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The Infamy of the Park

Nellie Bly Unearths a Scoundrel Favored by the Police

Charles Cleveland, a Man of Leisure, Debauches Central Park to His Own Vile Uses—He Drives There Daily and Invites Young Girls to Ride—The Police Smile at Him and Assist in Getting His Prey

There is one man in this city who, with the sanction of the Park Police, debauches Central Park to his own infamous uses.

Many complaints have come, from time to time, to THE WORLD touching Park policemen. Women complain that they dare not go to the Park alone because of the familiar and offensive manner of these officers—those paid guardians of propriety and quietness. Young men complain that if they stay in the Park after dark these same guardians blackmail them, and that rather than be subjected to the disgrace of taking their companions before a magistrate, they accept the officers' offer to compromise and give up their money.

A few days ago a young married woman sent THE WORLD a letter, the startling contents of which suggested the necessity for an investigation. She said she went to Central Park every morning for a walk and she had noticed particularly the peculiar actions of one man. Regularly every morning he drove through the Park. Whenever he saw a girl sitting alone on a bench he would draw up and ask her to take a drive. One morning he asked a girl—who was to all appearances a working girl—to take a spin with him around the Park. She did so and when he brought her back the young married woman went to the same bench and, sitting down, began to talk to the girl. First they talked about the weather and then the girl, yielding to the subtle inquiries, told the story of her drive.

The man, while driving around, spoke to every officer and in return received familiar salutes. Several times he drew up and spoke in a whisper to some, who would continue on their beat with a smile, while he resumed his drive. He told the girl that every policeman knew him, and that they would solicit girls for him to take driving. Every day between 10 and 11 A.M. he took to the officers their beer, which they drank behind the trees. This insured his safety, and he could do anything he wished, from robbing a man to cutting down a tree or stealing flowers, and they would not molest him. He repeatedly referred to the "madam" who he said owned the team which he drove.

This was about the substance of the letter, which, in addition, contained a description of the man and his turnout, so I decided to see if the Park policemen, who are paid to protect, were capable of abetting crime. I dressed myself like a country girl and went to the Park. I sat down on a bench fronting the drive which leads from the Fifty-ninth street entrance to the Seventy-second. I opened a book and awaited developments. I had not long to wait. Among all those driving I saw

only one who answered the description of the man I wanted, and it required but a few moments to be convinced by his actions that I had made no mistake.

When he saw me sitting alone he endeavored to attract my attention. Although he never once glanced at the other women around who were accompanied by escorts. Four times he drove past me, coming within a few yards and repeating. He gave little whistles, coughs and smacking of his lips to make me look, but I still gazed at the top line in my book, which allowed me, without raising my eyes, to see all that was going on before me.

THE MEETING WITH THE SCOUNDREL

When he passed the fifth time, going towards Seventy-second street, I lifted my head and gazed at him. He nodded his head for me to follow him, and though I made no move and did not look pleasant, he kept on making motions with his head for me to come after. An officer on the path, who could not but see the man's performances, merely looked at me lazily. I walked down along the path, going in the direction he had driven, and I saw him a few yards distant talking to a woman. He held his team close by the path and she stood on the green sward bordered the path and the drive, talking to him. A giard was standing beside his horse, on the opposite side of the road. I sat down on a bench facing the guard and pretended to read.

Just then the man and woman saw me. She laughed and went back to a bench, while he drove direct to me. He drove as closely to where I sat as the road would allow and then stopped.

"Good morning," he said. I made no reply, but kept my eyes fastened on my book.

"I would like to take you for a drive," he said, "if you will go down the path while I turn."

I got up without replying and looked at the officer. He was watching us.

"Which way?" I asked the man.

"Down towards Seventy-second street," he replied. I walked past the officer, who turned his face, on which rested a broad smile, towards his horse, presenting his back to us. I passed the woman with whom the man had been talking and she looked at me in an amused way. I stopped where the first path crossed the drive and the man came up.

SOLID WITH THE POLICE

"Aren't you afraid to do this?" I asked as I got into the vehicle with him.

"Why, there's nothin' to be afraid of," he answered, as he arranged the lap robe.

"The officers," I suggested, "aren't you afraid they will arrest you?"

"No, I'm solid with them," he answered, laughing, as if the idea was a good joke. "They wouldn't touch me, no difference what I do."

"You are sure of that?" I asked. "Then they allow men to do such things in this park?"

