

A BURGLAR ALARM

The Story of a Night of Surprises

By FRED. JAY, Author of "The Elimination of Mr. Bates"



"MY dear fellow," said Parlby, with an irritating wave of his hand, "your contrivance may be interesting—quite possibly it is ingenious; but you may take it from me that no electric alarm will keep out the up-to-date burglar."

"As an electrician, your opinion should not be without value," rejoined Harding. "At the same time, I venture to assert that my little arrangement would frustrate even your scientific attempts to break through it."

Parlby smiled. "Does it ring bells?" he asked, "or jerk a cord fastened to your toe? Take my advice; convert your apparatus into a battery for your nerves—and keep a dog."

"It is scarcely becoming, old chap, to sneer at amateurs in one's own line," remarked Harding, reprovingly. "Personally, I always endeavour to avoid that not uncommon error in taste. You may remember that when you played Falstaff at the Charity Bazaar, I did not suggest that you should recite at Dorcas meetings—and keep a cat. As a matter of fact, I laughed heartily all through your performance, and made myself conspicuous by so doing. Now, look here! I'll wager you ten pounds you don't break into my house without disturbing me!"

"Done!" agreed Parlby, without hesitation.

"Good!" exclaimed Harding. "I'll give you a month."

"As a burglar, I wouldn't ask for more. I'll make the attempt one night shortly. You'd better tell your wife about it, she might be frightened, you know."

"Naturally. She has been looking forward to meeting you and Mrs. Parlby. Come to dinner next Sunday—not to-morrow, Sunday week, I mean. Kate is spending this week-end with a married sister."

"All right, many thanks." Parlby stopped and held out his hand. "I've seen you over the longest and loneliest half of the road, so I'll turn."

"Come up now and have a whiskey and soda?"

Parlby declined, adding with a smile that when he did come he would help himself.

"It would be just as well to make quite sure of the house, you know," urged Harding.

"That's all right. About the third up, stands invitingly isolated, cowshed-looking place with tarred chimney pots. There's no mistaking it. But, if you're feeling nervous, old chap, of course I'll—"

"Good-night," rejoined Harding, and they parted with a laugh.

A reflective walk up the hill to his new house convinced Harding that Parlby would take advantage of his wife's absence, and make the burglarious attempt that night or the next. Moreover, he had mentioned that he would be alone in the house, the maids having been given a holiday; consequently, there would be less fear of disturbance.

The "grandfather" in the hall struck twelve as he let himself in, and he started violently as a door upstairs opened with a creak.

"Is that you, Phil?" anxiously inquired a voice over the banister.

"Hello!" exclaimed Harding. "You quite startled me. Why, what's the meaning of this?"

"Cissie's children were down with the measles, so I thought it safest to come home at once. Fortunately I was able to find the cook in the village, or I should have been frightened out of my life alone in the house. As it was, I felt rather nervous."

"But there's the alarm, dear," Harding reminded her, with the inventor's pride. "That should have made you feel easy, eh?"

Mrs. Harding looked a little anxious. "It's—its out of order to-night, dear," she said, hesitatingly. "Out of order!"

"You see, I hadn't the latchkey with me, and you were out, and we had to get in somehow. So Emma forced the kitchen window. A sensible girl, that, Phil; such an idea would never have occurred to me."

"Sensible!" exclaimed Harding, wrathfully.

"Of course, dear, we might have slept in the

shrubbery. The evergreens have grown nearly tall enough to cover us, but there was a rather heavy dew."

"It's no joking matter, Kate."

"The alarm answered splendidly," added Mrs. Harding in mollifying tones. "I do wish you had been here, it made such a beautiful noise!"

Harding grunted.

"The idea is all right, but unfortunately, Phil, the construction was rather faulty. The sudden strain brought down the Leyden jars, and made an awful mess on the kitchen floor. After all, it had to be tested some time or other, so I don't see what reason you have to be disagreeable."

"It has cost me ten pounds—that's all."

"Ten pounds!"

Harding explained, detailing the conversation that led up to the bet.

"It's not losing the money I mind," he added; "but Parlby, a nice enough fellow in most respects, is a little inclined to be too dogmatic. The worst of it is I feel certain he'll come to-night, and instead of my taking him down a peg, he'll have the laugh on me."

Mrs. Harding puckered her pretty brows. "Not necessarily," she said thoughtfully. "There's no reason why you should not take him down a peg yet—two pegs, if you like. Oh, Phil, it would be a joke. Let him get in, and I'll go down and hold him up with a revolver. You told him I was away from home. He doesn't know me, and will think he's got into the wrong house."

"That's all right as far as it goes, but what are you going to do with him? Let him off with a caution?"

"No, send Emma for a policeman."

"Steady," said Harding, laughing. "That's carrying a joke too far."

"Not if you're the policeman! How dull you are to-night, Phil. You've got an old helmet and tunic."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Harding, "so I have. We'll do it."

