

[From the London "Once a Week."]
My Adventure at the Assizes

It is now about fifteen years since I was compelled to attend the assizes at our county town as a junior member of a highly respectable legal firm. Knowing that there would be several important causes, besides our own, and two or three cases on the criminal side, which excited much public attention, that thus the small county town would be overwhelmed with visitors, I took the precaution of writing—the night before my journey—to secure beds for myself and clerk at the principal inn, where I was, of course, well known.

The next day I took my journey, arriving at my destination early in the day. I found, as I had expected, the town crowded with people; and, on going into the hotel, the landlord informed me that he had received my letter, but that to retain a bed-room for me in his house had been absolutely impossible, the hotel being filled to overflowing by other persons who had bespoken rooms before me. He had provided one small bed-room in a respectable public house, which would suit my clerk; but as to myself, if I would confide my sleeping arrangements to his care, he would ensure me a handsome apartment and comfortable bed-room out of the house, and would convey me there in one of his carriages.

Being somewhat particular in the matter of sleeping accommodation, I thought it desirable to inquire more particularly where he proposed to send me; but as he was much pressed for time, he could only briefly acquaint me, that the room intended for my use was in a large, unoccupied house standing rather on the outskirts of the town, and that the owner had been a man of fortune, which he had spent neither well nor wisely, and had been in consequence compelled to leave England.

The mansion itself, which had two or three half-furnished rooms, had been placed by the agent at the disposal of the land-lord of the hotel on this occasion for the accommodation of such customers as he might find himself unable to receive at his own house. There being no remedy, I was compelled to submit to this arrangement; and in a few minutes, the attendance on witnesses, consultations with counsel, and the usual preparations for going into court, put the matter entirely out of my head.

My cause was the third on the list. The first was understood to be a short cause which would soon be disposed of; the second was a case relating to a watercourse, which everybody knows to be one of the most tedious and lengthy of all imaginable cases; this, it was expected, would be arranged out of court, in which event my cause would be called on early in the course of the day. Contrary, however, to expectation, neither of these probabilities occurred, and although compelled to stay in court all day, my cause remained untried.

About six o'clock, therefore, fatigued and mentally wearied, I repaired to the hotel, where, after a good dinner, and a consultation with our leading counsel, I found a comfortable fly ready to take me to my quarters at about ten o'clock. It is scarcely needful to add that my mind was intensely occupied with the coming trial, the result of which, from various circumstances, was of more than ordinary importance to our firm.

It struck me, however, that the fly was longer than I had expected in conveying me to my place of abode for the night, and this circumstance at length roused me from my pre-occupation; and looking out of the window, I perceived that I had left the town and was proceeding along a dark lane which appeared to have diverged from the turnpike road. In a few minutes the carriage stopped at a garden door, which was opened by the driver, who then proceeded to let me out of the fly, intimating that this was the house where I was to sleep, and that he had brought the key in his pocket.

On getting out of the fly with my small portmanteau, which contained amongst other things a considerable sum of money, I found myself in front of a large old-fashioned house standing at the head of a desolate, neglected lawn. In a window on the first floor a light was burning; that room, the driver informed me, was my bedroom. The house was locked, and he had instructions to deliver the key into my hands, and to assure me that I should find everything very comfortable; and that in the morning he would bring the fly for me at an early hour to take me to my breakfast at the inn. Bidding the man “good night,” I went towards the mansion, key in hand, prepared to forget all troubles in a sound night’s rest.

The night was starlight—there was no moon—and but for the little light which glimmered in the window, the position of the house and its character would have been scarcely traceable from the distance at which I entered by the garden gate. As I advanced it became more defined, and the overgrown wilderness in which it stood gave it a decided character of desolation.

Opening the door with my key, and again carefully locking it inside, and securing it with one or two rusty bolts, I went up stairs, the light from the small lamp fixed against the wall of the staircase being my only guide. As I ascended the staircase a momentary feeling of solitude flashed across me; but my mind was too much pre-occupied, and my brain too weary to allow this feeling to develop itself as it might have done under other circumstances.

