

The Burglar-Proof Man

A Detective's Story

I don't suppose you feel much interest in burglars, nor are their habits a very choice theme in polite literature; but then that occurrence at Glen Spring was really an extraordinary affair. I was on the police force at the time and knew Calico Charley well. His father was one of the best machinists in the country, and he took more pains to make a man of his boy than the fellow deserved. The old man had a little machine shop and had the boy Charley with him—a bright, smart chap he was then. When he was twenty-one he got to be pretty lively about town, for the old man had saved up a handsome property and let Charley have more money than was good for him. Then they got up a new safe lock, and it made a big stir, and I believe they went into that sort of thing pretty heavy. Any way Charley went over with the lock to the first world's fair in London. There he got tipped up. I never heard exactly how it was. They put up a wicked job on him, and got him mixed up with a pretty bad London "mob." The story that we heard was that he picked a safe lock for a party that shouldn't have been picked. Any way, he got in with the wrong crowd and they wouldn't let go of him. He stayed over there about five years and got to be a regular first-class sneak, and worked a half a dozen jobs in the most scientific manner. We got word from Scotland Yard that he was coming back, and I dropped in at the old man's place to try to find out something. Old Calcott (that was his name) had got rich. What with his bank lock and his other inventions, his mean way of living, and his luck in buying some down town property before people had an idea how big the city was going to be, he'd come to be a regular nabob. I couldn't get a word out of him about his boy. He said he'd given him up, and was going to retire from business. Money must have come pretty fast then to the old fellow. He showed me half a dozen patents that he was going to sell out; any one of them must have been worth a pile of dollars.

Now that I think of it, it was Calcott who put the first Franklinite in an iron safe, and he invented the rubber flange which prevented the thieves from using the air pump when they wanted to blow up a safe.

It seems that when young Calcott started for America he'd made up his mind to cut his London acquaintances and tricks, and live honestly by going back to the old man. None of us knew it at the time. Well, when he got here a curious thing happened. We had a man in the central office by the name of Meehan, who was in with the east side mob. He was broke about a year afterward. Meehan had got word from the London gang, and he met young Calcott on the dock with facts enough to send him up; and he made a straight offer to him to stay with the east side gang if he didn't want to end his career for usefulness, and Calcott, frightened at the prospect of going to prison, forgot his good resolutions, and joined the thieves.

It was in the winter of '65 that the places along the Hudson river were broken into by a river gang. You may recollect it. Judge Schermerhorn's house at Glen Springs was entered one night and robbed of \$50,000 worth of property. The papers made a good deal of fuss about it, and we had three or four men working at it. One day Mattison comes into the office with a copy of the

Glen Spring Herald, and says: "Look at this. Here's a go. Read that." And he pointed out an advertisement. This is the way it read:

"All burglars, house-breakers, sneak-thieves and assassins are hereby notified that I have over \$60,000 worth of coin, jewels and silverware in my house, which they are welcome to if they will come and take it. No dogs, servants or laborers about the place. The house is a mile from any other residence, and the only occupant is an old man, not in very good health, by the name of
"JOHN CALCOTT."

"It's some old lunatic," says I, "who hasn't got money enough to get credit."

"No," said Mattison. "They say up there he's worth half a million. He lives in a fine house all by himself about two miles from the depot."

It was a three days' talk in the office and then we forgot it. But the advertisement was kept in the paper, and one day it seems Tony Frost, down at Dobb's Ferry, struck it. That was the way it got to the gang. They pooh-hood it as "chaff," but Frost it seems went up to Glen Spring, poked about, sifting the thing, reconnoitered the premises and came down to the city with a big yarn for his pals. His report was that the old "lunny" had got a sign on his fence informing everybody that passed that here was the unprotected house full of valuables that the river gang didn't dare to walk into. He was sure, too, that there wasn't any gammon about the stuff, for he'd found out that old Calcott was immensely rich and kept nearly all his wealth in his house.

Now I don't suppose it's reasonable that a regular cracksman should bite at any such bait as this; but Tony Frost kept poking away at it, and one day somebody in the gang said it was too much to have the profession insulted in that way, unless they were all afraid of the old duffer. After that Tony Frost went to the house, got up as a tramp, and tried the back door. The moment he knocked it flew open, and an old man's voice hailed him over the stairs: "Hello there, what d'you want?"

"Summat to eat, if yer please," says Tony, shuffling in and taking a good look around.

"Go down and try the kitchen," shouts the old man, "and don't stand gaping around that way. There's bread down stairs. If you want to examine the house, come up when your belly's full, and I'll show it to you."

