

Barnabas and Sam

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Sam was the first to sense danger. She was in the middle of her act, standing erect on her hind legs and twirling around with her front paws fully extended. Between her teeth, she held a short wooden rod with an American flag on each end. It was a crowd pleaser and she reveled in the delighted giggles of children, the heartier laughter of adults, the loud applause, the cheers and whoops of approval and most of all, the smiles and happy faces. Only now a disturbance threatened that joyful interaction. Pushing their way through the throng of onlookers were the three bad men. Sam stopped spinning, dropped to all fours and padded to her friend's side. Then she nudged his hand with her muzzle and the instant she had his attention, she turned her head and pointed toward the three.

Barnabas had been looking away, collecting tips and talking to a young family in the audience when Sam unexpectedly came to him. He scratched her behind the ears, looked out into the crowd where she was pointing and saw the three men. They were the same three enforcers who had harassed them outside of the Brown Derby and then at Union Station. Now they followed Barnabas and Sam here to the small corner they occupied a few blocks from the Tivoli Club. They had been sent by Soapy Smith to demand a percentage of Barnabas' and Sam's meager take and both times he had refused them and moved on. Now he realized he must either acquiesce or fight or leave town. He didn't like any of these options. It wasn't fair. A mix of anger and fear erupted within him. He wanted to fight, but he was afraid of these tough brutal men. He knew that he would lose and worse, there was a chance that Sam might be hurt. Adrenalin raged through his system. He felt a knot in his stomach, a roaring pressure in his head and his bowels suddenly felt loose.

And then time slowed down and Barnabas was able to see and hear every detail around him with absolute clarity. It was if everyone and everything was suddenly suspended in thick clear molasses. He saw the three enforcers in mid-step with one foot hovering in the air, their faces all dirty and in need of a shave with cold dead eyes and ugly twisted grins showing tobacco stained teeth. And he saw the faces of the onlookers, some showing fear for themselves and their children as they moved away while a much smaller number leered and moved closer to witness what promised to be a more violent show. Above them all, new electric streetlamps sputtered to life casting the street and people in tight circles of bright, harsh, undulating yellow light. On the street behind, horse drawn carriages competed with gas powered motor cars for right of way in a crazy death defying dance on wheels. Further down, the doors to the Tivoli burst open casting more garish light on the scene as a riotous cacophony of tinny music, screams and raucous laughter spilled out to mingle with the shouts and pleas and boasts of street musicians, jugglers, peddlers, tarot card readers, con artists and beggars.

In that wild jumble of sight and sound, Barnabas made eye contact with one of the street vendors, a man with a broad dark face and large drooping mustache playing an accordion. A monkey wearing a bright blue vest and red fez was tethered to him with a long cord and performing tricks. The man smiled broadly at Barnabas revealing two sparkling gold teeth and

for the briefest of moments, Barnabas thought this fellow performer must understand his predicament and come to his aid. But then the man pressed his hands to his accordion and played an earsplitting clamorous cord that drowned everything else out and he shouted, "Come see the monkey! Come see the monkey! The dog is bad! The monkey is good! Come see the monkey!"

Barnabas turned away from the man with the accordion and time sped back up to normal. The three thugs were almost upon him and Sam was snarling and baring her teeth. He needed to decide on a course of action and in desperation held out a stout four-foot stick with a red pendant attached to its end. The stick was a prop he used for their act. When he held it level and high, Sam jumped over it. When he held it level and low, Sam crawled under it. And when he held the stick vertically and twirled it, Sam stood on her two rear legs and spun around. Now he would use it to protect them. He waved it as menacingly as possible and said in as deep a voice as he could muster, "Don't come any closer."

The three brutes laughed. One took out a large wicked looking bowie knife. Another produced a lead-filled leather sap and the third fit gleaming brass knuckles on his right hand.

Barnabas looked at his stick and then at Sam and then back to the three and said under his breath, "Get ready to run, girl." Then he chanced a quick glance behind and to his horror saw three more toughs blocking their escape.

"What'cha gonna do now?" The man with the knife asked with a big grin. He was chewing tobacco and spit out a giant dirty brown wad at Barnabas' feet.

Barnabas jumped back to avoid it and that brought more laughter from the enforcers. Then, completely defeated, he lowered his stick to the ground and retrieved his hat filled with tips. He held it out and said, "Here. It's all yours. We don't want any trouble."

"You should have thought of that before you dodged us. Now we want more than your money, we want a piece of your hide and we want your mongrel dog too." The man with the brass knuckles said cruelly.

