

[Written for The Flag of our Union.]
A MYSTERIOUS BURGLAR.

BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

“Did I ever tell you of the strange thing that happened to me some three years since?” asked my friend L——, as I sat in his store one stormy afternoon, when it was too bad for customers to venture out. I assured him he had never told me anything of the kind, and he proceeded to give me the following story:

“Perhaps you remember what a panic there was in this part of the city, some three years ago, caused by several daring burglaries. Three stores, very near me, had been entered, and the safes broken open and robbed. But as I lived with my family directly over my store, I had not so much fear, though, I must say, I entertained some feelings not very pleasant. One day, during the excitement, an agent for a safe manufacturing company—for Wilder’s patent—came into my store to banter me to take one of his safes. I had one of the old-fashioned kind, but I had great confidence in it, for the lock was stout and curious. To convince me that my safe was *not* safe, the agent went at work to pick the lock, which he did in about five minutes.

“But this did not convince me. I knew that he could pick any lock, and I told him so; but he got the upper hands of me. He made me go over to B. & S.’s, and see a safe he had put in for them, and I was so pleased with it, that I finally told him he might bring me one, if he would exchange and allow me a fair price for mine. This he promised to do; but I could not have my safe under two weeks, as he had orders filled for as many as could be got off before that time. However, I was to have my new safe in two weeks.

“That night I put my money in my old safe, and locked it up. There was over six hundred dollars in all—some in a pocketbook, and some in the drawer; and as I turned the key, and slid the secret knob over the hole, I wondered if any burglar could get in there. But the next morning, when I opened the safe, the money was all gone from the pocketbook!—just five hundred and ninety dollars! That in the drawer had not been touched. The safe showed no signs of violence, and the pocketbook was just where I had left it on the night before. I called my bookkeeper, a Mr. Andrews, but he could tell nothing about it. My salesman, Burke, knew nothing; and I knew my boy Bill would know nothing.

“I examined the safe all over, and thoroughly overhauled the pocketbook, even opening bits of paper that would not hold a dose of calomel, but not a bit of the money could I find. Then I examined the doors and windows, but they were all right, and Bill assured me that he found nothing out of the way. Of course I felt sure that the lock of the door must have been picked, as well as the lock of the safe. I waited until noon, and then I went and gave the Chief of the Police an account of the affair, with a description of such bills as I could remember.

“That night I had three hundred dollars in bills which I had taken after two o’clock. I hesitated some before I concluded to put them into the safe, but I at length concluded to trust them there, feeling sure that no one would make a second attempt in the same place. I rolled the bills all up together, and tucked them away in an obscure corner, and then locked all up.

“On the next morning I unlocked my safe. The money in the drawer was as I had left it. I reached in after the bills—and they were gone! Down on my knees I went, and into every nook and corner I looked and felt, but the money was gone. I summoned my store crew, and laid the case before them, but they seemed to be as much astounded as I had been. But I thought a strange smile crept over the face of my bookkeeper, and in an instant my suspicion rested upon him. ‘He has some secret way of entering,’ thought I, ‘and he has contrived to get a duplicate to my keys.’ Of course he could do that easily. Just as I was about to turn away, he told me I had better wash my face. I went and looked in the glass, and, sure enough, in my search among the dusty papers, I had got my face pretty well besmeared. But I was not to let my newly-awakened suspicion be whipped off in that fashion. I believed I had a clue to the burglar, and I resolved to fix a plan to catch him.

“There was eight hundred and ninety dollars gone! You may believe I felt unhappy. But I brightened up when I thought of my bookkeeper. That very noon, while Andrews was gone to dinner, a friend came in, and, during the conversation, he asked me how long before he — Andrews—my bookkeeper—was going to California. ‘Why do you ask?’ said I. And my friend then told me he had heard Andrews talk about going himself.

“Here was the secret! Ah, that was it! Andrews was off for California, and he was preparing by making free with my funds. Of course all was as clear as daylight! So I resolved to set a trap for him. When he came back I was at the safe, and as soon as I knew that he was looking, I placed some bank bills between the outer and inner covers of one of the ledgers, as though I were trying how they would fit. As soon as I knew that he observed me, I took the bills out, shut up the ledger, and put it back.

“That night I had four hundred and twenty-five dollars in bills. We did a heavy business evenings. I fixed these bills all carefully away in the corners of one of the ledgers, and then I locked the safe up. I then went over to a druggist’s, and got him to fix for me the most caustic liquid he could prepare. He soon fixed some, and informed me that a drop of it upon the skin could not be removed but by cutting off the skin itself. I went back to my store, and having locked all the doors and windows, I went at work and fixed a bit of sponge so neatly beneath the knob of the safe door, that it could not be seen, even by daylight, while standing in an ordinary position, and when it was all done, I poured the caustic liquid out upon this sponge. I did it by letting it drip, drip, upon the upper part of the knob, and of course it trickled down into the sponge. I kept on until the sponge was thoroughly saturated, and then I left the store, locking the inner door, and taking the key with me, which I afterwards put beneath my pillow.

