

A Case of Larceny
by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

We began to think that camp life had a very bad effect upon those who had gone to war from our section. Jack Stanton had, previous to the breaking out of the rebellion, been one of the best young fellows in our town,—genial and kind-hearted; ever ready to assist suffering humanity wherever he found it; and never known to do a mean or corrupting act. And yet, within two months after he had returned from the war, while engaged in a drunken frolic, he came very near killing the landlord of a low tavern, for which offence he was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to three years imprisonment. The penalty was made thus severe because it appeared to the court that the offence was a very aggravated one, and the extenuating circumstances, which subsequently came to light, did not appear in evidence at the trial.

Within a fortnight after Jack Stanton had been imprisoned our good citizens were astonished and grieved upon learning that Wallace Danbury had been arrested for larceny. Wallace and Jack had both been members of the same company, the former a sergeant, and the latter a corporal; and they had borne from the field of battle the noblest record a soldier can win. They had been brave and true, always ready for duty, foremost in the charge, and among the last to leave the field when there were wounded companions to be brought off.

At first people would not believe that Wallace Danbury had been guilty of theft. It could not be possible—he who had always been so free from even the appearance of wrong-doing.

“I can hardly understand it,” said our aged clergyman, “except upon the supposition that the young man is deranged. He has certainly appeared to be honest, upright, and industrious; and always ready and willing to help in every good word and work.” Still, pursued the old man, with a solemn shake of the head, “there has been something peculiar in his character—something which has led me to think that a slight cause might unsettle his reason. In religious matters he has been very peculiar. He is a fatalist of the ultra kind; and I have fancied that his intercourse with the modern spiritualists has done him no good. Poor boy! I pity him.”

The old minister had told the whole story. Wallace Danbury had been a strange sort of youth; but his peculiar notions of religion he had kept quietly to himself, save when closely questioned by his friends. His parents had been dead several years, and he lived in his own house—a neat, pretty cottage, surrounded by trees and flowering shrubs—with an old maiden aunt for housekeeper.

The young man himself exhibited but little interest in the matter of his defense at the trial which was soon come off; but some of his friends came to me and engaged me to act as his counsel, and I directly set myself at work to learn all the particulars of the case. And this is what I learned:

One of our most worthy and honest citizens was a man retired from business named Henry Carter. His house was situated on a romantic eminence, just outside of the village, where he had expended of his wealth to make things comfortable and beautiful. He was a kind-hearted and benevolent old gentleman, a friend always to those in distress. And one thing that rendered the

present case more puzzling was, that Mr. Carter had been known to befriend Wallace Danbury on many occasions. At the time of the alleged larceny Mr. Carter was absent from home, having gone on a visit to some of his relations in a distant State, and it was not expected that he would return for at least a month. One bright, moonlight night, about a week after Carter had gone, the old gardener, a man named Moses Winter, on his return from the village, where he had been stopping rather late at the tavern, observed some one climbing in at the window of his master's library.

"I knew it was Wallace Danbury the minute I saw him, for the moon shone full upon him," said Winter to me, as he told me his story; "and I can't help wondering now what made him so bold; for he must have seen me where I stood. In fact, I am almost sure he saw me; but he did not stop. After he got into the library I crept up and looked in, and saw him afoul of master's private desk. I should have gone in and stopped him, only I feared that if he was bad enough to rob, he might be bad enough to do something worse; and as I knew he had been used to killing men down South, I didn't know but he might fix me in some such way if I meddled with him. So I hurried to the kitchen, where I found my wife sitting up for me, and I got her to go out with me and watch what the young man did. He had just got the desk open when we got there, and we saw him take a package of something out and put it in his breast pocket. Then he shut up his little dark lantern, and came out through the window and started off. I followed him at a distance, and when I had seen him enter his own house, I went and called up the sheriff and told him the story.

The sheriff had obtained a proper warrant and arrested Danbury; and the young man had not only confessed the crime, but he delivered up to the officer one thousand dollars in United States "Seven-Thirties," which he had stolen from Mr. Carter's desk.

I visited the prisoner, and told him that I wished to save him. He replied to me that he did not wish to be saved from the punishment due his crime. He said that for him to deny that he took the money would be a falsehood, and only adding crime to crime. He had done the deed, and he could no more lift up his head among honest men; so he would prefer to go to prison.

I left the accused with the conviction strong upon me that he was deranged. He had certainly given token in other years of peculiar psychological influences, and might the startling scenes of the battle-field have actually upset his mind?"

On the very evening of the day on which I visited the prisoner, Alice Graham called to see me at my house. She was a fair-faced, generous-hearted girl; and I knew that Wallace Danbury was her accepted lover. She had come to see if I could do anything for her friend. I told her of my interview and of its results.

"Mr. Dulaney," she said, with no attempt to conceal her deep love for the unfortunate young man, "I think you are mistaken. Wallace is not crazy, nor do I believe him guilty of that crime. I have seen him—I left him not an hour ago—and I am sure there is some terrible mystery connected with the affair."

