

A Hunt on the Highway

From the "Record" of a Sheriff

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

THERE WAS A SHREWD ROBBER SOMEWHERE. The farmhouses were robbed; shops were robbed; the tills of the bars at the wayside inns were robbed; and people had their pockets picked. All this happened in the region of the country between Sidney and Lowstone—not a field of vast extent—and yet the robber, or robbers, could not be found. Officers had searched in every direction, and several suspicious looking individuals were apprehended; but the real culprit still remained at large. One day the mail was robbed, and on the next a man had his pocket picked of ten thousand dollars, while riding in the stagecoach. The money had been carried in his breast pocket, and he knew that it was stolen from him while he was enjoying a bit of doze on the road.

I had been confined to my house by a severe cold for several days, and was not fit to go out now; but as this matter was becoming so serious, I felt it my duty to be on the move, and accordingly I fortified my throat and breast with warm flannel, and set forth. I had no settled plan in my mind, for I had not yet been upon the road, and was not thoroughly "posted up." A ride of five miles in my own carriage brought me to Sidney, and thence I meant to take the stage to Lowstone, where Sam Stickney, one of the shrewdest of my deputies, lived. Stickney had already been on the search, and I wished to consult him before making any decided movement. I reached Sidney at half past five in the morning, and the coach left at six. Lowstone was sixty miles distant, so I had a good ride before me. During the early part of the day I rode upon the box with the driver, and from him I gained considerable information touching the various robberies that had been committed. He was forced to admit that several people had been robbed in his stage, though he declared he couldn't see into it, for he had not the most remote idea, even, of who the robber could be.

We reached Bonnville at noon, where we stopped to dine, and when we left this place I was the only passenger. A cool wind was blowing, and as I wished to be as careful as possible, I got inside, where I had room in plenty. At the distance of twelve mile—at a little settlement which went by the name of "Poodle City" we stopped to change horses, and here another passenger got on board. I had been occupying the forward seat, as that happened to be wider than the others, and gave me a better opportunity for lying down; and when the newcomer entered he took the back seat. He was a young man, I judged, and not very tall in stature; but so completely bundled up was he in shawls and mufflers, that his size was not so easily determined. He was very pale, and coughed badly; and I at once made up my mind that he was far less fit to travel than I was. After we had got fairly on our way I remarked to him that I had been suffering from a severe cold, and that this was the first time I had ventured out for quite a number of days. He looked at me out of a pair of dark, bright eyes; and when he seemed to have determined what manner of man I was, he said—

"I have something worse than a cold, sir." He broke into a fit of coughing, which lasted a minute or so, and then added—"It won't be a great while before I shall take my last ride!"

“You are consumptive?” I suggested.

“Almost gone with it,” he replied. Again he was seized with a spasm of coughing, and when he had recovered from it, he continued—“The disease is eating me up and shaking me to pieces at the same time.”

He further informed me that he had started on a tour for his health, but that he had given it up, and was now on his way home, which place he was anxious to reach as soon as possible. Another paroxysm seized him at this point, and he intimated that he was unable to converse, as the effort brought on his cough. I had noticed this, and had made up my mind to trouble him no more, even before he had given me the hint.

After this he drew his outer shawl more closely about his neck and face, and having secured an easy posture, he closed his eyes, and I was not long in following his example. Towards the middle of the afternoon the coach stopped at a small village, where we changed horses again, and where four passengers got in. This broke up the arrangement of my friend and self for rest, as he had to take one of the strangers upon his seat, while I took another upon mine, the other two occupying the middle seat. The newcomers soon broached the subject of the robberies which had been committed in that region, and I listened to gain information if possible; but they knew no more than everybody else knew. They had heard about it, and were inflated with wonder. One—an old farmer—asked me if I knew anything of the robber. I told him that I knew but little of the affair in any way, having been sick, and unable to be out among folks. Then he asked my consumptive friend if he knew anything about it. The latter raised his head from its reclining position, and was on the point of answering, when we heard our driver, in quick, abrupt tones, ordering someone to get out of the road. I instinctively put my head out at the window to see what the trouble was, and my eye was just quick enough to detect a load of faggots in season to dodge back and avoid them. The road was quite narrow at this point, and as the faggots were loaded very widely, it was impossible for the driver to wholly avoid them, and the side of the coach was swept by them quite smartly. I escaped without being touched, but not so my friend. I heard an exclamation—I thought rather a profane one—from his lips, and on looking towards him, I saw that one of the faggots had struck him over the left eye, making quite a mark upon the pale skin.

“Curses on the lout!” he muttered, as he pressed his hand upon the pain-spot. “I’d rather be robbed a dozen times than get such a blow as that!”

