

The Detective's Trick

The series of burglaries which startled the public in the autumn and early winter of the year 186- was of a description to alarm any household. The general features of each robbery were the same. In each case a gang of from seven to eleven masked men had broken into an isolated dwelling containing an unusual amount of silver or jewels; had intimidated the inmates by threatening them with fire-arms; mastered them, secured them, gagged them, then quietly proceeded methodically to strip the house of all the valuables it contained.

My own position filled me with anxiety. My house is six miles from town, set in the centre of wide grounds, remote from any habitation but the gardener's cottage at the gate. Both my wife and myself had inherited a large amount of bulky family plate. Had my own wishes been carried out every ounce of silver and every jewel we owned would have been sent into town to my bankers', but my wife objected, laughed at my apprehensions, and begged me not to worry.

But I continued to worry, and perplexed myself with conflicting plans for safety, and one day while in town I went to the head-quarters of the police, and inquired for Betts, the detective engaged on this case.

"Bye the bye," said he, after we had talked a few moments, "how many servants have you, Mr. Powers? Please tell me about them individually."

I went over their names, and the detective checked them off in his memorandum-book as I gave the facts connected with them. Saunders, the butler had been with us seventeen years; the cook, five years; coachman and groom, seven; and the chambermaid, three – all fixtures in the household but Marie, my wife's maid, who had come within the last four weeks.

"Ah!" exclaimed Betts, "where did you get Marie? Was she well recommended?"

"Oh yes; she is French, and has just come to this country with a family by the name of De Sturges. She was a nurse to a child who died on the passage, and was thus thrown out of employment; she advertised, and my wife saw her, liked her, and engaged her."

"Did you see her former employers?"

"Yes; both De Sturges and his wife—chatty, agreeable people, of some means, apparently, and are going to settle in New Orleans."

"Describe her, if you please," said Betts, with a keen interest, which surprised me.

"Marie is small, black-eyed, black-haired, compactly built, with remarkably neat hands and feet. She has a saucy, laughing face, and her hair is short, crisp, and curly."

Betts laughed uneasily, then bent his head on his hand, his elbow resting on his knee.

"Mr. Powers," said he at last, looking up with a peculiar flash in his eyes, "I am going to take

you into my confidence, but you must be discreet, or you will ruin me. I've sworn to see this thing through, or resign my position. I'm sick of this infernal foolery of calling myself a detective and letting Satan reign night and day all over the city. The newspapers drive me mad! They know nothing about the obstacles we contend with, and goad us into premature steps, which cost us our reputation, and end in failure. I've been working in the dark these nine weeks but, by Heavens, I believe you've shown me a glimmer of hope."

His manner indicated intense excitement; his words came spasmodically, his face worked, and he had to draw his hand two or three times across his mouth before he could go on. Then producing a note-book, he opened it at well-worn leaves.

"There have been," he began, looking at me with a sort of smile, "five great robberies within the last six months, and each one has these special features, characterizing it as the work of the same hands as the other four:

"First, the combination of seven to eleven masked men, all adroit burglars; second, an isolated house is attacked, sure to contain ample provision for a successful robbery; third, the thieves know the premises; fourth, the leader of the gang is a small man, of active habits, with a clear, shrill voice."

He stopped and looked at me.

"I did not know there was a recognized leader," I remarked.

He drew a large book from his desk. "Here," said he, "is the full testimony in all five cases. Run your eye over it, and you will see that the general facts all coincide. This small man gives directions and leads everybody. I suspect it's a woman."

"Impossible!—No woman has the nerve."

"You have to jump at conclusions sometimes, and find facts to suit. As soon as I had mastered the details, I was impressed by the conviction that one of the thieves had been on the premises before. At Mr. Stewart's for instance, the safe is built into the wall, and a false panel in the wainscot is the only opening to it; yet the first place the burglars approached was that panel, which the little fellow slid aside at once. So I set to work looking for a suspicious character in the house, and found all satisfactory till I came to a French governess who staid with them six weeks last spring. Now, Sir, in each house entered by these masked devils there has been during the past twelve months some similar transient inmate. At Wardwell's it was a French cook, and in a white cap and apron; at the Lewises', the young ladies' page, a clever Buttons; at the Pratts', a protégé of the children, a handsome vagrant Italian boy, with a violin. And now, Mr. Powers," continued Betts, bringing his hand down heavily upon the knee, "I am ready to swear that you have this dangerous inmate under your own roof in the character of your wife's maid."

