

A Burglar Trap:

And the Sweet-Looking Set of Thieves It Caught.

I WAS only a girl of sixteen when I trapped the burglars and received the five-thousand-dollar reward for doing so.

Our family were in Europe during the fall, and I, in their absence, was head of the house. With me were my elder brother and his wife, two servants and Michael, the hired man, who slept in the barn and managed our country place.

There had been several robberies in our pretty town, mostly in outlying and lonely houses such as ours, and no traces could be had of the thieves in spite of the large rewards offered or of the wise detectives sent from the adjacent city. The burglaries had all been skillfully done, nothing being taken except silver plate and jewels, and in only one case was violence offered.

As I said before, I was "head of the house," and in consequence there was little knowledge and no opposition to the plans I used to carry out my crack-brained scheme.

In a recess in our dining-room stood a large, old-fashioned iron safe which opened with a big brass key and which contained considerable silverware and jewelry. These I carefully packed and shipped to our jeweler in the city.

To take their place I had sent out a lot of showy, plated stuff, which I carelessly displayed in full view of the windows as a tempting bait for the expected burglars.

In the cellar beneath the safe was a small, corner brick-walled room, with two doors, and a narrow, outside window. These I had filled with brick, making the room strong and tight. In front of the safe, just where one would naturally stand in opening it, I had a square cut from the floor, beams and all, and the hole neatly fitted with a trap, such as is used in the theaters for pantomimes. This cost me something, for it was necessary to have a stage carpenter arrange it.

In my bedchamber, directly overhead, I had a peep-hole made in the floor, through which I could see the safe below. Alongside of this hole was a wire which, when pulled, would unbolt the trap and drop whoever was on it in the dark and secure tomb beneath.

Then I bought a barrel of the cheapest and stickiest molasses I could find and had it poured into a great wooden box built on the cellar floor exactly under the trap. I calculated that my robbers, if ever they got in it, would be so occupied in getting out that it would give me plenty of time to call in the help needed to complete their capture.

Every thing was ready at last, and, as I had moved so quietly in the matter, I was satisfied that no one outside or in had any suspicions of what I was up to.

In order to know when the robbers came, I, after every one had gone to sleep, each night stretched a thread across the first story hall and rooms a foot from the floor carrying the end, on

which was tied a wet towel, to a stick fastened to my bedstead just over my pillow. I calculated that the house-breakers would unknowingly snap the thread while moving around in the dark, and then, the wet rag falling on my face, would arouse me.

For some weeks I anxiously waited for my dreaded visitors to come. The strain made me nervous and every calling tramp and peddler gave me a shock.

Late one night, after I had nearly despaired of being robbed, I was alone in the dining-room with my back to the piazza window writing a letter. Happening to glance in the mirror of the buffet opposite I fancied I saw from the reflection a movement of the blinds close behind me. Carelessly resting my head on my hand and peering between my fingers I could see plainly in the glass a pair of sharp eyes watching me.

My robber was evidently taking preparatory observations.

After my fright was over I leisurely finished my letter, and rising, coolly opened the safe and began putting the silverware away, making, at the same time, a brilliant display of what was already inside. Then I locked the safe door and laid the key under the mat of the clock on the mantel.

I knew the eyes saw every thing I did, as I wanted them to do, and I took particular pains to let their owner know that he would find the key under the clock, and not under my pillow.

Then I picked up some things that were scattered about, turned out the light and with an effort slowly walked past the window to the hall, where— I confess— I ran upstairs as fast as my trembling legs would carry me.

This happened on a Thursday night in October, and on the Saturday night following the robbery took place.

I was entirely alone in the house, for my brother and his wife, taking advantage of the midnight train, had gone to the city and had not returned, owing, as I learned afterward, to their missing the train. The upstairs servant was at her mother's, sick, and the cook was off visiting a friend, who, treating her too well, made it impossible for her to walk home before the next day. Our hired man, after bringing in the milk, had started for his barn-room, where I supposed he was sound asleep.

