

The Wrong Burglar

“Perhaps I should say the ‘wronged’ burglar,” said my friend Barrister — (from whom I received the following narrative as we were steaming down from Albany last week behind the locomotive “Superior;”) “wronged, because he was legally convicted of one burglary, when he was only morally guilty of another.”

Returning from the Court of Appeals, we had been giving reminiscences of our early professional career. What preceded the story is unnecessary to recount.

“I had unsuccessfully defended him before Recorder Riker, nearly a quarter century since, for breaking into a Pearl Street store”—was the point at which I pursue my friend’s narrative. “The testimony fixed him in the vicinity of the crime, and he could not explain his presence there, nor could he give testimony of that good character which the Judges in Cancemi’s case have just held of such weight—so much so, that we shall never again convict men of a first offense! But he was not guilty, and why not I will tell” (continued H——,) [“]as I paraphrase his own story, narrated in his cell the night before he went up.

“‘Stony Davis and I,’ said the culprit, ‘and by Stony Davis I means the hard faced man as brought you the fee (we’ve been pals for thirty years,) were agoing that night to pay a sort of outside visit to a German store in Maiden Lane. When we looks around a place to see about bolts, and inside fixins, and who leaves last and cums fust, and where the safe-keys are left, and all sich-like things, that’s wot we calls an outside visit. It’s never policy to go into a store and take things fust off: that ought to be left to another time—and the blowing, washy night’s, them’s the times for a full crack! Well, Stony Davis and me was there with our jimmy and lantern when the alarm from Pearl Street was given, and Stony was fool enough to run, instead of dodging into an area. Of course I had to follow, and that made the pavement tramp the harder; but as Stony ran the fastest he got off. I was nabbed with the jimmy, and that killed me on the trial, as you sed it would. But the porter’s gabber about recognizing me in the daytime prowling about the store was lively fancy, cos I never seed the place nowise. It was good retribution, as the Judge called it, though; for among my first burglaries in London, afore I come over, I shot one of his tribe—one of these porter men: and I dare say I’m to be punished for that after all the years gone by since it wer done. When that thing happened, they arrested no end of wrong chaps for that, and the Coroner blundered hissself into a mess. This was the way. The store had a little house next to it. Stony Davis and I hired rooms there, as emigrants just come over from Antwerp, and the rooms were against the store. Maybe we didn’t look German, though, with our false beards and pipes. The big chests over which the landlord and the carriers sweated were filled with pieces of scrap-iron! We kept up a very good character there for a week, and made one or two visits inside of the store about a bogus draft we had, and looked around pretty well fust. But one Saturday night, about midnight, we began operations. The windows were hung with sheets and heavy brown paper, and the floor was well stuffed. The featherbed spread on the floor was to catch the pieces of mortar; and, by good luck, the floor of the second story of the store started from about my hight. Stony Davis had laid in a good five gallon of ale, and we went at it by turns. There was two walls to break through, and we couldn’t give hard blows, but had to pick, as it were. The fust wall must have been built fifty years—the mortar was a sight harder than the brick. So it was ten o’clock Sunday morning, at least, afore we got a hole through. Stony Davis was tougher than I—

there's where he gets his name from—so he went in fust, and I followed. We struck a light, and blazes! what a sight. They had been taking what the tradesfolk call “account stock,” and there had been no end of measurin' and unfolding. The shawls and silks and satins were piled on the counters. Stony Davis fairly hugged me, and sez he, ‘Plimmy, my dear, we can go half over England and not find this, and now we shall live like publicans!’ So we went right to work. Shawls we gave the go-by—they are too bulky, and don't sell to the nunkies and fences so well. Velvets, them's the go! So are satins. They make sweet packages, and stow away like ribbons! It didn't take long to get the scrap-iron out of one chest, and put in the things. The papers said what was right—every blessed bit of velvet and satin went, and how *we* lost them, too, you'll see in a minute. When the chest was full, we agreed to send Stony Davis off t'other side of Holborn, to Jew Mose, and fence the swag. We dressed up German again, as if ‘*mine frien*’ was going away. There was a carrier hard by, although it was Sunday—he had been carrying a smallpox corpse to a graveyard, and was in spirits for a job to ventilate himself—so we got him. Blowed if the street warn't charmed with the tears I shed over ‘*mine frien*’ at the door as we parted. I kissed him on the nose and ears and everywhere, false hair and all, I was so sorry; even the carrier thought we were parting forever. And then, Stony off, I went back to my lonely German exile, *alias* (as indictments say) the store, to stow away some light stuff in a bundle—ribbons and such light things. I don't know what possessed me, but I thought I would go downstairs and examine the safe. Taking my lantern, jimmy, file, oil bottle, and some vitriol in its stone case, I went downstairs, and, to my delight, found, by turning my master wire about, that the double lock was not turned—only the upper padlock held. Them was the infancy of safes, and before Hobbs's time of day. In an instant, regardless of everything, I applied the vitriol to the padlock, and filled the socket full, so as to soften the hasp. I sat down on a chair to wait a bit. That was as bad a piece of luck as ever comes to a cracksman. I had been hard at work nearly twenty hours, and the excitement was wearing away. What wonder I fell asleep? I dreamed I was in a bank vault with nothing but gold. I tossed it—I tumbled it about—I scooped it up—I shovelled it with my boots—I laid down and kissed it—I filled my pockets with it—and then fell to counting it by thousands, into bags! It was a glorified dream. I have had many such—even in prison. Talk of sperrits or wines! There's nothing like the sight or touch of gold to bring the reel to the cracksman's brain.