“Early the next morning I was up and dressed. I went down into the store just as Bill was taking down the shutters from the back room windows. He could not get into the front store, for I had the key. I unlocked the door, however, and went in, and bade Bill take down the shutters by the desk first. He did so—and the first thing I saw was my sponge lying upon the floor. The little thread by which it had been secured to the knob had been cut—I could see that. But of course someone must have got their hand upon it first. With a trembling hand I unlocked the door of the safe, and looked in. The ledger looked as I had left it. I took it out, and—the money was gone!

“I said not a word to the boy, but re-closed the safe and went back upstairs, where I told my wife the whole affair. She was as much astounded as myself. Thirteen hundred and fifteen dollars gone!

“‘I’m sure it’s Andrews,’ said I. But I resolved to wait and look at his hands.

“Andrews did not come in until eleven o’clock. He had not been so late before for a long while.

“‘You are late this morning’ said I, trying at the same time to get a look at his hand.

“‘Am I?’ he replied. And I saw that he was nervous, and could not look me in the face.

“‘What have you been doing?’ I asked.

“‘O, nothing in particular,’ he said.

“‘But something must have kept you so.’

“‘It’s only a little private business of my own, sir.’ And then, with a very red face, he went to his desk.

“At that moment I saw a dark spot upon his finger—upon the inside, at the end—and I asked him what it was. He looked at it, and said ‘twas where he held his pen. But I didn’t believe that, for he was some time in getting the explanation out, and then he had not had a pen in his fingers in the store that morning, and I wondered if he had anywhere else. I was sure he was the villain, for his every look showed it. He was red and pale by turns, and he could not look me in the eye a moment. When I went up to breakfast, I opened the whole to my wife. She pondered upon it awhile, and then told me I had better wait one more night, and place myself somewhere and watch. We had not yet quite proof enough to convict Andrews, unless we could find the money in his possession, and if we gave the alarm now, he might destroy it. So I took my wife’s advice, and resolved to watch. Strange that I had not thought of that affair before.

“During the rest of the day, I treated Andrews as frankly and kindly as usual, and I saw that he began to gain assurance, and look quite happy. At nine o’clock in the evening, the store was closed, and I put two hundred dollars in the safe. This I put in the pocketbook, as usual. I then went up and sat with my wife until eleven o’clock, and then I came down and fixed a comfortable seat in the back storeroom, close by the door, which I left open a bit, so that nothing could be done in the store, not even the tracking of a mouse, without my knowing it. There I sat until midnight. Then I went and got something to eat and drink, and came back again. One o’clock came—then two—and yet all was quiet. I remember of hearing the clock strike three, but I was too sleepy to hold out. I knew if any one entered the store, it would awaken me, and so I concluded just to drop into a gentle doze—nothing more.

“But I went sound asleep. How long I had slept, I don’t know, but I know that I was awakened by feeling two hands on my shoulder, and hearing a loud, ringing laugh in my ears. I started up with a quick cry, and dropped something which I had held in my hand. Then that same ringing

laugh broke upon me again. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. It was my wife who stood by my side, and she held a lamp in her hand. My first movement was to see what I had dropped. It was my lantern.

“And now where do you think I was. I’ll tell you. In my own private study, right back of my bedroom, and standing before my secretary. The green-curtained doors were open, and so was a little secret drawer, which I had constructed myself; and in that drawer I saw a pile of banknotes. My wife laughed again.

“‘For the love of mercy,’ I cried, ‘tell me what all this means.’ And as soon as she could stop laughing, she spoke:

“‘When I heard the clock strike three,’ she said, ‘I thought I would go down and relieve you. So I dressed and went down. When I got there, I found you fast asleep, and while I was considering whether I should wake you up and send you to bed, you started up out of your chair. I spoke to you twice, but you did not answer. You passed close by me, and your eyes were like two tea saucers, but yet you did not notice me. At first, I was frightened by your wild look; but in a moment more the thought flashed upon me that you were asleep! I resolved to watch you. You went and got the lantern and lighted the lamp by a match, and then you went directly to the safe and unlocked it and took out the money. You closed the door again and locked it, working all the while as deliberately as could be, and then you started away, and came upstairs, and in here. I followed close behind—saw you open the doors of the secretary, unlock the little secret drawer, and put the money in there. Then I woke you up!’

“And the mysterious burglar was found! I took out the money and counted it, and found fifteen hundred and fifteen dollars—just the sum I had lost, with the two hundred I had just put in.

“When I was a boy, I used to walk in my sleep; but to my knowledge, I had never done it before since I had grown up. Of course, the excitement caused by the burglaries about me had operated somewhat upon my mind, and then the picking of my safe-lock by Wilder’s agent had given more weight to it. I suppose the very fact of seeing that lock picked, and realizing that I had engaged a new safe, thereby virtually acknowledging that I did not put the fullest confidence in my old one, had such an effect upon my mind, that as soon as I got sound asleep, my impressions took mastership over my convictions, and led me into the somnambulistic feats I performed.

“That forenoon, Mr. Andrews handed me a neat billet, directed to myself and wife. I opened it, and found that he had taken a wife. He was married that very morning when I saw so much *guilt* in his face! He had a right good laugh when I told him how wickedly I had looked upon him,—and, of course, he has concluded not to go to California.

“That is my new safe—up in the corner, there.”

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