With that Tony goes down the way he came and walks into the kitchen, where a little girl was washing dishes. She gave him some bread and meat and talked quite freely. To his astonishment she told him that the old man had lots of money in the house. She'd seen it. She told him that she lived in the village and went home every night. He must have made a favorable report, because it wasn't long after that that Bill Ketchum, who was the ringleader of the river gang, thought he'd take a look at the house. So up he goes, playing the part of a peddler, and drops the neatest little pack in front of the place when he sees the sign. There it was sure enough, nicely lettered in red on a white ground, and inviting all burglars, house breakers, sneak thieves and assassins to come and take what they could get. The house stood a good ways back from the road, and as Bill went up the wide path he had a good chance to take in the dwelling. It was a large brick house with a

high stone foundation and an iron stoop. There wasn't a shutter nor a pair of blinds on the place. And if anybody had tried to set it afire he would have given up the job as a bad one.

Ketchum got in through the window. He had lots of things in his pack that tickled the fancy of the girl, and he let her amuse herself with them while he ate a sandwich she had given him, and asked her a lot of sly questions. But he couldn't get much out of her, simply because she didn't know anything, so he made up his mind to interview the old man and poke about till he got upstairs, and was hailed over the balusters: "Well, now then, what do you want, hey?"

"Nish gloves, neckties, soaps sheep," says Ketchum pushing up.

"Didn't you read the warning to peddlers on the fence. Ain't you afraid of dogs?" shouted the old man.

"Warnin'!" says Bill, giving himself away.

"All right," sings out the old man quicker than lightning. "You're no peddler. You want to see my property. Come up. I'll show it to you."

Well, this stumped Bill a good deal, but he plucked up and followed Calcott into an upper room, keeping one eye round him and taking in everything but making a great show of trade.

"This room," says Calcott, "is where I sleep. There isn't any lock on the door, and this room is where I keep my money. There's the safe – I never lock it. Here, I'll show you what's in it – stand still – because when I pull the door open it starts a telegraph machine, and three of the best men in the country start from the village – they're officers." With that he jerked the door open.

Bill was a little nervous, and he couldn't help showing it.

"If any of your gang should come here at night I'll put you up to a trick – cut the wires first, they run across the road below the big gate. Don't be nervous. Do you see that? It's gold. Feel the weight of it. There are diamonds. Can you tell a real spark when you see it? I should say they were worth, in the market, between \$30,000 and \$40,000."

The old man kept up this kind of patter, standing there in his old calico wrapper, Bill Ketchum watching him with one eye and wondering whether he was insane or just the smartest man he'd ever met. He had an idea that it was just the easiest thing to knock him over as he stood there and walk off with the plunder. But that hint about the telegraph stopped him. Then the old man showed him out, and when he got into the hall he says: "You're the first peddler I ever saw that carried a revolver in his breast pocket."

Bill started a little, for he had an idea that Calcott must have seen it.

"Ho, ho!" says the old man; "so you have got one?"

The last thing he said to him as he was going down the steps was: "You're not smart enough for this job, my man."

Ketchum told his fellows that he was never so clean winded in his life. "I felt so mean when I was coming away," says he, "that I had half a mind to reform and cut the profession."

Well, not to make the story too long, the upshot of it was that Ketchum, a fellow by the name of Welter and Jack Frost put up the job to crack the old man's place. Ketchum and Frost, I think, went about the business from a kind of pride. They considered they had been challenged and it was a point of honor to take the old man at his word.

They got up there one dark night in May and laid by till long after midnight. Then they got over the fence and sneaked up to the house. They were all heavily armed, and, I forgot to say, were delayed some time looking for the telegraph wire, which they couldn't find, of course, there not being any. Fancy their surprise when, after crawling around the place for a spot to break in, they found that the front door was unlocked and the hall dark. I had been arranged that old Calcott should be shot at sight if he interfered.

There was a good deal of anxiety in the headquarters of the gang that night, for this job had been talked about for a good while, and Ketchum had staked his reputation on it. Dutch Morley was to be at a point in the road about two miles north of the house with a fast team to carry off the "swag," and arrangements had been made at Dobb's Ferry to divvy and cut.

Dutch Morley waited till day begun to break, and then only two of his men turned up. They were covered with blood, and one of them had his arm broken. Welter had been left behind disabled. They had not one ounce of plunder. The story they told was a curious one. The whole gang got round them when they reached their dive, and put the questions to them fast and quick.

"But you fixed the old fellow's flint anyhow?" said somebody.

"We didn't see him at all," answered Ketchum, dolefully. "No, we were in the dark. Why, a lamp wouldn't burn any more'n a stone. We liked to suffocate."

"Oh, that's thin," says another; "why didn't you go out into the air?"

"Because we couldn't get out; we were fastened in like rats. Every window and door closed up with a steel shutter on the inside as tight as a rich man's pocket. There was only one way out – down a back staircase outside, about twelve inches wide; only one of us could go at a time, and when we reached the bottom something fell on us in turn."

