

A Queer Burglary
The Perpetrator Captured and made Happy Thereby

“You have been recommended to me, sir.”

I looked up from the drawing I was studying, as a musical yet low voice uttered the words. I knew that I was to look upon a female. I was disappointed to find her closely veiled.

A slender form, plainly yet richly clad, confronted me, a small gloved hand resting on the desk just in front of me.

“What is it that you desire, madam?” I said, the moment I could gather the words to reply.

“Assistance, sir.”

“Exactly.”

I waited calmly for her to speak further. Some inward emotion seemed to hold her tongue for a full minute. When at length she did speak her voice trembled perceptively.

“I have met with a loss, sir, one that I can ill afford, and I have come to you to help me. I have been assured that you are a detective of ability, and just the one to assist me in my present trouble.”

“Please state your case, madam,” said I, blushing inwardly at the praise she was giving my abilities.

“My brother Frank was a sailor, sir, and visited many countries, and sometimes he brought home queer articles from the Orient. One he presented to me, a Hindu idol, an image of gold and precious stones, the value of which has never been computed. I care not so much for the money value of the image, although Heaven knows I am not beyond want, but I prize it as a keepsake from my brother, who long ago found a grave in the waters of the ocean.”

Emotion cut short further speech on the part of the girl. I was deeply interested, and waited with some degree of impatience for the girl to proceed.

“I have had the image several years,” she went on. “Frank brought it with him on his return from the East Indies, and I promised never to part with it. Since he was lost times have been hard. Mother died, and father became helpless. Out in this Western country father had some land, and I resolved to move on it. That was a year ago. We have been here since. Doubtless you know the ranch, the stone house in the basin.”

“Yes, I know,” I returned. “I have passed the house many times, and a lonely place it is. You are Miss Grandis?”

“I am Irene Grandis.”

“Well, about this image. When was it stolen?”

“Two nights ago.”

“Do you suspect any one?”

She lifted her veil now and presented a pale, beautiful face.

“I do not wish to seem ungrateful or wicked, Mr. Short, but I can not help thinking that our servant, John Lawns, has acted strangely ever since I missed the image.”

“Yes?”

“We have trusted him fully, sir, up to the present, and I do not wish to wrong him, but—”

“I understand. I will accompany you and investigate.”

Miss Grandis' carryall stood at the door, and closing my office I accepted a seat in the vehicle. She was her own driver, and handled the reins with a firm hand. It was two miles from Rock Ridge, the Western mushroom town, to the Grandis ranch, and the spirited horses were not long in covering the distance.

The stone house in the basin was moss-grown and ancient. There was a tradition that it had been constructed a century before by missionaries from the East. All that Mr. Grandis and his daughter could tell about it was that it was on the ground when the land came into possession of its present owner, some ten years before.

I went through the house from cellar to garret, met the two servants, John Lawns and Miss Peggy White, interviewed them, and then, after hearing Irene's story, sat me down to meditate on the situation.

The Hindu idol had stood always on the little bureau in Irene's room. Peggy White knew it was there, had in fact often taken it in her hand and admired it. She and John Lawns were on good terms, and it might be that the two had conceived and executed the plan of possessing themselves of the valuable image.

The two, however, had been faithful servants in the Grandis household during twelve long years. Strange, that with the gold image in the house for years neither had thought of appropriating it until now!

It was not likely that either servant had stolen the Indian idol.

The unexpected often occurs in detective experience, so I was not ready to accept the theory of the guilt or innocence of Peggy and John. I examined Irene's room, and soon made the discovery

that it could be entered from the outside by means of a tree covered with vines that grew close to the house, within easy reach of the window. Doubtless this was the way the thief had taken.

“But not a soul knew of the existence of the image outside of our family,” avowed Irene, when I pointed out the probable manner of the robbery.

“You are quit sure of this?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

“It may be that the thief entered for the purpose of robbery, and found the idol by accident.”

“I would think so but for one reason.”

“And that?”

“On the night the image disappeared my wallet lay on the bureau, not a foot from the image, containing over one thousand dollars—not our money, understand, for we are not so well situated, but the money sent my father by an acquaintance in the East, who wished him to invest it for him. We would have been ruined had the money been taken.”

“And the wallet was untouched?”

“This is the fact, sir; only the image was taken, and a card that lay beside it.”

“A card?”

“A photograph of myself.”

“Ah!”

She seemed to guess the meaning of that monosyllable, and hastened to explain that she had no lover, and that no one among the Western rangers had thought of paying court even to Peggy.

“Well,” I said, after a time, “I’ll do the best I can, Miss Grandis, but at the present the outlook does not point to immediate success.”

“Oh, sir, I hope you will find and return the image; it’s the only keepsake I have from dear Frank.”

“I shall do my best.”

And then I left the house, refusing to accept Miss Grandis’ offer to return me to Rock Ridge. I resolved to remain in the vicinity for a time and shadow every person who promised anything in his appearance.

