

The Trained Horse

From A Sheriff's Papers

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

From Clayville to Boonetown is about fifteen miles, across a rolling prairie, and the road runs very near east and west. Half way between the two towns the road is touched by a point of timber, where a heavy growth of pine sweeps away to the northward, into a dark, dense forest. In the spring of 1842 a man left Clayville in the morning, bound for Boonetown. His name was registered at the inn as Richard Bizbee, of New York; and he was supposed to have money with him. He left Clayville upon horseback, in fine health and spirits; but he was never seen in Boonetown. Perhaps he had, unnoticed, gone part way, and then returned. At all events, he was never heard of more in that section.

About a month after that a man from St. Louis left Boonetown for Clayville. He was also on horseback, and started off well and hearty; but he never reported himself at the place of his destination. Within a fortnight after this second disappearance two more travelers were missed. What did it mean? The road between the two towns was direct, and not even a byway was there to lead one astray; there was no crook, no fork: so that to wander from the true path was impossible. During the month of July three travelers were missed; and the people turned out in a body to search. Of course attention was directed to the wood, and the search was extended for miles and miles through the heavy timber; but without success.

On the fourth of August a young man, who gave his name at Clayville as Michael Dupont, of New Orleans, left that place for Boonetown. He was on horseback, and when he was told of the dangers of the road he only laughed at them. He said he had a good horse and good weapons, and he was not afraid. But Michael Dupont never reached Boonetown.

It was on the nineteenth of August that I arrived at Clayville, and put up at the village inn. I was on the track of two rogues who had robbed the bank at Jackson; and I had not been at the inn an hour before I made myself sure that the men I sought had passed that way only three days before. And then I heard this other story of the travelers who had so mysteriously disappeared from the road that lay before me. I had heard something of it before, but I had not realized how bad it was.

When I had gone some five or six miles the next morning, I noticed that my horse began to falter, and in a little while afterwards he came to a walk, and seemed to be in great pain. Imagining that he would soon fall, I slipped from the saddle, and led him out upon the grass at the side of the road. As I stood thus, wondering what in the world I should do, I saw a man coming towards me from the direction of Boonetown. He was seated on a powerful black horse, without any saddle, and his only bridle was a bit of rope passed around the animal's nose. He was a simple looking fellow, dressed in ordinary farming garb, and behind him were what appeared to be some empty bags. As he came near to where I stood, I saw him gather his halter as though he meant to put his horse to a run.

“Hallo!” I cried. “Stop a moment.”

The fellow seemed to consider upon it, and finally he turned his horse’s head towards me, and soon dismounted by my side.

“I’ve heer’d a good deal ‘bout this yer road,” he said, eying me from top to toe, “and I like to be kind o’ keerful. Met with a fall, eh, stranger?”

“Not exactly a fall,” I said. “My horse seems to have given out.”

The fellow walked around my quivering beast, and when he came back he put his hand upon the animal’s throat, and gave a sharp punch. The horse started back with a grunt, and directly began to heave and slaver at the mouth.

“You don’t belong in these yer parts, stranger?” he said, eying me again.

“No,” I told him.

“I thought not,” he added. “I guess your hoss has been eatin’ *devil’s tail*.”

I asked hi8m what that was.

“It’s a kind o’ pisen,” he informed me, “that hosses pick up hereabouts.” He gave the animal another punch, and the drooling increased. “Yas,” he continued, “that’s all. I reckon yer hos’ll be well enough by tomorrer, or next day, at the farthest.”

“If that;s the case, perhaps you’ll trade.”

“I never owned anything that I wouldn’t sell ef a man wanted it more’n I did,” he replied. “For a trade I don’t, jest at this present time, call your horse any great shakes, but I’ll trade.”

“How?” I asked.

“For jest about what I call my hoss wuth. Ye see I’m honet, stranger.”

“Certainly,” I said. “And may I ask what price you set upon your beast?”

“Sartin. I’ll trade for jest seventy dollars.”

I had expected to hear him say a hundred. I took him at his offer in a moment.

“But—hold on,” he cried, “I don’t want none o’ yer flimsies.”

I asked him what he meant.

“None o’ these yer rags on rotten banks.”

I told him he should have gold.

The trade was made; I counted out seven ten dollar pieces, put my saddle and bridle upon the new horse, and then mounted.

