

The Child Stealer

"Ah! Burleigh, here's a job for you; one that's got game in it, and a long chase, perhaps."

It was the chief of the Scotland Yard detective force who spoke as he stepped into the private office. A knot of "hale fellows well met," and X, an American, among the number, were engaged in the innocent pastime of a game of whist. I threw down my cards, and the chief handed me a telegram which read as follows:

READING, Eng.—Charles Burton, the infant heir of Beenham Lodge, was stolen from the Lodge last night; it is suspected by the nurse in whose charge he was placed. She has disappeared. She is tall, blonde hair, blue eyes, graceful and easy in her manners, and wears a plain, dark costume. Large reward for his capture and the recovery of the child,
EDWARD PORDAGE.

"Where is Beenham Lodge?" I inquired as soon as I had glanced at the telegram.

"Near Reading, about forty-five miles up the Thames."

"The nurse will come to London with the child?"

"That is not so certain. This is doubtless a scheme to remove the heir to the Beenham estate by some person or person? Who are itching to obtain possession after Sir Edward Pordage's death."

"Then you think they will not run the hazard of bringing the child here?"

"Certainly not."

"With a flash my mind was made up. I started out of the office and in a few minutes was on a train that was bearing me at a rapid rate toward Reading.

Upon my arrival I secured a private conveyance and after a drive of a few miles was landed at the entrance to the lodge. I was met by an English gentleman who received me with much warmth and withal agitation when I informed him that I had been placed on the case.

"The object of my hasty visit is to glean some of the facts in the case and follow up any intelligent clue, if there be any. Was this your child that was stolen, Sir Edward?"

"Bless you, no! I am a bachelor—never was married. Charles Burton was the child of my sister. I am his uncle, and by will have made him the lineal male heir to the Beenham estates."

"Have you other relatives, Sir Edward?"

"Yes, another sister, a spinster, Miss Applebee Lowage, lives with me and has been my housekeeper for many years. She also manages much of my business affairs of late, as I feel the weight of years increasing upon me."

"Who was the nurse and what was her name?"

"My spinster sister's waiting maid. Her name is Percy—Miss Jane Percy. A more docile, winning and obedient servant we have never had in our employ. Charles Burton's mother died soon after Charles was born, and we took the helpless little infant to our home and nursed it with the tenderest care. Miss Percy took such an interest in the child that she was given the sole charge and seemed to love it with a mother's love. Oh, I trust no harm has befallen it, wherever it has been taken."

"What is its age?"

"About a year."

"What motive, think you, was there for the abduction of the child?"

"None that I can see, unless the expectation of securing a large reward for its return."

"Then do you not suspect that a plot has been formed among some branch of your relatives for the removal of the child?"

Sir Edward stopped for a moment, as if a flash of new light had entered his mind, but he stamped his ponderous cane on the floor and indignantly replied;

"My relatives steal that poor, helpless babe! No, perish the very thought of it. Not one could so dishonor the name of an Applebee or a Pordage."

As I arose to depart, an elderly lady of the genuine spinster type walked gravely into the room and glanced furtively at me as she advanced.

"That is Mr.—Mr.—"

"Burleigh," I interjected, to help the old man's memory.

"He's a detective sent up from London to discover our poor lost child, and he wants to get all the information he can. Sister, give him all you can. You know what Miss Percy wore and what clothing the child had on."

"I presume, Sir Edward, you can do that," she replied rather tartly, and seemed to shrink from having anything to communicate. Without wishing to force the matter and making an apology for haste, I took my departure and I was soon back in London. I went at once to my room, and picking up a good-sized gripsack threw in some of my clothing, with the expectation that I might be required to make a long journey. Going out upon the street I

ordered a cab and was driven to the Inman line of steamers, where I ascertained the City of Richmond was expected to leave Liverpool early the next morning.

"You have your passenger list, I presume," I inquired of the clerk.

"Certainly."

"Will you please allow me to look at it?"

"With pleasure."

I glanced along the list of names, but could not see the one for which I was searching. I handed the paper back and was about turning away when the thought occurred to me that it would do no harm to question the official a little further.

"Do you sell the London passage ticket?"

"Yes sir," somewhat sharply.

"Do you recollect selling a ticket to a tall lady with blue eyes, blonde hair and attired in a dark costume?"

"Very distinctly. I was attracted by her beauty. She's a lovely woman."

"And she purchased a ticket?"

"Two tickets."

"Two tickets!" I ejaculated with some surprise, which drew the attention of the clerk. For once I had been thrown off my guard.

"And she had a child with her—in her arms?"

"I saw no child. I took her to be a young lady who might not object to a good husband."

"Strange?"

"No, I don't think so. She never was a mother."

"Perhaps not; but then—"

"Then what?"

"She might have someone else's child, you know," and I hastened out of the office and went to the railway station, where I had the good fortune to catch the night express for Liverpool. So sure was I that I had got upon the trail of the child abductor that I felt

annoyed at every little delay along the route. My mind was in a glow of excitement. The game was big but shy and cunning. Nothing less than the bird in the hand would make me feel any certainty of success. I must reach Liverpool before the City of Richmond took her departure. If not, the pursuit would be long and might end in failure even. When half the journey had been made and the train was whirling through the darkness at a tremendous speed, there was a sudden stoppage that forboded no good. We came to a dead stop. One of the drivers of the engine had broken down. The situation was interesting and exasperating to me. Some of the passengers slept on, oblivious to their surroundings; not so with me. I fretted and chafed with disappointment.

