

How We Trapped the Burglars

We lived in a Terrace, at the time in which my tale was laid, in what we may term a sub-district of London, for we were within five miles of Charing Cross, and the dark month of December was upon us. Robberies had been frequent in our neighborhood, and no less than three houses out of ten in the Terrace had been entered by burglars, and robbed, and yet no discovery of the thieves had taken place. So ably, also, had the work of entry been accomplished, that in no case had the inmates been alarmed; and it was not until the servants descended in the morning that the discovery of a robbery was made.

In two out of three cases, an entrance had been effected through a pantry window, by removing a pane of glass, and cutting a small hole in the shutter. The window was on the ground floor and could easily be reached, therefore, from outside.—

In the third robbery, an upper window was entered by means of a knife which forced the fastening, and of course allowed the sash to be raised.

So rapidly had the robberies occurred, that the whole neighborhood was alarmed. The police shook their heads, and looked knowing, but did nothing, and, what was much to be lamented, failed to find any clue to the robbers, who, they at the same time asserted, were evidently not regular cracksmen.

Affairs had reached such a stage, that we used to sleep with a revolver close to our bedsides, when we happened to have a friend who came to stay with us a few days. This friend was an old jungle hunter and was *au fait* at every artifice by which the animal creation might be captured. He was delighted at the idea of having an adventure with the burglar, and scorned the belief that they were more than a match in cunning for even the average bush hunter. It was in vain that we assured him it was an axiom that an accomplished robber could effect an entrance into any house; and, in fact, that through roofs and skylights, down chimneys, and up water-spouts, an accomplished burglar could easily enter the best defended house in the kingdom.

Our friend's argument was, that a burglar was a man on watch, who takes advantage of the residents being asleep and unsuspecting; "but" said he, "let my suspicion be raised, and I will defy any burglar to enter my house without my having due warning; because, although I may be asleep, I shall hear his approach, and can then make my arrangements to welcome him."

Although we were not desirous of having our house robbed, yet we wished much of our friend's confidence should be taken out of him.

A few days after the conversation, the police informed us that several suspicious characters had been seen about, and recommended us to be on the alert. Here, then was a good opportunity to test our friend's skill and wakefulness; so, having informed him of the policeman's warning, I asked him if he felt confident to undertake the defense of the house.

“Certainly,” he replied. “I only demand a dark lantern, and stipulate that you have a pair of galoshes beside your bed. I also must go to bed last, and no servant is to go down stairs before me in the morning; nor is anyone to walk about during the night; then I will defy the burglars.”

Thus it was agreed that my friend was to act the part of guardian, and was to commence his charge on the ensuing night.

Three nights had passed, no alarms had occurred, and no robberies had taken place; and we began to think our alarm had been groundless; but our friend said that *now* was the time to be most guarded, for that no wise burglar would rob when he was expected. Besides, he said, he did not give up hopes of yet having something to say to the robbers before his visit terminated.

I usually sleep very lightly, and therefore awoke readily upon hearing a tap at my bedroom door during the fourth night of our watch. It was my friend’s voice that answered me, and we were requested to come at once. “As soon as I strike a Lucifer match,” I replied.

“Nonsense, man; a light will spoil the whole thing. Come in the dark; slip on a dressing gown and your galoshes, and come at once.”

I was soon provided as he wished, and ready to descend the stairs in the dark.

“Now, remember,” said my friend, “there are seven steps to the first landing, twelve others afterwards, and the fourth step creaks abominably; so be careful to descend without noise.”

The night was boisterous, and many a window and door shook and rattled, so that the slight noise we made in descending the stairs was not sufficient to have alarmed even the most keen-eared listener. We descended to the ground floor, entered the pantry, and then, standing perfectly still, devoted ourselves to listening.

In a very few seconds we heard a grating noise on the shutter, then an interval of quiet, and again a noise. Presently the window was gently raised, and again all was quiet. The noise of a heavy vehicle passing the house seemed to afford an opportunity for a more decided effort; for, while the rattle of the wheels was the loudest, a crack sounded from the shutter, and we could hear that the bolt was forced, for the shutter was gently moved.

“Don’t stir till I do, and hold your breath if possible,” whispered my friend in my ear.

I found the latter a difficult request to comply with; for my heart was beating with rapidity, and thumping against my ribs in the most excited way; still I stood quiet, and trusted my friend.

Nothing could be more cautious than the proceedings of the robbers. The shutter was pushed back in the most slow and steady manner; had there been even a bell fastened to it, I doubt whether it would have been made to ring. At intervals there was a rest from work, evidently for the purpose of listening, and then one of the robbers placed his leg across the window sill, and lightly descended into the pantry.

The night, even out of doors, was very dark, and in the corner where we stood it was as black as Erebus. Our forms, therefore, were quite indistinguishable, and the only chance of discovering us was by touching or hearing us.

The first burglar was soon followed by a second, whilst we could hear that a third, who was outside, was to remain there on watch.

“Now let’s light up,” said number two.

“Not yet, till you pull the shutter to,” replied the other, “or the glimmer’ll be seen; then you come and hold the box.”

