

The Abduction

From *Paul the Poacher*

By Thomas Frost

The sun was just sinking below the western horizon, and gilding, with its latest beams, the straw-roofed cot of penury as well as the palatial abode of rank and wealth, when Lucy Copsley and Emma Barnsley quitted the homestead of the latter's father, and walked across the fields to the lane, in which stood the cottage of Will Oliver, and that which had once been Lucy's home, but which was now untenanted and desolate.

"Then you like your situation at Sir Miles Robartes's, Lucy?" observed Emma, half interrogatively, as they entered the lane.

"Oh, yes! I have nothing to complain of, Emma," returned Lucy, "and had I no one to think of but myself, I should be quite happy. But the fate of my father often causes me a sigh, and I feel very anxious and uneasy about Robert. He has not written since he was here, and therefore I know not whether his fault, in leaving the regiment without leave of the colonel, was overlooked on account of the circumstances, or whether he has been punished."

"In the absence of any knowledge upon the subject, it is well to hope the best, while we prepare ourselves at the same time to hear the worst," observed Emma Barnsley.

"I have been much annoyed by an elderly gentleman lately," said Lucy, after a moment's pause. "He met me several times near the house, and spoke to me; but I did not like his looks and manners, and I behaved very distantly and cool. He would not be shaken off, however; and the other day he made me an insulting and dishonourable proposal. Then I answered him in a manner which his conduct merited, and I have not seen him since."

"Have you any idea who he is?" inquired Emma Barnsley.

"I do not know him," replied Lucy, "but I have described him to the cook, and she thinks he must be the Earl of Rona, who has a mansion at a few miles distance."

"Well, I must leave you now, Lucy," said the farmer's daughter, pausing at the top of the lane. "I dare say your elderly admirer will not trouble you any more, after the proper manner in which you have rejected his advances; and you must not be too much cast down about Robert, without knowing whether you have really any cause for anxiety."

"I cannot help thinking about him, Emma, for, whether he has been punished or not, I am sure he is not happy," returned Lucy. "But I appreciate your friendship and good intentions, and hope that your future will be as unclouded as the present is to you."

"I shall be so glad to see you smile again as you used to do," observed Emma. "You must strive to look forward, and not backward, dear. George Stapleton will, some day, make you amends for all. Good by, dear."

"Good by, Emma," returned Lucy, pressing her friend's hand warmly. "God bless you!"

Emma Barnsley then ran off down the lane, and Lucy proceeded on her way.

She had not gone far when she heard the sounds of wheels behind her, and, looking round, saw a light cart approaching, driven by a tall red-faced man, about fifty years of age, and clad in a clean white smock-frock. In another minute the cart came up, and the driver stopped the horse, looking attentively at Lucy as he did so.

"Don't you live at Sir Miles Robartes's, young woman?" said he.

"Yes," replied the maiden, pausing.

“I thought I had zeen you about there,” said the man. “You have come vrom Varmer Barnsley’s, beant you?”

“Yes, I have just left there,” returned Lucy.

“Well, I be going within a mile of where you live, if you like to jump up,” continued the man in the smock-frock. “I live near Sir Miles Robartes’s, but I have been up to Riverdale to see a daughter of mine, that’s in sarvice there.”

Lucy had hesitated to accept the man’s offer at first, for, though she had a long walk before her, and it was growing dark, she felt reluctant to trust herself with a stranger, but when she heard that he was a father, and had a daughter in service, she hesitated no longer, but got into the cart.

The man drove on at a steady pace, talking, at intervals, of his daughter, of the household of Sir Miles Robartes, the recent weather, and the appearance of the crops, and though it soon grew dark, Lucy knew that they were pursuing the right road. But at length the cart turned down a narrow lane, with fields on either side, dark hills in the distance, and not a single light glimmering from farm-house or cottage window which ever way she turned her eyes.

“Are we going the right way?” said she, as she looked around her, and became satisfied that she had never been down the lane before.

“Oh, yes,” returned the man, “I won’t take you out of the way, young woman. This is a near cut, that’ll save us a mile or more.”

Lucy’s apprehensions were allayed by this reply, and the man continued to drive on. Presently the lane grew narrower and the hedges higher, increasing the murky obscurity, and she began to think that they were not making such a saving in the distance as the man had asserted. She was about to make some remark upon the length and dreariness of the lane, when the man all at once threw his left arm round her neck, and she shrieked involuntarily. But at the same instant the man thrust a piece of sponge into her mouth with his right hand, and not only stifled the cry of alarm to which she would have given utterance, but effectually gagged her.

