

The Defendant's Accomplice

A Witness's Story

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

During the month of February, 1853, Seth Damon, of Acton, instituted an action at law against Gabriel Butterworth, of the same town, for the recovery of thirty thousand dollars, of which he claimed that said Butterworth had defrauded him. The circumstances were these:

Butterworth owned and kept the principal store in Acton, and though he had never been regarded as an exemplary gentleman, his honor in business had not been impugned. Those who had the faculty of looking upon the undercurrents of human actions decided that he was a man not bound by honor, but who understood the laws of self-interest too well to be guilty of small meannesses in business. What he was capable of doing on a grand scale was not mooted until the occurrence of which I am about to speak.

Seth Damon had removed from Edson to Acton in the Fall, and had purchased the iron-works. Shortly after concluding the purchase, he had a payment of thirty thousand dollars to make, and late on a Saturday afternoon he arrived from New York with the money—part of it in bank-notes, and part of it in gold. When he arrived he found that the parties to whom the money was to be paid had left town, and would not return till Monday. Mr. Butterworth had the only reliable safety-vault in the town, and to Mr. Butterworth Damon took the thirty thousand dollars, asking permission to lodge it in his vault over the Sabbath, which permission was readily and cheerfully granted.

During Sunday night the people of the village were aroused by the alarm of fire; and upon starting out it was found that the alarm came from Mr. Butterworth's store. But Mr. Butterworth had been active. He had discovered the fire in season, and, with the assistance of his boys, had put it out before much damage had been done. Upon looking over the premises it was found that the fire had not only been the evident work of an incendiary, but that it had been set in several different places.

“How fortunate,” said the owner, “that I discovered it in season.”

But very soon another discovery was made. The safety-vault had been broken open, and every dollar it had contained stolen away! Here was alarm and consternation. Gabriel Butterworth seemed fit to go crazy.

“For myself I care not,” he cried. “A few hundreds were all I had in there; but my friend had a great sum!”

Immediate search for the robber, or robbers, was instituted, and word was sent far and near to all Sheriffs and their Deputies, and to the police of the cities.

Now it so happened, that on that very Sunday evening—or, I may say, Sunday night, for it was near midnight,—I, John Watson, had been returning home from my brother's in

Dunstable. I had left my hired team at the stable, and on my way to my boarding-house I passed the store of Mr. Butterworth. In the back yard of the store was a horse fountain, and being thirsty I stepped around that way to get a draught of water. As I stooped to drink at the spout of the fountain I saw a gleam of light through a crevice in the shutters of one of the store windows. Curiosity impelled me to go and peer through; for I wondered who could be in there at that hour of a Sunday night. The crevice was quite large, made by the wearing away of the edges of the shutters where they had been caught by the hooks that held them back when open, and through it I looked into the store. I looked upon the wall within which the safety-vault was built; and I saw the vault open; and I saw Gabriel Butterworth at work therein. I saw him put large packages into his breast pocket, and I saw him bring out two or three small canvas bags, like shot-bags, and set them upon the floor by the door that opened towards his dwelling. As I saw him approaching this outer door a second time I thought he might come out, and I went away. It was an hour afterward that I heard the alarm of fire. And it was not until the following morning that I heard of the robbery of the safe.

I was placed in a critical position; but I had a duty to perform. I went to Mr. Damon, and told him what I had seen; and also gave him liberty to call upon me for my testimony in public when he should need it. Until I should be so called upon I was to hold my silence.

While the officers were hunting hither and thither Mr. Damon kept a strict watch upon the movements of Mr. Butterworth, and at length detected him in the act of depositing a large sum of money in a bank in Buffalo. His action immediately followed, and Butterworth was arrested.

This was the way matters stood when I was summoned to appear before the Grand Jury at Wiltonburg. I went there in company with Mr. Damon, and secured lodgings at the Sabine house. It was a small inn, well and comfortably kept, and frequented by patrons of moderate means. There were two public houses of more fashionable pretensions in the place.

It was on the afternoon of Monday, the 14th day of February, that I took quarters at the Sabine House, and after tea I requested the landlord to build a fire in my room, which he did; and he also furnished me with a good lamp. It was eight o'clock, and I sat at the table engaged in reading, when someone rapped upon my door. I said, "Come in," and a young man, named Laban Shaw entered, bringing his carpet bag in his hand. This Shaw I had known very well as a clerk of Gabriel Butterworth, but I had never been intimate with him from the fact that I had never liked him. He must have seen the look of displeasure upon my face, for he quickly said,—

"Pardon me, Mr. Watson. I don't mean to intrude. I have come down to be present at the examination tomorrow—summoned by Butterworth's man, of course,—and I got here too late to get a room with a stove in it; and, worse still, I must take a room with another bed in it, and with a stranger for company. And so, may I just warm my fingers and toes by your fire, and leave my carpet bag under your bed?"

He laughed when he spoke of the carpet bag; but yet he did not know what sort of a faculty his stranger roommate might have for getting up and walking off in the night.

