

The Transformed Burglar.

The very excellent woman who was cook in my father's household was afflicted with a serious impairment of vision in the last years of her active service. I remember how she used to take a big pinch of salt and wave it over a roast of meat with the mistaken notion that she was dropping a little here and there. Then she would suddenly open her hand and all the salt would fall in one place. It is thus that blind fate seasons our lives with the condiment of adventure. As a rule, we get it in a lump!

This philosophical reflection is suggested by the recent remarkable experience of a young friend of mine. She is a charming girl, blonde, petite, and graceful and possessed of a very promising voice, for the cultivation of which she came to the city. She took up her abode in a genteel boarding-house where some friends of hers were living, and everything was very ordinary and commonplace. Her early life had run as quiet as the brooks mentioned by Spenser the gladiator, and there was no reason to suppose that it would not continue to do so.

She had been to the theatre with her friends and had had a bit of supper and was home again a little after midnight. As she entered the dark room the moon peeped in through the window at her. It was a thin, silver crescent, and it looked very nice up there in the sky. Edith threw a couple of cushions on the floor by the window and sat there gazing out at the heavens. There was nothing especially romantic about it—the moon and the stars were pretty; that was all.

How long she sat there she does not know. She was suddenly startled by the opening and closing of a door. The key turned in the door, and then she heard the ring of it as it fell to the floor.

Facing about, she saw the dark figure of a man by the door. The form was barely distinguishable in the gloom. Edith tried to scream, but, greatly to her surprise, her voice would not serve her; it seemed to be clogged like one's limbs in a nightmare. This was surprise, not fear.

The intruder heard her, however. He had been standing in a stooping posture with his ear against the door, but he sprang away from it and faced her at the sound of her choked cry.

"You keep still!" he said in a voice so monstrously hoarse and rough that she knew it must be assumed. "If you make a noise, I'll kill you!"

There was just light enough for her to see a shining object in the hand that was outstretched toward her.

Edith was brave: most people are who have been guarded from alarms during their youth. What she lacked was no course but experience. Courage said "Keep cool. Don't make a fuss. He won't hurt you." Experience would have said: "Yell! Yet like a sacred elephant! It's the only chance you've got."

"What do you want she demanded "what are you doing here?"

"Keep still!" he said in a growling whisper. Edith kept still. It seemed to her that there had never been any such stillness before. The house was like a tomb, the whole city outside was listening and forgot to murmur.

"I must think; I must think," the girl was saying to herself, but she couldn't think. She knew that this man was a burglar, but all her other ideas were whirling round and round in absurd confusion.

There was a sound of steps in the hall. The door of the large room at the rear on the same floor, was opened. Edith had never seen the lodger there, but she knew the room was occupied by a man. She opened her mouth to scream.

Now, the burglar, being an experienced person, knew perfectly well that this impulse would seize her at that moment. He knew also if he sprang upon her her voice would be released from her throat. Instead he merely thrust his revolver close to her face. The sudden clear view of this object had almost a hypnotic influence. Instead of screaming she started back with a gasp and threw up her hands as if to ward off a bullet.

"I ain't going to hurt you," growled the man. "I'm goin' to stay here about two minutes, and then I'm goin' to skip. Don't you tell after I'm gone, because if you do I'll come back an fix you for it. Have you got any money?"

"I have only a few cents," she said and, greatly to her surprise, he seemed to know that she was telling the truth.

"Gimme that watch," he continued, and with wild rage, her heart, mingled with contempt of herself for yielding, she gave him the diamond studded trinket that was her most cherished possession.

How he knew she had a watch was a mystery to her, even in that moment. Poor child! She had clutched at me, in the bosom of her dress, the instant that he had asked her for money.

He took it in his hand, and then some sudden change seemed to come over him. He sprang back to the door and put his head against it for a moment. Then with frantic

haste, he began to feel around on the floor for the key. He seemed not to pay any attention to her, and this was so surprising that she forgot to cry out, though she could have done it with safety.

She saw that he was fumbling in his pockets. Then he tried the door, without any attempt to do so quietly. It rattled under his hand, but it was heavy and strong.

"Get matches!" he called over his shoulder to her. Light a match and hold it down her on the floor.

She was more than willing to help him to get out, even though he had her watch, and she ran toward him fancying that she knew where the key had fallen. In an instant she realised what was in his mind.

As she came forward a strong and acrid blast struck her in the face. Smoke was whirling in around the door. A sudden and awful cry arose from the lower part of the house.

"There ain't any fire escape on this house!" said the man in a tone that would have frightened an iron image, it was so full of terror. "We're locked in! We're done for!"

He shook the door once more, and then grovelled on the floor, seeking the key. He was talking to himself. His tone had taken on a different tone.

"I must have set it afire with those matches in the basement," he said. "Unless the firemen gets us, we're gone."

