

A New Year's Mystery

Between the years 1840 and 1850, the crime of burglary prevailed to an alarming extent all over England. In the suburbs of large towns precautions of an almost incredible nature had to be taken to provide against the determined and skillful attacks of midnight depredators. Iron shutters protected the windows, and to those were attached bells on springs to announce to the household any attempt on the part of the burglars. The doors were lined with metal, and strong bolts and bars afforded a further safeguard. It was no uncommon thing for houses to be entered and robbed in twilight, and every door was provided with a catch-chain, which permitted it to be open only a few inches, thus allowing an unknown visitor to be scanned and spoken to without the possibility of his forcing his way into the dwelling. These difficulties, however, did not thwart the thief, but merely aroused his enterprise and ingenuity.

As already stated, the vicinity of the large towns afforded to the burglar his favorite field of operations, and the very remarkable case now to be narrated occurred in Edgbaston, a fashionable suburb of Birmingham.

In 1843, there resided in Edgbaston a wealthy retired merchant, named Goodall. He was a childless widower, and his two maiden sisters lived with him. His dwelling was one-half of what is there known as a double or semi-detached villa. It was large and sumptuously furnished, and Mr. Goodall was famous for the splendid entertainments he gave. His plate was superb and his sisters' jewelry unsurpassed.

In November of the year named, the residence adjoining Mr. Goodall's was rented to a gentleman named Mathews. He, also, was a widower, but twenty years younger than Mr. Goodall, and he had a daughter aged about twenty-two, and a son eight or ten years old. He furnished his house elegantly and kept a very stylish turnout. The neighbors were soon on intimate terms, and the gentlemen frequently drove out together. Mr. Mathews and his family spent Christmas Eve at the house of Mr. Goodall, and the latter and his sisters agreed to eat their New Year's dinner and spend the evening at Mr. Mathews'.

Mr. Goodall's servants were invited to enjoy the occasion with Mr. Mathews' domestics, and he caused the laundry and the loft above the stables to be fitted up tastefully for their use.

On the morning of New Year's day, Miss Mary Goodall, Mr. Goodall's elder sister, slipped on the ice and so seriously sprained her ankle as to render it needful for her to remain at home. She insisted, however, that no one should stay with her, and after the departure of all the household for Mr. Mathews', she was able to lock the front door, and so secure herself from intrusion, the understanding being that her brother and the domestics were to return not later than midnight.

At about 12:30 Mr. Goodall and his sister bade their entertainers good night, having been detained longer than they anticipated by the absence of Mr. Mathews, who had been obliged to take one of his visitors home in his carriage, as she was suddenly taken ill.

On reaching the front entrance of his residence, Mr. Goodall rang the bell. Several minutes passed, and there was no response. By this time the domestics had gathered at the doorway, and much surprise was expressed at Miss Goodall's not answering the summons. The bell was rung several times with increased violence, but in vain, and the footman climbing to the balcony of the parlor, tried the windows, but found them locked. After further delay, Mr. Goodall directed him to break a pane and to unfasten the window. This, however, was fruitless, for, as was to be expected, the iron shutters inside the blind were closed. At this juncture, a policeman appeared on the street, and inquired what was the matter. Mr. Goodall gave a brief explanation, and then the officer said:

"Was there nobody but the lady in the house all evening?"

"No," was the reply, "not since 7 o'clock, when myself and sister and all the domestics went to a merry-making next door."

"That's odd," the officer said. "I came on duty at 10 o'clock, and soon afterward, as I passed here, I saw a gentleman step out. He stood for a moment as though glancing at the weather, and then went back into the house."

This announcement greatly astonished Mr. Goodall, and he expressed to the officer his worst fears that something dreadful had happened. The officer, accompanied by two of the servants and Mr. Mathews, who by this time had been attracted by the voices outside, and had joined the group on Mr. Goodall's entrance, went to the nearest police station and procured a ladder. By this means an entrance was had at one of the upper windows by the footman, who descended and unlocked the front door.

On entering the parlor, the gas was found turned down to a spark. Mr. Goodall turned it on, and as he did so, a shriek arose from the domestics, who had crowded to the door. Miss Mary Goodall lay across the couch, with her head beaten in, and the blood and brains bespattering the rich furniture, the carpet, and the wall. Two valuable diamond rings had been torn from her fingers, and a splendid emerald brooch as missing from her bosom. Mr. Mathews, the officer, and the footman, began a search of the premises. In the library, adjoining the parlor, all was confusion. Mr. Goodall's secretary had been rifled of a large sum of money, and two elegantly chased silver goblets were gone. The butler's pantry had been ransacked, and a strong plate chest had been wrenched open and the contents removed. From the chambers up stairs jewelry of great value had been taken, and the contents of the bureaus lay scattered around. Over the grief of the brother and sister so awfully bereaved, a veil must be drawn.

Information was conveyed at once to Col. Snell, Chief of Police, and the premises were subject to a rigid scrutiny. Not a door or window was found unfastened except the window forced by the footman, and the main entrance, likewise opened by him from the inside. Here was a startling mystery: How had the burglars got in? How had they quitted the house with their booty? There were no footmarks, no finger-marks, no clew of the slightest description as to who the burglars were, their number, or their method of entering or quitting the premises. The house, just as it was found, was left in charge of the police, and the most expert detectives, after examining the dwelling from cellar to roof, admitted they were beaten.