I sat up in the parlor with the cat till one o'clock, heard the train arrive, and after vainly waiting for the sound of the village hack bringing my brother home, opened the front door to listen. O! how black the night was. I quickly closed and bolted the door, and, brave as I naturally was, when I locked myself in my bedroom I shivered at the thought that the burglars might have chosen that time to visit me.

I couldn't sleep—only lay there hoping and praying they wouldn't. After a while I felt calmer, and then— just as I was losing myself in a doze—down fell on my face that awful towel, token

of danger. The thread, which I had never failed to set, was snapped, and the robbers, and, perhaps, murderers, were in the house, knowing most likely that I was alone.

At first I was so overcome with fright that I couldn't help trying to scream; but, luckily, I only emitted a noiseless gasp.

Alone, with burglars in the house, with no neighbors near enough to hear or help, I realized, perhaps too late, the extent of my girlish folly in playing amateur detective. Then, somehow, my vanity and the fear of ridicule got the upperhand, and I thought of the glory of success, the five thousand dollars reward, how the papers would praise me and print my pictures till, flushed with conceit, I slipped out of bed and donned my gymnasium suit which I had kept handy for my purpose.

Then I cautiously opened the peep-hole in the floor and peered through it to the dining-room below.

For a while I could see nothing in the darkness; soon I heard a whispering and stealthy footsteps and then when a match was struck I made out two forms by the safe.

I held in my trembling hand the wire leading to the trap, ready to pull when both the rascals were surely in position.

I had cunningly placed an obstruction in the key-hole of the safe, so while one robber attempted to open it the other would have to stand close by him to give light.

It worked exactly as I planned. One fellow was on his knees trying the key, the other burning matches and both squarely on the trap. Now was my time. Click! went the spring in answer to my nervous pull and down disappeared my two gentlemen before either could say "Jack Robinson." I heard the dull splash made in the molasses, then the trap, swinging back to its place, left them for the present, at least, securely entombed.

Not even climbing one on the other could release them, even when they had recovered from their confusion and demoralization, and rubbed the stickiness out of their eyes.

Now to get the assistance necessary to complete their capture.

But—how and whose? My brother, being away just when I needed him, upset this part of my scheme.

I must go out in the black night myself, run other and unthought of risks, and find help.

Again the horror of my situation overcame me and I nearly fainted.

Forcing a courage that I will confess I did not feel, I stole down the back stairs, and, thinking to rouse Michael in the barn, softly unlocked the kitchen outside door and looked out. A low

whistle from the shrubbery at the corner of the house turned me to ice. There was another burglar watching from without.

I had not reckoned on that. Evidently he took me for one of his pals.

Hoping so, I returned his whistle, and with what little strength I had left, managed to fasten the door and make my way along the hall, past that awful dining-room to the front of the house, leaving him at the back. Through a parlor window I gained the piazza, trusting to escape to the road before discovery and there run for my life.

As I was feeling for the steps my hand touched something cold.

It was my brother's bicycle which I could ride as good as he and, in my gymnasium dress, even better. His "safety" seemed put there by Providence to be my safety. Quickly and noiselessly I lifted it on to the grass, trusting to get it across our three-acre lawn and out on the road before the burglar on guard knew what was going on. Then, unless he had a horse, I could laugh at him.

I had gone over the grass and through the trees and bushes, maybe fifty feet, when I felt that I was followed. I stopped to listen and that signal whistle sounded again.

"Is that you, Bill?" I heard, and from the front of the house.

Then advancing footsteps and a pushing through the evergreen hedge told me of my peril.

Instantly I took the carriage drive and, leaping on the bicycle, started full speed for the road with the robber, flushing his dark-lantern in my direction, cautiously following.

Was the front gate open or shut? Taking the chance, and my only, that it was open, I dashed for it, and thank Heaven, through it and reached the road.

The lantern's glare now had surely betrayed me for the burglar was forcing his way through the, to him, strange paths and bushes, trying to head me off ere I could pass our fence line. But I beat him there and then heard him on the road behind in hot pursuit.

