

THE BALCONY THIEF.

A BIT OF A YARN BY A MEMBER OF THE PRESS.

I am a journalist—one of the disengaged who make a living by picking up items here and there and contributing them to any one of half a dozen journals that are willing to take my stuff—and the first idea that entered my mind when I saw his head appear above the railings of my balcony was purely professional. "Here's a chance for a two-column article!" I whispered to myself and sat quite still in my corner, awaiting developments.

The stranger smartly drew himself up on to the balcony, and then, loosening the cord, let down the green blinds that screened my bedroom windows from the sun. He was a well-dressed, reputable-looking party, not a bit like one's everyday idea of a common thief.

Just as the blind fell he turned and discovered me amongst the greenery of the in-growing creeper. He gave a slight start, and then ran into the other corner. There was a flutter of wings, and when I faced him in the centre of the balcony he held a small bird in his hand.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, "I came after my canary. See." It certainly was a canary.

"Are you in the habit of hunting canaries on peoples balconies?" I asked.

"Oh, no, one doesn't lose a canary every day."

"No; and when one does one runs the risk of being mistaken for a thief by climbing up the balcony instead of asking to be let in by the door. Why did you drop the blind?"

"To keep the bird on the balcony, of course." This answer came quite glibly.

"Oh! Look here, mate, I am not inclined to believe your yarn about the canary. I think you came to rob my room."

"What rot you talk! I'm not going to stay here to be insulted."

"Yes, you are, old man. You came here without an invitation. You'll stay on mine."

His eye ran me up and down in a calculating way. It was the eye of a man accustomed to weighing opponents. I was the larger, obviously the stronger, and much the younger of the two. He abandoned the idea of making a fight for it, and said:

"You're quite mistaken. I can bring witnesses to prove my respectability."

"If I'll let you go and hunt for them, eh?"

He grinned, showing white teeth. The grin was almost a confession.

"Well, what's your game?" he said.

"Step in and have a drink."

He went ahead of me through the open window, I closed and latched the window, and he stood regarding me with a puzzled face as I reached down the decanter and the soda syphon.

"Sit down," I said, "and help yourself."

"I don't see what your driving at," he said. But he sat down and he helped himself to a stiff whiskey.

"I'll explain," I continued, taking a seat and toying casually with an ebony ruler that would make an excellent club in a scrim. "I'm a journalist. I'd like to know a few points about your business, trade, profession—whatever you call it. In prosecuting this honorable calling of balcony thief do you often drop in on the resident unexpected and unexpected—as this evening for instance?"

He played with his glass, and eyed me closely.

"I tell you you're making a mistake," he said. "I am no thief. I came after my bird."

"Then, I suppose you'll not mind if I send the girl across to telephone for my friend, Inspector Blunt? You'll have no difficulty in satisfying him." I moved to the bell button.

"Hold hard!" he said. "Do I understand that if I answer your questions you'll do the square thing?"

"I'll not send for Blunt, anyhow."

"Fine away."

"Now, about that canary. How did it come on my balcony?"

"I carried it in my pocket. You will understand it sometimes happens that a professional gentleman has to explain his presence on a balcony. At such times it is useful to have a canary. I know others who are in the habit of climbing balconies who first throw their hats up, with the intention of putting the responsibility on a passing gust of wind if called upon to explain. The canary's better—more convincing."

"Much more convincing," I said. "Go on."

He helped himself to another whiskey, and seemed quite to enter into the spirit of the thing. He spoke like an educated man, and had the easy manner of one accustomed to decent society.

"Once before I climbed a balcony for the purpose of robbing my canary—you see it is extremely valuable canary—and I came upon an old gentleman gasping on an invalid chair. He imagined, I think, that I had come thru the window, and was glaring at me in wild surprise. I did not use the bird on that occasion. I simply took the old fellow's wrist in my hand, my watch in the other, and counted his pulse. Then I

asked him to show me his tongue, hummed and hawed a little, and told him he should not eat so many pickled eels' feet, and marched thru the French windows, downstairs and out of the house, without anyone offering any opposition."

"Take anything out with you?"

"Hem! well, between gentlemen, and knowing my confidence will be respected, I'll admit that an overcoat and a gold-headed umbrella became mine as I passed through the hall. This, of course, is strictly confidential."

"Between gentlemen," I said.

He grinned again, and drank. I offered a cigar and he lit and continued:

"Those blinds people use to shut in their balconies are a boon and a blessing to men in my profession; they screen us while we use a jem—; that is while we use persuasive measures to open locked windows."

"Are there many at the game?"