I started as if I had been shot.

"But Betts, admit that though I am an old fool, my wife is a thorough woman, and, as a rule,

suspects all her own sex, yet she is positively fond of Marie.”

“Marie is a clever little puss. Wherever she has lived, as man or a woman, the whole family have adored her. I have always thought,” he went on, “that no fact about woman is more damning than that the good ones are, as a rule, the dull ones. Put spirit, sparkle, intellect, into any one of them, and she is certain to play the deuce. Has Marie shown an interest in these burglaries?”

There could be no doubt of her having questioned me concerning them with intense eagerness, and if I spoke to my wife about any apprehensions while she was present Marie never lost a word.

“Does she know about your silver? Has she charge of your wife’s diamonds?”

I started. That very morning I had shown her my safes behind a false bookcase in my study, and asked her opinion whether any one could mistrust those innocent looking encyclopedias, or suspect the existence of a closet of six feet square between my room and the library. I was ashamed of my own greenness, but made a clean breast of it to Betts, who was good enough to refrain from expressions of his opinion of my discretion.

“My word for it,” he cried, “she has been waiting to find out that secret, and now she will leave your house within forty-eight hours. Her pretext will be a reasonable one, and she will promise to return, but when she does return she will bring her gang at her heels to rob your house for you.”

The idea of connecting our pretty Marie with such outrages filled me with horror. I rejected it strenuously.

“Whom did you see in town?” inquired my wife, when I returned.

“Don’t speak of it,” said I, looking fearfully about, as if the walls had ears, “but I was with Betts, the detective. You must not repeat what I say, Marie.”

“Never, monsieur!” cried Marie.

“The fact is,” I proceeded, sinking my voice to a sepulchral whisper, “that gang of masked burglars have been traced to New Orleans, and may be arrested by this time.”

“Then I hope, dear,” said my wife, laughing, “that you will again sleep soundly in your bed. After you got up last night for the fourth time to promenade about, pistols in hand, I decided it might be better to eat off pewter and wear French gilt jewelry than to lead such a life.”

I too laughed, and stretched my legs comfortably. “Yes, I mean to sleep like a Christian hereafter; besides, I have brought home a dog.”

“A dog!” exclaimed Marie, startled.

“Yes.” I turned and looked at her attentively. “Don’t you like dogs?”

She protested vehemently that she loved dogs better than anything in the world; and when Jingle, the spaniel, was produced it was so pretty a sight to see her playing with him that I was freshly incensed with Betts for putting his cursed suspicions into my head. She took the little beast to bed with her, I believe, and next morning he would obey her lifted finger.

That very day she received a letter from Madame De Sturges, her former mistress, asking her to come and pass a few hours with her before she left for New Orleans. Marie carried the letter to Mrs. Powers. "Madame wishes to talk to me about Mlle. Helene," pleaded the girl, with tears in her eyes. "To-morrow will be the birthday of the pauvre ange, who lies at the bottom of the cruel sea."

"Poor Madame De Sturges," exclaimed my wife, touched at the thought of the sorrowing mother; "you must spend to-morrow with her, Marie. Go in at nine o'clock and come back at five."

Meanwhile I telegraphed Marie's proposed movements to Betts, and now, with some nervousness, awaited events. The detective had warned me that she would win the dog's affections; that she would leave the house, promising to return, but would not return. Two of these predictions were already verified; but if Marie came back I could laugh at his suspicions, and regard them as futile.

But Marie did not return at five o'clock; a telegram arrived in her stead from Madame De Sturges, saying that she had kept the girl, and would write at length and explain. Next morning a letter was received from that lady. She told my wife she was ill, yet obliged to travel; homesick in a strange land, without a familiar woman's face near her, and that she persuaded, almost forced, Marie to remain and set out with her and her husband for New Orleans that very evening. An incoherent, tear-blotted note from Marie accompanied this, filled with protestations of sorrow at the necessity of thus deserting us.

