

The Burglar's Hat

by a Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

“HELP! murder! Help!

If you were to hear those cries in the middle of the night, of course you'd run, wouldn't you? Well, so did I. As I approached the house from whence the voice proceeded, I saw a woman in her night-dress at the parlor window still screaming “Help!”

“What's the matter?” I inquired.

“Oh! make haste in; I'm sure there's murder going on.”

“Then you must let me in. Open the door, quick.”

“Oh! I cannot; I should be murdered.”

“What do you mean? Who's hurting you?”

“Oh! not me, but my mistress. Somebody I'm sure is murdering her. I heard the blows, and I hear her groans now. Hark! Oh! don't *you* hear them!”

It was no use to stand there parleying. The street door looked too heavy and strong to be easily forced in, so I mounted the railings, and, by the aid of the water-pipe, somehow or other, I can't tell you how, reached the window; and, with a little assistance from the woman, who clutched me by the coat collar, I managed to get into the room.

“Now, young woman, what is it?”

“Hush! there's some one murdering missus up-stairs.” “How do you know?”

“I heard them break into the back-parlor window and go up-stairs. I was afraid to stir. Then I heard them go into mistress's room. I could hear them strike her, and then she screamed, and then her groans. Oh, dear, we shall all be murdered!”

“Now you keep quiet. Which way is it?”

“I'll open the door softly. Can you find your way up?”

I crept cautiously up the stairs, and, by a dim light shining through a door standing ajar, I was guided to the scene of action. I heard a noise of keys and of rummaging as I approached the door, and taking out my staff, I prepared for an encounter.

As yet I had no knowledge of how many villains I should have to engage with; but as I gently pushed open the door with my left hand and looked in, I saw, by the light of a lantern held by one ruffian who was searching a bureau, that there were three of them. The other two were acting

as sentinels—one over an old lady lying in the bed, the other with his back to the door by which I entered.

Of course my appearance was quite unexpected, and disturbed the operations of the villains. The fellow with the lantern was the first to see me, as he happened to turn the light full on my face just as I put my head in.

“A policeman, by G—d!”

The fellow’s head was bared for the blow, and I struck it. At the same moment the other two fellows sprang upon me, and with some heavy instrument—a *jimmy*, or life-preserver, or something of that sort—struck me two or three violent blows on the head, and I lost my consciousness.

When I recovered my senses I found myself on the floor of another room, with the young woman I had first seen bathing my temples with vinegar. Two other policemen stood looking on.

“Well, old fellow, feel all right?”

“What’s all this?” I inquired. “What does it mean?”

“It means that you have had a good thump on the head, and have been to sleep over it.”

“Well, I thought I’d been dreaming; where’s those rascals?”

“We were just going to ask *you*. Come, tell us what you did with them.”

“I have some recollection that I gave one fellow a token of remembrance, and—”

“And—he returned the compliment; so you’re quits.”

“I feel very queer,” I said, putting my hand to my head, and feeling a lump as big as an egg.

“No doubt you do. You’ve had that which would make any man feel queer. Hardly expected to see you open your eyes again. Who gave it to you?”

“I think I know; but I must consider. But what brought you here?”

“I brought ’em, sir,” answered the maid-servant. “I listened after you went up stairs, and I heard a scuffle and thought perhaps the villains would murder you too; so I opened the street door and let these gentlemen in.”

“Yes, and when we came up-stairs we found you lying stiff on the floor beside the bed where the old lady lay murdered. The staircase window was open. We looked out, but could see nothing; but, upon listening, could hear a noise like some one scrambling over a wall. I ran round into the

court at the back of the house, but was too late; the fellows got dear off. How many of them were there?"

"I saw three."

"Did you recognize them?"

"I have seen one of the fellows' face before, but my head's so confused I can't say where now."

"Take time to consider. The old lady's dead—you'll have to attend the inquest."