Whereupon an old lady—probably the wife of the farmer mentioned, remarked that it was “a marcy it hadn’t put out his eye!”

“These fellows ought to be taken up for loading their faggots out so,” said another of the passengers. “It’ll do very well to load hay out wide, for that won’t hurt anybody if it does hit ’em; but faggots is different.”

This turned the conversation from the subject of the robberies, and it was not renewed again during the day.

We reached Lowstone shortly after dark, and I went at once to the residence of Mr. Stickney, whom I found at home. He had been out all day, and had made all sorts of efforts to obtain some clue to the perpetrators of the robberies that were being committed, but without effect.

“I can learn nothing,” he said, “upon which to hang a suspicion. Two stores have been robbed in this place, but not a clue can I gain to the perpetrators. They must be old birds.”

“Have you seen Gamblit?” I asked. Gamblit was the deputy at Orton, a town twelve miles distant.

“Not lately,” replied Stickney.

“He has been at work!” I suggested.

“Yes—I am sure of it.”

“Then,” said I, “we will go over in the morning to Orton, and with Gamblit in company we may be able to perfect some arrangement for pursuing this investigation to better advantage.”

This met the views of my host, and so we left the matter for the evening. On the following morning we were up early, and as the stage would take us directly to Gamblit’s house, we chose that mode of conveyance, and repaired at a seasonable hour to the tavern for that purpose. When we reached the inn we found the old farmer, who had been one of my fellow passengers on the night before, stepping about the piazza in a high state of excitement. He had been robbed of twelve hundred dollars, and he was sure it must have been done in the stagecoach, for he had slept with his pocketbook under his pillow. He had not thought to look into it when he retired, but he had found it empty that morning when he got up. He said the wallet had been taken from his pocket and put back again—he knew it. As soon as he saw me he was anxious I should be searched. I allowed him to perform the operation and then told him who I was, and informed him of my business.

“But,” said I, “where is the pale, consumptive man who came in with us?”

“He went away last night,” answered the landlord, who stood near.

My first aim was to satisfy myself that the old man had been robbed in the stagecoach, and of this he succeeded in convincing me. After this my suspicions rested upon the consumptive man, and I believed, if I could find him, I should find a rogue. Should we go to Orton, or remain where we were? Stickney said, go to Orton first—get Gamblit—and then make up a programme for action. So I bade the landlord to keep a sharp lookout; and also spoke with the driver who had brought me from Sidney, and who was now on the point of returning; requesting him, if he saw anything of the pale man, to see that he was secured. The suspicious individual had only remained at the inn a few minutes on the previous evening, and had then gone away in a wagon, which had come for him; but no one could tell what direction he had taken.

The coach for Orton soon came to the door, and Stickney and myself took our seats upon the inside, the farmer having determined to remain where he was until he heard something from his money. There were two other passengers on the inside, and two or three on the outside, but they were strangers to me. We had gone two or three miles, when the driver pulled up before a small farmhouse, where a woman and a trunk were waiting by the garden gate. The lady was handed into the coach, and took a seat facing me, and as she turned to give the driver some direction concerning her baggage, she threw her veil over her bonnet. She was pretty—very pretty—with rosy cheeks, and sparkling eyes, and teeth that gleamed in their pure whiteness like pearls. Her hair hung in glossy brown ringlets over her neck and shoulders, and was a type of beauty in itself. I looked at the rosy cheeks again—and into her dark, lustrous eyes. My gaze was fixed upon this latter point when she caught my glance, and quickly dropped her veil. At first I felt a little ashamed at having been caught in so rude an act as that of staring at her so boldly; but as her face was hidden from sight, and I had opportunity for reflection, it struck me that I had seen those features before.

Here was a study for me, and I was buried in it at once. Where had I seen that face? Was it possible that I had ever known that woman—one so lovely—and now forgotten her? I thought over all the intimate friends of my wife; but she was not to be found there. Then I thought over all the pretty girls I had known before I was married;— but when I called them all by name I remembered that the girl before me must have been a mere child when I was a single man. It was annoying—it made me provoked with myself—to think that I could not call this piece of female beauty to mind. I whispered to Stickney, and asked him if he had ever seen her before. He said he had not, and joked me for being so curious about a pretty face.