In spite of my fiercest efforts he was gaining and calling me to stop or he would shoot. Still I rushed on in the pitchy blackness, every moment expecting to strike something to throw me or be hit with a bullet. A half mile of rather soft road must be gone over before I could reach the macadamized part and here was his advantage. Though I drove the treadles to their utmost I seemed scarcely to move, and the hot pace was beginning to tire me.

Twenty feet behind, for I could hear his breathing, raced my now silent and terrible pursuer, apparently certain of my capture, for I was fast breaking down under the fearful strain.

Ten feet behind he was, and saying he had me—five feet behind and—striving to clutch me, he stumbled and fell. When he got on his feet—quick as a cat—I was on the hard macadam, leading and increasing the distance between us.

Zip! Zip! two bullets whizzed past my ear. Thanks to the darkness I was unharmed, and, at last, unpursued.

Soon I was on the main street of the village, and before the police station, in which I rushed, dressed in gymnasium garb, without a hat, and my loosened hair flying in all directions. I startled the dozing old watchman so that he wakened in a jiffy, and after I managed to identify myself and get sufficient breath to tell my tale and convince him it was not a dream, he rung the signal bell and four big constables came in.

In a hurry a wagon was obtained and in it we jumped and drove back to our place as fast as the whip could urge the horses.

When we got there the house seemed darker and stiller than when I left.

Finally, hearing nothing, we all went into the dining-room together. The safe stood there unopened and only a lot of burned matches on the floor around the unbolted and unrecognizable trap showed any signs of the burglars' existence.

While we considered what to do first, Michael stuck his scared white face, with a mass of red hair standing on end, through the hall door and withdrew it just in time to save it from the descending club of the nearest policeman. At the same instant the farthest policeman, more inquisitive than the rest, stepped on the trap and with a yell of terror, disappeared.

“Michael, bring the ladder! Quick!” I cried and to the horror-stricken constables: “Raise the trap—he's not hurt— only down with the robbers in the molasses.”

Before they recovered enough to ask questions Michael dragged in the ladders and prying open the trap and fastening it upright the ladder was let down and by a lantern's light we got on our knees and gazed below.

Then I drew back as something in the form of a head emerged from the hole, followed by a shapeless and glistening body. I laughed in spite of my efforts to be solemn, and the other constables had to join me.

Hair, whiskers, nose, eyes, hands— every bit of the forlorn and frightened fellow were all one undistinguishable mass of the sticky, yellow liquid, trickling and streaming from all over him. Getting water, we cleared his eyes and mouth and then prepared for the serious and more dangerous work at hand.

So far no sign nor sound of the robbers had been noticed, though if they had escaped, their trails would have been left on the carpet.

We lowered a fresh lantern by a string and the boldest one of us— which wasn't I— stretched his neck carefully down the trap, and seeing nothing loudly called on the burglars to surrender.

No answer came. Then he fired a pistol shot in, aiming at the far corner. The result made all of us jump. “Don't shoot, boss! We give up,” sounded from the vault.

“Come out, then, one at a time, mind ye,” replied our leader, “and hold up your hands for the bracelets, when ye do.” “All right, boss!” we heard, and then *three* molasses smeared heads and bodies—exact images of our exploring constable—followed each other out, and after being handcuffed were set in a row on the sofa.

“Be jabbers!” grinned Michael, “but yoz are a shwate lot. Bedad, now whin yoz git 'pulled' yez'll make foine molasses candy, an' yez'll go to the 'jug' too, oov course— too shtuck oop to notice any wun, ain't yez?”

But the poor creatures never made answer, or if they did their words, no doubt, stuck literally in their throats.

The rest is soon told. I got the five thousand dollars reward, out of which I paid expenses and the damage done to carpets and furniture.

My name, fame and picture (which looked as if I, too, had been in the molasses) were printed in the newspaper and I was the heroine of the day.

But not for ten times the money I got would I be a detective again, for many a night since have I shrieked in terror from dreaming it over.

I forgot to mention that the third burglar was the one who had chased me and then returned to find and join his trapped companions— “in the soup,” as the boys would say. —H. C. Dodge, in Goodall's Sun.

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