But the officer had seen a man about 10 o'clock, or soon after, open the front door and then close it, so that there had been one man there, at all events. The same officer also remembered that as he approached the house from the Edgbaston Road he met a carriage which was being driven rapidly away. This was about two minutes before he saw the man at the door. Much importance was not attached to the circumstance, however, as the carriage was in all probability the one in which Mr. Mathews accompanied his sick visitor to her home.

All Birmingham was thrown into consternation at this dreadful and mysterious occurrence. Lambert, the great London detective, took the matter in hand, but was apparently as unsuccessful as the local police in discovering any clew. The day after the murder, Mr. Mathews closed the house and removed temporarily to a hotel. The inquest was held, and an open verdict returned, and the body of the murdered woman interred.

On the day of the funeral, Detective Lambert and an associate paid another visit to the Goodall residence, and went over the premises for the hundredth time. Then Lambert first heard that Mr. Mathews and his family had quitted the adjoining house. He procured an entrance, and searched it as thoroughly as he had searched Mr. Goodall's residence. All the furniture and many articles of value had been left behind, but everything that was easily portable had evidently been removed. The detectives searched the closets, the attics, the roof, the cellar, in hope of finding some communication between the two houses, but there was none. In the kitchen grate were the remains of some papers which had been burned. Lambert looked around for the poker to stir the ashes but no such article was near. He used his hands, and then sought for water to wash them. On the opposite side of the kitchen was a party pump – that is, a pump that had two handles, one in Goodall's house and one in Mathews'. You could see from one kitchen into the other, and when the top of the cylinder was unscrewed and removed, there was a hole leading from one kitchen into the other eight or ten inches in diameter one was and six the other.

Lambert and his associate gazed at the hole for fully a minute without saying a word. Then the two officers looked at each other, and simultaneously exclaimed:

“That's it!”

“No man could get through there,” Lambert's associate said.

“True,” was the reply, “but a boy could, and *he* had a boy. Lets' go up stairs and look at something.

In a wardrobe up-stairs was a quantity of wearing apparel. It had already been examined, but Lambert went over it again. Among the clothes was a boy's blue-cloth blouse. The back of it was covered with lime-wash, and four of the buttons were half ripped off.

“That settles it” said Lambert, as he held it up. “The boy went through that hole, and opened the door to admit the man and his pals, for there were two or three of them.

In ten minutes the two detectives were at the Hen-and-Chicken Inn, but Mr. Mathews and his family had gone. They were traced, by means of the boy, to Liverpool, and captured on board an outward bound vessel, which was already under weigh. Mathews had in his possession some seven thousand pounds, the result of the robbery, and three splendid diamonds, identified as Mr. Goodall's. Mathews was identified as one Brice, who had formerly been a master at Bermondsey, but had defrauded his creditors and decamped. The woman who passed as his daughter was his wife, and the boy was their child.

When Mathews found that everything was dead against him, and his case utterly hopeless, he made a clean breast of it. He had been connected for over two years with a gang of burglars who had worked the midland counties, and had undertaken the robbery of Goodall's house, satisfied from the reports of his confederates that it would repay the risk. In taking the adjoining house his design was to work through into the cellar, which, with the aid of his coachman and groom, who were his confederates, he could soon have done. But accidentally discovering the means of communication by the pump, he planned the New Year's Day to get the Goodalls and their domestics out of the way, so as to ransack the house without fear of detection. After he had made all his preparations, the detention of Miss Goodall at home with a sprained ankle seemed to upset all his plans. He had got everything in the house on credit, and it was a desperate game, so that rather than lose the last chance he resolved as needs be to take the unfortunate woman's life. When he quitted his visitors for the purpose of accompanying his sick guest home, he was but performing a part of the plot, the supposed lady being in with him. The carriage stood below in the road without exciting suspicion, with the female accomplice seated inside, while Mathews returned to the rear of the house, and passed his son through the pump hole. The lad, acting on his father's directions, easily opened the back door and admitted Mathews and his supposed groom. The door was again closed and fastened and the boy handed through the hole again to a confederate. As Mathews was about to ascend the stairs, Miss Goodall, hearing a noise, cried out in an alarmed voice –

“Who's there?”

Mathews darted back to the kitchen and seized the poker.

“Come on,” said he to his confederate, “or we shall be bagged.”

The two passed hurriedly toward the parlor. Mathews entered, and, before Miss Goodall could utter a scream, brained her with a poker. Then they turned down the gas and ransacked the library, proceeding next up stairs. The groom moved all the booty to the carriage, which was driven off. Pausing for a moment, lest the carriage wheels should attract the attention of any in his own house, Mathews at length opened the front door to depart. There was a faint light in the hall, which was shed on the uniform of a policeman on the sidewalk below. Mathews, with great presence of mind, looked up at the sky as though scanning the weather, and then re-entered the house and closed the door. He locked it as he found it, and returning to the kitchen, directed his son to be passed through the pump-hole as before. This was done, and after quitting the house by the back door, the boy bolted it and was safely drawn back into the adjoining kitchen. The poker with which the fatal blow was struck was dropped into the well. Mathews then followed the carriage into the Edgbasten road, where it awaited him, and drove off to superintend the disposal

of the stolen property. This took him longer than he expected, and, on his return home, after midnight, he excused himself to his visitors by saying that his companion was so ill that he had to remain with her until the arrival of a medical man.

Mathews was hanged at Warwick in the spring of 1844. His confederates were not captured, and it is supposed they fled to this country.

Palo Alto Reporter, March 18, 1876

Nebraska Advertiser., December 28, 1876