In searching the premises for traces of the murderers, we found an old hat in the back yard, which had evidently been dropped in the flight. I took charge of this, hoping some day to find the owner.

The usual inquiries were made on the neighboring beats as to the appearance of any suspicious characters, but nothing satisfactory was elicited.

I took particular care of that hat; there was nothing very remarkable about it, but still I held on to it with a kind of apprehension that it would serve as a clue. It was the only one I could reckon upon, so I made the most of it.

At that time I kept a little spaniel, one of king Charles's breed, which I had found astray in the street one night. I used to lock him in my room while I was on duty. One day, upon returning home, I found he had been amusing himself with that hat, and in his sportiveness had torn the lining out. Of course I scolded him; but, from his frisking about, I think he fancied I was expressing approval of his conduct. However, I picked up the hat and restored the lining to the inside; in doing so I saw a little slip of paper, quite saturated with grease, adhering to the felt. Upon removing it I found it to be the fragment of a letter, evidently torn off to preserve the writer's address, which was "Henry Miller, — Street, Boston." The street was illegible.

I set myself to working out this clue. The owner of the hat was doubtless acquainted with this Henry Miller. I must see Miller. But how to find him? He might not be a resident at Boston, or, if he were, only a temporary one—perhaps a transient lodger.

However, I started immediately for Boston, and instituted inquiries among the police authorities if any one of that name was known to them.

There was none.

I next proceeded to the post-office, and, although every facility was afforded me, no Henry Miller was known to any of the carriers. After reiterating my inquiries, one old man said he thought he remembered that name, and directed me to the house where he had delivered letters for it. To this house I bent my steps, but no such person resided there, nor was the name known to the present tenant. I returned again to the post-office, and while relating my failure, a person accidentally present suggested that I should apply to a certain retired publican who was the oldest

inhabitant of that neighborhood, and who probably knew everybody that had lived in it for the previous thirty years. He had retired from business life to a comfortable little villa some three or four miles off. I made the best of my way thither, and was very courteously received.

He remembered the name of Miller. It belonged to a gentleman who had taken a newly built mansion in —Street, but from some cause or other connected with the state of the house, had quitted, after occupying it only three months. He did not know where he was gone; but the man who removed his furniture lived in the same neighborhood, and could probably give me the information I required.

I found out this man without much difficulty. He informed me that Mr. Miller had gone to live at Providence. He described him as a gentleman in easy circumstances, without any trade or profession.

You must know that the old hat was my companion on the voyage of discovery, safely locked in a travelling hat case. I made the best of my way to Providence, and introduced myself to Mr. Henry Miller.

I frankly stated the matter to him, showed him the hat and the slip of paper with his name upon it that I had discovered under the lining.

“I remember it well,” he said. “That hat was mine, and that slip of paper I put where you found it one day when I was travelling by railroad to New York. I put it there to identify my hat among the many others it might happen to be mixed with at the various public places to which I was going.”

“And did you lose the hat, sir, while in New York?”

“No, it got knocked about a good deal, so before leaving town I gave it to my servant.”

“Is he with you now?”

“No, the foolish fellow got married and remained in New York.”

“Do you know his address?”

“Oh, yes! He keeps the confectionary at No.—, Greenwich Street.”

This concluded my negotiation with Mr. Miller. My next step was to return to New York and see his *ci-devant* servant, and the desired interview was soon obtained.

Of course I introduced the subject of the hat.

“Your late master, Mr. Miller, has, for particular reasons, a desire to refer to a hat he gave you when you quitted his service; it happens to contain some memoranda of importance which he wishes to refer to. Have you that hat still by you?”

“No, I am sorry to say I have not. It did not fit me, so I disposed of it.”

“Of course you remember to whom?”

“Oh, yes! I exchanged it for some trifle with Hodson, the grocer.” “And where is Mr. Hodson to be found?”

“Well, he lives up by Chelsea. I know his store; but I do not know what street it is in. However, you can easily find it by looking in the directory.”

