

The Mysterious Burglar

A Detective's Story

BY W.S. HURLEY

THE following story was related to me by a noted detective, and hoping it may prove interesting to a few of the many readers of the FIRESIDE, I will give it as nearly as possible in his own words.

I was not a professional at the time, in fact. I had never acted in an independent capacity, and was not certain that I should succeed in the peculiar calling.

One day, just after dinner, I received a city letter superscribed in a hand entirely strange; and which, upon opening, I found to be very brief and comprehensive.

It read as follows:

“NEW YORK, Jan. 7th, 18—.

“MR. WARREN EVANS:

“Please call upon me, at my place of business, No.— S— street, this afternoon, at two o’clock. Business of importance demands your prompt attendance.

“Faithfully yours,
“ROBERT SMITH.”

I knew Robert Smith, as one of the most successful and wealthy merchants in the city. What could he want with me?

I repeated the question again and again; and the longer I did so, the more puzzling it became.

I did not stand long to consider, however, and precisely at two I called at the store of “Smith & Terry,” as requested.

A few minutes afterwards, I was ushered into the merchant’s private office.

He arose as I entered, and shook me warmly by the hand, remarking as he did so:

“You are prompt, I see. Well, I am glad that you are. Give me a man who knows the true time appointed, and can properly estimate it.”

We then seated ourselves, and proceeded to business, the merchant having first been careful to assure himself that no one was sitting within earshot upon the outside.

“Mr. Evans, I wish this business between you and me, to be strictly confidential. I hope you understand me,” he said.

I assured him that, so far as my will was concerned, he should not find his confidence misplaced.

“I think I can trust you,” he said at length, and I was pleased to observe that his face wore a satisfied expression.

There was a pause after this, during which the merchant sat with his head bowed upon his hands.

I could not help observing him at the time.

He appeared to be a man of about forty years; regularly built; with mild, passive blue eyes; a face of calm, thoughtful beauty—every feature stamped with truth and goodness.

At length he started up—looking anxiously over his shoulder towards the place where a massive iron door was let into the wall—then shot a quick glance out at the windows of the partition—and then turned to me.

“Mr. Evans, I am in a predicament. In a word, I am being robbed!—gradually and mysteriously robbed! I had hoped to discover the perpetrator ere this; but having failed, I concluded to solicit your aid in the matter.”

“How long is it since you first made a discovery of the fact?” I inquired.

“Nearly two months, sir,” he replied; “and during that time, I have lost over fifty thousand dollars. How much may have been taken previous to that, I know not.”

The merchant then asked me to look at his safe, which I did.

First was a triple iron door, the centre plate of which was warranted to be utterly impervious to drilling, and the whole armed with a first-class powder-proof lock.

This being opened, we came to another safe—one of the very best in the world—which of itself, was warranted by its makers as capable of withstanding any amount of fire or of burglarious manipulation.

“Now, sir, what do you think of it?” he asked, after I had examined it to my satisfaction.

“I think,” I replied, “that, without the true keys, it would be absolutely impossible, for any human power to reach the heart of this vault—not in one night, at least.”

“Just my opinion, sir,” he rejoined, “and yet, that same safe is robbed continually.”

“And you wish me to find who does it?” said I.

“Yes, sir,” he answered.

I then asked him if he stayed in the store nights.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, “I have made a practice of sleeping here nights, for the last four months. I not only take the keys to the safe to my room with me, but sleep with them under my pillow.”

“And still, Mr. Evans, notwithstanding all these precautions—by night—while sleeping in the same apartment, you may say, and after having locked the safe myself,—money is stolen from that iron chamber.”

“Is there any person whom you suspect?” I inquired.

He hesitated at first, but at length replied:

“To tell you the truth, sir, I have thought that all was not right with Terry.

“You see we have two sets of keys. Terry keeps one set, and I the other; and he is the only person, besides myself, having access to the safe.

“So, sir, you will not wonder that I suspect him. And him I wish you to watch. Find out if he is the thief. But, above all, if you find him guilty, breathe not a word of it to an ear save my own.”

I gathered the merchant’s wishes, and promised strict obedience.

We then walked out into the store.

“Gather all the information you can, and report to me at nine this evening. I will await you here,” he said, as we parted.

Nine o’clock and we were again closeted together in the office.

“Well, my friend,” he inquired, as soon as we were seated, “what have you learned about the matter; anything new?”

I told him I had learned enough to satisfy me that Terry was not the thief. Beyond that, I had discovered nothing.

“It is strange, very strange,” he muttered in a perplexed tone. “But have you no plan to suggest, Mr. Evans?”

“I can think of no better one at present,” I replied, “than to keep a strict watch. If, as you say, money is stolen from this safe, some person of course must take it. And to get it, that person must enter this room. Therefore, if you are willing, I will watch for him, to-night, at least.”

“I shall not object to your doing so by any means,” he answered.

“That point being settled then, let us proceed to business.

“What I propose is, that you occupy your sleeping apartment as usual, taking along with you the keys of the safe; and if you hear an unusual noise below, hurry here at once.”

“Now, as it is getting quite late, suppose we take our positions.”

He expressed his willingness to do so, and accordingly left the room, taking with him the lamp and the keys of the safe.

