

The Dumb Countersign

A Deputy's Story

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

In the Summer of 1843 Jackson County was infested by a gang of desperadoes that for a time threatened to overturn the whole arrangement of social and domestic affairs. Horses were carried off; cattle and sheep were stolen; houses were broken into and robbed; travelers were waylaid and relieved of their valuables; and in some instances still grosser outrages were committed. Our sheriff call us, his deputies, together, and told us that something must be done to put a stop to this dreadful state of things. We held a long conference, and the separated and set out upon our travels, some going East, some, West, some North, and some South, in search of the marauding ruffians. We traveled two or three weeks—traveled all over the county; we met wayfaring men of whom we made all sorts of inquiries; we stopped at public places; and we arrested a few men on suspicion; but we met with no real success. Those whom we arrested proved their innocence, and others whom we would have arrested eluded our search. And yet, during all this time the depredations went on as before. Robberies were committed almost under our very noses; horses were carried off; houses were broken into; and even good, honest Andrew Drake, our high sheriff, had his portmanteau rifled of its contents while stopping at a public house in Clayburgh. The innkeeper was arrested instantly; but he proved himself as innocent as a lamb.

“Mr. Clark, what do you make of it?” asked Drake, when he met me at Errol.

I answered him that the robbers evidently had an organization more perfect than was the organization that had been brought to bear against them.

The sheriff admitted that I was right. It was very evident that the villainous gang was not only perfectly organized, but that the members were individually shrewd and daring, and true to each other.

“I am going to send to some of the large cities for a few of their most expert detectives,” said Mr. Drake.

And send he did. The detectives came; and at the end of a week they were upon the track of at least a dozen suspected men. They followed the tracks after the most approved systems, and in the end all but one of the spotted individuals vanished entirely from sight. That exceptional one was arrested, and locked up in the jail at Boonborough. He was a desperate looking fellow, giving his name as Shandy McClough. He was locked up just at the close of the day, and that evening Mr. Drake, with three of the detectives, held a consultation in a private room of the inn; and it was finally determined that the prisoner should be promised his freedom if he would reveal the secrets of his gang.

“If he won't reveal 'em,” said our sheriff, who had imbibed a goodly quantity of Peckwell's Old Rye, “we'll put him to the torture! We'll make him tell!”

In the morning the officers visited the jail; but the bird had flown. Mr. Shandy McClough was *non est*. The jailer was found bound and gagged in his bed; his keys had been taken; and the jail door had been opened in a legitimate manner. The jailer could only tell that three stout men had entered his room about midnight, and overcome him without so much as asking his permission. He could not tell who they were, for they had been disguised.

Shortly after this a traveler was robbed and murdered on his way from Clayburgh to Blue Bottom Cross-Roads; and as murder was thus added to the list of crimes the excitement became so intense that the ordinary business of the inhabitants of the county became entirely deranged. Everybody asked everybody else—what shall be done? And everybody else shook his head, and said he didn't know. It was evident, however, that things must soon come to a crisis. The villains were becoming so bold and defiant, and the citizens were becoming so exasperated, that matters could not much longer continue in such a state.

One evening during the first week in October, I stopped at the inn in Boonborough, intending on the following morning to keep on to Blue Bottom Cross-Roads, where I was to meet Drake. I had been on the tramp so long that my clothes had become pretty worn, and my vest in particular was in a sad plight. It had been but a thin, flimsy affair when new, and the wear and tear of the summer campaign had reduced it to a sorry thing of shreds. The next morning was quite cool, and as I went to the bar to take a little something warm before breakfast, I remarked to Peckwell, the host, that if I could find a good vest that would fit me I should like to buy it.

“I believe I've got just the thing,” he said. And from an inner room he brought forth the garment in question. “I found it in one of my chambers about two months ago,” he explained; “and it must have been left by some traveler. I should have worn it myself, only it wouldn't fit me.”

And no wonder, for the good host measured sixty inches around the waist; but the vest I knew would fit me the moment I took it in my hand. It was not of a woven fabric, but of a sort of felt, like the stuff of which thin, soft hats are made, and it was colored in alternate stripes, or bands, of blue and gray. I had never examined any cloth like it before, and though the colored zones were very peculiar, yet they were not odd enough to attract particular attention; though I remembered that I had seen several garments of the same description. I told the landlord that I would take the vest if he would stand the explanation in case the proper owner ever claimed it. This he promised to do, and in a very short time my vest of shreds had been cast among the mop-rags, and the better vest, with its nicely shaded zones, was donned in its place. It fitted nicely, and I certainly felt more comfortable when I had buttoned it around my waist.