“Thank you, that is sufficient.”

Mr. Hodson fortunately was at home when I called. He acknowledged the transaction of the “hat,” but *he* had not got it. He had sold it to—he did not know who.

“But you have some knowledge of the man, surely. Did you never see him before? have you never seen him since?”

“Oh, yes! I used to see him pass my store almost every day. I had that hat in my hand one morning, brushing it up a bit, and he came up and asked me if it was for sale. I had no particular fancy for it, so I said, ‘Yes, for half-a-dollar;’ and he bought it at once.”

“Of course it fitted him? Have you seen him with it on?”

“Yes, but not lately. I think it must be a fortnight since I saw him.”

“And you don’t know where to find him?”

“I do not; but there’s a neighbor there who I think does,” pointing to a public-house nearly opposite.

“But who am I to ask about?”

“Ah! I did not think of that. Well, I don’t know his name, but I think I can describe him.”

We crossed over together to the porter-house, and called for some ale. The grocer put certain leading questions to the host, which caused the latter to recognize the worthy of whom we were in search.

“Yes, I know. He had not been here for a week or so, but came last night. Said he had been laid up. Wanted to sell me a gold ring. I did not buy it; but he left it with me to try and sell for him. There it is.”

“This,” said I, “is a lady’s ring. I know a young-lady I think it will suit. I will bring her to look at it. Do you know the owner’s name?”

“His companions call him Bob Lester. I don’t know where he lives, but I dare say he will be here this evening.”

“Will you send him over to me?” said the grocer. “Certainly. Perhaps you may do a little business together.” “Not unlikely. Send him over.”

I was not sure that I might venture to take the grocer into my confidence; so I thought I might work the oracle by means of the ring. I wanted the servant of the murdered old lady to see this ring. Perhaps she might recognize it.

I brought her up immediately to the porter-house. When the ring was shown to her she at once identified it as having belonged to her late mistress.

It now seemed highly probable that Bob Lester was one of the gang who had robbed and murdered the old lady.

The price the keeper of the porter-house was instructed to ask for the ring was eight dollars. I wanted to negotiate with the owner, if possible; so I made an offer of seven dollars, and was to call in the evening for an answer.

I arranged with the grocer to negotiate for the ring, for I did not deem it advisable to show myself in the matter at present. I would remain in his store while he made the bargain, and brought the owner over to me to conclude it.

According to appointment, I was at the grocer’s at seven o’clock. He went over to the porter-house while I waited in his store.

An hour passed away and he did not return, and I began to grow fidgety, when my attention was attracted by a crowd in the street following a drunken man in charge of two policemen.

At the same moment the grocer came in laughing.

“There he goes. That’s our man who has the ring to dispose of. He came into the porter-house quite drunk, and made such a disturbance that he is going to be locked up.”

I quickly followed him to the station. Arrived there, I made such a communication to the captain in charge as induced him to have the man searched.

In his pocket we found a small canvas bag containing a few trinkets, a key to a Hobbs lock, and a quantity of duplicates. A key of a room door was also found in another pocket.

I had no doubt these articles were the proceeds of the robbery at which I had figured, but I could not identify this man as one of the three I had encountered. In fact, from the momentary glance I had of two of them, there was scarcely time to recognize their features. Of the other I saw enough to enable me to identify him in the event of meeting with him.

At the station I left instructions that if any one called to see the drunken man he should be detained.

I then proceeded to the residence of the murdered lady. Her servant was able to identify all the articles found in the drunkard's pocket, and the Hobbs key was found to fit a writing desk among the lady's property.

Late in the evening I made a visit to the station. There I found a man who, coming to look after his friend, the drunkard that was locked up, had, agreeably to my instructions, been detained.

Upon seeing him I had little doubt that he was the man whose face I had seen on the occasion of my encounter with the murderers and thieves.