I instantly telegraphed to Betts that I would meet him at my son-in-law's office at twelve o'clock, then proposed to my wife that she should go to town and spend a couple of days with our daughter, and offered to drive her in myself. We set off within an hour, and after leaving her up town I hurried down, eager to see the detective. It was on the stroke of twelve when I entered the office, and I thought at first that Betts had failed me, for no one was there but a ponderous old gentleman with gold glasses and white side-whiskers. I am not used to intrigues and masquerades, and when I recognized Betts in this disguise I could hardly refrain from exclaiming at his cleverness; but his own coolness kept me within bounds, and I sat down beside him, and began reading a paper. Presently, he edged toward me, and dropped these sentences into my ear:

"It's all going beautifully.—I followed the girl yesterday.—Went to —Hotel.—The De Sturges booked there all straight.—Whole party left Jersey City at nine o'clock last night, ticketed and luggage checked to Washington.—Slipped out of the car at Newark, all three in men's dress, and were back here before midnight.—Met eight fellows I know at a saloon in—street, and I can spot all eleven of 'em this very minute.—They're at a den in —street, getting ready to play their little game some where to-night."

"At my house?" I cried.

He shook his head.

“Dunno,” said he, looking straight into the fire.

“Look here, Betts,” I whispered, “this may be fun to you, but, though I’m no coward, it’s death to me. Why not arrest ‘em now?”

“Yes, just so,” he returned, irritably—“why not? Where’s your evidence? Now, Mr. Powers, just look at this matter sensibly. You know as well as I do that half the thieves we catch get off because no one will swear to their identity at their examination. Now I’m anxious to make a sure thing of it for once, and take my oath that I caught them in the act.”

“You mean to arrest them while they are robbing me?”

“I do.”

“All-right—only I should prefer to have the row in another man’s house.”

I saw that Betts’ opinion of me had gone down to zero; but he disguised his contempt, and went on to tell me that he had dispatched one of his men, Johnson by name, to my place to make a reconnaissance, under the pretense of trimming my evergreens. Upon this man’s report, and upon two or three other open questions which he did not think it worth while to explain, depended his programme for to-night. If by any possibility there was a likelihood of my house being entered at once, I was to know by dinner-time, that I might be prepared for the burglars. I was meantime to go home quietly, and spend my time in my usual manner, so as to excite no comment among the servants, and, receiving no word from Betts, I was to rest satisfied, and consider my house safe for another twenty-four hours.

I went home according to directions, and set about spending the day in my usual way, but the house was so still, and seemed so deserted, I found it impossible to read, even to sit quietly in a chair, for more than five minutes at a time. So I called the little dog, Jingle, and set out for a walk about the grounds, feeling some curiosity to get a glimpse of the detective, Johnson. I heard the sound of an axe through the sombre stillness, and Jingle frisked forward and barked at a man hacking at the firs in the shrubbery. I addressed him regarding his work, and he winked back his appreciation of our mutual sharpness; then I went on, reconnoitered a few minutes longer, and again turned in.

Dinner-time came, and brought with it a semblance of occupation, and when I was half through my meal I suddenly remembered Jingle, and sent for him to keep me company. He was not in the house. It flashed upon me that I had not seen him after passing Johnson in the thicket, and I dispatched the coachman to call him in; but only echoes answered the cry. He had evidently remained out in the grounds with the policeman, and I dismissed the subject from my mind, finished my dessert, and went back to my library fire. No word had come from Betts, hence I was safe for to-night, at all events, and I breathed freer, and stretched my legs and dozed until ten o’clock in comparative comfort. Then, rousing myself, I lit a lantern and went out the door and

along the side piazzas to speak a word with Johnson, who, Betts had arranged, was in any case to keep a watch under the covered carriage-way.

He was not there. I did not understand it. Had he got drunk, or had Betts taken him away? Perhaps, however, he was still loitering at the edge of the grounds; accordingly, I walked out on the lawn, and swung my lantern two or three times. Then, as it was bitter cold, and was beginning to snow, I ordered Saunders to close the house and send the servants to bed, and to bed I went myself.

But as soon as the light was out, and my head touched the pillow, I was freshly impressed by the mystery of Johnson's disappearance, and accordingly I got up, opened my pistol-case, took out two revolvers, and putting them and a sword-cane within easy reach, I returned to bed.

"Deuce take this suspense!" said I, as I again lay down. "I shan't sleep a wink." But after tossing a few times, and assuring myself I could not close my eyes, I fell asleep—at least, after a time, I was awakened by a bright light shining full in my face.