At eight o'clock I called for my horse, and having settled my bill, and examined my pistols, I set out towards Blue Bottom Cross-Roads. I had twenty miles to travel, and as most of the distance was through a woody country, with very few inhabitants, I chose to be well prepared. At the distance of six miles from Boonborough, I left a hamlet of three or four poor dwellings behind me, and struck into a piece of woods that extended more than half the remaining distance to the Blue Bottom settlement. I was riding leisurely along, thinking how a single robber, or even two of them might get sucked in if they should waylay me, when, upon approaching a tributary of the Big Blue Creek, I found a horseman ahead of me, quietly sitting in his saddle, while his beast drank from the stream. He raised his head as I came in sight, and with a quick movement drew a

pistol from his belt. I drew a pistol from my holster, and pulled in my rein. Two things came within the scope of my observation very quickly. The man seemed more afraid of me than I could be of him, and he wore a vest exactly like mine—the same soft, felty material, the same tones of blue and gray, and cut after the same pattern.

“Hold on!” he cried, as I held my pistol half raised. “*Don’t you see?*”

“I saw you draw a pistol,” said I.

“But I hadn’t noticed the token,” said he.

“The *token?*” I repeated.

“Our *countersign,*” he added, with a significant nod.

I do not claim to be a very bright man, but I can see a hole through a ladder, and I am pretty good at solving riddles; and furthermore, at the time of which I am speaking, my every thought and instinct was so bent upon discovery, that I naturally caught at every curious thing and held it for analyzation. The “*countersign*” of which the man had spoken must have been a dumb countersign, of course, and I judged that it was nothing more or less than the vest I wore. And now, with a flash of thought, I remembered that the other vests I had before seen of like description had been worn by strangers, and by men who seemed to be of a roving mood. I cannot tell half the thoughts that passed through my mind during the few moments of silence that followed while I was approaching the stream. Suffice it for me to say that I was determined, if possible, to solve the riddle, and to this end I accepted the stranger’s explanation as though I perfectly understood it. He was a young man, perhaps five-and-twenty, with a rough, unpolished exterior, and though not evil-looking, yet possessing a face that gave token of no very exalted virtues.

“You are one of us,” I said, as I drove my horse into the stream.

“Of course I am,” he replied, very emphatically.

I saw at once that he held the impression that I might doubt his word, and I judged therefrom that, be the countersign what it might, he was a novice in its use.

“Do you come honestly by that vest?” I asked, jumping directly in.

“Of course I did.”

“But you have not worn it long?”

“No. I was admitted only night before last. My God! didn’t they put me through a course of sprouts!”

“Our initiation ceremonies are severe,” said I, jumping in again.

“They’re perfectly awful!” responded the stranger. “You’ve been a long time with ‘em, I suppose.”

“From the first,” I told him.

“Would they have really put that knife into my heart if I had offered to back down?”

“Yes,” said I. “They would have made no more of it than they would of sticking a pig. And,” I added, by way of giving him confidence in me, “if you have any desire to know from experience how a bit of cold steel would feel in your heart, you have only to show the white feather, or—“

He interrupted me with an oath, and assured me that I need not fear him. He would be true, and would suffer death before he would betray any of his comrades.

“Where is the captain?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since the night I was taken in.”

“Whom do you obey?”

“Shandy McClough?”

“Where is he?”

“He’s in camp.”

“Where?”

“Over the creek. I’m going back there now.”

“How many men has he with him?”

“Not many now. Our men are scattered, you know.”

“Certainly,” I assented. “Even you and I ought not to be seen together here on the highway; but I guess I’ll keep you company as far as you go.”

The young man said he guessed there would be no danger; so we rode up the opposite bank of the stream together, and leisurely pursued our way.

Of course I had now discovered that there was an organized band of robbers, and that the vest I wore was their distinctive badge, and by this means they were enabled to recognize each other wherever they might meet. Anyone can readily understand the advantage to such an organization of such a sure and silent means of recognition.

I conversed with my friend very freely, but very carefully. I found that he was not acquainted in the eastern part of the county, so I professed to have come from there, and I was anxious to know how our brethren were prospering in the West. He believed me to be a man of rank in the fraternity, and he was as eager to communicate as I was to listen. The camp in the woods was but a small affair—only a place of refuge for those who dared not appear in public. The active members of the band were scattered throughout the county. Some of them were boatmen; some farmers; some trappers; some traders; some hostlers at public houses; and two or three inn-keepers were of the number. In short, every town, village and hamlet gave a home to one or more of the robbers, so that the infection had really become a part and parcel of the body of the community.