I told the weeping girl that I deeply sympathized with her, and that I felt most deeply, too, for Wallace Danbury. “But,” said I, “since the proof is clear that he purloined the money, what shall we think if we do not allow that he was not in his right mind at the time?”

Alice was willing to grant that he might have been out of his head when he took the money; but still that was not all.

“He keeps something from me,” she said. “O, Mr. Dulaney, if you could only get at the secret which he is keeping locked up in his own bosom! I know there is something. It is all dark to me—all save one thing: I know that Wallace is true and honorable, and that he could never knowingly and willingly done a wicked deed. This horrible charge seems like a dream to me.”

She reflected a few moments, with her head bent upon her hands, and then she looked up and asked me:

“Can they convict him, sir, before Mr. Carter returns?”

“As for that matter,” I replied, “I can very easily have the trial put off until Mr. Carter comes.”

“Then he will help Wallace, I know.”

And allowing her to take away this bit of consolation, I bade her good evening.

It was curious to observe the effect produced upon the citizens by this strange case. The great majority of them were entirely unwilling to believe Danbury guilty; some expressed the opinion that it was a plot gotten up by his Secesh enemies to pay him off for the bitter things he had said against those who sided with the rebels during the war; while some others were ready to go to the jail and liberate him by force.

A few days after my interview with the prisoner I received a letter from Mr. Carter. It seemed that Moses Winter had written to him concerning the robbery, giving him all the particulars. After informing me what his gardener had written, and telling me that I must look out for the young man until he returned, which he should do as quickly as possible, he went on:

“It is an entire puzzle to me—the whole concern. Wallace Danbury could not have taken any money from my desk belonging to me, for I did not leave any there—not a penny. Nor did I leave any in my house, save a small sum which I left with my housekeeper for incidental expenses during my absence. But I can tell you what I do know about money: I know that Danbury himself had a thousand dollars in Government Seven-Thirties; because he came to me before I left home, and wanted me to take charge of them for him; and he seemed much disappointed when I told him I was going away, and he must take them to the bank. My dear Dulaney, there is something strange in it, I assure you. Hold on until I get home. At all events, Wallace Danbury shall never be convicted of stealing a thousand dollars from my desk, because I know I left none there for him to steal. * * * *

As ever, thine,
HENRY CARTER

I had just called my office boy, intending to send him to Alice Graham with this letter, when another letter was brought in. it was from the Warden of the State Prison, and he wished me to call upon him at my earliest convenience, remarking that he felt sure he could throw some light upon the curious case of larceny which I had in hand.

I left the errand to Alice Graham for another time, and having put the letter from Mr. Carter in my pocket, I set out for the prison. I found the warden in his office, and after a very brief conversation upon other topics, we came to the business at hand.

“What have you been able to discover?” he asked.

I told him the result of my interviews with the prisoner and with Alice Graham, and then I showed him the letter which I had received from Mr. Carter.

“Good!” he cried, when he had read it. “Upon my soul, Dulaney, this is one of the most curious cases I ever heard of. You know that I have Jack Stanton here in prison?”

“Yes,” I said. “But,” I went on to add, “if all the circumstances could have been known at the time of his trial, if it could have been shown how he had been plied with drink, and how the landlord himself was a party to the—“

“Never mind,” interrupted the warden. “Those things are all known now; and they have been told to the Governor; and by tomorrow I shall receive a pardon for the bold and unfortunate soldier. But hold you here. I will call Jack, and let him tell you his own story.”

In a little while Jack Stanton stood before me. At first he was a little shy and downcast; but when he saw that I took no notice of his prison garb, but greeted him cordially, his face brightened, and he was the same bold-faced youth that came home so gallantly from the scenes of his many battles. We talked a little while of the misfortune which had befallen Wallace Danbury, and finally I asked him what he had to tell me. He told me how he and Wallace had always been friends and companions; how they had fought side by side; and how they had always shared each other’s secrets.

“At Cedar Mountain,” he went on, “our regiment made a charge, and Wallace and I were on the extreme right of the line. We gained a position which we could not hold, and as we started to fall back in some disorder Wallace was wounded in the hip by a piece of shell. I did not see him at first; but when I did see him he was just trying to struggle to his feet, but was unable to stand. A squadron of rebel cavalry was whirling down towards him, and I knew if he remained there he would be trampled to death. Thinking only of my friend I dropped my musket and rushed to his side. As I was bearing him if I received a shot in the leg from a cavalry officer’s revolver; but I got off alive and brought my friend with me. We were in the hospital together, and when Wallace knew what I had done he swore by a sacred oath that if ever he found me in need he would help me even to the sacrifice of his own life. I did not know then how deeply he could regard such an oath; but I know now. On the day they brought me to this prison Wallace Danbury was in the crowd; and he pressed to my side, and touched one of my manacled arms;

and he said to me,— *‘Keep a good heart, Jack. If they don’t set you free, I’ll come to the prison and set you free myself, even if I have to commit a crime to get there!’*

“That is what he told me, Mr. Dulaney; and I know he has done this thing on purpose to gain entrance to this prison. If he had been brought here, be sure he would have found some means to have supplied himself with implements with which to work a way out for both himself and me. Perhaps you don’t know what a curious fellow Wallace is. I know him like a book; and I really believe that he would no more hesitate to give up his life if it was necessary for my salvation, than he hesitated to take steps to get himself into prison for the same purpose. Mr. Haines tells me that I shall receive my pardon tomorrow. And now I want to know if Wallace has got to come to prison, whether or no; because, if he has, I won’t accept any pardon.”