We stopped at a place called “Turner’s Mills,” in the edge of Orton, to exchange mails, and here I jumped out to see the postmaster, who was an old friend of mine; and as I was returning to the coach the thought struck me to go and look at the trunk which had been last put on, and see if any name was on it. It was marked with the simple initials—“A. M.” So that was all I gained from that source. As I came to the coach door I approached it from behind, and as I cast my eyes up I found that the beauty had her veil raised, and was looking in at the post office, as though anxious for the mail to come, that we might be off. The expression of anxiety detracted somewhat from her beauty, and as I looked upon her now, seeing her face in a different light, I was struck with a sort of snake-like cast which was perceptible in the whole character of her features. I was upon the point of withdrawing my gaze, lest she should catch me a second time, when a slight motion of her head rolled the curls over her temple, and I saw a faint line, something like a vein, over her left eye. It was a mark—a livid scratch—where something had struck her. It might have been the stroke of a whip. But—no! I quickly glided back behind the coach, and there I reflected. Such a mark as that *could* be made by a whip, but I was sure that THAT mark *had been made by a faggot!*

When I returned to my seat in the coach the fair passenger’s veil was down again. Could it be possible that my suspicions were correct, and that chance had thus thrown in my way a solution of the problem which had vexed my deputies so much? Yes—I was sure of it; and the more I compared the two faces in my mind, the more I saw the resemblance. Either these cheeks had been painted red today or they had been painted white yesterday. The eyes were the same—the contour the same—and that brow, with its telltale mark, was not to be mistaken.

What's the matter?" asked Stickney.

"I feel chilly," I replied. "I'm afraid I've caught more cold."

"Never mind.—Here we are. A dose of something warm will help you."

As Stickney spoke we stopped at the door of the inn at Orton. The driver announced that they would stop there fifteen or twenty minutes, to exchange horses, and wait for the mail, and also informed the passengers that they would find plenty of accommodation in the house if they chose to go in.

"Will you step in m'am?" he added, to my beauty.

She said she guessed she would; and he helped her out, and conducted her to the ladies' sitting room.

"Stickney," said I, "I'm going to find out who that woman is."

"Nonsense!" said he.

"I think I've got a trail to follow."

"Eh?"

"I rode with her yesterday."

"With her?"

"It was a HIM then!"

"She——!"

"Don't take that respectable old gentleman's name in vain; but do you stand there by the door, and pop in the moment you hear anything to warrant it."

I left my deputy in a state of perfect wonderment, and entered the sitting-room. The beauty was sitting by a window, gazing out between the slats of the blinds. She started up as I entered, and let her veil fall.

"I thought this was a private room, sir," she said. Her voice trembled, and sounded unnatural.

"It may be," I returned, "but that does not exclude those who have business. I came on purpose to see you."

There was a momentary struggle, and then she appeared to be as calm as could be.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I am sheriff of this county,” I replied.

“And what do you want with me?”

“I want to know who you are.”

“Stop—one moment,” she said; and as she spoke she carried her hand beneath her cloak. It was quickly withdrawn, and in it was a pistol, but she had grasped a portion of her dress with it, and before she could clear it, I had sprung upon her and seized her by the arms. But it was a *her* no longer. By the shades of Hercules, but there was more muscle in that slight body than I had bargained for! However, my man “popped” in the moment he heard the scuffle, and the beauty was soon secured. The glossy brown tresses fell off during the scuffle, and some of the paint was removed from the cheeks.

As soon as the prisoner was secured I had his trunk taken off and brought in, and upon overhauling its contents we found disguises of all sorts, and quite a sum of money, besides watches and jewelry of much value. I made him assume a proper male attire, and when he stood forth *in propria persona*, I found that he had not only used red paint for the blushing beauty of today, but that he had applied a more cadaverous coloring matter for the consumptive individual of yesterday. As he stood now, he was a lithe-built, intelligent looking youth, of not more than five-and-twenty; but with a cold-blooded expression upon his marble face, and an evil look in his dark eyes.

We carried him back to Lowstone, where we found the money of the old farmer upon him, besides other money which had been lost by different individuals. At first he told strange stories of himself, but finally when he knew the worst must come, he confessed the whole. He was from New Orleans, and had come up here on purpose to rob. He had had two confederates with him, who had helped him from place to place. One of them had taken him away from the inn on the night before, and the other had brought him and set him down at the farmer’s garden gate that morning. We made search for these confederates, but they had got wind of their principal’s arrest, and were not to be found.

However, we had got the chief sinner, and broken up the game. After he had been found guilty, and sentenced, he seemed to enjoy himself hugely, in telling how he had deceived the good people of our county. Now he would turn himself again into the old woman, who had given the driver so much trouble about her bandbox. Then he would be again the meek-browed minister, who had distributed tracts to the passengers, and picked their pockets while they read. Then he would draw himself up into the little hump-backed old man, who had been lifted into and out of the stage, and robbed his helpers while they fixed his crutches for him. It was funny—very—and perhaps we might never have caught him but for the accident of the faggots. That was not so funny for him; and I doubt if he finds much fun in working at our hard stone—hammering, hammering—early and late—with an inexorable master over him to spur him up when he lagged.

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