

but the course of my thoughts suggested an idea, and pulling hastily from my pocket a tablespoon, I felt, for I could not see, the legend which contained my fate. But my fingers were tremulous; they seemed to have lost sensation—only I fancied I did feel something more than the governor's plain initials. There was still a light in the hall. If I could but bring that spoon within its illumination! All was silent; and I ventured to descend step after step—not as I had bounded up, but with the stealthy pace of a thief, and the plate growing heavier and heavier in my pocket. At length I was near enough to see, in spite of a dimness that had gathered over my eyes; and, with a sensation of absolute faintness, I beheld upon the spoon an engraved cross—the red right hand of a baronet.

I crept back again, holding by the balusters, fancying every now and then that I heard a door open behind me, and yet my feet no more consenting to quicken their motion than if I had been pursued by a murderer in the nightmaric. I at length got into the room, groped for a chair, and sat down. No more hurry now. O! not there was plenty of time; and plenty to do in it, for I had to wipe away the perspiration that ran down my face in streams. What was to be done? What had I done. Oh, a trifle, a mere trifle. I had only sneaked into a gentleman's house by the area-window, and pocketed his tablespoons; and here I was, locked and barred and bolted in, sitting very comfortably, in the dark and alone, in his drawing room. Very particularly comfortable. What a capital fellow, to be sure! What an amusing personage! Wouldn't the baronet laugh in the morning? Wouldn't he ask me to stay breakfast? And wouldn't I eat heartily out of the spoons I had stolen? But what name is that? Who calls me house-breaker? Who gives me in charge? Who logs me off by the neck? I will not stand it. I am innocent, except of breaking into a baronet's house. I am a gentleman, with another gentleman's spoons in my pocket. I claim the protection of the law. Police! police!

My brain was wandering. I pressed my hand upon my wet forehead, to keep down the thickening fancies, and determined, for the first time in my life, to hold a deliberate consultation with myself. I was in an awkward predicament—it was impossible to deny the fact; but was there anything really serious in the case? I had unquestionably descended into the wrong area, the right-hand one instead of the left-hand one; but was I not as unquestionably the relation—the distant relation—the very distant relation—of the next-floor neighbour? I had been four years absent from his house, and was there anything more natural than that I should desire to pay my next visit through a subterranean window? I had appropriated, it is true, a quantity of silver-plate I had found; but with what other intention could I have done this than to present it to my very distant relation's daughter, and reproach her with her carelessness in leaving it next door? Finally, I was snared, caged, and trapped—door and window had been bolted upon the without any resistance on my part—and I was now some considerable time in the house, unsuspected, yet a prisoner. The position was serious; but come, suppose the worst, that I was actually laid hold of as a malefactor, and commanded to give an account of myself. Well: I was, as aforesaid, a distant relation of the individual next door. I belonged to nobody in the world, if not to him; I bore but an indifferent reputation in regard to steadiness; and after four years' absence in a foreign country, I had returned idle, penniless, and objectless—just in time to find an area-window open in the dusk of the evening, and a heap of

plate lying behind it, within sight of the street.

This self-examination was not encouraging; the case was decidedly queer; and as I sat thus pondering in the dark, with the spoon in my hand, I am quite sure that no malefactor in a dungeon could have envied my reflections. In fact, the evidence was so dead against me, that I began to doubt my own innocence. What was I here for if my intentions had really been honest? Why should I desire to come into any individual's area-window instead of the door? And how came it that all this silver plate had found its way into my pockets? I was angry as well as terrified; I was judge and criminal in one; but the instincts of nature got the better of my ache of justice, and I rose suddenly up to ascertain whether it was not possible to get from the window into the street.