“I suppose,” said I, in a careless way, “it is the same here as it is in the East: Some of our brethren would leave us if they dared.”

“O, yes,” replied my companion. “I have no doubt of it; but then they won’t be very likely to do it. It isn’t very pleasant to go to bed with the knowledge that you are likely to have a knife through your heart before morning.”

“Still,” I suggested, “we must provide for our own safety.”

“Of course we must. That is the only way I like the arrangement.”

And yet I knew the poor snipe lied when he said so. I could see it in every look and tone. He had found the brotherhood of crime more than he bargained for, and he would gladly slip his neck out if he could.

By and by we came to an old wood path where my companion said he must turn off.

“I don’t know about that,” said I, easily. “Can you read?”

He shook his head.

“I have an order here,” I continued, drawing a paper from my pocket, “empowering me to call for such assistance as I may need. I think there is a danger of one of our brethren being arrested at the Cross-Roads, and I am going to see about it. It will not detain you long. You must go with me.”

“But McClough will find fault,” he remonstrated.

“I am above Shandy McClough,” I answered; “and I give you my word that when you return to him I will bear you company. What shall I call your name?”

“My name is Bill Withers,” he answered readily.

“I have that name on my list,” I said; and I told the truth. “Come, let us button up our coats, and conceal our vests, and hurry on.”

My manner was authoritative, and yet kind, and in the end Master Bill Withers concluded to accompany me.

We reached the settlement at the Cross-Roads just at noon, and went directly to the house of a friend whom I knew I could trust. In half an hour two other friends were called in, and in their presence I slipped a pair of irons upon Master William's wrists.

What did I mean by that?

"Easy," said I, "my name is Nathan Clark, and I am a deputy sheriff; but don't be alarmed. You are better off here than you would be in the wood with Shandy McClough. If you will serve the officers of the law as they shall require, in the ferreting out and bringing to justice of the robbers who infest this section, I will make you two promises: First, your companions shall never know that you had a hand in exposing them; and second, you shall be permitted to go free and leave the State as soon as the ends of justice are answered."

For a while the poor fellow was so dumbfounded that he could hardly speak; but finally he came to comprehend the matter, and among the objections which he urged to the confession we demanded was the fact that many of the gang were misguided men, who had been induced to join the fraternity without fully understanding its character, and now only remained in it, and suffered their houses to become the receptacles of stolen goods, because to back down would cost them their lives. But we satisfied Withers that all such as he had mentioned should be let off with very slight penalties, and he finally consented to do as we wished. He gave himself up to my direction entirely, for I think I had made him understand that I had really saved him from a worse fate than any he had now to fear.

Leaving my prisoner where I knew he would be safe, I hastened to Errol, where I found Mr. Drake, and when I had told him my story, we posted off together, and in five days we had visited every part of the county, and made arrangements for a grand *coup de main* against the robber band. I carried with me the vest I had bought of Peckwell, while Drake took with him one of the same pattern which had belonged to Bill Withers. In the settlements we found good citizens, who eagerly joined in the enterprise, so that when we were ready to strike, we had plenty of help.

On the sixteenth day of October, early in the morning, more than two hundred well-armed officers and citizens started out on the expedition. They went in squads of two, three, and four, and, in some cases, there were as many as ten in one party. And on that day, I believe that every man who wore a vest with the zones of blue and gray, was arrested; and when night came, there were forty-seven of them assembled in Boonborough. No lives had been lost in the work, though there were a few ugly wounds to be dressed.

The examination and trial followed as speedily as possible, and we found no difficulty in procuring evidence. Bill Withers was not forced to appear at all; for among so many, where each was examined separately, knowing that all his companions were all in the trap, and yet unable to confer with them, the truth had come out, and the result was what might have been expected. All found with that dumb countersign upon them were proved to have had a hand in the mischief.

A few of the farmers were let off upon promise of better behavior in the future; about twenty were punished lightly; others were sentenced to imprisonment for a term of years, while four of the number, Shandy McClough included, were sentenced to imprisonment for life.

And so ended the reign of terror in Jackson County. Honest people breathed freely again; and I think I may safely say that, of all the thankful people, none were more thankful than those few deluded farmers who, in hope of golden gain, had been induced to join a fraternity, the fearful character of which they knew not, until they had solemnly pledged their own heart's blood for the faithful keeping of the villainous secret.

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