A single thread will sometimes lead to wonderful and startling results. I had not found even so much as a thread in the present case on which to hang a theory.

My inward questioning ran like this: why had the image been taken, and the wallet, with the one thousand dollars, left untouched? Was it possible that the thief had overlooked the greater prize? Yes, it was barely possible, but not at all probable.

In detective work I usually prosecute my plans on probabilities, and have found that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred I have not erred.

In the present case, then, the thief had not stolen the Indian idol for gain. This I premised, and on this theory I proposed to work.

Although Irene Grandis had asserted that she had no admirers among the sterner sex I was satisfied that she was mistaken in a partial sense at least. On this supposition I proceeded to work.

For several days I hung about the old stone house without making any discoveries.

One morning I entered the house to find its members more deeply excited than ever. The invalid, Mr. Grandis, was nervous to prostration, and Irene met me with a pale face and troubled, half-starved expression of the eyes.

“We’ve been visited again,” she said.

“Visited?”

“Yes, by the idol thief.”

Then she turned about and showed me where a large chestnut curl had been severed from her head.

“It was done last night,” she explained. “When I felt the cold steel against my head I awoke and saw a human form darting away. He went through the window. I nearly fainted from fright, and I feel almost afraid to live another night under the roof.”

I was puzzled but fully satisfied that the perpetrator of these strange acts was an admirer of Miss Grandis. She again asserted, however, that she had no gentlemen friends in the West save her father and John Lawns.

I at once examined the ground beneath the window, and was this time able to track the intruder.

I followed the trail only a short distance when it was lost, and I was unable to find it again.

“I’ll secure the window so that no one will be able to enter,” declared Irene, when she learned that the outlaw had come from the hills and climbed the tree beside the old house.

“Do nothing of the kind, miss,” I urged. “He may come again. I will watch, and rest assured I will see that no harm comes to you; in fact, you might occupy another room for the present.”

This last plan was agreed upon, and for a time I occupied Miss Grandis’ room. A week passed with no reward for my vigils, and I began to think we should have no more visits from the strange night-prowler, when, one pleasant night when the moon rode high in clear heavens, the crisis came.

On no night did I remove my clothing, but lay on the outside of the covering, anxiously waiting for a denouement.

I had fallen into a dreamless slumber on the night in question when I was aroused by a touch on my cheek. I did not move, but gazed upward into the face of a bearded man, over whose face the moonlight streamed. To say that I was startled would only feebly convey my feelings, for I was completely at the mercy of the intruder should he make an attempt upon my life.

I was in the shadow, and he did not seem to understand the situation.

“See, Irene, I have brought back the image that you have shed so many tears over. I only took it for a little while; its bright figure brought back the old days.”

Then the man laughed, and turning, placed the image on the bureau.

I gathered myself now for a spring, determined not to permit the fellow to escape. He seemed fumbling with something on the bureau, then giving way to another chuckle, he turned away. His look was now toward me.

I bounded forward full upon him, planting my knee in the small of his back; with a quick, sharp jerk, I brought him to the floor with tremendous force. He was stunned by the fall, and I had no difficulty in securing him with the cord I had prepared for the purpose.

Then I lit the lamp and lifted him to a sitting posture, as a groan informed me of returning consciousness. He opened his eyes and stared at me in a bewildered way.

“Bless my eyes! What does this mean? Where am I?” cried the man, a handsome fellow, in spite of the fact that a rough beard covered his face.

“You’re safe for the present, my man,” I returned.

He still looked bewildered, and glanced at his bonds in a comical way that assured me that he was not shamming.

“Fine room. Deuced pretty place.”

Just then the door opened. The sound of the struggle had brought Irene to the room. She stood in the doorway with fused cheeks and streaming hair, and a more beautiful picture I have never seen.

“You have caught the robber?”

“Yes—”

“My God! It is Irene!”

The man on the floor held up his hands and made a desperate effort to gain his feet. He was helped, however. Then he cried out in an excited voice:

“Don’t you know me, Irene? It is Frank, your brother!”

Miss Grandis stared, then reeled across the floor and sank fainting on the neck of my prisoner.

Afterward it was all explained. Frank Grandis had been shipwrecked and come near losing his life. He was cast among cannibals, became a member of the tribe, and saw no white men for years.

He was finally rescued and came to America to learn that his family had gone West, but where no one seemed to know. It was while camping with a party of hunters in the neighborhood of the stone house that he visited it.

“I had such beautiful dreams of finding you, Irene.”

He had visited the house in his sleep, and taken the idol, secreting it, the photo and the stolen curl, so that he knew nothing about the affair in his waking moments.

The burglar was a somnambulist.

Great was the happiness that followed the strange denouement. Frank had money, and I was handsomely rewarded for my part in the unearthing of the thief. I think if I had not been a benedict I should have fallen in love with Irene. The outcome was more pleasant than I had anticipated.—J.M. Merritt, in *Chicago Inter-Ocean*

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