Now, that Providence which is generally supposed to safeguard the irresponsible steps of drunken men and children, does not invariably withhold succour to the less worthy, and Daniel Mole, as he crawled on all fours through the long meadow grass in the rear of the Hardings' residence, was not entirely devoid of gratitude when the moon, who for some time had kept her luminous watch upon his nefarious movements, became screened by a mass of opaque clouds. Dan, blessing their blackness, negotiated the fence in perfect obscurity.

He crouched awhile in the garden, mentally taking his bearings, and at length decided on the dining-room window as affording the safest means of ingress. To remove a small pane of leaded glass put no tax on his resources; it was yet an easier matter to insert his hand and unfasten the catch, to drop a piece of looped wire and release the hasp. Dan quite approved the revival of old-fashioned windows, although, were he a builder, he would increase their dimensions, for his huge frame was not got through the casement without some inconvenient compression.

He removed his boots and made a search in the kitchen, where a bottle of stout refreshed him after his exertions. Then he began exploring. Knowledge directed his attention to the objects of greatest value, while instinct prompted the selection of the smallest of the kind. The drawing-room afforded him a few specimens, and, with his sack over his shoulder, he felt his way back in the darkness to the dining-room. Here the moon, which was again clear, shone full through the window, and as a precaution Dan stepped forward to draw the curtains. As he did so his heart—for even burglars have hearts—stood still at the sight of a man on the path outside. The next instant he made swiftly and silently for the door, but a light footstep on the stairs deterred him. Both ways were barred; he must hide. A high-backed oak settle afforded the best retreat, and Dan crouched low with his sack behind it.

Presently he heard the voice of Parlby softly ejaculating in surprise at the open window: "Deuced funny!" exclaimed that astonished gentleman.

"Looks as though somebody's been on the job before me."

He crawled cautiously through the casement, determining to arouse Harding immediately and point out his alarming discovery. With that purpose in view he crossed the room, but nearing the door he became conscious of some stealthy movement outside, and, seizing a chair, he stood on the defensive.

The door opened softly, and a sharp click preceded a flood of light as Mrs. Harding, dressing-gown berobed, pressed the electric switch, and calmly and steadily extended her right arm in the direction of the intruder.

"If you move a muscle," she declared with cold-blooded ferocity, "I'll kill you!"

Temporary paralysis appeared to save Parlby's life. For some moments he stood absolutely motionless and inarticulate before the threatening apparition, the chair held high above his head. He recovered sufficient presence of mind at length to perpetrate what he fatuously intended as a reassuring smile.

"Er—Mrs. Harding, I believe," he said, with nervous politeness. "I will explain this—this intrusion, madam, if you will kindly lower the muzzle of that thing; it might go off by accident, you know."

"Oh, no, it won't," replied Mrs. Harding quietly, "not by accident."

"I—I do not wish to alarm you," continued Parlby, "but I have reason to believe that there is a burglar in the house."

"So have I."

"Pray don't misunderstand me; this is serious. I found the window forced and open."

"Really!" exclaimed Mrs. Harding in unpromising tones. "A little habit of yours, I presume, to take casual strolls in other people's back gardens at one o'clock in the morning?"

"I will explain everything later," urged Parlby, "or, better still, your husband will. Believe me, it is imperative that you should call him at once. He—he may be in great danger."

"Not half the danger you're in, my man," replied Mrs. Harding. "He is not at home—a fact you were doubtless aware of before you ventured in."

"He must be," declared Parlby desperately. "I parted with him only about an hour ago. He was under the impression that you had gone away for the week-end. And he—he invited me to—to break into his house. Just by way of a little joke, you know!"

"I see," said Mrs. Harding. "Now, just to continue this little joke of yours, you'll be good enough to step into that cabinet at once!"

The antique piece of furniture she indicated with her free hand was a large gentleman's wardrobe, which, on account of its design and carving, was accorded a position of honour in the dining-room—a not unusual circumstance in these artistic days. Parlby, glancing in its direction, hesitated to obey.

"Pardon me, madam," he said with dignity. "If you will not accept my explanation, let me ask you, do I look like a burglar?"

"I've never seen one before," replied Mrs. Harding, vaguely. "You certainly are not particularly awe inspiring."

"Then allow me to assure you," continued Parlby, hopefully, "although this little affair has unfortunately developed in an altogether unexpected and embarrassing manner, that I am a gentleman, and a friend of your husband. As a matter of fact, we had a little bet about—"

"All of which," interrupted Mrs. Harding, "is very plausible, but not quite good enough, my friend. Step in at once, or I fire!"

"Call your husband," pleaded Parlby. "He must be in the house somewhere. He will tell you that what I say is true."

Mrs. Harding smiled. With her disengaged hand she opened the door a few inches. "Call him yourself," she said, "if it will satisfy you."

"Phil!" cried Mr. Parlby, aloud. "Phil, old man!"

There was no response, for in the concoction of their plan for his discomfiture, Harding had arranged that on first hearing the sound of voices, he should get quietly into the road from his study window and

(Continued on page 23)