The shutter was gently pulled to, and both robbers moved away a few paces from the window by which they had entered. By the quiet way in which they walked, it was evident that they were either without shoes or had on India-rubber coverings. Of their size or weapons, we could see nothing; and I began to doubt whether our position was an agreeable one, as I was armed only with a sword—a weapon, however, I knew how to use;—whilst of my friend’s offence or defense I knew nothing.

I had not long to wait; for a Lucifer was immediately struck by one of the men, and the room consequently lighted up. At the same time my friend drew up the slide of the dark-lantern, and flashed the light on the faces of the two men, at the same time showing the muzzle of a revolver pointed towards them.

“If either of you move, I’ll put a couple of bullets in him,” said my friend, as he placed his back against the window by which the men had entered. “Now drop that crowbar,” he continued in a voice of authority; “down with it; and you,” he said to me, “pull open the shutter, and shout for the police.”

The idea that is usually entertained of a burglar is, that he is a man of great size, strength, and daring, and that he would in an encounter annihilate any moderate man. When, then, the light revealed the faces and forms of the men we had captured, our humble self, although no great pugilist, yet felt able to defeat with either of them if it had come to a matter of fists; and I must own that the pale and astonished faces of the men were not indicative of very great courage.

Our shout for the police was shortly answered; and the burglars, having been subdued by the sight of the revolver, the muzzle of which pointed first at one, and then at the other, were taken by the police, three of whom were speedily on the spot, and conveyed to the lock-up; whilst we, and a detective who had been brought down from London some days previously, examined the details by which the men had effected an entrance.

“You were lucky to see them, especially on such a night,” said the detective. “When once they’re in, they move like mice. We know them; and I expect they’ll get seven years.”

The man was about correct; for one, the older offender, was sentenced to six and the other five years’ penal servitude.

“It will, I suppose, be of no use trying to sleep again tonight, for it is three o’clock,” said my friend.

“I cannot sleep,” was my reply, “and I am dying to hear how you found out that these men were approaching the house.”

Being, then, of one mind, we partly robed ourselves, lighted a fire in the kitchen, and soon being provided with cigars and grog, got very comfortable, and satisfied with our work. My friend then began his account, which he gave much in the following words:

“The burglar, as I told you, has usually the advantage of surprise. He can select the time at which he makes his attack; and, if his proceedings are carried on cautiously, he enters a house before he is heard. Few men would, however, venture to do so, unless they previously had good information as to the interior arrangements of the house; this they obtain either from the servants, tradesmen, or one who visits the locality; or they come themselves as tramps, or with some trifle to sell. Thus, if there are bells attached to doors or windows, they find it out; and they know tolerably well the domestic arrangements of the locality they purpose trying their skill upon. There are, too, conventional methods of protecting a house, such as bolts, bars, chains, locks, &c., all of which require merely time and proper instruments to overcome. It therefore occurred to me that novelty and simplicity combined would be more than a match for the coarse intellect of a burglar, and thus I made my plans, which, you see, answered very well.”

“No doubt about that,” we replied.

“Well now, come up to my room,” he continued, “and see the apparatus.”

We entered his room, and there, close beside his pillow, was a tin box, in the bottom of which was a key.

“This is nearly all the apparatus,” he said. “But you notice some thread fastened to the key. Trace that thread, and you will find it passes that small hole in the sash; and from there it goes down to the back-yard. And now you will understand my plan. I knew that no man could approach the back part of the house without walking up the back-yard, which is only four yards wide. I therefore tied across the back-yard, and about two feet from the ground, some fine black thread; this was made fast on one side, but slipped through a loop and led up to my window on the other. The thread then passed through the hole I bored in the window sash, and was then made fast to this key. Under the key I placed the tin box, you see; and over the key was a bar to prevent its being dragged up more than six inches. Each night, before I went to bed, I just drew the string tight, and fastened it in the yard; taking care to free it before morning, so as to keep the plan a secret. If, then, a man or anything above two feet high, walked to the yard, the string was pressed against, the key was drawn up sharply against the bar, and the string broken; when the key, of course, fell into the box, making quite noise enough to wake me. Immediately the string or thread broke, it would fall to the ground; and the person who had done all this would not have felt anything, the resistance being so slight. I must own I should have preferred horse-hair to thread;—but, as it was, the latter answered as well. I was fast asleep when the key fell; but

immediately awoke, and taking my lantern outside my door, lighted it, and came to you, for I knew that a man only in the back-yard could have dropped my key. So now you see how the burglars were trapped, for you know all the rest.”

“Certainly, you succeeded, and so we ought not to be critical,” we replied. “But suppose they had entered by the front window, instead of by the back? How then?”

“You see this thread.” He said, grasping one near the door. “Pull it.” I did so, and immediately a tin cup dropped into the hand basin.

“That thread goes down stairs, and is fastened across the front window; but I broke that off as I went out of my room, so that it should not impede my journey down stairs. Thus I could at once know whether a man was approaching the back door or had entered by the front window; and in either case, I think I could have captured him.”

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