The Abducted Ward

A Cabman's Story

By Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

I CAME HOME from India sick and sore from many wounds, bringing with me the horse that had borne me through fourteen battles. The captain of the ship was my friend, and he allowed my faithful beast a passage for a slight consideration. Three months in London restored me to something of my former health; but completely emptied my purse. I was not yet in debt, but there was a fair prospect that I should soon be if I did not stir myself. What should I do? First, I thought of selling my horse; but when I went to his stall, and he laid his head so affectionately upon my bosom, I could not bear the thought.

"That's a knowin' animal o' yourn, Mr. Dunner," observed the hostler.

"Yes," I replied; "he's picked up knowledge under difficulties."

"P'raps ye'd like to sell him. He's a little old an' shaky like; but then he'd be good for somethin'. He'd do for a light cab."

What—put my faithful old charger to a cab! How ridiculous it seemed. And yet, before that day had passed, I had resolved that I would hire a cab, and go into business on my own account. It was a curious business for an old soldier like me; but it was an honest business, and I was not afraid of it. I found a good cab at the very stable where my horse had been kept, which I succeeded in hiring upon very reasonable terms; and thus prepared, I obtained a stand near Blackfriar's Bridge. It was an unhealthy location, but I fancied it would be a profitable one. During the first two weeks I had as much as I could do; or, at least, as much as I was willing my horse should do; but at the expiration of that time a fellow took a stand close by me, with two cabs—both of them better looking than mine—and my business was essentially contracted.

Monday—Tuesday—Wednesday, and not a passenger. My prospects were certainly not of the most promising kind. At ten o'clock on Wednesday evening my rival cabman took his departure, leaving the field to myself. The fog had settled down thick and heavy, and the street lamps were scarcely visible. I walked up and down the pavement, ever and anon stopping to pat my horse upon the neck and talk with him, until a distant clock struck eleven. And no passengers yet. I had mounted to my seat, determined to go to the stable, when a man came up and hailed me. Was that my cab?—and was I at liberty? I answered both questions in the affirmative.

"I want to hire you for an hour," said the stranger.

I told him I was at his service; and as I spoke another man emerged from the gloom, and approached my stand.

"I wish to hire you," pursued the first comer; "and if you consent to the proposition I mean to make I will pay you liberally. I think there is room in your seat for two men."

I replied that we could make room.

“Then,” said he, “I’ll tell you what my proposition is. You shall suffer yourself to be hoodwinked; you shall take a seat upon your box; and you shall allow my companion to take the reins. You shall not remove the bandage from your eyes until you have permission so to do; and you shall ask no questions. What say you?”

The individual who thus spoke was a young man, very well dressed; and though he bore himself with the air of a gentleman, yet I could see that he was inclined to fast living and dissipation. His companion was of a different cast,—short, stout, poorly dressed, and evidently a cracksman. Had I spoken from my first impulse I should have refused to listen to the proposition; but upon second thought I changed my mind. There was a spice of adventure in the prospect which suited me; and moreover, I am free to confess that I wanted the money.

“I will pay you liberally,” added the applicant, when he saw me hesitate; “and I furthermore assure you that no harm shall come to you.”

It was not of myself that I was now thinking; for I was not much used to fear; but should I allow a stranger to drive my horse? Why not? I was to ride by his side, and I could quickly throw the bandage from my eyes should he abuse the noble animal.

“Well, sir,” I said, “what will you pay?”

“If you are true—if you hold your tongue, and keep the hoodwink on until you have permission to remove it, I will give you five pounds.”

“It’s a bargain,” said I; “but before we start I have a remark to make. If I think there is danger either to myself or to my horse, I shall be very apt to let you know it.”

“You need have no fears in that direction,” he replied. “My man is used to the reins, and he will drive very carefully.”

Without further remark I allowed them to bind a large silk kerchief about my eyes, after which I climbed into my seat. The cracksman was soon by my side, with the reins in his hand, the master having ensconced himself inside. Once or twice my horse hesitated, and once he fairly stopped, upon hearing the strange voice, and feeling the strange hand; but a word from me quickly set him right. I think we had ridden half a mile, when the cab stopped, and the gentleman got out from the inside. I heard him ascend a few wooden steps; I heard what sounded like the turning of a key, and the shooting of a bolt; I heard a door opened and closed. It seemed a long time that I sat there by the side of the cracksman in silence, though I suppose it was really not more than five minutes. I was strongly tempted to make some conversation with my companion, just to pass away the time; but I remembered my promise, and concluded to keep it.