“I awoke from it!

“Horrible! Not three feet from me stood a man. I shall never forget the smile upon his face as he looked. There was triumph and glee in every line of his lips as they worked up and down, sort of maliciously like—just the smile which you see on a policeman's face when he sez to himself, “Now, my fine fellow, I've got you foul!” I looked for but an instant. I saw the thing at once, and how, betrayed by the yawning muss, I had been discovered. Just as quick as I strike my knee with this hand, I sprung for his throat and caught it. He dropped like a plummet in water when it sounds “thug,” and my free hand was got over his mouth. The lantern was just going out; but over his shoulder I could see a streak of light as if from a street lamp. That told me he had come in and left the front door ajar. I thought for another instant, had he persons in company? for if he had, I would have let him go. To kill him at such odds, would have been a fearful waste of my life. I held him so, by the throat and mouth, for full three minutes, and listened eager-like. He seemed paralyzed. I heard nothing near by; but a clock struck nine a few squares away. Then he began to struggle. I collected all my strength and turned him to the floor. “Are you alone?” said

I. He wheezed a fearful “Yes.” So much the better, thought I to myself. The lantern-wick gave a spiteful sputter—flashed up and went out. By the flash, he must have seen the determination on my face, for he gave a fearful roll and freed his mouth; but my grip weakened his voice to a whisper. There we were in the dark—and oh, *so* dark! and he so near the *great* dark! He whispered, “I’ll—open—the—safe; I’ll—give—you—all; but—spare—life.” For a moment I relented. I had never exactly killed a man—only stood by at it—but I knew what I’d suffer if I let him go. So I knelt upon his breast, tightened his throat, and held him. How he rolled! It seemed a year before he was still—and then he was *very* still. I didn’t need to light a match to look at him, as I first thought I would do. I *felt* his look, and saw the smile stiffen into a spasm. Then I stepped softly to the door, shut it, and went out. I forgot about ribbons, safe, hole in the wall, and every thing after that.

“I walked boldly away for a few blocks, and then ran for it three miles over to Jew Moses’. Stony was there with the chest, and the bargain was being struck. That rascal, Moses, saw by my face something had happened. Indeed my right palm was bloody where the blood must have run from the man’s nose. ‘Holy Abraham!’ said the infernal rascal, ‘have you been at dog’s mischief?’ I nodded. ‘Then I gives you up. These trifles here—found in your house as they will be—may hang *you*.’ I broke in, ‘and if you dare to Jew me I’ll blab the fust!’ Stony stepped in and the quarrel was stopped; but the upshot of that business was, the Jew got all the goods—moved off to where we never knew—which was lucky for all of us when the carrier turned up—and we got not a farthing. They was worth £1,000; for the papers the next day was full of the thing. It is nigh ten years ago at this time of my tellin’ you; but I remember the whole matter. It seems the porter was found in the morning dead. The holes in the wall explained every thing as to how and why he died. It seemed too, from his wife’s story, that he remembered in evening church about the safe, and went down to lock it. There was fifteen thousand sovereigns in gold in it, paid into the store after bank hours Saturday. Stony Davis and I grieved over the thing more for the gold than the man. We went off to Liverpool, and so to Dublin. How little we made by that night’s work has been often talked over by Stony Davis and I since we’ve jobbed together in ‘Meriky.’

“I was more shocked by his hardness of soul than I can now tell you” (concluded H——;) “but it had just this effect upon me—I never again defended a villain. First offenders and the unfortunate I always attended to, but never rascals. Perhaps, too, that incident gave me my taste for prosecutions— But here is Thirty-first Street; and now to supper and bed with what appetite we may.”

The Sacramento [CA] *Bee*, March 30, 1858

Strange Stories of a Detective; or, Curiosities of Crime by Russell, William. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1863.