The hours wore on when at length the injury had been repaired and the train started on its course. I had the satisfaction of knowing that I could not reach Liverpool before the steamer sailed. I resolved to take the chances, and so I curled myself up within myself and my own thoughts. Just as I had feared, the steamer had sailed upon my arrival in Liverpool.

My next thought was to cable to New York, giving a description of the woman and child and have the former arrested. This would bring others into the case. I wanted the honor and reward myself. Besides, after careful reflection, I thought I might be on the wrong scent. The personal description seemed to tally.

The two tickets, no babe in the woman's charge and other circumstances led me to think that after all I might be mistaken.

The thought of defeat drove me to devising every scheme for pursuit.

A new idea popped into my head, [and I] rushed to the office of the Guion line.

"When does your first steamer sail?" I inquired of the clerk.

"To-morrow afternoon."

"What's her name?"

"The Alaska."

"Alaska, eh?"

"Yes."

"She's a quick one?"

"Fastest vessel afloat."

"Do you think she can reach New York before the Inman's City of Richmond, which sailed this morning?"

"I should think so—will probably distance her by a day."

"That would make a difference of over two days."

"What of that, barring accidents?"

Thrusting my hand into my pocket, I said: "I want a cabin passage to New York."

"Your name, sir?"

"James Burleigh, an American detective, anxious to cross the ditch and get back home."

With a somewhat contented spirit I went to a hotel and waited for the hour of the Alaska's departure. I felt that I was still in the race, but my competitor having such a start, while I was left practically at the post, I was not so confident of winning after all.

Anyway, I was glad to sail for the land of my birth. The novelty of having been sent to England and the continent in quest of some noted criminals who were wanted in the States had worn away and I longed to see my friends once more.

Nothing of special note occurred during the passage across. The noble vessel seemed as fleet as the wind. Day by day I studied with eagerness the log of the vessel to learn our rate of speed. Good fortune favored us with fair weather and sea.

Upon our arrival at Quarantine we learned that the City of Richmond had not yet reached port—in fact, was not expected till the next day. I came up to the city, engaged my rooms at the hotel, and made what preparations were needed for the execution of my plans.

Lest the steamer might arrive at night, I stayed that night at Staten Island to be near at hand. The precaution was unnecessary, as she did not arrive till the next day.

Accompanied by the health officer and others I was soon on board and walked through the saloon cabin with the nonchalant air of a person who had no other business than to hum a tune or twirl a cane. There was the usual preparatory bustle for disembarking. My eye could not catch the object of my search. Perhaps she was in her stateroom. I would wait and see.

The vessel was rounding into her pier, but still no person who could by any stretch of the imagination be said to resemble the one I wanted.

I rambled back and forth and then ascended to the aft of the steamer. There stood a tall, shapely woman, with her back turned toward me. She was twirling her sunshade and seemed absorbed in gazing at the many sights that commanded her view.

I ventured to approach the rail. My presence attracted her attention; she turned her face toward me; there were momentary mutual glances. What a handsome face! What a charming figure!

Stepping nearer, I ventured, in the most polite manner, to speak.

"Glad to get back from your foreign tour, I presume, Miss—"

"Benson is my name."

"Miss Benson, I took you to be an American lady. I am an American, returning, after a long absence, to my native land."

"I am so tired of this ship. How glad. I will be when I step on shore again. It won't be long now, will it, sir?"

"But a few minutes."

"Pshaw! I've made a mistake," thought I. "This lady hasn't blonde hair. Her eyes are more of a steel gray than blue. Her costume is a steel gray traveling suit. Then she is alone."

But I thought I detected a decidedly English accent in her conversation.

If she were Miss Jane Percy, where could the child be? If she has a companion, male or female, where was that mysterious personage? I must not be foiled at this stage of the game. Once on land and swallowed up in the maelstrom of the masses, the child-stealer and the child might soon lose their identity. I must act quickly.

Confronting the fair woman, I said in a stern voice: "Your name is not Benson. You are Miss Jane Percy, the abductor of the nephew of Sir Edward Pordage of Beenham, England. I am a detective. You are my prisoner."

The woman stood transfixed; her form trembled, her cheeks blanched at this sudden encounter. Although capable of calm self-possession, she was thrown off her guard. Woman-like, her emotions overcame her and she fell at my feet.

"Where is the child?"

She hesitated and falteringly moaned:

"In the steerage."

She conducted me there, when my eyes fell upon the heir of Beenham Lodge crowing in the arms of a fat Irish nurse.

I saw that my beautiful prisoner was comfortably provided for till the sailing of the

next steamer and had the pleasure of placing the young heir in the arms of old Sir Edward. The spinster sister, stung at the action of her brother in making the line of the Burtons instead of the Applebees the successors of his large estates, had concocted this plan to abduct the child. True to his promise, Sir Edward bestowed upon me such a handsome reward that with ordinary caution the wolf need never howl at my door.

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