By and by I heard the door reopened, and the sound of a man’s feet upon the steps, but the movement was not a free and easy one. The tread was slow and heavy, as though the man bore some weighty burden in his arms. Nor was I mistaken; for when he reached the pavement my companion leaped down from the box, and I could easily distinguish that they were lifting

something into the cab—something which one man could not easily handle. And one other thing I noticed: the fumes of chloroform were very palpable. I could not be mistaken. I had smelled it so much in the hospital at Calcutta that I detected it very quickly. What were my thoughts as the cracksman resumed his seat by my side and started on I cannot tell; for I thought a great many things in a very short time.

On we went, through many streets and around many corners; and when we stopped again it seemed as though we had ridden over most of the city. We had been in some narrow, dirty streets, as I could tell by the echo from the close walls and by the run of the wheels; and we had been in some wide ones. As near as I could judge we had been three quarters of an hour from our first stopping place; and I knew that we were close to the river, as I could tell from the sound of plashing oars and the voices of the boatmen. My companion again leaped down, and assisted his master in lifting the burden from the cab.

"You may help me up the steps," I heard the gentleman say; and presently afterwards I could detect that they were bearing their load across a sidewalk.

The temptation was strong, and I could not resist it. With a quick movement of my left hand I raised the bandage from my eyes. We were in a dark, narrow street, where the fog was still thick and heavy; but a neighboring gas light enabled me to see the two men bearing something up a short flight of steps—something which looked very much like a female, if I might judge by the habiliment. A door was opened, and an old woman, with a candle in her hand, made her appearance. The young man bore his burden into the hall, and the cracksman turned back towards the street. I knew that he regarded me sharply as he resumed his seat by my side; but he could detect nothing out of the way. He took the reins from my hand, and drove off, and at the end of half an hour, or so, he stopped, and told me that I might remove the bandage. I did so, and found myself at my old stand. We proceeded to the nearest lamp, where he paid me the price agreed upon, after which he remarked that he might have occasion for my services again.

"You will find it for your interest," he added, "to keep perfectly silent about this."

I did not tell him how lightly I held his implied threat, but gave him to understand that he would find me at my post when he wanted me.

It was an hour past midnight when my horse had been stalled and fed, and as I sought my lodgings my mind was busy with the events of the night; and the conviction was forced upon me that I had been lending my aid to the accomplishment of some evil work. On the following morning, at a later hour than usual, I was at my stand, where I remained until four o'clock in the afternoon without earning a penny. Before taking my horse home to give him his supper, I thought I would drop into a neighboring tap room, and drink a pot of ale. A man, in a fine suit of livery, was standing at the bar, and as I called for my ale he turned towards me. His countenance was familiar.

"Mark Dunner!" he cried, putting out his hand, "is this you?"

I quickly recognized him. It was Tom Gasson. We had been soldiers together in India, and during the later part of the war with the Sikhs we had been orderlies together in attendance upon Gen. Sir Charles Copeland. We shook hands most cordially, and after the first impulsive salutations we retired to a sidetable, there to drink our ale, and talk over old affairs. I had been wounded at Googerat, and there Tom and I had separated, and I had not seen him since until now. What was he doing in London?

"I am still in Sir Charles' service," he told me.

"What?" I cried, "Is Sir Charles Copeland really in London? Really, I should like to see him. I think he would welcome an old soldier who had followed him through so many perils."

"Of course he would, Mark; but you must wait a while, for, just at this time, he is in trouble—ah! a terrible trouble, old boy."

"What is it, Tom?"

"It is something that strikes home to his heart. A maiden whom he loved as he loved his own life had been mercilessly torn away from him."

"How?—When?" I asked.

"Ah, my boy, we don't know how; but she has been missing since last night; and I have been to start more of the police on the search."

"Who was she? What was she?" I eagerly inquired.

"Why, bless me," said Tom, "you seem to be startled. You look rather paler than you did at Googerat."

"Never mind my looks. Tell me of this girl. Perhaps I can help you."

"Eh?"

"Will you tell me?"

"Certainly," replied Tom, setting down his pot. "She was Sir Charles' niece, only child of the baronet's brother. She was an heiress, too."

"Has Sir Charles any suspicions of the guilty party?" I asked.