“Prehaps,” said the fellow, as he gave the sick horse another punch, “tf I should see ye in Boonetown one o’ these days, ye might like to trade back again.”

I told him we’d see about that, and the, bidding him good morning, I started off.

I had certain got a splendid horse. He stepped as lightly and gracefully as a dancing master, and bore me as easily as though I had been a carriage. In a little while I touched him with the whip, and he pranced gaily. I patted him on the neck, and told him that I liked him. We were now just at the point where the angle of the wood reached the edge of the road, and, without any apparent cause for it, the horse started into a gallop. I spoke to him, and tried to hold him in, but he only went faster. In a few moments he wheeled out from the highway, and struck into the wood, and now he ran as if for dear life. I yelled with all my might, and tugged at the rein till my arms ached, but I could neither turn his head nor slacken his speed. He flew on like the wind, selecting his course where the great trees were farthest apart—flew on sweeping now to the right and now to the left, just as the passage through the forest seemed most favorable.

As soon as I found that the horse was not to be stopped, I turned my attention in another direction, and very quickly it plashed upon me that the flying beast had been trained to just this kind of work. Like horses I read of in Arabia, he would take his course for his master’s habitation, let it be where it would. The man with whom I had traded was one of the gang, and there must have been another at the stable at Clayville who had given my horse something to make him sick. These thoughts not only passed through my mind with lightening like rapidity, but they were systematically arranged as they came, and I knew that I had been trapped, and that the animal was bearing me to the haunt of the robbers. For a moment there was a desire to keep on and meet the rascals, but that would only be madness. I must get off the saddle somehow.

Ha! The opportunity presented itself. Ahead I saw a stream of water. I withdrew my feet from the stirrups and placed my hand upon the pommel. One more leap, and the horse’s feet touched the pebbly shore. With a sudden spring I lifted myself clear of the saddle, and as the beast flew from beneath me, I dropped into the brook without hurt of any kind. As quickly as possible I sprang to the bank, and when I reached the wood I stopped to consider. The horse had stopped on the opposite side of the stream, as though looking for his rider, and for a moment I felt like firing a pistol-ball at him. However, I did not waste my powder, and in a little while the animal turned and trotted off, and was soon out of sight.

Now what should I do? Of course I must get out of the wood; and to do that safely I must go back by the way we had come. I looked to my pistols, and started. The sun gave me my direction, so I could make no mistake. By and by I heard the tread of a horse ahead, and as quickly as possible I found shelter behind a large pine tree. The horseman came along within a hundred yards of me. The horseman was my honest countryman who feared that I might be a robber; and the horse was the one I had owned an hour before. The animal still drooled some at the mouth, but cantered along without apparent trouble. So the "pizen" had not been so very deadly; and, moreover, the punching in the gullet had not been without its effect. Surely the plan had been a 'cute one, and the game had been adroitly played,--only, I had chanced to gain one effective play before their game could be finished.

I remained behind the tree until the horseman disappeared, and then moved on again. Had I been nearer to the rascal, I might have intercepted him; but, as it was, the thing could not be well done. I hurried forward with all possible speed, and in a little while after I reached the highway I had the good fortune to be overtaken by a man in a wagon. When I first hailed him he drew a pistol, and seemed disinclined to stop; but in a moment more he recognized me as one whom he had seen on the road beyond Clayville the day before, and finally pulled up and addressed me. I soon convinced him that I was an honest man, and he took me in. He was bound to Booneton, and was glad that he had found safe company; but I did not tell him what he had discovered. I explained the fact of my being afoot by telling how my horse had failed me by the wayside.

I reached Booneton in the middle of the forenoon, where I found two shrewd, intelligent-looking officers, to whom I communicated my secret; and together we laid a plan for finding the robbers. On the following day we disguised ourselves and proceeded to that point in the road where the trained horse had turned off into the wood; but we found nothing. On the next day we went again; and this time we had the good fortune to meet my honest-looking horse-trader astride of the very animal that had carried me to the brook. He did not recognize me, and readily stopped when my companions hailed him; and, as may be supposed, we captured him without much trouble. At first he expressed much surprise; but when he came to recognize me, he ceased his railing and professed a willingness to go with us where we pleased. We carried him to Booneton, and while the officers were taking him into the tavern, I took good care that his horse was safely housed in the stable. The fellow gave his name as Mark Sackett, and swore that he knew nothing of any robbers, or anything of that kind; and, touching the affair of the horse, he declared that that was something he could not explain. He said that he saw me when I was carried into the woods; and, as the horse I had left him with began to revive, he mounted up and followed me. Beyond this we could get noting from him.

