

## NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS.

(Continued.)

Yet his own heart grew sore as it was chafed by the word, which could not be forgotten.

The expression and the tone in which it was uttered came to him unbidden in his dreams and roused him from needed rest—came to him as he read the morning paper while dashing by rail to the city—came to him as he added columns of figures at his desk, and caused him to make some terrible blunders. "Gang!" Although he was a mild-mannered man, and a member of the church besides, he came to regard this next-door neighbor, woman and handsome though she was, with deadly hatred. So intense did his dislike become, that he sat in his window, one sultry moonlight night, and gleefully beheld a stray cow enter the Maytham garden and do more damage than any florist could undo at that season. "Gang," indeed!

In fact it was more with joy than sorrow that, one day, Zenas learned from a chance acquaintance on the train that there were special reasons why Mr. Maytham would be away from home for some time, for the man was a defaulter, and fleeing from justice. The Bortleys agreed that it was providential that the families had not become acquainted; for although Zenas, like a good man, tried to pity sinners while he hated sin, told his wife that a mere entry clerk, with a family dependent upon him, could not afford to be known as an acquaintance of a defaulter's family. Everybody seemed "down on" the Maythams; people said it was only because the house was in the wife's name that Mrs. Maytham had a roof over her head—that the couple had not lived there long, and never had become acquainted in the village, anyway.

Though he was still full of bitterness, Zenas began to be interested anew in his handsome neighbor, for he never before had seen the wife of a criminal—one of Mrs. Maytham's class. Crimes had been committed at Grass-hopper Falls, and wives of thieves and rowdies were too numerous, as occasional subscriptions for their relief showed, but they were a shabby, forlorn, characterless set, just like their husbands, while here, in the very next house to Zenas, was a criminal's wife who was handsome, self-contained, proud, apparently rich, and even scornful of the honest. "Gang!"

Zenas thought of Mrs. Maytham until he became almost fascinated by her. His eyes sought her each day as he left home and returned. Finally, when he got his customary summer vacation of a fortnight, he spent hours of each day in a hammock under the trees, looking slyly for Mrs. Maytham, and following her with his eyes whenever she sauntered through her finely kept grounds. He was sorry for her; he could understand why she did not care to make new acquaintances; he could not see anything in her face that indicated complicity in her husband's crime; he so pitied her in her loneliness and probable gloom that he prayed earnestly for her—but do what he would he could not forget the tone in which she had called his adorable family a "gang."

As the dog-days dragged on Zenas's hammock under the trees became more and more attractive as a lounging-place, until finally the little man, who had often slept out of doors in the woods when he was a country boy, ventured to be young again and spend an occasional night in his hammock. The first effort was quite successful, but during the second night he was roused by an awful dream of an anaconda gliding through the grass near him, and causing a rustle such as any meandering anaconda could be depended upon to make. Starting up in a fright beneath his low-hanging covert of boughs he saw what at first seemed really a huge serpent about to cross the fence and enter the Maytham estate; through well-rubbed eyes, however, the monster resolved itself into a ladder, evidently brought from a house in course of building not far away. Of course the ladder was not moving of its own volition; a man was under it.

Zenas was at once as wide awake as if no such condition as sleep had ever existed; he also was an object of terror, and conscious of the outbreak of cold sweat of which he had often heard but never before experienced. What should he do? What could he do? Pshaw! Perhaps the man was a carpenter, who had been after a bit of his own property, to have it ready for use somewhere else. But no, the clock of one of the village churches struck two just then; it was impossible that any honest mechanic could be going to work at that time of night, brightly though the moon shone. Maybe the fellow was a fruit-tree plunderer—Zenas had been warned to gather his own early pears if he did not wish the trees to be denuded some moonlight night by unbidden gatherers. Well, if this man was bent on stealing fruit from the Maytham place, let him steal, it was a shame that such things should be, but Zenas was not one of the three policeman, and he would rather have his own single pear trees stripped than attack a midnight prowler, he could not be expected to protect his neighbor's property—the property of a neighbor who called his family a "gang."

But horrors! The man was no fruit thief, for he had taken the ladder toward the Maytham house—placed it in the shadow cast by the moon and stood motionless a moment as if to rest. Evidently he was a burglar and knew his business, for it was down town talk that the Maytham house was expensively furnished and contained much solid silverware, besides a great deal of bric-a-brac worth its weight in gold. Probably the windows inside the blinds were wide open—all country windows were during dog-days. Let that ladder once be raised, and the thief at its top, and Zenas was sure that the frail blinds would prove no obstacle to the fellow's wicked designs.