"I don't know," answered Tom. "He may have; but he keeps them to himself; or, at any rate, he hasn't said anything to me about them."

After some further conversation the conviction was strong within me that I had unwittingly helped in the abduction of the baronet's ward; and I told Tom I must see his master.

“It is not impossible,” said I, “that I may help in this matter. At all events, I can try.”

The valet did not need much urging. He was ready to conduct me to the baronet at once. So I took my horse to the stable, and when I had fed him I returned to the tap-room, where Tom was waiting for me. We went out together, and having called a cab, we were whirled away to Regent Street, and set down before a stately mansion, which we entered by a side passage. I was left alone for a short time; and when Tom came back he informed me that his master was anxious to see me.

I found Sir Charles to be the same noble looking, frank faced man as in the other years; only there was more silver in his hair, and his strong features were shadowed by grief—He was glad to see me, and called my familiarly by name as though I had been his equal.

“Mark,” he said, after I had taken a seat, “you will excuse me if I omit ceremony, and hurry on to the business which brought you here. My valet tells me that you may help me to find my niece. If you can do so you may name your own reward.”

I was determined to proceed carefully, for I would not raise hopes which I could not support with success.

“I am not sure,” I replied, “that I can help you at all; but I may be able to do it. Your niece was taken away—“

“Last night,” said the baronet, interrupting me. “She was my ward—the only child of my brother—a lovely, precious being, who had become all in all to me. If I do not find her, there will be no more of joy to in this world!”

“Have you any suspicions?” I asked. “Do you think of anyone who could have had an object in taking her away?”

Sir Charles arose and walked to the window, and as he returned he motioned for Tom to leave the room.

“Mark Dunner, why do you ask me that question? Is it from mere curiosity, or have you reason for it?”

“I have the best of reason, Sir Charles.”

“And,” pursued the baronet, looking me steadily in the face, “I know I can trust you for you are a true and brave man. Still, I have a caution to give. Should nothing come of this you are never to mention to any human being the suspicions I may shadow forth.”

I told Sir Charles he might depend upon me.

“Then,” he resumed, “I will give you a bit of family history. George Copeland was my younger brother. His wife died three years after their marriage, leaving one child. George survived her only five years, and when he died he left his child in my charge. A sweet, precious child, was Clara Copeland, and I loved her as though she had been my own. Beside my brother, I had one sister, who married a naval officer of the name of Orton, by whom she had a son, who was called William. My brother left a very large property, amounting to more than a hundred thousand pounds, and by his will he bequeathed it as follows: It was all to go to his daughter when she reached the age of nineteen years; but in the event of her dying before that time, the bulk of the fortune was to fall to William Orton, the son of his sister. Clara, if living, will be nineteen in a very few months. William Orton, who is nearly six years her senior, has sought her hand, but she could not listen to his suit. She did not love him; and, moreover, she had reason to believe that his character was not of the best kind. Thus you will see that Orton has had two chances in view of coming into possession of my brother’s property.”

“Is William Orton in London?” I asked.

“I am not sure,” replied the baronet. “Tom is confident that he saw him in Finnsbury Square day before yesterday; but I had supposed he was in Portsmouth.”

“William Orton is about four and twenty?” said I, interrogatively;—“tall; of good form; with dark, curling hair; rather a heavy moustache; very bright eyes; a voice naturally low and soft; generally bearing himself with a free and reckless air?”

“You have hit him, exactly,” returned Sir Charles.

“One question more,” I added. “What is his character?”

“I fear it is not good,” said the baronet, shaking his head.

Without further delay I gave a clear and detailed account of my adventure of the preceding night; and when I had concluded Sir Charles started from his chair with clasped hands.

“It was Clara! It was Clara!—I am sure of it!” he cried. “O, the villain must not succeed! We must find her at once. Have you any idea of the locality of the house where you left her?”

“Not the least,” I answered.

“Have you any idea of the route you took?” “No, sir.”

“Merciful Heavens! Something must be done. Can you suggest anything?”

“I think,” said I, “that I can find that house this very night. I still own the horse that bore me though the wilds of the Punjab, and I believe he will carry me over the same track tonight that he took last night. At all events, that is our best chance.”

“Has your horse been on any other route since?”

"No, sir."

"Then, I'll put him against one half the policemen in London. By my soul, Mark, we'll try the experiment; and let it be as soon as possible. O, you cannot know how anxious I am."