But I had an idea of my own. I believed that, if there was a haunt of robbers anywhere in the wood, the prisoner's horse would take us there; and when I gave my opinion to the officers, they jumped at the conclusion. It was now only an hour past noon; and in less than an hour more we had twenty men, well mounted and well armed, ready to follow us. The black horse was led out, saddled and bridled, and I took my seat upon his back; and he behaved himself well as we started off. In fact, he seemed to like the company of the

other horses, and to be proud of leading them. When we reached the wood I gave him rein, and he turned off just where he had turned with me before; but he did not dash away this time as he had done on that former occasion. Being in the society of steady horses seemed to sober him down, and he led the way as a well disposed pioneer should.

On by the very path I had been before—across the brook where I had made my leap—and then away through the dark, deep wood beyond. By and by we came to another stream, upon the opposite bank of which arose a high, perpendicular bluff; and it appeared to us that there could not possibly be any passage that way. But the black horse pushed into the stream, and when we reached the other side he walked down a few rods in the shallow water, and then, turning square to the right, he entered a narrow gut which had been before invisible. A little way through this curious passage, and we came into a deep, circular basin, or hollow, walled in upon all hands by an almost perpendicular bank; and here, sitting beneath some small trees, we found six men. They started up when they saw us, but as our pistols were quickly out, they concluded not to offer resistance. One of them, however, made a dash towards a point in the wall directly behind two of my companions; but his course was quickly stopped; and as my eyes followed the course he had taken, I discovered an open place in the face of the bluff, like the mouth of a cavern.

I need not tell how we overcame the villains; nor need I transcribe the thousand and one wicked things they said. Suffice it for me to tell that we secured them, and that we then examined the opening in the bank which I had discovered. It proved, as I had suspected, to be the mouth of a large cavern, within which we found plenty of arms and ammunition, and also many valuables which had been taken from murdered travelers. The whole thing had happened very fortunately for us. Had the robbers been in the cave when we entered the basin, or had they been in possession of their fire-arms, we might have had some hot work; for they were desperate characters; but we fairly caught them napping.

And one thing more. I discovered my two bank robbers in the party.

We returned to Booneton, and after the rascals had been lodged in jail, the one whom we had captured upon the road, and with whom I had traded horses, turned State's evidence, and his story was just about what I had expected. He said that the gang had been together for several years, operating in different parts of the country. The horse had been trained by one of their number, who had been an old circus performer, and had been taught, when sent away from home without any breakfast, to dash off with the victim as he had done with me. This was done to avoid any bloody scenes near the highway.— But the victim was not always taken to their cavernous retreat. When a prize was expected, some of the gang stationed themselves along the wood between the two streams, ready to stop the horse, and dispatch the entrapped traveler; and I was assured that, if I had been taken across the first brook, I should have met my death very quickly afterwards. They had no accomplice at the inn. When a traveler was "spotted," either at Clayville or Booneton, one of their number was sent to look out for the traveler's horse, who, by careful management, had little difficulty in administering a sickening dose to the animal.

The rascals were tried and condemned, and executed; and I retained possession of the trained horse; but I did not keep him long. One bright morning I missed him from the stable, and all search for him was in vain. It is possible that the intelligent brute unfastened his own halter-strap, and ran away; but I have chosen to give the matter a different solution. I believe he was stolen by the honest-looking countryman in whose hands I first found him.

The New York Ledger, January 4, 1862

The Iola [KS] Register, July 4, 1884

St. Landry Democrat [Opelousas, LA], July 26, 1884

The Richwood [OH] Gazette, January 10, 1889, credited to Cyrus Tudor, an American Agriculturist, with the principal character being changed to a "detective," rather than a "sheriff," under the title "A Four Footed Accomplice."

This story was first published abroad in *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser* [Ireland], July 16, 1862 and *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* [Scotland], August 30, 1862.