I assured Jack that he need be under no apprehension on that account.

On my return to my office I found Alice Graham there; but I did not show her Mr. Carter’s letter. I had made up my mind that I would let her lover break the truth to her in his own way when he was free; for I knew very well that he would not remain much longer in durance. So I said to her, after answering a few of her questions:

Go home, Miss Graham, and keep a good heart; for I think I may promise you that Wallace shall not only very soon be set free, but that this event shall leave no stain upon his name.”

And she went away very happy.

That evening I went to see Wallace Danbury. He shook his head when I offered to broach the subject of the larceny, and intimated that he did not wish to hear anything about it.

“But you must listen to a few words,” said I, “and you must answer a few questions. In the first place, I wish to know what you did with the thousand dollars which you once requested Mr. Carter to take and keep for you.”

The prisoner trembled, and a momentary pallor overspread his handsome face.

“What has become of that money?” I urged.

“I shall answer no such questions,” was his final reply.

“Then,” I continued, “I shall answer for you. Listen to me: one bright moonlight night, when you knew that Moses Winter was on his way home, you went on ahead of him, and got into Mr. Carter’s library through the window; and you did it on purpose to attract the gardener’s attention. Then, when you were sure that Winter was watching you, you opened the desk and appeared to take therefrom a package of money; but really the money which you brought away was your own property—money that was to have been used in making cheerful and comfortable a home for Alice Graham.”

Wallace put forth both his hands and begged me to desist. His stout frame shook, and he tried in vain to keep back his tears.

“Wallace Danbury,” I said, solemnly, “I know that I speak the truth. I have heard from Mr. Carter, and he assured me that he left no money in his desk. I have seen Jack Stanton—“

“Mr. Dulaney,” cried the prisoner, starting up and extending his clasped hands towards me, “Say no more. Let me go where Jack is. You don’t know what that man is to me!”

“I know all about it, Wallace. I think you would even die to save him.”

“God knows I would.”

“But suppose I should tell you that Jack Stanton has already been pardoned, and that tomorrow he will be free.”

The prisoner sank back upon his stool and gazed into my face with speechless wonder.

“It is as I have said,” I continued. “Jack has been pardoned, so you could not help him if you went to prison; but you can help him by staying out; for he declares that he will not accept the governor’s pardon if you are to be imprisoned.”

Wallace again started to his feet, and caught me by the arm.

“Mr. Dulaney, you know all.”

“I do.”

“For Alice’s sake, can you save me from shame?”

“There is no shame upon you, Wallace. Confess the truth and all shall be well.”

And then he confessed the whole—confessed just what the reader already knows; and he furthermore confessed that it had been his intention to smuggle tools into the prison, so that he might be able to set Jack free.

On the very next day Mr. Carter arrived, and as soon as the proper legal steps could be taken, Wallace Danbury was set at liberty. The story had become generally known, and when Wallace and Jack appeared together on the street, they were made the recipients of more congratulations than when they had first returned from the war.

One month later Wallace and Alice were married, and a grand party assembled on the occasion. Jack Stanton was there, and late in the evening, after most of the guests had departed, the fair bride drew him aside, and spoke to him where no one else could overhear her.

“Jack,” she said, looking into his face with an eager, imploring expression, “I have a husband whom I love most dearly, and I know it would kill me if a great calamity should befall him. He loves me in return, and I think that next to me he loves you, Jack. And furthermore, he is so bound to you by a gratitude which, in his soul, has become a most potent power, that his own peace and happiness depend in a great measure upon your welfare, and surely my joys of life depend now upon him. Jack, while you are safe Wallace will be safe, and I shall be happy, but if I thought that you were unsafe I should be most miserable. You have but one dangerous enemy, Jack.”

“You mean rum, my sweet sister.”

“”Yes, Jack.”

“If you will only kiss me—“

Her arms were around his neck—around the neck of the brave, true man, who had risked his own life to save her love—and a warm kiss was implanted upon his brown cheek.

“Now, sister, be as happy as you can, for Jack Stanton will never taste another drop of the accursed stuff. I’ve thought of it before now, Alice—I’ve thought how many brave fellows escaped the thousands of deadly bullets that flew around their heads on the battle-field, just to come home and drop down into a shameless death by their own wicked foolishness. But I’ve escaped that, too, and for the future there shall be a safe distance kept between my lips and the brim of the fatal cup.”

Alice could ask no more. She was happy enough.

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