill on the subject of sea-sickness," said his companion; "but it's no joke to those who experience it."

"Can't we help those ladies?" asked Chester.

"Not very much. You will find the best thing to do is to let them alone. They'll not thank you, not now, for any suggestion or proffer of help. If you should be so foolish as to ask them what you could do for them, they would reply, if they replied at all, 'Stop the ship for five minutes.'"

"Then I'll be wise," said Chester.

The night came on, dark and stormy. The two friends kept up well. They ate the evening meal with appetite, then went on deck again.

Night adds awfulness to the sublimity of a storm at sea. The world about the ship is in wild commotion. The sky seems to have dropped into the sea, and now joins the roaring waves as they rush along. The blackness of the night is impenetrable, save as the lights from the ship gleam for an instant into the moving mass of water. Now and then a wave, rearing its crested head higher than the rest, breaks in spray upon the deck. The wind seems eager to hurl every movable object from the vessel, but as everything is fast, it must be content to shriek in the rigging and to sweep out into the darkness, and lend its madness to the sea and sky.

But let us leave this awe-inspiring uproar and go down into the saloon. Here we come into another world, a world of light and

peace and contentment. The drawn curtains exclude the sight of the angry elements without, and save for the gentle rocking of the ship and the occasional splashing of water against its sides, we can easily imagine that we are a thousand miles from the sea. Passengers sit at the long tables, reading or chatting. Other groups are playing cards or chess. In the cushioned corners, young men and maidens are exchanging banter with words and glances. A young lady is playing the piano, and over all this scene of life, and light, and gaiety, the electric lamps gleam in steady splendor.

Elder Malby soon retired. Chester remained in the saloon for a time, studying the various aspects of life about him; then he made a good-night visit to the deck. He looked into the men's smoking room, where a few yet sat with pipes and beer, playing cards. Among them were two men, fat-cheeked, smoothly shaven, who were dressed in priestly garb. There was an expressive American in the company, an Englishman and a quiet German. Before the American could carry into effect his intention of asking Chester to join them, the latter had passed by and out beyond the stench of the tobacco smoke.

"This air, washed clean by a thousand miles of scouring waves, is good enough for me," thought he.

The wind was not blowing so hard. The sky was nearly clear of clouds. The moon hung full and bright above the heaving horizon. Here was another aspect of the wonderful sea, and Chester lingered to get its full beauty. The steamer rolled heavily between the big waves. The young man leaned on the railing, and watched the ship's deck dip nearly to the water, then heave back until the iron sides were exposed nearly to the keel.

Chester was about to turn in for the night when he heard a commotion, apparently among the third class passengers. He walked along to where he could look down on the forward main deck. A number of people were running about shouting excitedly. Chester ran down the steps to get a nearer view.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I don't know. Someone overboard, I think."

People were crowding to the rail at the extreme forward end of the ship. Someone with authority was trying to push them back, using the old-fashioned ship-board language to aid him. Chester drew near enough not to be in the way, but so that he could observe what was going on. By leaning well over the rail, he could see what appeared to be two persons clinging to the anchor, which hung on the ship's side, about half-way down to the water. One was a dark figure, the other appeared in the moonlight to be a woman dressed in white. Other ships-men now rushed up.

"Clear way here! Where's the rope? Hang on, my man; we'll soon get you" — this down the side of the ship. There came some words in reply, but Chester did not hear them. A rope was lowered. "Slip the loop around the lady," was the order from above. The man on the anchor tried to obey. He moved as if cautiously and slowly. "Hurry, my man!" But there was no haste. Limbs and fingers made stiff by long exposure and cramped position, clinging desperately to prevent himself and his burden from falling into the sea, were not now likely to be nimble; but in a few minutes, which, however, seemed a long time, some words were spoken by the man on the anchor, the command to haul in was given, and slowly the nearly-unconscious form of a young woman was drawn up to safety.

"Now, my man, your next," shouted the officer. The rope soon dangled down again, the man reached out a hand for it. The ship cut into a big wave, whose crest touched the man below. He grasped wildly for the rope, missed it, and fell with a cry into the sea. Chester tried to see him as the ship rushed on, but the commotion and the darkness prevented him.

"Man overboard! stop the ship!" came from the excited passengers. "Man overboard!" What could be done! The man was gone. He had not one chance in a thousand to be rescued. Had he fallen overboard without much notice, the ship would have gone right on — Why should a world be stopped in its even course to save one soul? — but too many had seen this. Signal bells were rung, the engines slowed down, and then stopped. Lights flashed here and there, other officers of higher rank came on the scene; a boat fully manned was lowered. It bobbed up and down on the waves like a

cork. Back into the track of the ship it went, and was soon lost to view.

The search was continued for an hour, then given up. No trace of the man could be found. The small boat was raised to the deck, the engine moved again, and the big ship went on its way.

Chester lingered among the steerage, passengers and listened to the story of the lost man who, it seems, had been one of those unfortunate ones who had failed to pass the health inspector at New York and had therefore been sent back to his native land, Ireland. He was known as Mike, what else, no one could tell. And the woman? Poor girl, she had wandered in her night dress to the ship's side, and in some unknown way had gotten overboard as far as the protruding piece of iron. How Mike had reached her, or how long they had occupied their perilous position, no one could tell. He was gone, and the woman was saved to her husband and her baby.

The night was growing late; but there was no sleep for Chester. Many of the passengers, having been awakened by the stopping of the ship, were up, hurriedly dressed, and enquiring what the trouble was. Chester met Elder Malby in the companion-way.

"What's the matter?" asked the Elder.

"A man has been lost at sea," replied the other. "Come into the saloon, and I'll tell you about it."