She made an effort to rise, but the man threw his arms round her, and laid her down at the bottom of the cart upon some straw. She attempted to remove the sponge from her mouth in order to scream for assistance, but, before she could do so, the man seized her hands, and tied them together with a handkerchief. Then, while she yet struggled ineffectually at the bottom of the cart, he tied her legs together, just above the ankles with another handkerchief, and immediately drove on.

The unfortunate girl had now but a confused idea of whither she was being borne; the cart was driven on briskly for a little distance, and then it stopped, and the man got out. She heard him open a gate, and lead the horse through; and then he got into the cart, and drove on again over ground that seemed rough and uneven. Presently the cart stopped again, and the man stooped down, and first enveloping the head of the trembling girl in her shawl, he lifted her up in his arms, and leaped with her to the ground. He carried her a few yards over ground that seemed level, but uneven, and then she became aware that they were descending a flight of stone steps, on reaching the bottom of which he bore her a few yards, and then laid her down upon the ground.

Though the shawl, in whose folds her head was still muffled, somewhat deadened her perception of sounds, she now heard the man ignite a chemical match, and give vent to a half suppressed imprecation at not being able to find something which he sought. This object appeared to be a lamp, for in a few moments she became aware that there was a light, though her eyes strove in vain to pierce the folds of the shawl. Then she heard a sound as if a stone was

being removed from its place, and immediately afterwards she was lifted from the ground, and borne down a flight of narrow stone steps; that they were narrow she knew from her feet touching the wall as they descended, and that they were of stone she judged from the sound of her abductor's footfalls.

At length they reached the bottom of this subterranean flight of stairs, and then she was borne along a narrow passage of considerable length, the footsteps of her ruffianly abductor raising dismal and prolonged echoes. Her brain began to reel before the appalling idea that she was being borne into the bowels of the earth, perhaps to be immured for life in some dungeon, where the atmosphere would be close and damp—where moisture would trickle down the green and slimy walls—where the toad and the newt would be her companions; or perhaps to be ruthlessly deprived of life, subjected to unheard of torments, or to the brutal lust of some miscreant whose crimes had made him shrink into gloomy vaults from the light of day and the outstretched arm of justice. But she was diverted from the appalling current of her thoughts by the discovery that the end of the long subterranean had been reached, and that she was now being borne up an ascent of stone steps, which relieved her of the dread with which she had a moment before been inspired, that she was to be confined in some horrible vault far below the surface of the earth.

The ascent was at first straight forward, but they soon came to a landing, and commenced the ascent of a flight steeper than the other, and apparently winding spirally round a perpendicular centre. Her bearer seemed to be getting fatigued with carrying her, for he twice set her down during this ascent, and rested for a few moments. At length the summit was reached, a door opened, and she was borne into a room, as she conjectured from the change of atmosphere of which she immediately became sensible, and from the circumstance of the man's footfalls emitting no sound, which seemed to show that the floor was covered with a soft and thick carpet. She was now laid down, and the man unbound her hands; she immediately raised them to remove the shawl from her head and the sponge from her mouth, but before she could do so she heard the door close, and when she threw off the enveloping shawl, and cast a glance of terror and apprehension around the place to which she had been brought, she was alone, and in darkness profound and impenetrable.

Almost frantically the unfortunate maiden tore the gag from her mouth, and, as her pent-up feelings found vent in a piercing shriek, she sank insensible upon the floor.

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Half an hour after Lucy Copsley had thus been left to solitude, and the horrors which it might conjure up in her imagination, Captain Hector Fitzflash entered the drawing-room of the Earl of Rona, whom he found turning over some French lithographs, illustrating the amours of the deities of the Grecian mythology, and ever and anon applying himself to the wine and fruit which stood upon the table.

“Have you been successful?” was the eager question which the voluptuary put to his unprincipled satellite, the instant the drawing-room door closed behind him.

“The bird is safely caged, my lord, and awaits your pleasure in the matted chamber,” replied Captain Fitzflash, taking a seat at the table.

“Beautiful! beautiful!” exclaimed the Earl of Rona, rubbing his hands, while his sallow countenance became radiant with satisfaction. “Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Help yourself to the wine, captain; pray do not stand upon ceremony. Does she seem quiet and resigned, or is she violent?”