As I moved, however, the horrible booty I had in my pockets moved likewise, appearing to me to shriek like a score of fiends "Police! Police!" and the next instant I heard a quick footstep ascending the stair. Now was the fatal moment come! I was on my feet; my eyes upon the door; my hands were clenched; the perspiration had dried suddenly upon my skin; and my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. But the footstep, accompanied by a gleam of light, passed—passed; and from very weakness I sat down again, with a dreadful indifference to the screams of the plate in my pockets. Presently there were more footsteps along the hall; then voices; then drawing of bolts and creaking of locks; then utter darkness, then silence—lasting, terrible, profound. The house had gone to bed; the house would quickly be asleep; it was time to be up and doing. But first and foremost, I must get rid of the plate. Without that hideous *corpus delicti*, I should have some chance. I must, at all hazards, creep down into the hall, find my way to the lower regions, and replace the accursed thing where I found it. It required nerve to attempt this; but I was thoroughly wound up; and after allowing a reasonable time to elapse, to give my enemies a fair opportunity of falling asleep, I set out upon the adventure. The door creaked as I went out; the plate grated against my very soul as I descended the steps; but slowly, stealthily, I crept along the wall, and at length found myself on the level floor. There was but one door on that side of the hall, the door which led to the area-room—I recollect the fact distinctly—and it was with inexpressible relief I reached it in safety, and grasped the knob in my hand. The knob turned—but the door did not open: it was locked; it was my fate to be a thief; and after a moment of now dismay, I turned again doggedly, reached the stair, and re-entered the apartment I had left.

It was like getting-home. It was snug and private. I had a chair there waiting me. I thought to myself that many a man would take a deal of trouble to break into such a house. I had only sneaked. I wondered how Jack Shepherd felt on such occasions. I had seen him at the Adelphi in the person of Mrs. Kreeley, and a daring little dog he was. He would make nothing of getting down into the street from the windows, spoons and all. I tried this; the shutters were not even closed, and the sash moving noiselessly, I had no difficulty in raising it. I stepped out into the balcony, and looked over. Nothing was to be seen but a black and yawning gulf beneath, guarded by the imaginary spikes of an invisible railing. Jack would have laughed at this difficulty; but then he had more experience in the craft than I, and was provided with all necessary appliances. As for me, I had stupidly forgotten even my coil of rope. The

governor's house, I found, had either no balcony at all, or it was too far apart to be reached. Presently I heard a footstep on the *trois-étier*, a little way off. It was approaching with slow and measured pace; the person was walking as calmly and gravely in the night as if it had been broad day. Suppose I hailed this philosophical stranger, and confided to him in a friendly way, the fact that the baronet, without the slightest provocation, had locked me up in his house, with his silver spoons in my pocket? Perhaps he would advise me what to do in the predicament. Perhaps he would take the trouble of knocking at the door, or crying fire, and when the servants opened, I might rush out, and so make my escape. But while I was looking wistfully down to see if I could not discern the walking figure, which was now under the windows, a sudden glare from the spot dazzled my sight. It was the bull's-eye of a policeman; and with the instinct of a predatory character, I shrunk back trembling, crept into the room, and shut the window.

By this time I was sensible that there was a little confusion in my thoughts; and by way of employing them on practical and useful objects, I determined to make a tour of the room. But first it was necessary to get rid, somehow or other, of my plunder—to plant the property, as we call it; and with that view I laid it carefully piece by piece, in the corner of a sofa, and concealed it with the cover. This was a great relief. I almost began to feel like the injured party—more like a captive than a robber; and I groped my way through the room, with a sort of vague idea that I might perhaps stumble upon some trap-door, or sliding panel, which would lead into the open air, or at worst, into a secret chamber, where I should be safe for any given number of years from my persecutors. But there was nothing of the kind in this stern, prosaic place: nothing but a few cabinets and tables, and couches, and arm-chairs, and common chairs, and devotional chairs; and footstools and lamps, and statuettes, and glass-shades, and knock-knacks; and one elaborate granite luncheon round with crystal pisms, which played such an interminable tune against each other when I chanced to move them, that I stumbled away as fast as I could, and subsided into a *fauteuil* so rich, so deep, that I felt myself swallowed up, as it were, in its billows of swan's down.

How long I had been in the house by this time, I cannot tell. It seemed to me, when I looked back, to form a considerable portion of a lifetime. Indeed, I did not very well remember the more distant events of the night; although every now and then the fact occurred to me with startling distinctness, that all I had gone through was only preliminary to something still to happen; and that the morning was to come, the family to be astir, and the house-breaker to be apprehended. My reflections were not continuous. It may be that I dozed between whiles. How else can I account for my feeling myself grasped by the throat, to the very brink of suffocation, by a hand without a body? How else can I account for sister Laura standing over me where I reclined, pointing to the stolen plate on the sofa, and lecturing me on my horrible propensities till she grew black in the face, and her voice rose to a wild unearthly scream which pierced through my brain?

When this fancy occurred, I started from my recumbent posture. A voice was actually in my ears, and a living form before my eyes: a lady stood contemplating me with a half-scream on her lips, and the colour fading from her cheek; and as I moved, she would have fallen to the