"I know of four prosperous gangs."

"Gangs? Then you have friends—"

"Oh, dear, no." He shook his head. "I'm on my own. I do not want a mate to double my risks and halve my profits. The gangs are in touch with one another. That is necessary, otherwise we might all be working the same suburb on the same day. The man who scores at this game has to be smart, cool, plucky and a bit of an athlete. If you had not contrived to look like Sampson out there I might have thrown you over the balcony."

"Drinking my whiskey is easier."

"Yes, but—" He looked uncomfortable, and glanced towards the door. "I can't say I am perfectly happy. This reminds me of the experience B— tells. Blinky B— is one of the fraternity. He broke his way into a room where a comic artist was living, and the impudent devil discovered him, held him up with a horse-pistol and made him pose for two hours while he was drawn in a score of attitudes. Then the artist gave him a drink, and let him go, calling downstairs after him: 'By the holy, if you come here again I'll rob you of all you possess.'"

I laughed aloud.

"That sounds like a fairy tale," I said.

"Yes, doesn't it? But Blinky swears to it; and Blinky has no more imagination than a cow."

"Does that game pay?"

"It pays better than being a lawyer in a small, high office to which clients never come."

"Great Scott! then you are—"

"I'm a balcony specialist, a bird fancier, a climbing plant. Hello! what's that?"

He started up in alarm. Someone was knocking at the door. In response to my call the maid-of-all-works attached to our superior establishment where paying guests were entertained, entered timidly.

"Please, sir, there's a policeman down at the door. He says there's someone in here he wants to see," she said.

"How about this?" said my visitor. "You promised to deal fairly."

"I promised not to send for Blunt, but if the police about here are so confoundedly zealous as to come on their own account, what am I to do?"

"Let me out by the back door."

It was too late; at that moment a heavy foot was heard on the stairs, and a second later a big policeman entered.

"Ah-ah, me beauty, I thought I hadn't made a mistake," he said. "Do you know this man, sir?" he continued, turning to me.

I shook my head.

"He's an old criminal. I had my eye on him when he climbed that balcony. I was waitin' for him to come out with the swag, but he was so long that I began to fear he'd left by the back way. Come along, Balcony Charley, you'll have to go back to skilly and hard beds again, I'm thinkin'." He's a luxurious devil, this, sir. Lives shap up when he's out."

The policeman snapped a pair of handcuffs on my guest, and the latter accepted the inevitable in a philosophical spirit.

"I'll take him out by the back, if you don't mind, sir," said the policeman.

"Is it necessary for me to go along?" I asked.

"Oh, no, not at all. You'll hear from us when we want you. Good day. Come along, Charley."

They went downstairs and out into the back right-of-way, and since that day I have not seen the face of my interesting stranger. I had an idea once that I was rather a smart young man, a young man that knew a thing or two. I blush to finish my story. However, here goes.

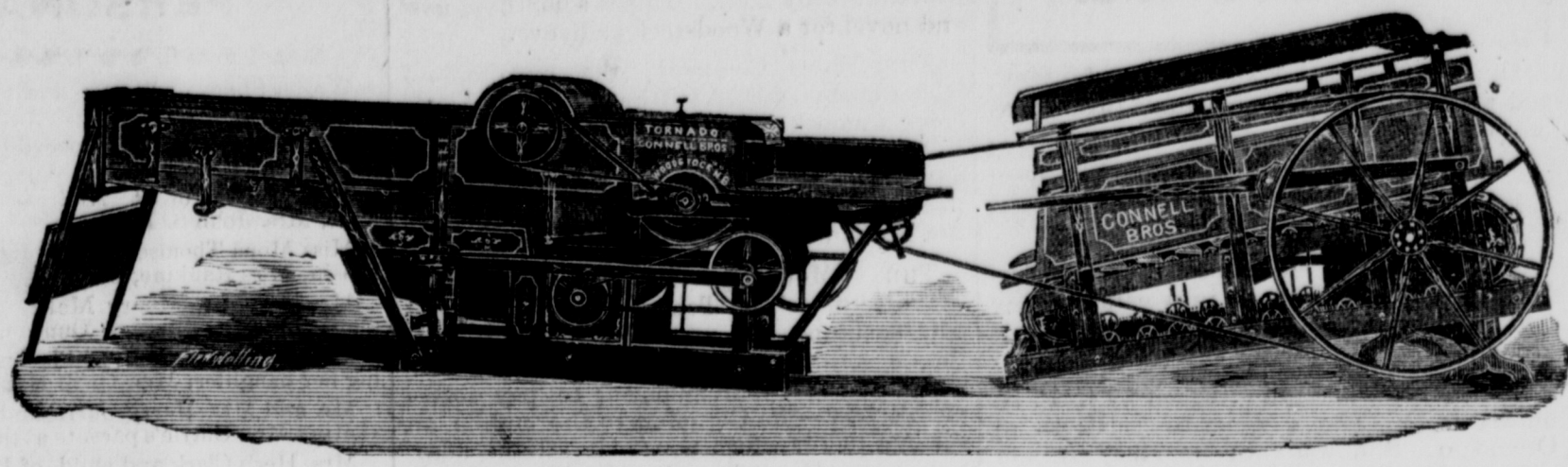
When no word came from the police or Balcony Charley, I called on Blunt for an explanation. The Inspector heard me out, then he slapped the table.