Sam's snarl turned into a deep growl and she tensed preparing to strike.

"Watch out for the dog." One of the men behind Barnabas and Sam called out and then the six enforcers moved in closer and formed a circle around the two.

Barnabas pleaded, "There's no need to fight. I'll do what you want. Just, please, let my dog alone. She hasn't done anything except what I've told her to do. I'm the one you want, not her."

"Too late," said the tough with the lead-filled sap as he twirled it in front of him like a ball on a short chain.

In that moment, Barnabas knew he was doomed and he decided to sacrifice himself to save Sam. He planned to throw the hat filled with tips at the man with the knife and then charge

forward and hopefully break the circle so Sam might have a chance to run free. Only, he knew that Sam would never leave his side and they would perish together. An intense shame washed over him replacing the fear and the anger. He looked at his one friend in the world and said, "I'm sorry." Then he made ready to charge.

Just a fraction of instant before Barnabas and Sam could make their move, a high-pitched voice from somewhere behind the enforcers called out, "Leave them alone."

The six brutes stopped advancing immediately.

Barnabas struggled to see who had called out, but the six men surrounding him blocked his vision. Then the same voice called out, "Back off," and the brutes retreated. "Not too far," the voice called again and the men stopped.

A man dressed in a black suite, white shirt, black cravat tie and black fedora stepped into view. He had black unruly hair sticking out from under his hat and a heavy full beard. He appraised Barnabas and Sam with dark menacing eyes and asked over his shoulder, "Are these the ones you were talking about?"

A large portly blond-haired man with a scarred face walked forward. He was dressed in a loud plaid suit and tan derby. Holding his arm was a tall, slender, exquisitely dressed black woman. "Yes, Soapy, that is he, though it is his dog I am most interested in," answered the man.

Soapy Smith nodded, waved his hand and his enforcers stepped back further. Then he reached into his inner coat pocket, took out a thick stack of bills and asked, "How much for your dog?"

Barnabas had never seen so much cash in someone's hands before. There was enough there to get him and Sam to Alaska and finance all the gear and supplies he would need for a year. But Sam had saved his life and was his loyal friend and he could be no less. "She's not for sale," he answered.

"She's only a dog." Soapy said with a tinge of surprise in his voice.

"She's not for sale." Barnabas repeated.

Soapy put the stack of bills back into his pocket and nodded to his thugs. They started to advance again and Barnabas prepared himself to carry out his futile plan, but then the black woman called out, "Can you act?"

Barnabas looked at her not understanding the question.

"Can you act?" She asked again in a louder, slower voice.

Barnabas still didn't understand, he was focused on the six men coming towards him.

The woman sighed and poked her companion in the ribs. He looked at her, shrugged, and called out in a booming voice, “Soapy, it may be we can find use for this fellow. I’ve no doubt your brave and courageous men can convince him, but they may leave him too broken to... to help promote our joint endeavors. Perhaps if I speak with him, he may better understand our generous offer?”

Soapy waved his men back. Then, arm-in-arm, the blond man and black woman sauntered over to Barnabas and Sam.

“Who are you?” Barnabas asked suspiciously.

“I am Bill Castle, friend and confidant of presidents, kings and queens, and other notable luminaries,” he glanced at Soapy, “and I am the creator, producer, writer and director of the world’s finest and most authentic production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Surely, you have heard of me?”

“No.” Barnabas answered.

The woman giggled and Castle gave her an annoyed look. “This beautiful, tittering, young woman is my star, my inspiration, my muse, my love, my constant companion and my Eliza – both in fact and in fiction. And, in all the world, she is the only quadroon to authentically be playing the part of Eliza in any production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

Eliza bowed theatrically and then knelt down to pat Sam on the head. Sam, her tail wagging and all hostility gone, licked Eliza’s hand and then her face.

Castle continued, “Well, sir, I have introduced us, perhaps you have some introductions of your own, you would care to make?”

“My name is Barnabas Lovitt and this is my friend Sam.”

“Friend, you say. I thought she was your dog. I take it, you do not own her?”

Sensing a trap, Barnabas responded sternly, “No one owns her and no one will. We are traveling together to the Klondike to seek our fortune.”

“Why do you call her ‘Sam’ when she is a girl?” Eliza asked as she scratched Sam vigorously under her chin.

Barnabas looked down at Eliza who was kneeling beside Sam and felt a lump in his throat. She was the most stunning, most exotic woman he had ever seen. He gazed into her dark brown luminescent eyes and became lost. It was if time was slowing down again. When he finally answered, his voice was softer and friendlier. “It’s short for Samantha.”