"They wouldn't allow everybody," he answered, "but there are men who come out every day just to pick up girls and the police never bother them. They are only too glad to do something for me," he added. "Just notice how respectfully they salute me when I drive past them."

That's just what I intended to do, so I kept my eyes open. His boast was not a vain one. Every officer we met or passed, on foot or mounted, spoke to him, and in every instance smiled. Whether the smile was but pleasantness or had a meaning I do not know.

"This is a handsome team you drive," I said, "Yours, I suppose?"

“Oh, yes, they’re mine; I’ve got lots more. I own a livery stable,” he replied.
“Om indeed. Then you come to the Park frequently, I presume,” I insinuated.
“About four times a day.”

“What do you call your horses?” I asked.

This seemed to stagger him, for he was silent some time; then he answered that he had no names for them. I smiled and said that seemed strange, as I never knew any one who owned horses to have them unnamed. He then asked me if I liked to drive and if I could ride. When I gave him an affirmative reply he said he had a phaeton he would allow me to drive, and he had a good saddle-horse I could have any time. I told him his kindness was overwhelming.

REGULARLY HUNTING FOR GIRLS

“Do you often get acquainted with girls this way?” I asked.

“Every day,” he replied.

While we drove around he asked me all about myself. I told him that I was a country girl and had come to New York as a governess. He told me it was lucky that all my relatives were dead, and asked me if I would not like to go on the stage. He could easily get me on, as he had lots of friends among the profession. Lest the man be given to telling untruths I shall not publish the names of the managers whose friendship he claims; however, he told very strange stories concerning their treatment of the girls. He said he received lots of complimentary tickets and asked me to go with him to the theatre.

“Who was the woman you were talking to in the Park?” I asked him.

“She’s a friend of mine,” he answered.

“Why didn’t you take her driving, then, instead of a stranger?” I inquired.

“Oh, I never take her driving,” he said, with a laugh. “She understands it.”

“Understands what?” I asked, but he would not answer.

“Does she often come to the Park?” I asked, and he answered that he talked with her there every day—of what I could not learn.

“I go away in a short time to visit all the summer resorts,” he said. “I always take several horses along and I have a good time driving. Will you come along?”

“I?” I exclaimed, in my simple, country manner. “Oh, that would be impossible. Is your livery-stable far away?” I asked, artlessly.

URGING HER TO GO WITH HIM

“Down on West Fifty-eight street, and I live on West Fifty-seventh street,” said he; “and where do you live?”

I named a street—the first one I thought of—and refused to give a number simply because I was afraid of giving wide of the mark, which he would find out. I endeavored to tell the avenues it lay between but got mixed up in that, which was due, I explained to my country simplicity.

“You will go with me, then, to the summer resorts,” he urged.

“Oh, you shouldn’t ask me so soon; wait until we are better acquainted. Maybe we will not like each other then,” I said evasively. “What is your name?” I asked coaxingly.

“If you meet me tomorrow I tell you my name,” he said cunningly. “You can call me Charles until then.”

Determined to hunt him down, I made an engagement to meet him the next morning at 10 o'clock, at the corner of Seventy-second street and the Boulevard. If it rained I should not come until the following morning.

WHAT HE LOOKS LIKE

The man, who is about 5 feet, 8 inches, usually wears a gray pongee duster, which is buttoned up closely to his chin, hiding his clothes entirely. He wears a white straw hat of cheap grade with a black band around it. His gloves are a snuff-brown lisle thread with brown leather inside, rather the worse for wear. His entire clothing is cheap and coarse. His face does not bespeak refinement or culture. His black eyes, deep set and rather close together, are overhung with heavy black brows. His nose is long and very red, the redness which looks more the work of the sun than drink. His drooping black mustache, in which are many gray streaks, covers his mouth completely. His chin and cheeks wore the stubbled beard of many days' growth. His collar, which accidentally got above his gray ulster, was a straight band, very much soiled. His hair is rather white on the temples and above his ears. His conversation is conducted without regard for any grammatical rules. The team he drove was above reproach. One was a bobtail sorrel and the other a bay whose tail almost touched the ground.

A reporter was instructed to follow me the next morning and to track the man to his house, while a photographer was waiting in the Park to get a picture of the man and his rig. Although it rained we were all on the watch for Mr. "Charles." I had found a place where I could watch without being seen. A few minutes before 10 the rain ceased and the sun came out—so did the man. He drove to the place where I was to meet him and round and round, as though expecting that I would yet come. At last he gave up in despair, and about 10.30 went to the Park, closely followed by the reporter. Here he met and talked with the woman he had met the day previous, and, after a consultation of some length, he resumed his drive. The woman went down a side path, and though the reporter followed after as quickly as he dared, she was lost to sight, and he was unable to again find her.