"Good God!" I cried out loud, "they've come to-night." For three men, with black cambric masks concealing their faces, stood over me, each pointing a pistol at my head.

"Please to get up, Mr. Powers," said one of them, in a cool, civil way, "please put on that dressing-gown and those slippers. You shall not be harmed in the least if you will only be quiet and obey directions." With three pistols aimed square in his eyes any man will be docile, I suppose; at least I got up, and put on dressing-gown and slippers. Then one of the men caught my arms, drew them behind, and manacled them; another gagged me with one of my own silk handkerchiefs; and thus rendered harmless, I was led down stairs, where my household, in various stages of night-attire, gagged and tied back to back, were awaiting me in the dining-room. I was put into an arm-chair, and fastened to it by feet and hands, then was left alone to stare about me.

Maddened, desperate though I was, when I discovered that the sixth of the prisoners was Johnson, the detective, I recognized him with a keen sense of the ridiculous, and only wished that Betts—whom I was mentally anathematizing with curses not loud but deep—were in his place, and tasting some of our humiliation.

Besides the three masked men who had mastered me and brought me down, there were five others in the dining-room. Two were left as sentinels over us, and the rest at once fell to work in a way that meant business. A small, active man (was it our Marie?) motioned toward the sideboard. It was wheeled aside, and, stepping forward, he pressed the sliding panel, and disclosed the closet where the silver in daily use were kept, and the shelves were at once stripped, and the contents piled on the table.

The bedrooms upstairs were next visited, the locks of drawers and wardrobes wrenched apart, and the contents thrown pell-mell on the floor for the chief expert to decide on what should be carried off. The upper rooms gutted, they came down with their spoils, which they piled high before our eyes on the table, and then leaving us again alone with our sentinels, they went

through the entry into my library.

It was a dark hour. I leaned back my head and closed my eyes, and felt that fate was cruel to me. Only one consolation illumined the blackness of my despair—my wife had carried her jewels to town with her, and I was spared the humiliation of telling her I had lost them for her through my idiotic faith in Betts. There was a long silence now, which I understood but too well, it was followed by three muffled explosions that shook the house like an earthquake, and almost simultaneously was heard the noise of a scuffle, and I opened my eyes to see the room filled with policemen, and hear pistol-shots exchanged, while our two sentinels were thrown down, disarmed, and pinioned before our eyes.

I looked and listened, mentally stunned, without clear comprehension of the meaning of the uproar, for with the noise of the fire-arms, the clang of manacles, and the beat of heavy feet, the tumult was somewhat terrifying.

In less time than it takes me to describe it, the situation had been reversed, and now Betts, the detective, appeared in the door at the head of his posse of men, who brought in eight of the captured burglars, two of them wounded and bleeding profusely, while the rest showed signs of having maintained a stout resistance; all had lost their masks in the melee, and disclosed sullen and brutal visages.

“How are you, Mr. Powers?” inquired Betts, coming forward and releasing me. “I hope you’re not hurt. I beg your pardon for taking possession of your house in this way.”

“Why did you make me think I was safe for to-night, Betts?”

“Because,” he replied, with a shrug, “I discovered you were just a little upset at the prospect, and I felt afraid of you.” He ran his eye over the group beside me, and when he saw Johnson, he grinned, and going up to him, knocked his manacles off. “You are a pretty detective, you are,” said he, “to be caught and tied up by the very fellows you were waiting for!”

“Betts,” I gasped suddenly, “You haven’t got the little one.”

He gave a tigerish cry, and glared from one to the other of his prisoners. “You are sure there was another?”

In another moment he had set picked men at work searching both house and grounds; but he never succeeded in finding even a trace of the eleventh of the party of burglars. Nor even after the conviction and heavy sentence of the other ten would any one of them confess the secret of their leadership. I had easily identified M. and Madame De Sturges—both swarthy and robust Frenchmen—among them, but in spite of all my efforts, neither one could be induced even to acknowledge they had ever heard of such a person as Marie, or that they had ever masqueraded under the respectable disguise of her employers.

But when the snows melted off in the spring one little silent witness came to light, and told his pitiful story against her; it was the dog Jingle, found dead in the shrubbery, his throat cut, and his

frozen eyes still upturned in reproachful agony. – *Harper's Bazar*.

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