"Well, I'm d—!" he said.

"What's wrong?"

"You've been had. That was no policeman, who took Charley, but a pal of his. Did you take particular notice of the uniform? Of course you wouldn't. See, the idea is to have a pal round in a uniform concealed under a long coat and carrying a helmet in a bundle. When a thief is captured, the first idea of the people is to send for the police. Charley's pal is the first to offer of course, and Charley is marched off by one of his own gang."

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"I sent for no policeman."
"No; but the others thought something was wrong, and the gang wasn't taking further risks."
"Well, I'm hanged!" said I.
And this is how I came to know something of balcony thieves, and their little tricks.

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"Fine," answered the husband.

"Buy any gold bricks?"

"No; but I sold them tough chickens and them last year's packed eggs and a few other choice bargains. When them city people comes to count up, I reckon, they'll be ready to admit that the worm has turned."

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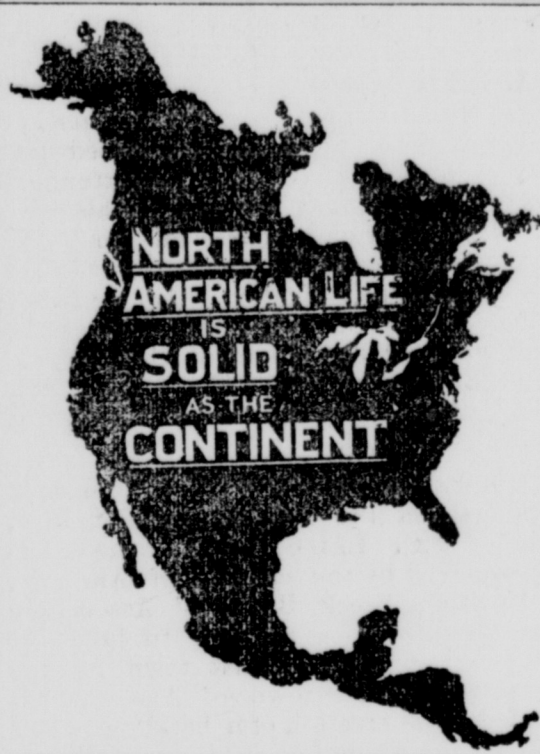
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Sensible Advice.

Young Lady—A friend of mine is engaged to a man, and now he refuses to marry her. What would you advise her to do?

Old Lawyer—Is the man wealthy?

Young Lady—No. He hasn't a shilling.

Old Lawyer—Then I'd advise her to write him a nice letter of thanks.

Useless.

"It's too bad about those crullers you made," said the new husband, sadly.

"Why?" asked his wife quickly.

"Well," replied the husband, "they are too rich to eat, too heavy for life-preservers and too small for quots."

"Do you pingpong?"

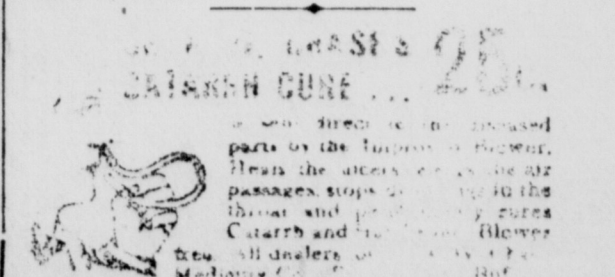
"Well, I've got so I can just about half play it."

"Eh? Which half, ping or pong?"

The Mean Thing!

Gwendolen—You told me he dreamed of me all night. How pale he looked, poor fellow!

Ethel—Yes, I met him on the steps. He said he was suffering from the effects of a night mare.



"And whereabouts in this plan is your dining room?"

"We don't have any dining room. We are going to serve our meals in the pingpong parlor."