HIS NAME AND ADDRESS

A photographer from THE WORLD office got a view of the man and his team and the reporter followed him to the stable. There it was learned that his name is Charles Cleveland, and that he is said to be foreman of Lovell's boarding stable, No. 230 West Fifty-eighth street. The team he was driving is said to be the property of Judge Hilton, who is boarding it there during the summer.

In hopes that he would throw some light on the business with the woman and his "pull" with the policemen, I was to meet him the next morning. It was a bright, sunny morning. I was there at the hour named, and Mr. Cleveland came a few moments afterwards. He wanted to go to the Riverside Drive, but I insisted on going to Central Park, where I knew a reporter was waiting for us. He refused to drive over the road where he found me the first morning; why, I do not know. He wanted to go out on the road, but I told him I was to go downtown with a woman and I must return in a few moments. He roughly told me the story was manufactured and kept on his way. He spoke to all the officers, as he had the other day.

Driving out the road on the occasion of our first meeting, he proffered the information that he intended to stop at a road house kept by a widow, a particular friend of his—for drinks. I

told him I never drank and insisted on his returning. It made no difference, he drove up to a one-story frame house on One Hundred and Sixteenth street, speaking to the two mounted guardians on the corner, and we got out. The horses were taken around to the stable, and he came into the reception-room, pulling off his gray ulster. He had on a clean collar, and his hair couldn't have been slicked tighter to his head. His trousers were the worst bagged at the knee I ever saw and were quite short, plainly showing the new heavy shoes he wore. After removing his ulster he looked at me in a self-satisfied way, as if he felt sure in all this "get-up" he would completely capture, as well as awe, the simple country girl.

IN THE ROAD HOUSE

He told me to "sit down and give us a tune," and when I declined he said: "I see my friend ---, of Wallack's Theatre, and he sez he'll take you on, so I want to hear your voice. Come, give us a tune!"

Finding that I would not he went out to order drinks. I had at last consented to drinking a lemonade. The waiter, in white jacket and apron, followed Mr. Cleveland in with two glasses, which he placed on the table. The lemonade was a deep amber shade to the depth of an inch on top.

"That doesn't look like country lemonade," I said, as I stirred it around with the straws until it all became an amber tinge. "What is in it?"

"I only had him put some sherry in it," he said. "Go ahead and drink it; it won't hurt you; it will brace you up."

"I don't want to drink it," I said.

"Drink it; it won't hurt you; you're mighty particular," he growled.

"All right, I don't intend to drink it," I said, firmly.

"You drink it, now. I have to pay for it," Mr. Cleveland said, coarsely. "You think I put something in it, don't you? That's why you won't drink; you're afraid."

"Probably I am," I answered slowly. "I could not trust a man who has done as you have."

THE SCOUNDREL'S PLAN

"I've been better to you than most men would be," he hurled at me. "When they bring girls out and they refuse to do what the men say they put them out and they have to get back to the city as best they can."

I gave him a gentle hint that it would save him trouble to take me where he got me, and so he made me go to the back of the house to where the team was standing beneath a shed. We drove back to the Park.

"You will get into trouble if you go around hunting up girls in the Park all the time," I said, after a long silence.

"Will I? I'm safe enough. I ask the girls to take a drive and if they make any fuss the police will pull them in. They wouldn't touch me. I'm solid."

"How do you get solid?" I ask.

"That doesn't make any difference. It's only the girls that get into fusses," he said. "I never ask regulars to get in; I always take girls who are strangers. Now, I knew you were a stranger the first moment I saw you."

"How did you know?"

“Well, I’m in the Park all the time, and I know everybody by sight who comes there. The moment a strange girl comes in I can pick her out. I’m no fool. I’m not picking up the ones that know the town. Anyway, you can’t say that I used you badly.”

“It’s according to what we call badly,” I said. “Any man who will try to entrap a girl because she looks innocent deserves harsh treatment.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. You can get out here,” he said, gruffly.

I refused to get out because it was too far from any station, and compelled him to drive me nearer to Seventy-second street. Mr. Cleveland let me get out, and whipped up the borrowed horses without a word of farewell—almost before my foot reached the ground.