But what could the unsuspected observer do? He could not move toward his own house without being seen and heard; even were he with his doors he had no firearms, no telephone, no burglar alarm. He might slip out through the shadows to his gate and thence to the local police station, nearly a mile away, but before an officer could come, the robbery would be accomplished. Worse, still, the fellow, flushed by success, might move the ladder across the fence and enter the Bortley home. True, Zenas owned no valuables except his wife and children, but the thought of a ruffian prowling about his sanctuary was not to be endured for an instant. Could he scare the fellow away by making a noise? Perhaps—but he had heard of burglars who ran right at a noise instead of away from it. Should this burglar attack him there would be no hang to do but to give up the ghost at once, for his heart was already in his throat, and he felt unable to move hand or foot. And his life was insured for only a thousand dollars.

Terror and excitement had made him so wild that exhaustion speedily followed, with its constant apathy. Even his conscience followed the lead of his will and became utterly demoralized. It was too bad, on general principles, that a house should be robbed, but that particular house, probably furnished with the wages of Maytham's crime—well, the little man recalled, without a bit of shame, and to his great satisfaction, the infamous old saying that "the second thief is the best owner." And really—this as his conscience attempted to rally—might not spoilation be a judgment upon the woman who had been so blind, insensate and brutal as to call the Bortley family—the larger and better part of it—a gang?

But why all this worry and terror? Probably the man was after all only a common fruit thief. Only a few feet from where the ladder had been dropped was a great tree of "strawberry" apples, which the Bortley children had been eyeing wistfully for a fortnight, as the blush of the fruit had deepened to crimson. Such apples commanded a high price, as Bortley had learned to his sorrow. Well, if the trees were robbed, the children would be delivered from further temptation; such trees were not safe when he was a boy. He recalled, with a wicked chuckle, which was almost audible, how he once had braved bulldog and shotgun to despoil such a tree. Perhaps a tree of apples might not seem worth much to that proud woman.

Just then the man began to raise the ladder, not to the apple tree, but against the side of the house. At the same instant Bortley's heart and head began to throb as if they would burst. He feared heart disease and apoplexy. He closed his eyes and tried to think of something else. What was in his mind a moment before? Oh, yes—that proud woman—woman—woman—

In an instant the little fellow slipped out of the hammock, and with jaws tightly set and nerves and muscles like bundles of steel wires, had bounded across the fence and toward his neighbor's house.

Short though the distance was, he had time, as he ran, to realize that his wits had never before been so clear since the night he had proposed to the angelic girl who afterward became his wife. The ladder had touched the wall, making considerable noise, but the burglar did not seem to mind this, for he already had a foot on the lowest round when Zenas, springing in front of him, gave the ladder a push and shake that threw him backward. The unknown man sprang off quickly, but in an instant Zenas had him by the throat, and bearing him backward, got him upon the ground. For a moment or two there was a fierce struggle: then the man appeared to yield, turned on his side. Zenas, fearing he had killed the fellow, relaxed his grasp, but in an instant he saw a hand drawing a pistol from a jacket pocket. Quickly the weapon was wrested away and thrown aside, and the struggle by natural arms began again. Zenas recalled, as if by magic, all the long-forgotten fistic lore of the school yard and village green; but his antagonist was larger than he, so the little fellow devoted himself to dodging, and even some skill at this art did not entirely save him. First he became conscious that he could not breathe through his nose; then he lost the sight of one eye, and his chest ached dreadfully, but he availed himself of another youthful trick, practiced by small boys who were attacked by bullies—he got behind his antagonist and secured a tight collar-grip with both hands, brought up his knee sharply against the burglar's back, and quickly had the fellow securely pinned to the ground.

While the struggle had been going on Zenas heard window blinds open, and a startled exclamation in a voice he remembered well—the voice that had uttered the word "gang." Now, as he tried to breathe, he heard a soft rustle, and looking up, saw clad all in white, and with hair dishevelled, his handsome neighbor.

"Madam, this—this burglar—tried to get into—your house. I saw him—he tried to shoot me. His pistol is somewhere—in the grass. Find it, please—fire it—fast—make an alarm—bring help."

But the woman, instead of looking for the weapon, fell upon her knees, looked at as much of the man's face as was visible and moaned:

"Oh, Arthur!"

Then she sprang to her feet and hissed rapidly:

"He's no burglar, man. Let him go—do you hear me? He's no burglar, I say. He's my husband."

"Your husband!" gasped Zenas, relaxing his hold—a movement of which the prostrate man endeavored to take advantage.

"Yes—yes! Hasn't a man a right to enter his own house any way he chooses, when he's not expected—has no key? Let him go. Don't you hear me say he is my husband?"

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