I found the room prepared for me very comfortable, and everything about it was in apple-pie order. I stood retired to bed, but from some cause could not sleep, though I was extremely tired. For an hour or two I lay there in a state of nervousness that I cannot describe. It was impossible to close my eyes in slumber. Presently I thought I heard footsteps on the gravel walk outside. I rose, opened the door, and listened. I was not mistaken, for soon I heard the peculiar crunching sound of a center-bit boring at one of the lower doors. A burglar was at work, and I knew very well that my own effects were the object of his labors.

My first consideration was as to my means of defense, and the time which would be allowed me for completing them. I remembered with some degree of comfort that there were three heavy fastenings upon the outer door, and although I knew too well that each must yield in its turn to the irresistible implement of the housebreaker, I calculated that some minutes must elapse before he could succeed in gaining an entrance.

Suddenly the crashing sound ceased; and for a few seconds there was a dead silence, during which my vivid imagination represented to me as distinctly as if I had been an actual spectator, the brawny arm of the burglar stealthily introduced, and the bolt in the process of being cautiously withdrawn. For a moment I thought of imitating a clever and successful expedient

said to have been resorted to by a person similarly attacked, who quietly awaited the introduction of the housebreaker's hand through his kitchen window shutter, and being provided with a powerful cord, in which he had prepared a running noose, slipped it dexterously over the hand, tightened it rapidly at the wrist, and fastened it securely at the other end of the heavy kitchen table, leaving his visitor outside to enjoy the dawn and early morning air, while he quietly returned to bed to finish securely his night's repose. But a few moments' reflection convinced me that my best means of resistance were rather passive than active, and that I might more safely rely on them. In the first place, I quickly ascertained that my room had two powerful bolts beside a heavy lock. I had contented myself on going to bed with turning the key in the lock, but I now endeavored to shoot the upper and lower bolts; these I found very much rusted, but with the aid of a little Macassar oil I soon overcame their resistance. While I was thus employed the work of the center-bit was again resumed, and every movement of the housebreaker was again before me.

I now looked round me for some weapon that might serve me in case of need, and found a tolerably heavy poker, which satisfied me that I had something besides bolts to rely on. My preparations for attack and defense being now completed, I coolly awaited the next step of the housebreaker, feeling something like a tortoise in his shell, or like Robinson Crusoe, in his lonely citadel. A slight lowering of the flame of the candle from a current of air which rushed up the staircase and beneath my door, showed me that the burglar had effected his entrance; in another moment his footstep was on the broad staircase. He stepped with the caution of one proceeding on tiptoe, with the least possible noise, but having ascended three or four steps, there was an apparent halt. I knew perfectly well what he was doing, and the measured creak of the staircase thenceforward alone gave notice of his approach with shoeless feet. In spite of my preparations, it is impossible to deny that my heart beat violently. I relied, however, upon this, namely, that the burglar being apparently alone, he would hesitate to attack a man whom he found awake and vigilant, and who for aught he knew, might be prepared with fire-arms, or prove more than a match for himself in point of personal strength or courage; only upon the supposition of finding me asleep and unprepared could he have hoped to succeed in his attack.

The footsteps now drew nearer, and could be marked advancing along the passage. They came at last to a halt by the door, and despite of my internal assurance that immediate personal attack upon me was impossible, I found myself irresistibly grasping my poker in unison with the grasp which the burglar cautiously made upon the handle of my door. Finding, as he probably had anticipated, that my door was locked, he lost no time in commencing his operations, with a view of introducing himself into my apartment. The peculiar noise of the center-bit re-commenced, and the burglar no doubt thought all was going on prosperously for the execution of his nefarious project. I, however, felt that I could stand this no longer, and thought it high time to let him know that I was awake and on my guard. Rising from my seat, and stepping heavily across the floor, I shouted in a gruff voice. "Hallo, you scoundrel! Do you wish me to shoot you through the head? Be off; for by heaven! If that hand of yours makes its appearance inside my door you shall carry away a bloody stump." The immediate withdrawal of the center-bit and the hurried retreat of the enemy satisfied me of the success of my threat; and having heard the house-door close, and the footsteps retreating through the garden, I betook myself to bed, and slept soundly during the few hours still left me.