Next morning, on being taken before the magistrate, they were both charged with the robbery and murder, and remanded for a week. I had not previously been able to ascertain where these men lived; but they were recognized in court by several parties, and their whereabouts easily discovered.

Upon searching the lodgings of the man first arrested, a complete set of housebreaking implements was found, besides many articles the evident produce of burglaries.

There was yet another of the gang to be found, and the way I fell in with him was rather singular.

I was standing one Sunday evening at the bar of a certain porter-house near the Park, taking a quiet glass of ale, and "looking on," when a buxom little maid-servant came in for her supper beer, with a jug in one hand and a door-key in the other.

She told the bar-tender how miserable she felt, all alone in the big house, as the family had gone out for the day, and they would not return until very late.

There were two men drinking sherry-cobblers at the bar at the same time, who overheard what the tattling girl had said; and as she left the porter-house they quickly followed and spoke to her.

Not liking their appearance, and thinking they meant no good, I asked the bartender if he knew what house the girl had come from. He told me it was No. — in the same street. I finished my ale, and went out to see what was going on.

As I approached the house, but on the opposite side, I saw the girl in conversation with the men, and after a time they all went into the house together. I remained in front of the house, watching.

After the lapse of about half an hour I saw the front door opened, and shut again; *but no one came out*. Shortly after this I saw a light in the second floor, and the shadow of a man moving about the room.

I at once understood what was going on; and I immediately returned to the porter-house, and requested that a messenger should be sent (quietly) to the station-house for assistance.

It speedily arrived. In the course of half an hour the street door, at which we were stationed, was cautiously opened, and a man, with a large parcel in his hand, was about to pass out, when he suddenly found himself pounced upon and walked off to the station. We left an officer at the door of the house.

Upon searching our prisoner we found enough of jewelry, plate, and other valuables in his pocket to stock a small shop. Among other articles was a purse made of a woman's hair; and as it was the only one of the kind I had ever seen, I particularly remarked it. It only contained a bent gold coin which probably you never saw, as none have been in circulation for the last forty years.

Having locked up our prisoner, we returned to the house. All appeared quiet there. After waiting some time, it occurred to me that the other fellow might be murdering the girl, or worse; so I gave a loud double knock and ring.

After a longer delay than appeared to me necessary, the door was opened by the girl. I inquired if her master was at home.

She replied that he was not—that there was nobody in the house but herself.

“Where,” I asked, “are the men you let in with you when you fetched your beer?”

“I let no men in,” she replied, greatly confused; “they are gone.”

“One is gone, but there's one inside now, and he's after no good.”

“How can you say so? I'm sure—”

“I'm sure the house has been robbed. We are policemen, and must search the house.”

“What do you mean! I don't understand you.”

“We'll soon explain everything.”

We entered the house, and proceeded to the kitchen in search of the other rascal, but he was nowhere to be seen. We had a long search for him, and at last found him in a small closet.

We quickly conveyed him to the station. When searched, nothing was found upon him but a silver spoon.

I did not at all associate these men with the murder of the old lady; but I happened to mention the story of the capture to her servant, and when I spoke of the hair purse and the gold piece, she exclaimed, —

“Why, that must belong to poor missus. She had such a purse, and has shown it to me many a time. I could swear to it if I could see it.”

“You shall see it.”

When, on the Monday morning, I visited the fellows I had arrested on the Sunday night, I fancied the face of the one upon whom the purse was found looked familiar to me. Come to furbish up my memory, I at length arrived at the conclusion that he was the one upon whom I fetched so unlucky a blow. I asked a surgeon to examine his head, to see if there were any marks of a recent wound.

The result of his examination was quite conclusive and satisfactory. I had no doubt of my man, and certain evidence produced at the trial confirmed it.

The three villains, upon very good circumstantial evidence, were all found guilty, and suffered the extreme penalty of the law. I doubt if they would have ever been detected had it not been for the BURGLAR’S HAT.

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