Edith was on the floor by this time, groping about as madly as he was. And that is her last memory of the scene.

Confused and vague impressions succeeded the actual recollection. She seemed to be clutched by some creature of enormous strength, to be dragged over rough places, and then up, up in the dark, where there was no air. There was a sound of fierce blows struck upon some resounding substance, and suddenly a sense of peace and safety. It seemed as if she were lying in a field at home where she used to play. There was no more danger or trouble. She would have been happy lying there, but for the strange pain in her throat—happy and content to lie there looking at the stars. The Stars? Why, to be sure! There they were, blinking down at her, and she was not in that field, but on the roof of a house. Some one was crouching beside her, and holding her head on his arm.

"You're all right now," he said. "We came up through the scuttle. I'll tell you it was a hard fight. But don't you worry. Here's your watch. I picked it up off the floor."

He propped her against some small structure on the roof and put the watch into her lap. She could see his face quite clearly. It was a dark, handsome, manly countenance. The voice was no longer rough; it was of a deep register, but soft and sympathetic in tone.

"You risked your life to save me," she cried.

"Well, I couldn't leave you there in a dead faint, you know," he responded almost apologetically. "There are some things that a fellow simply can't do."

"I don't see how you can do anything that isn't right," she said. "You don't look capable of it."

"You are very flattering," he replied. "And now you won't be frightened if I leave you here alone. We're quite a long way from the fire. I've carried you over three or four roofs. Ah, here come some people."

A scuttle in the roof was lifted, and a man's head followed. He climbed out, and another followed. There was quite a party, both men and women, who had come to watch the destruction of their neighbours' property. The rescued maiden appealed to their sympathies instantly, and they all volunteered to accompany her to the street to look for her friends. One of the men assured her that all had escaped from the house and that no one had been injured.

"I'm going to slip away," said her rescuer in her ear, "if you need me no longer."

She stepped aside with him and gave him her hand. It was a hard situation, and she could not find the words to match it.

"We cannot talk now," she said. "I cannot thank you as I would wish to. Promise me that you will give another opportunity—and—and—tell me your name."

"Promise me you won't mention it," he said earnestly. "There are reasons—"

"Yes, I fully understand. I promise."

"My name is David Graves," said he. "It's Graves—David Graves. Don't tell on me please. I couldn't stand it to get into the papers."

"You need have no fear that I will betray you," she replied. "I feel, in regard to you more than I can say. Promise me that you will let me see you again. My name is Edith Mason, and—and I don't live anywhere now, of course, but you can always address me at Burton's conservatory of music."

"I promise gladly," said he.

"And meanwhile," she continued, "don't let anything drive you to—to that again."

"To what?"

"Burglary," she whispered, quaking. "It must be some terrible need that forces a man like you to such a fate. I can help you. My family and my friends will do anything for you if you will let me tell the truth. I have

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no money, as I told you, but—but won't you take my watch? It was so good of you to restore it to me. Take it and sell it, and pay your way until you and I can talk and come to some decision about what you can do. Please, please, take it!"

She thrust her treasure into his hand. He sank back on the low party wall dividing that roof from the next.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," he said feebly. "Are you sure you're quite right in—in your mind? Dreadful shock, you know. Wouldn't you better go down into this house and get some rest?"

"But I couldn't take such a reward," he gasped. "And as for money and doing things for me— Why, I'm not poor, I'm quite well off."

"Then why—why do you do it?" she whispered frantically.

"Do what?" he demanded.

"Why, what you did tonight?" she gasped. "That dreadful trade! That weapon!"

"My poor child," he said tenderly, "this has been a good deal too much for you, hasn't it? I can readily understand how you're upset. But this burglar business really is queer you know."

"You don't mean to deny," she whispered, "that you broke into that house? and set it afire by lighting matches in the basement and held a pistol in my face—"

"Did—did somebody do that?" he exclaimed.

"Don't! Don't speak so loud! Denial is useless, and—"

"Miss Mason," he said, very gently. "I am—or was—your neighbor. I had the room back of yours in that house. I had just came in when the fire broke out. I ran into the hall. Your door was open. I saw—and, oh, thank heaven that I saw it—the white of your dress upon the floor within. You had fainted. In picking you up in my arms, I found your watch lying beside you. The stairs were impassable. Somehow we got to the roof. I don't know any more about it."

She took both his hands by a sudden impulse and looked into his face. Then she laughed, with sheer nervousness, perhaps, or with joy, that this man to whom she owed so much was not what she had thought him.

"How can I thank you? How can I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"Easily, easily," said he. "Just don't mention my name. The confounded papers would write me up as a hero. I have a more than mortal horror of that fate. Just let's keep it for our secret, please. And as for thanks, some day I may ask for them—"

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