

*Speech Without Words,
Or Circumventing A Burglar*

“I’ll tell you a story,” said the mistress of a village school in England, to one of her small scholars, “of how I once saved my life entirely through having learned the deaf and dumb alphabet. There were two little boys who used to come and stay with Uncle Frank and me when we were married, and they could neither hear nor speak. They could only talk with their fingers—so—only ever so much quicker. They were quick and clever; could read and write, and do many other things which most boys would make a very bad hand at. They could play at draughts and backgammon, at chess and fox and geese as well as any boys. They could almost see what we said, though they could not hear, with such quick, eager eyes did they watch every movement of our lips. We soon, however, got to talk as easily with our fingers as our tongues; when the lads were not with us Uncle Frank and I used to converse in that manner, when alone, for practice.

“It happened on one occasion that he had to go up to London on important business; he was to have gone by an afternoon train, but something delayed him, so that he was not able to leave before the night express. I was not in very good health, and retired to my bed-room about two hours before his departure. He promised, however, to come and wish me good-by before he started, which would be between twelve and one o’clock in the morning. The matter which called him away was connected with the bank here, which had just burnt down; and my husband, it seems, though I did not know it at the time—so great a secret had he endeavored to keep it—had many thousands of pounds belonging to the concern in his temporary possession, locked up in an iron safe in our bed-room, where the plate was kept. He was a bank manager, and responsible for the whole of it. It was winter time, and there was a fire in the room, so bright and comfortable that I was in no hurry to leave it and get into bed, but sat up, looking at the fiery coals, and thinking about all sorts of things—of the long journey your Uncle Frank had to take that night, and of how dreary the days would seem until he returned, and in particular of how lonely I should feel in that great room, all by myself, when he should be away; for I was a great coward. It was a little after eleven o’clock when I got into bed, [but] I did not seem inclined to sleep then. I knew Uncle Frank would be coming to wish me good-bye presently, and besides, there seemed to be all sorts of noises about the room, which my foolish ear always used to hear whenever I was alone at night-time.

“If a little soot fell down the chimney, it was, I thought a great black crow at least, which would soon be flying about the room, and setting on my pillow; and if the wind blew at the casement, I thought it was something trying to get in at the window, although it was two stories high. You may imagine, then, my horror when I heard a sneeze within a quarter of an inch of me, just behind the head-board of the bed, and between that and the wall, where there was a considerable space. I had, as usual, taken the [precaution], before I put the candle out, of looking everywhere in the room where it was quite impossible any person could have hid; but in the little alcove into which the bed had been pushed, I had never thought of looking, although that was a capital hiding place for anybody, ever since I had slept in that room; in short, I had been like the ostrich

of which we read, who puts his head in the sand, and then imagines himself in perfect security. I had piqued myself upon precautionary measures, that after all, might just as well have been omitted. The only thing, as I believe, which saved my reason from departing altogether, when I first heard that terrible sound, was that my mind clung to the hope that it might be, after all, only the sneeze of a cat. Fifty cats together could not have made half such a disturbance, it is true; for it was the sneeze of a man who sneezes in spite of himself, and almost shook the house, but the idea sustained me over the shock. The next instant the wretch had sneezed again, and pushing aside the bed, which rolled on castors, was standing beside my bed looking at me. If he had only given one sneeze, he might, perhaps, have believed me, as I lay quite still, breathing quite regularly as I could, and pretending to be asleep; but he reasoned very justly, that, unless I was deaf or dead, I must have been awakened by the sound.

“You’re awake marm,” said he in a gruff voice, “and it’s no use shamming! If you don’t want a tap with this life preserver, just look alive.”

“I opened my eyes exceedingly wide at this, and beheld a man with a crape over his face, standing by the bed; he held a sort of club with two knobs upon it in his right hand, and with his left pointed to the iron safe.

“Is the money there?” said he.

“The plate is,” said I in a trembling voice. “Pray take it, sir; I am sure you are very welcome;” for he might have had everything of value out of the house with all my heart, so long as he left me my life.

“The money—the gold—the notes, are they there?” cried he again, in a trembling sort of whisper.

“It’s all there,” I replied, although I knew nothing about it; “all except fifteen and sixpence in my purse on the dressing table yonder. There’s a silver mustard pot besides in the pantry; and a couple of candlesticks in the study, only they are plated, for I would not deceive you, sir, on any account.”