Of course I granted him his request, and he put his carpet bag under my bed, and then sat down by my stove, and we chatted sociably enough for half an hour, or more, without once alluding to the business which had brought the pair of us to Wiltonburg. His conversation was pleasant, and I really came to like the fellow; and I thought to myself that I had been prejudiced against him without cause. At length he arose, and bade me good-night, and went away, and shortly afterward I retired.

I had been in bed but a little while, when another rap upon my door disturbed me; and to my demand of what was wanted I received answer from Laban Shaw. He bade me not to light a lamp. He had only come for his night-gown. He could get it in the dark. I arose and unlocked my door, and his apologies were many and earnest. He always slept, in winter, in a flannel night-gown, and he thoughtlessly left it in his carpet bag. He was sorry—very sorry. He had thought to try to sleep without it rather than disturb me; but his room was cold, and—

I cut him short, and told him there was no need of further apology; and while he fumbled over his bag, I went to the stove to make double assurance that the fire was all right. I offered to light a match for him, but he said he had got his dress, and all was right. He then went out, and I closed and locked the door after him, and then got back into bed.

But I was not to sleep. I had been very sleepy when Shaw disturbed me; but an entirely different feeling possessed me now. First came a nervous twitching in my limbs—a “crawly” feeling as some express it—that sensation which induces gaping and yawning, but which no amount of yawning could now subdue. By and by a sense of nightmare stole upon me; and, though perfectly awake, a sense as of impending danger possessed me. At length, so uncomfortable did I become in my recumbent position, that I arose and lighted my lamp, resolved to replenish my fire, and dress myself, and see if I could read away my nervous fit.

My lamp was lighted, and as I returned to the bedside for my slippers, my attention was attracted by a string which lay upon the carpet—a string leading from the bed to the door. I stooped to examine it, and found it fast at both ends. I brought the lamp, and took a more careful survey. The string was a fine silken trout-line, new and strong, one end of which disappeared beneath the bed, and the other beneath the door. In my present condition I was suspicious of evil, and my senses were painfully keen. Raising the hanging edge of the coverlet I looked under the bed. The carpet bag which Laban Shaw had left lay there, partly open, with the silken line leading out from it. What could it mean? Had the man accidentally carried the end of the line away with his night-dress without noticing it? I drew the bag out from beneath the bed, and as I held its jaws apart I saw, within, a double-barreled pistol, both hammers cocked, bright percussion caps gleaming upon the tubes, while the silken line, with double end, was made fast to the triggers! And I saw that the muzzles of the pistol barrels were inserted into the end of an oblong box, or case, of galvanized iron. And I comprehended, too, that a very slight pull

upon that string might have discharged the pistols,—and, furthermore, that a man outside of the door might have done that thing!

For a little time my hands trembled so that I dared not touch the infernal contrivance; but at length I composed myself, and went at work. First, I cut the string with my knife; and then, as carefully as possible, I eased down the hammers of the pistol, after which I drew it from the iron case. I had done this when I heard a step in the hall outside my door. Quick as thought I sprang up, and turned the key, and threw the door open; and before me, revealed by the light of my lamp, stood Laban Shaw. He was frightened when he saw me, and trembled like an aspen. I was stronger than he at any time, and now he was as a child in my hands. I grasped him by the collar, and dragged him into my room; and I pointed the double-barreled pistol at his breast; and I told him I would shoot him as I would shoot a dog if he gave me occasion.

He was abject and terrified. Like a whipped cur he crawled at my feet, and begged for mercy. His master had hired him to do it with promise of great reward. It had transpired that my testimony before the Jury would be conclusive of Butterworth's guilt, and Butterworth had taken this means to get rid of me. In his great terror the poor accomplice made a full confession; and when he had told all, I released my grasp. He begged that I would let him go; but I dared not—my duty would not allow it. I rang the bell, and in time the hostler, who slept in the office, answered my summons. I sent him for an officer, and at length had the satisfaction of seeing my prisoner led safely away.

On the following day the carpet bag was taken before the Grand Jury, and the iron case examined by an experienced chemist assisted by an old armorer from the arsenal. It was found to contain a fulminate of mercury, mixed with bits of iron; and it was the opinion of both the chemist and the armorer that the power of the terrific explosive agent, had it been ignited, would not only have been sufficient to blow me to atoms, but that it would also have literally stripped and shivered to fragments all of the house above it!

And a single pull of that silken string would have been sufficient to this horrible end! And, but for my nervous waking—my incubus of foreboding—the destroyer would have come; the fatal cord would have been touched; the mine sprung; and I should have been launched into eternity as upon the lightning's bolt!

So Gabriel Butterworth did not procure the destruction of my testimony; but, through that testimony, the Grand Jury found cause for indictment of far graver character than had at first been anticipated; and of those graver charges he was convicted. Seth Damon received back the full sum he had entrusted to the false man's care, and shortly afterward I entered into business with him; and today Seth Damon and I are partners. Laban Shaw came out from prison and went to Idaho. I have not heard of him since. Gabriel Butterworth did not live to serve out the full term of his sentence.

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