Chester was visibly affected as he related what he had seen. At the conclusion of his story he bowed his face into his hands for a moment. Then he looked into the Elder's face with a smile.

"Well, it's too bad, too bad," said George Malby.

"Do you think so?"

"Well – why – isn't it a terrible thing to die like that?"

"I hope not," replied Chester. "I think the dying part was easy enough, and the manner of it was glorious. He was a poor fellow who had failed to land. He had no doubt thought to make fame and fortune in the new world. Now he has gone to a new world indeed. He entered it triumphantly, I hope. As far as I know, he ought to be received as a hero in that world to which he has gone."

Chester's eyes shone and his face was aglow. "Elder Malby," he continued, "I remember what you told me just yesterday,—To our immortal soul, nothing that others can do, matters much; a man's own actions is what counts. Neither does it matter much when or how a man leaves this life; the vital thing is what he has done and how he has done it up to the point of departure. The Lord will take care of the rest."

As the two men went slowly along the narrow passage way to their state rooms that night, the older man said to the other, "I guess you're right, my brother; yes; you are right. Good night, and pleasant sleep."

CHAPTER II.

The next morning the sky was clear and the sea was much smoother. The sun shone bright and warm; more people came on deck, rejoicing that they could live in the vigor of the open rather than in their stuffy state rooms. The two seasick elders thought it wiser to remain quietly in their berths for another day, so Chester and Elder Malby had the day to themselves. As the accident of the night before became known to the passengers, it was the topic of conversation for some time.

That afternoon Chester and his companion found a cosy corner on deck away from the cigar smoke, and had a long heart to heart talk. The fact of the matter was that the young man found comfort in the society of his older brother. For the first time in nearly two years Chester could pour out his heart to sympathetic ears, and he found much joy in doing this.

"Yes," said Chester to a question, "I should like to tell you about myself. When my story gets tiresome, call my attention to the porpoises, or declare that you can see a whale."

"I promise," laughed the other.

"Well, to begin at the very beginning, I was born in a suburb of Chicago, and lived in and near that city most of my life. My mother's name was Anna Lawrence. I never knew my father, not even his

name. Yes, I can talk freely about it to you. The time was when I shunned even the thoughts of my earthly origin and my childhood days, but I have gotten over that. I have learned to face the world and all the truth it has for me.

"When I was but a child, my mother married Hugh Elston. Shortly after, they both heard the gospel preached by a 'Mormon' elder, and they accepted it. I had been placed in the care of some of my relatives, and when my mother now wished to take me, they would not give me up. They were, of course, fearful that I, too, would become a 'Mormon.' Mr. Elston and my mother went west to Utah. I was sent to school, obtained a fairly good education, and while yet a young man, was conducting a successful business.

"I had nearly forgotten that I had a parent at all, when one day, my mother, without announcement, came to Chicago. She had left her husband. Mother did not say much to any of us, but I took it for granted that she had been abused among the 'terrible Mormons.' After a time I took a trip out to Utah to see about it, meaning to find this Mr. Elston and compel him to do the right thing for my mother. Well, I went, I saw, and was conquered. Mr. Elston was a widower living in a spot of green called Piney Ridge Cottage amid the sagebrush desert,—living there alone with his daughter Julia. And this Julia—well—Do you see any porpoises, Brother Malby?"

"Not yet. Go on."

"Mr. Elston is a fine, good-hearted man,—a gentleman in very deed. He soon found out who I was and invited me to his home. Julia was mistress there. In the midst of the desert, these two had created a beautiful home. I went to their Sunday School and their meetings. I read Mormon books. My eyes were opened to the truth, and I was ready to accept it."

"Thanks to Julia," suggested the listener with a sly glance at Chester.

"Yes; thanks to Julia, Brother Malby; but not in the sense you hint at. I think I would have accepted the gospel, even had there been no Julia mixed up with the finding of it. But Julia helped. She was a living example of what 'Mormonism' can do for a person, and when I looked at her, learned her thoughts through her words, and saw

her life by her every-day deeds, I said to myself, 'A system of religion that produces such a soul, cannot be bad.' Yes; she was a wonderful help; but I repeat that had the truth come to me by other means and other ways, I believe I should have accepted it."

"Forgive me for the thoughtless remark," said Elder Malby.

"O, I know how justifiable you are for it, so you are forgiven."

"Did you join the Church in Utah?"

"No; I went back to Chicago. Away from Utah, from Piney Ridge Cottage and its influence. I pondered and prayed. I found the elders there and was baptized. Then I went to Salt Lake City, where Julia had gone to attend school while her father was away on a mission to England." Chester paused, looking out on the sea. "You don't blame me for falling in love with Julia, do you?" asked he.

"I don't blame you a bit."

"But there was someone else, a young fellow who had grown up as a neighbor to her. He also went on a mission, and then I believe Julia discovered that she thought more of Glen Curtis than of me. I do not now blame Julia for that. She told me plainly her feelings. I persisted for a time, but in vain — then I went away, and have never been to Utah since."

"And that's the end of your story?"

"Oh, no; while I was roaming aimlessly about the country trying to mend a broken heart, mother, becoming uneasy about me, and thinking I was yet in Utah, journeyed out west to find me. The team on the stage-coach which took her out to Julia's home, ran away from the drunken driver, and just before they got to Piney Ridge Cottage the wagon upset on a dug-way, and mother was mortally hurt. She died under Julia's care, and now lies in Mr. Elston's private graveyard near Piney Ridge Cottage beside Mr. Elston's other wife. Let us walk a little."

The older man linked his arm into Chester's as they paced the long reach of the promenade deck. They walked for a few minutes, then sat down again.