“You had better not,” observed the burglar grimly, “or it will be the worse for you.” He produced a key like that my husband used, and approached the iron safe, but as he did so, his guilty ear caught a footstep upon the staircase. “Who’s that?” cried he.

“My husband, sir!” I returned, “but pray don’t hurt him, pray.”

“Is he not gone to town, then?” cried the ruffian with an oath of disappointment.

“He is going at twelve o’clock,” replied I, “he is, indeed.

“If you tell him,” said the burglar hoarsely, “if you breathe but one word of my presence here, it will be the death doom of you both.” He had slipped into the alcove, and drawn back the bed to its place in an instant. My husband entered immediately afterwards and even while he was in the room, I heard the awful threat repeated once more through the thick curtain behind me:—“If you do but whisper it, woman, I will kill you where you lie. Will you swear not to tell him?”

“I will,” said I solemnly, “I promise not to open my lips about the matter.”

Your Uncle Frank leaned over the pillow to kiss me and observed how terrified I looked.

“You have been frightening yourself about robbers again, I suppose, you silly child.”

“Not I, Frank,” returned I, as cheerfully as I could; “I have only a little headache;” but I said with my fingers so that he could plainly read in the fire-light—“For God’s sake, hush; there is a man behind the bed-head.”

Your Uncle Frank was as bold as a lion, and had nerves like iron, although he was tenderhearted and kind. He only answered, “Where is your sal volatile, dearest?” and went to the mantle piece to get it. I thought he could not have understood me, he spoke with such coolness and unconcern, until I saw his fingers reply as he took the bottle, “All right; don’t be afraid.” And then I was not afraid, Dick, or at least, not so much; for I knew that I should not be left one instant in that room alone; and I felt that my Frank was a match for any two men in such a case. Only he had no weapon. “He has a little life preserver,” (pistol) said I, with my fingers.

“Your fire is getting rather low, Georgey,” observed he, as he took up the poker. (Ah, he had a weapon then!) “I must leave you a good blaze to comfort you before I go.” He poked the fire and left the poker in, but without ever taking his eye off me and the bed-head. “I will just ring the bell, and see whether Thomas has got the portmanteau ready.” “Mary,” continued he to the maid that answered the bell, “send Thomas up.” Then, when she had gone upon that errand:—“By Jove! I never gave him that key; where is it, Georgey? I have not a minute to lose; if it is in your dressing case with the rest there I shall be an age in looking for it. Might I ask you to get out of bed an instant and show me which it is?” He said with his fingers, “Jump!” and I jumped, you may be sure, Dickey, quickly enough, and was inside the dressing-room, and with the door locked, in half a second.

“Come in, Thomas,” said your uncle; “come in;” for Thomas was modestly hesitating at the chamber door; “there’s some blackguard got into the house and behind my bed there; if he makes the least resistance, I’ll kill him with this hot poker.”

At these words the bed was pushed slowly outward, and the burglar, without his crape mask, and with a face as pale as ashes, emerged from his hiding place. Your Uncle Frank knew him at once, as having been a bank messenger, who had been turned out of his situation since the fire, upon suspicion of dishonesty.

“O, sir, have pity upon me,” cried he; “I am an unlucky dog. If it had not been for a sneeze, I should have had ten thousand pounds in my pocket by this time.”

“O, you came after that, did you?” said my husband, coolly. “Well, please to give up that life-preserver which you have in your pocket before we have any more conversation.”

“And did your lady tell you that, too?” cried the villain, in accents of astonishment, as he delivered up the weapon to the man servant; “and yet I stood by her yonder, and never heard her utter a syllable.”

“I never spoke one word,” cried I, through the dressing-room-key-hole, for I did not wish the man to think that I had broken my oath; nor, to say the truth, was I anxious to make a deadly enemy of him, in case he should ever be at large again.

“Then it’s a judgement on me,” exclaimed the miserable wretch, “and it’s no good for me to fight against it.”

“It’s not the least good,” replied your uncle Frank, decisively, “and we will go to the police office at once.”

So off the burglar went in their custody leaving poor Aunt Georgy safe and sound after all. And now, don’t you think there may be some use in learning everything, even so small a thing as a deaf and dumb alphabet, Dickey?

“Sometimes,” replied the small boy, cautiously, not wishing to comit himself to the general question.

“It actually saved my life, you see,” continued the old lady; and I didn’t break my promise, [either]; did I, Dickey? I said I wouldn’t speak a word, and I didn’t; for what I did was what I call speech without words.”

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