“Oh, not at all violent, my lord, but rather frightened,” returned Fitzflash. “As I pulled the spring door after me, and descended the stairs, I heard faintly—that of course—a shriek, and I expect that, if she has not yet recovered, your lordship would find her at this moment prostrate and insensible upon the floor.”

“Here is a cheque for the promised amount,” said the Earl of Rona, giving it to the captain as he spoke. “I knew that the faithful Fitzflash would not disappoint me of the gratification that I have been so eagerly anticipating, and, therefore, drew it last night. I do not like transacting pecuniary matters on the Sabbath, captain. But how did you manage?—tell me how you caught the pretty flutterer in your toils.”

“As easily as possible, my lord,” returned Captain Fitzflash, consigning the cheque to his pocket-book. “I assumed for the occasion the smock-frock of a rustic, and, borrowing a light cart, drove to Riverdale, arranged so as to overtake her soon after she turned out of the lane leading to the farm-house, and representing myself as a steady old file who had been to see his daughter, she did not hesitate to trust herself to my protection, and accept a ride home. The rest was easy enough; gagged and bound, and laid down upon the straw at the bottom of the cart, she was powerless as could be wished and escape was out of the question.”

“Beautiful creature!” ejaculated the earl. “How I long to clasp her in my arms.”

“Well, I wish your lordship all imaginable success and felicity,” observed Captain Fitzflash, and he then took his departure.

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How long Lucy Copsley laid in that insensibility which came over her when she found herself alone, and in utter darkness, in the place to which she had been borne, bound and gagged, along that interminable subterranean and up and down those underground stairs, she had no means of ascertaining; but at length, consciousness returned to the bewildered maiden by slow degrees, and, raising herself to a sitting posture, she strove to collect her thoughts. Back from the memory-cells of her brain came the recollection of her riding from Riverdale in the cart of the pretended rustic, of his treatment of her in the lane, and then of the echoing subterraneans through which she had been borne to the dark chamber in which she now found herself.

Where was she—and for what purpose had she been brought there? These were the questions which she vainly asked herself as she untied the handkerchief with which Fitzflash had secured her legs, and which that vile miscreant had not removed when he quitted the room. With regard to the first question, she could not form the most faint conjecture. She had never before been down the lane in which Fitzflash had gagged and bound her, and had not even the slightest knowledge as to where it led. She shuddered involuntarily as she asked herself the second question, for the thought suggested itself that the purpose for which she had been brought there could only be an evil one; and how black, she thought, must be the degree of the criminality that hid itself from the light of day, and required so many precautions to veil it in mystery impenetrable and profound!

She rose from the floor, which was covered with a carpet so soft and thick that her footsteps fell noiselessly upon it, and groping with her hands to avoid coming in contact with any projecting article of furniture, she made a few cautious steps in the direction of the door, by which she had been borne into the room by her abductor, but, to her surprise, her hands encountered a padded matting with which the wall was covered, and no tangible indications of a door were there. She moved her hands slowly and carefully to the right and left, but no door

could she discover; and she groped along all that side of the room, from one angle to the other, with no better result.

She now thought that she must have erred in her supposition that the door was on that side of the room, and accordingly groped her way along the wall; but though she made the circuit of the room, she could discover no indications of either a door or a window, the thick matting covering the wall on every side, nor was there a single article of furniture in the room. She stood still in the centre of the room, and listened; but not a sound from without met her ears—the silence was so profound that she could hear even the beating of her heart. And as she stood there, with up-heaved bosom and bated breath, a fear-fraught idea suddenly flashed like an inspiration upon her mind, and she pressed her hand upon her throbbing brow, as if her brain reeled before it.

The thickly carpeted floor, the matted walls, the secret door, the darkness that seemed palpable, all must be parts of some infernal contrivance to shroud in secrecy and mystery some diabolical outrage, from the contemplation of the probable nature of which she shrank in horror. Through that concealed door which she could not discover, but which she yet knew to exist, the perpetrator would enter—those matted walls would shut in every sound, and deaden every shriek—that palpable darkness would veil the crime, and guard from the chance of future recognition the criminal! It was dreadful for one so innocent and so defenceless to stand there alone, enveloped in darkness, anticipating all that was horrible and revolting to her pure mind, and fearfully conscious of her utter powerlessness to evade her impending doom.