The hostler came to rouse me in the morning, bringing a fly for my conveyance to the inn. When he found the entrance door unbolted, and the panels cut through in three places, he expected, I believe, to find my throat cut as a disagreeable *sequiter*; and was infinitely surprised as well as relieved to see me up and dressed, and in excellent health and spirits. I told him briefly how I had frustrated the burglar's attempt; and as he appeared much interested in the narrative. I accompanied him to the front door, where he examined with much attention the marks of the center-bit with something of the air of a connoisseur admiring a beautiful picture or piece of sculpture.

"Ay, ay," said he at length, as if speaking to himself, "the man that cut them holes know'd how to handle the tool."

"So strongly did this sentiment of admiration appear to operate on his mind, that at the conclusion of our journey (during which I observed that he was driving very abstractedly, getting twice locked with passing carts, and narrowly evading the massacre of a whole drove of young pigs) he informed me that he had invented two lines of poetry on the occasion, which ran as follows:

"Whosomedever handled that there tool,
Nobody oughtn't to call he a fool."

He was evidently extremely proud of this effusion, and much gratified at my assurance that I considered it a very remarkable piece of poetry.

The court opened at nine a.m., and previous to its opening I had much to do. Fresh witnesses on both sides had come up during the night—those on our side it was necessary I should see before going into court. I had an appointment with counsel at eight. Altogether, my head and hands were so full that I had no time to see my landlord and narrate to him my adventure.

Contrary to all expectation, the water case could not be arranged, and was now to be heard before mine; but as it might still be settled at any moment, we were all, attorneys and witnesses, compelled to remain in court in case of such an event occurring, which indeed it did about midday, and until eight o'clock that evening was my every thought absorbed in the conduct and consideration of the cause in which I was engaged, and which was now before the court. At half-past eight the court rose, leaving nearly half of my witnesses unexamined, one result of which was that I should be compelled to spend another night from home.

Having some misgivings as to passing the night again within the lonely house, I repaired at once to the hotel, and calling the landlord, related to him my adventure of the previous night, and expressed my unwillingness to spend the night again in the same quarters. He had heard the story from the hostler, and appeared much excited about it. In conclusion, he asked me to venture there again, accompanied by himself, and the superintendent of the county police, who had heard the story, and thought he had a clue to the offender. To this I readily agreed, and in ten minutes the landlord, superintendent and myself, with a variety of creature comforts supplied from the hotel, where on our way towards the solitary habitation.

As we passed through the streets of the town, the superintendent caught sight of a policeman, to whom he beckoned, and who, after a few words with his superior, which I did not hear, was admitted to fill the vacancy in our carriage. Arrived at the house, and the carriage dismissed, the superintendent, in company with myself and B 45, who, by the way, struck me as having an appearance of great stupidity, proceeded to reconnoiter the premises on the ground floor. We found that the hostler had very judiciously employed a carpenter to repair in a rough way the damaged door.

The landlord, who was well acquainted with the premises, made the shrewd observation that the attempt must have been made by some one pretty conversant with the interior of the house; otherwise, instead of effecting an entrance by the front door, he would have tried it at the back, which was of much less substantial materials, and was more privately situated—the fact being the from long disuse the bolts of the back door were so completely rusted in as to be immovable. All was quiet within the dwelling, and having made all secure below stairs, we ascended to my bedroom, where we intended to make a night of it.

It was chilly—we lighted a fire; the contents of the basket supplied by the landlord afforded, as we found, most luxurious means of gastronomic enjoyment, to say nothing of various long-necked bottles, which were apparently much enjoyed by the policemen, who proved to be great adepts at drawing, which were apparently much enjoyed by the policemen, who proved to be great adepts at drawing corks. Our occupation in this way having at length come to an end, discourse began to flag; we sat round the fire in silence, at single remark from time to time proving that some of us were awake. As for me, in consequence of my previous night's disturbance and the day's fatigue, I could scarcely keep my eyes open. Hour after hour of the night thus passed, and it was evident that we had all given up the idea of the attack upon me being renewed. The candles had burnt out, but the policeman's lantern gave us sufficient light, added to the light glimmering in the grate.