That was Ketchum's account of it. Frost was the only plucky one of the lot. He didn't believe in witchcraft, and he vowed he would get square on old Calcott.

With that he sets out to find Calico Charley, who was the best man in the business where there were iron shutters concerned.

The very next day but one after this attempt on Calcott's house, the Glen Spring *Herald* had another notice like this:

"The attempt to rob my house on Thursday night which failed so completely, should not frighten other thieves from making the trial. For the next thirty days there will be more gold and silver on the premises than ever before.

"JOHN CALCOTT."

Frost got hold of Calico Charley and explained the whole thing to him. None of the gang knew Charley's right name, and I don't think he was told the name of the man they were to rob. Frost explained to him that it was the steel shutters that "knocked them," and he thought now they knew the trick one of them could wedge the iron and keep the exit open while the other scoured the property. At all events, the two men cooked up a new job and made sure that they would haul the whole pile, as we say. Charley, who was a careful worker, went at the thing systematically, got his tools ready, and sent Frost off to reconnoiter, and talked very little. They were about two weeks getting ready. In spite of all their plans to keep it dark, the gang got wind of the affair, and of course they were all very anxious to see how it would come out.

Charley and his pal went up to a little station about three miles north of Glen Spring, and started down at night on foot. It was so dark when they got to the house that they could not see the sign. There wasn't a glimmer of light about the place. They were to go softly and try the front door. If it opened, they were to step inside quickly. One of them was to stay at the door to keep the egress open; the other was to go up stairs and secure the valuables. They had two jimmies, a cold chisel and a lot of other traps of Charley's that you can see down there at the central office in a glass case.

They found the front door unfastened as before. Charley pushed it open, and they both stepped quickly and stealthily into the hallway. "Wait a moment," he whispered to his companion, and striking a match; "I want to see how this thing works." With that he struck a light and took a good look at the doorway. "I see the trick," says he; "give me that screw wrench and be quick." In less than two minutes he had the groove in which the steel shutter moved so pinched that no earthly power could have made the thing work. "Now go on," says he, and with that Frost crawls up the stairway. He hadn't any more than got to the top when the iron shutters began to appear – coming up through the floor, and to Charley's astonishment it came down from above also. He saw in a minute that he was beaten. The two halves of the shutter would come to the pinch in the iron and leave not six inches space – through which no human being could escape. So he jams the jimmy upright into the groove to keep the irons apart and calls to Frost in a hoarse whisper to come back. Jack was in the upper hall, and getting scared, makes a bold rush down the stairs, catches his foot in something and lands all in a heap at the bottom, knocking Charley's light into smithereens and making a most infernal noise. Calcott was smart enough, though, to hold his jimmy steady so as to keep the shutters apart, and after Frost had picked himself up and they had both listened, without hearing anything, one of them says with an oath: "We're in a box; let's get out." It was Frost. "No you don't," says the other. "We've come for the stuff this time. I never was beaten yet at this sort of a game, and I ain't beat yet. Take your shooter, follow me up and show me the way."

They got up to the top of the stairs. It was still as death, and Calcott lights a bulls eye. Frost was getting pretty shaky. So Charley says: "Show me the room," and with his lamp in one hand and a pistol in the other he pushes in, leaving Frost in the hall watching the square hole in the door, between the shutters, and expecting every minute that it would close up. It must have been ten minutes before Calcott came back. He had the lamp in his hand yet, and Frost saw that he was as white as a sheet. All he said was: "Come down – it's no go."

When they got to the bottom the shutters separated and disappeared, and the men walked out. "Where's the plunder?" asks Frost. "I haven't got it," says Charley; "I tell you it's no use – the man is burglar-proof. If you don't believe it, go back and try it yourself. I'm off."

With this cock and bull story they got back to their rendezvous. And it was never known, I don't believe, till I interviewed Calico Charley up there at the prison, that he met his own father that night. According to Charley's story to me – the old man was waiting for him. And so struck was the son with remorse that he lost all his pluck and coolness. Whether he ever went back to the old man after he got rid of his pal I have never heard.

It was all fixed by the old man's ingenuity. The house was all wires and levers from one end to t'other. He could turn a crank up in his bedroom and shut the whole house up as tight as a drum. Then he'd slip down into his cellar, turn half a ton of charcoal into his furnace and kill everybody in the place, unless they crawled out of one exit, and then the old fellow had them at his mercy, one by one.

The last time I heard from Charley the warden said he had invented a new catch lock for the cells that could not be opened by anyone but the keeper without its ringing the alarm bell.

The Long Islander [Huntington NY], January 26, 1877

The Elk County Advocate [Ridgway, PA], February 1, 1877

The Weston [WV] *Democrat*, February 3, 1877

The Fresno [California] *Republican*, March 3, 1877