She clasped her hands, and, though in darkness, her eyes wandered round the room, and could any one have seen her countenance at that moment, it would have been seen pale and impressed with an aspect of mingled wildness and despair. A new thought suddenly struck her, and partly stilled the tumult of her mind; she would pray—it was impossible, she thought, that God would forsake her, if she prayed to Him for succour and deliverance. In obedience to this impulse, she knelt down upon the thick carpet, and prayed long and fervently that He whose name was Love, and whose attributes were Power, Wisdom, Justice, and Mercy, would deliver her from the doom which was impending over her, whether that doom was a violent death, or dishonouring outrage, which she dreaded most. This act of devotion exercised a tranquilizing influence over her mind, and she rose from her knees considerably comforted and strengthened.

At that very moment she heard a clicking sound, as if emanating from the wall on the opposite side of the room to that on which she supposed the door to be situated by which she had been brought in by Fitzflash, and turning her eyes in that direction she perceived a vertical line of light upon the wall, a portion of which appeared to be opening like a door, the light widening and increasing as it did so, until she beheld before her a man well-dressed, and evidently past the prime of life, but whose features were concealed by a black mask, and who carried in his hand a small bronze lamp.

The man entered, and the mysterious door rolled back into the wall, of which it then appeared to form a part. Lucy stood still, with her left hand pressed upon her bosom to repress the wild beating of her heart, and she could see, as the man held up his lamp so as to throw its light full upon her lovely countenance and Peri-like form, that his eyes gleamed through the holes of his mask with the expression of those of a satyr springing with libidinous intent upon a wood-nymph of classic story.

“I do not know who you are, sir,” said Lucy, in a trembling voice, “but you appear to be what the world calls a gentleman, and I appeal to you as such, whether the treatment to which I have been subjected, in being brought here against my will, and with brutal violence, is consistent with your apparent character.”

“We will not discuss that point, if you please,” said the Earl of Rona, for he was the intruder, as the reader has probably conjectured. “I am afraid we shall not be able to settle it to our mutual satisfaction. Let it suffice that I admire you, my beauty of the moors, and that I am determined that you shall be mine. It is for you to decide whether you will surrender upon terms which will make your future life one of luxury and ease, which I am ready to propose, should you be pleased to signify your willingness, or whether you will compel me to carry the fortress of your chastity by assault.”

“I am in your power, sir,” returned Lucy, after a moment’s pause, “but I beg of you, for your own sake, for the sake of your immortal soul, to pause before you commit an outrage which you would probably regret until your dying hour, and which, if unrepented, will peril your eternal salvation.”

“Upon my word, it is a pity, for your sake, that the Church of England does not admit female preachers,” returned the Earl of Rona. “But you have not made your decision, my charmer.”

“For the love of heaven, spare me!” exclaimed Lucy, throwing herself upon her knees in despair, and raising her clasped hands and pallid countenance to implore the voluptuary’s forbearance.

“Silly girl!” said he, setting down the lamp, and approaching her, “you compel me to take by force what I would fain owe to your good sense, if not to mutual inclination.”

A frantic shriek burst from the maiden’s lips as the earl seized her in his arms, and then she fell insensible upon the floor, overpowered by the intensity of her highly wrought feelings. Her unconsciousness did not prevent the voluptuary from executing the purpose for which he had caused her to be ensnared, and her insensibility enabled him to accomplish its perpetration without hindrance or resistance.

Sad was the awakening of poor Lucy Copsley from the swoon which bound up every faculty while the Earl of Rona made her the victim of his brutal sensuality—terrible were the thoughts that first flitted through her bewildered brain when consciousness returned, and with it the sense of the deep and unattonable wrong which she had suffered. With the crimson blushes of mingled shame and outraged modesty glowing upon her cheeks, she veiled her lovely countenance in her hands, and the pearly tears gushed between her white and tapered fingers.

What sad considerations were involved in the incident of that night—what mournful thoughts were evoked by her present situation. Not only had she been despoiled of her chastity by rude and lawless violence; she knew how long she might be immured in that diabolically constructed chamber, how often the outrage of which she had been the victim might he perpetrated, without her being able to prevent it, and even if she could succeed in effecting her escape, her reputation would be damaged, for who would believe the strange tale of mystery and crime which she would have to tell?