“Samantha, I like it,” Eliza said smiling.

Barnabas didn't respond. He couldn't. He was hypnotized by her eyes and captivated by her smile. Bill Castle had to clear his throat to get him back to reality. Reluctantly, Barnabas turned his attention away from Eliza and with some irritation in his voice, asked Castle, "What's a quadroon?"

"Why, a quadroon is a human being who is one-quarter Negro and three quarters white. Now, you also have Octoroons who are one-eighth Negro and of course, there are Tercerons and Mustees or Mustefinos and we can't leave out Mullattos. You must be a poorly educated man if you don't know this... and I somehow think not at all acquainted with the arts either."

"I've gone to school and I can read and write and I love books and I've seen plays, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Shakespeare, and I liked them too and... and I don't like you." Barnabas replied.

Castle let out a laugh. "Well said, touché. Now, as to my propos..."

"Get to the point, damn it!" Soapy interrupted him as he strode over with his men following a few feet behind.

"All right, all right, I will get to it directly." Castle said calmly. He took off his derby, wiped his brow with a handkerchief and then said to Barnabas, "Soapy and I have been working on something I call 'mutual promotion' and I believe you and Sam can help. I want Sam in my production as Eliza's dog and companion in the performance. The crowds and especially children seem to love her and I believe she can help increase our box office. I suppose I can find a place for you in the production as well. Of course, Sam will require a new name. 'Sam' is just too plain and ordinary for star billing. We need something with more excitement and mystery, something that stimulates the imagination, something with more oomph... and something to class her up a bit."

As Castle spoke, Barnabas was staring at the top of his head. There were small patches where the scalp was bare with scar tissue similar to the marks on his face. Castle saw him staring, put his derby back on and then continued. "You said her full name is Samantha, I think maybe we can use that with just a little addition." He paused for effect. "We shall name her, Lady Samantha." He beamed and looked at Eliza. "What do you think, my dear?"

Eliza was still kneeling beside Sam, pulling bits and pieces of grass seed and dirt from her fur. "Sounds like royalty. I like it, though she will need some work to fit the image." Eliza turned to face Barnabas and he felt his heart soar again. "Don't you ever brush her?"

The question felt like an accusation and Barnabas' soaring heart crashed. "Of course, I brush her," he answered defensively. "I use my own comb on her, only she doesn't like it when I try to get out the tangles."

"Your comb?" Eliza stood up.

Barnabas started to reach in his back pocket to pull out his comb and show it, but one of the enforcers shouted, "Watch out. He might be getting a gun."

"Shut your trap!" Soapy barked. "If he had a gun, he would have already been using it you dim-witted imbecile." He turned to Castle and said, "God damn it. Why do you always have to use all them words to say something that only takes a few? Get this over with or I will."

"I apologize. I do have a tendency to be a trifle long-winded at times."

"A trifle?" Eliza piped in.

Castle ignored her and started again with Barnabas. "As I was saying, Soapy and I have worked out a mutually beneficial arrangement that can also provide you and your friend, Lady Samantha, with a steady income along with room and board. And, in addition, provide you both with what I believe to be the greatest gift of all, an introduction into the magnificent world of the theater. Here is how it will work; we have shows running at the Princess Theater on Curtis Street in the morning, afternoon and evening. You and Lady Samantha will begin performing in our production the day after tomorrow. After each show there will be a curtain call and Sam... I mean, Lady Samantha, will come out with Eliza for her bows and perform a few tricks. We will then announce that Lady Samantha will also be performing at one of Soapy's establishments or place of his choosing. Do you understand so far?"

Barnabas nodded and Sam woofed.

"Good. You both understand. Now, when you and Lady Samantha are not performing on stage, you will be performing on the street where you will vigorously promote our show and Soapy's establishments. We shall provide you with the words you will speak and with a few signs to make certain our patrons understand our message. In this way, both Soapy's businesses and my production benefit, hence, 'mutual promotion.'"

"But I told you, once we get enough money, Sam and me are on our way to Alaska."

"Alaska." Soapy repeated the word smiling at some inner joke. Then his expression and voice became harsh. "You got no choice kid. Either do this or you and your dog will never be able to perform again." He pointed to his enforcers who still had their weapons ready.

"Barnabas, it's a good deal. It gets you and Sam what you need most right now. I think you should do it." Eliza added.

Barnabas wanted to be stubborn, but he knew he really didn't have a choice. "Okay," he said sullenly.