After some reflection I suggested the following arrangement: I would be at my usual stand, near Blackfriars' Bridge, and when it was fairly dark, Sir Charles and his valet, with such other help as he might select, should meet me there. This suited the baronet; and shortly afterwards I hurried away to attend to my share of the necessary arrangements.

It was past sundown when I had eaten my supper; and when I reached my stand with my cab it was half-past eight. In half an hour Sir Charles and Tom made their appearance, having left their carriage, in charge of two policemen, a short distance behind. My plan was to arrange matters just as they had been arranged on the previous night; so I had the baronet get into the cab, while Tom mounted by my side and took the reins. The policemen were to take the carriage and follow us. After we had started Tom sought to open a conversation, but I thought we had better keep silent.

"If we would have the horse repeat the jaunt of last night," said I, "we must give him every help."

Tom saw the force of my reasoning, and remained silent. My horse was allowed to pick his own way, and he did it without much faltering. Once or twice he hesitated, as on the previous occasion; but a light word from me reassured him. Thus we had ridden some ten minutes, or more, when the horse stopped before an old wooden building, in a dark, dirty street. Sir Charles leaped out from the cab, and asked if that was the place.

"No," said I. "This is the place where the lady was picked up.

Tom got down, under my directions, and ascended the steps to the door of the house, and then returned, and helped his master back into the cab, after which he resumed his seat by my side.

Again we started, with the reins evenly held, and my horse went on without faltering—on through narrow, crooked streets—sometimes trotting, and sometimes walking,— until at length he stopped again; and this time I was the first to leap to the pavement, for I recognized the house into which I had seen the female carried. We waited until the two policemen came up; and after a hurried consultation one of them led the way up the steps, and rapped upon the door. In a little while the door was opened by an old woman, who sought to leap back and shut us out when she saw us; but the officer was too quick for her. She was seized, and threatened with severe penalty if she made any noise.

"We are officers, my good woman; and if you know when you're well off, you'll keep quiet and answer me. We're after the young lady who was brought here last night."

The woman protested that no young lady had been brought there.

“Very well,” said the policeman. “We’ll take your lamp, and satisfy ourselves; and if you have any doors that are locked, you can open them for us, or you can leave them for us to open.”

At this point Sir Charles whispered to one of the officers that he would rather the hag should not be arrested, a she did not wish to have the affair made public if it could possibly be avoided.

“Look’e,” continued the policeman, giving the woman a shake, “I know you very well. Don’t you remember Inspector Rawlings? Didn’t I pick you up in Church Lane not many months ago, eh? I tell ye, my fine woman, you’d better look sharp, or you’ll find yourself picked up again. Now who leads the way, you or I? Speak quick.”

“Indeed, sir,” said the hag, trembling perceptively, “I haven’t had any hand in this. “‘Tisn’t my house, this isn’t. A girl was brought here; but I had noting to do with it.”

“Lead us to her,” returned Rawlings, “and if we find her safe and well, you shall go clear.”

“D’ye mean it, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Then come along, and be in a hurry; for the man as brought her here may be back before a great while.”

The woman led the way to an upper chamber in the back part of the house, where the lady Clara Copeland, pale and shivering, was found. She was first clasped in her uncle’s embrace, and then borne down to the street, and placed in the carriage. When she reached her home she had but a meager story to tell. On the previous evening, while standing upon the low balcony that overlooked the court, a man sprang up and seized her, and stopped her mouth and nose with a napkin saturated with chloroform. Before she could cry out her senses where gone, and when consciousness returned she found herself alone in the chamber from which we had rescued her. She had not seen William Orton, though she firmly believed that he was at the bottom of the foul plot.

Clara was still very weak from the effects of the chloroform, but her guardian knew how to overcome that, and on the following day she was quite well.

Two days after this, Inspector Rawlings brought word to Sir Charles that William Orton had been in London, lurking about the gambling houses; but that he had that morning taken passage on the South Coast Railway for Portsmouth.

I will only add, that I went to live with Sir Charles, where Tom and myself had things pretty much our own way. In less than a year Clara was married to a man whom she had loved for a long time, and I am free to confess that both Tom and I drank a great deal of wine on the occasion.

William Orton when last heard from, was in India; but whether he is now living or dead I cannot tell. I can only pledge my word that there is no danger of his ever showing his face in London again.

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