My first work after he had gone, was to fix a safe hiding place, from which I could watch all that transpired in the counting room, which, with the aid of my dark-lantern I did, by a simple arrangement of goods on a counter near by.

Then, with the closed lantern in one hand, and my revolver in the other, I waited and watched.

An hour or more went by, and still no appearance of the robber. A feeling of drowsiness came over me, and it was with difficulty that I kept awake.

I aroused myself, however, and resumed my watch with renewed spirit. At last, the clock on the merchant's desk struck the hour of midnight; and, as its last stroke died away, my straining ear caught the faint tread of approaching footsteps.

Onward they came, nearer and nearer, until the door was reached, where they paused. Then it was softly opened, and a tall form, robed in white, glided into the room.

At first glance, the blood curdled in my veins; at the second, I recognized the *merchant himself*. His eyes were wide open, and he advanced with an assured step, but it was evident that he was asleep.

Here was the mystery of the counting-room solved at once.

The merchant crossed over to the safe, and placing the lamp on the floor at his side, deliberately opened it. From the many packages of bank notes therein, he selected one, and after carefully relocking the safe, took up the lamp and left the room as noiselessly as he had entered it.

I immediately followed him, hoping by this means to discover the manner in which he would dispose of the money.

After leaving the office, the merchant made his way above, going in the direction of his room. He did not enter it, however, but kept straight ahead, until he reached the farther end of the building.

Here he passed up another flight of stairs, and after reaching the top, turned to his left and disappeared through an open doorway.

I immediately followed up after him, and looked in.

The floor of the room into which I gazed was covered with divers boxes, chests, and other rubbish.

An old bureau stood in one corner, and before which the merchant had halted. I saw him open one of the drawers, and drop into it the package of notes he had taken from the safe.

Then, after sliding it back to its former place, he turned and came out, passing slowly by me, and down the stairs.

I followed close behind, and watched him until he entered his room, and then made my way back to the office.

“I knew you would not catch him,” he said, the next morning, as he came into the office.

“Indeed, I have, at different times, watched for him myself; but I could never catch sight of him.

“And, I dare say, you have failed also.”

“By no means,” I answered, smiling. “On the contrary, I received quite a little visit from his thiefship.

“He entered the room without knocking, opened the safe in a very business-like manner, took out a package of bank-notes, locked it up again, and then left, without as much as saying good-night.”

“And you let him go, without making an effort to capture him?” exclaimed the merchant, angrily.

“I did, sir; for certain reasons induced me to believe he would not leave the store with the notes, and that, by following him I should discover where he would hide them.”

I then related to him how I followed the thief, and what I discovered, describing the room he had entered, and the old bureau in which he hid the notes.

At this, the frown upon his face gave place to a smile, and he eagerly exclaimed:

“It is the store-room; let us hurry there at once. Who knows but what he may have hidden the rest of the money there.”

And grasping me by the arm, he half led, half dragged me to the room.

“It must be all here, for the drawer is nearly full,” he cried, excitedly, as he tremblingly opened it.

We carried the money back to the office, and after seating ourselves at the desk, proceeded to count it. It was a wearisome task, but we accomplished it at length.

“Seventy thousand dollars!” cried the merchant, dancing about the room. “I shall pay you double for this, Mr. Evans; aye, and more too, if you want it.”

And grasping a handful of notes from the desk, he held them towards me. I saw that he was very excited, and therefore refused, telling him to wait until I had caught the thief.

“Never mind the thief,” he cried; “I have found my money, and that is all I want.”

“But he will get it again, if you don’t secure him,” I answered.

“True; I had forgotten all about that in my excitement,” he said, as he became more calm. “And as you have done so well thus far, I shall not object now.”

The same night I was again at my old station behind the counter, waiting patiently for my expected guest; for I felt sure he would come.

My calculations proved correct. And at twelve precisely he entered the room, crossing over and opening the safe, as he had done the night previous.

I waited until he had selected one of the packages of bank-notes, and was about to close the safe, and then stepped up and shook him by the arm.

“Wha—what’s the matter?” he asked, winking and blinking at me, in true owlish style.

I saw that he was yet half asleep, and gave him another shake, this time thoroughly arousing him.

As his gaze rested upon the open safe and the package of notes in his hand, he comprehended the truth at once.

“Can it be possible that I have been taking this money in my sleep? Yes, it must be so. And that accounts for my being unable to catch sight of the thief. But don’t, for the world, let Terry know how I have been fooled,” he said, looking very “sheepish.”

And then, as he looked up and saw me just ready to explode with laughter, and as he thought of the ludicrous figure he presented, he added:

“Ugh! It’s awful cold standing here. I guess I’ll go back to bed again.”

And hurriedly closing the safe, he bounded out of the room.

The next morning the merchant held quite a long chat with me about the affair, and concluded by saying:

“I can only add, sir, that I am deeply grateful for the quiet manner in which you have done it; and I trust this will sufficiently recompense you. If not, come to me, and I will make it more;” and he handed me a sealed envelope.

I did not open it until I reached my lodgings. I found one thousand dollars in it. At first I feared he had made a mistake. But I thought of the money found, and concluded that all was right.

So I kept it.

I saw the merchant two months afterward, and he informed me that the *expose* cured him, and that he had received no more visits from the Mysterious Burglar.

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