At that point, Castle and Smith got into an animated debate over details of the arrangement and what each other's split would be. Barnabas tried to follow what they were saying and interject his thoughts and objections, but they ignored him and when he got more vocal, they walked away. Just as he was about to follow, Eliza tapped him on the shoulder. "Let them go."

There's nothing you can do right now. But you should know that Denver is only a stop for us. We're heading to San Francisco. Stay with us and you will get closer to your goal."

Barnabas thought about that. "But I don't trust Castle."

"Bill comes across more than a little strong, doesn't he?"

"Yes he does."

"And he is kind of pompous and full of himself."

"And arrogant and sarcastic," Barnabas added.

"All true." Eliza smiled.

"So, how can you stand being around him? I mean, I'm not one to judge, but... why are you with him?"

Eliza knelt down to pet Sam again before answering. In the background, Barnabas could still hear the man with the accordion calling out, "Come see the monkey." He was getting a big crowd and Barnabas resented him for it. The six enforcers were still there waiting further orders. Soapy was making some point with a raised voice and broad gestures. Bill Castle was listening politely and wiping his brow. And the wild jumble of sight and sound and mayhem that surrounded them continued on. In that moment, Barnabas felt utterly insignificant.

A few minutes more passed and then Eliza stood. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but filled with an underlying determination that gripped and held Barnabas' attention. "I'll tell you a story about Bill Castle and maybe you will understand. Just like he found you and Sam here on your own, performing and trying to survive in a cruel world, he found me. I was waiting tables and singing songs in this little club in the black section of New Orleans. Bill came strutting in one night for a drink and a meal. Said he wanted to taste the authentic New Orleans. He was the only white man in the place. We all thought he was crazy, but he started to talk and buy rounds of drinks for everybody and soon it was like, well, it was like he was one of us. He stayed and ate and drank beer and told jokes and shared wild stories and he listened to me sing. Every time I got on stage, he shushed those around him and he closed his eyes and he listened. When I wasn't singing, he'd go back to talking and boasting and get us all to laughing. He stayed till we closed. Then, as I was leaving for the night, he asked me if I was interested in being his Eliza, in his new production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He said, I would be the only woman of color in any production anywhere and that would make his show unique and 'authentic.'"

"But how could he say he wanted his production to be 'authentic' when he's putting a dog into it as Eliza's companion? There isn't a dog in the book, except for the ones chasing Eliza."

"Well, Bill does have his own definition of 'authentic.'" Eliza smiled. She bent down and gave Sam one more pat on the head. Then she straightened and brushed some wisps of fur off her dress as her smile slowly melted away. "We were performing in a small town in the South

and the people there were none too happy with a black woman on stage. A mob formed outside of the theater and they demanded that Bill replace me with a white girl. They said a lot of nasty things about me and about anyone who would treat me as an equal. Bill said that I was an equal and I was talented and I was the best person for the part and that if they didn't think so, then they didn't understand what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was all about. That just got the crowd more angry and they threatened Bill, telling him to get rid of me or he'd be in trouble too."

Eliza's eyes were starting to tear up and she stopped for a moment. Barnabas fumbled and looked for a handkerchief. He found a red bandana in his back pocket and handed it to her. She took it, studied it and then let out a small laugh mixed with a few snuffles and said, "This is dirty."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. It's nice of you to offer this." She kissed Barnabas on the cheek. Then she wrapped the red bandana around Sam's neck and secured it with a knot. "I think Sam should have this. Don't you think she looks pretty with it?"

"Yes, I do." Barnabas answered. Sam wagged her tail and woofed again and for a few moments no one spoke. Finally, Barnabas asked gently, "What happened?"

Eliza wiped her eyes. "They tarred and feathered Bill and rode him out of town on a rail. That's why he has those burn scars. But even with all that, Bill never backed down. When I asked him why, he said it was because it was the right thing to do. He said that I was his 'Eliza' and I always would be. That's why I love him and that's why I trust him. And that's why you should trust him too."

Barnabas couldn't speak. He was stunned and ashamed that he had been so quick to judge. He looked for Castle to apologize and saw him walking toward the Tivoli with Smith. Then he saw that the six enforcers were now advancing on the man with the monkey. Just as it had happened with him, most of the onlookers were leaving except for the few who liked to watch violence and remained. He saw the man's face, just like before, only now there was panic and desperation in the man's eyes and he was pleading for help.

Barnabas turned back to Eliza, found his voice and said, "Thank you." Then he ran after Castle and Smith and called out, "Mr. Castle, can we use a monkey in the show too?"



Mark Grant - Author

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