Suddenly, and indeed in the midst of a good story of his own with which he was endeavoring to keep us awake, the policeman stopped, like a hound who has struck a scent, and dropping on his knees, listened with his ear to the ground for a second. The superintendent watched him in silence; I did the same; and it was now that it struck me how strangely I had erred in applying in my own mind the epithet of stupidity to this man, as he suddenly flashed into his own element, the personification of keenness and intelligence.

"I'll tell you what, sir," said the policeman, rising from the ground, "our man's in this room, or not far off; I can hear his breathing, and if I don't mistake, he has a dog with him."

Drawing a pistol from an inner pocket, the superintendent very quietly examined the cap, which he took off, and replaced by one which he fished up from his waistcoat pocket. The landlord, who was a resolute and powerful man, also drew forth a similar weapon, while I availed myself of my last night's resource, the poker, threw a handful of wood on the fire to create a blaze, and now, wide awake, awaited with much curiosity, and anxiety, what would follow. The policeman's bludgeon completed our defense.

It must here be observed that the room was papered with a representation of leaves and flowers in a strongly marked pattern. Taking the lantern in his hand, the policeman proceeded to make a close examination of the wall, which by the application of his knuckles he immediately ascertained to be hollow.

“We have a closet behind this, and must find the door,” said he.

A rigid inspection shortly enable us to do this, although it was concealed with great ingenuity, neither lock nor handle appearing; and the pattern of leaves and flowers being so disposed as to prelude the idea of any opening existing. Aided by a knife from the supper-table the superintendent threw open the door of the closet, which as far as we could perceive was untenanted. A deep, dark, hollow space, however, existed on both sides of the door, in the interior of the wall; and we felt that it was in one of these that we must now look for the object of our search. The superintendent was much excited; and disregarding a warning from B 45, stepped boldly within the door, lifting the lantern high above his head, so as to enable him to gaze into the dark interior. At the same moment, a shot was discharged from the recess, and the superintendent fell heavily to the ground. I was nearest to him, and rushed to his succor: he was bleeding copiously from a wound in the thigh, and my efforts and attention were so absorbed in dragging him beyond the reach of his assailant, and afterwards in endeavoring to staunch the blood by binding my handkerchief tightly round the limb, that I was unable to make any further part in endeavoring to capture the figure who now emerged from the closet, followed by a large white bulldog. This dog was shot at once by our brave landlord. The man, a powerful built and truculent-looking fellow, made directly for the door, fighting his way among his enemies with great vigor and determination.

At length B 45, with a blow from his bludgeon, laid him prostrate. He was then secured and handcuffed, and subsequently marched off to the county jail. On search-him, a discharged pistol and a large clasp-knife were found on his person, and he was recognized as a criminal of a most ferocious character, who had been transported many years before for complicity in a heavy burglary, accompanied with arson and attended with circumstances of great cruelty and atrocity. He was known to have escaped, and suspected to be in the neighborhood, where he had relatives and connections; and as he had in his boyhood lived as groom in the very house where we captured him, we were at once satisfied as to the means by which he obtained so minute an acquaintance with the premises. A reward had been offered by Government for his apprehension. It was eventually discovered that he had for some time been lurking concealed in one of the cellars of this house, where he had been supplied at night with the necessaries of life by his friends, and that he had been locked out of his lair on my arrival; and he was doubtless the perpetrator of many mysterious robberies, which from time to time had been supplied at night with the necessaries of life by his friends, and that he had been locked out of his lair on my arrival; and he was doubtless the perpetrator of many mysterious robberies, which from time to time had been lately committed in the vicinity. He would probably have both robbed murdered me on the previous night, had I been sound asleep, instead of recollecting, providentially, as I must always consider it, the school-boy story of John Armstrong, and his invitation to the diabolical entertainment.

The wounded superintendent happily recovered, and received from Government the reward promised for the apprehension of the felon. And as we frequently meet in the course of our professional avocations, we seldom fail to felicitate each other on the fortunate termination of our short acquaintance with the burglar, from whom I had been thus twice strangely and providentially rescued.

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