

## THE BURGLAR'S BLUNDER.

BY RICHARD MARSH.

"That's done the trick! Now for the swag!"

As Mr. Bennett made this observation to himself, he slipped the window up and stepped into the room. He stood for a moment listening. Within, all was still; without, not a sound disturbed the silence of the night.

"I think it's all serene."

It is probable that Mr. Bennett smiled. He was engaged in the exercise of his profession, and it consoled him to perceive that on this occasion the stars seemed to be fighting on his side. He drew down the window softly and replaced the blind. It was a principle of his never to leave anything which might give a hint to the outside public of what was going on within. The room, with the blind down, was intensely dark. He put his hand into his pocket and drew out a little shaded lantern. Cautiously removing the shutter about half an inch, a pencil of light gleamed across the room. He was apparently content with this illumination. By its aid he carefully examined floor, walls, and ceiling.

"Early English. I thought so."

This remark referred to the upholstering of the room, which was in the early English style. Stooping down, he drew a pair of list slippers over his india-rubber shoes. With swift, cat-like steps he strode across the floor and left the room. He was evidently familiar with his ground. The burglar's profession, to be profitably practiced, entails no inconsiderable labor. It is quite an error to suppose that the burglar has only to stroll along the street and break into the first house which catches his eye. Not at all. Such a course is altogether unprofessional. Persons who do that kind of thing get what they deserve—"stir," and plenty of it. A really professional man, an artist—such for example, as Mr. Bennett—works on entirely different lines. He had had this little job in his mind's eye for the last three months. Acacia Villa presented an almost ideal illustration of the promising crib to crack. Did he rush at it on that account? Quite the other way. He prepared his ground. He discovered what all the world—in that neighborhood—knew already, that it was occupied by a single and solitary maid. That fact alone would have induced some men to make a dash at it before unscrupulous competitors had had an opportunity to take the bread out of their mouths. But Mr. Bennett was made of other stuff.

It was situated in a lonely suburb. It stood in its own grounds. There was not a dog about the place. There was not a shutler to a window. There was no basement to the house—you had only to step from the ground to the window sill, and from the window sill into the house. These facts would have been so many extra inducements to the average burglar to "put up" the place at once.

But Mr. Bennett looked at the matter from a different stand point. He did not ask if he could crack the crib—he had never encountered one which had mastered him—but whether the crib was really worth the cracking. The very defenselessness of the place was against it—in his eyes, at any rate—at first. People who have anything very well worth stealing do not, as a rule, leave it at the mercy of the first individual who passes by—though there are exceptions to the rule. Mr. Bennett discovered that there was one and the discovery revealed the artist in the man.

The occupant of Acacia Villa was a Miss Cecilia Jones. Mr. Bennett had never seen Miss Cecilia Jones. Nobody—or hardly anybody—ever had. There appeared to be a mystery about Miss Cecilia Jones. But Mr. Bennett had seen the maid, and not only seen her but promised to marry her as well. This was a promise which he never made to any woman unless actually compelled; the present had been a case of actual compulsion.

The maid's name was Hannah—Miss Hannah Welsh. She was not young and she was not good looking. Mr. Bennett was partial to both youth and beauty. It went against the grain to court Miss Welsh. But he found that courtship was an absolutely indispensable preliminary. After he had encircled her waist a few times with his arm and tasted the nectar of her lips—also a few times—Miss Welsh began gradually to unbend. But the process was very gradual. She was the most reticent of maids. He had not only to present her with several presents—the proceeds of the exercise of his profession—he had not only to promise to marry her, he had not only to name the day, but he had even to buy, or steal—the words were synonymous with him—the wedding ring before all the tale was told. When he had actually tried the ring on Miss Welsh's finger—to see if it would fit—then, and only then, he heard all there was to hear.

Miss Jones was queer; not mad exactly, but peculiar. She had quarreled with all her relatives. She was rich. She was full of crotchets. She distrusted all the world, particularly bankers. To such a length had she carried her want of confidence that she had realized all, her fortune, turned it into specie, and kept it in the house. It was at this point that Miss Welsh's conversation became interesting to Mr. Bennett.

"Keeps it in the house, does she? In notes, I suppose?"

"Then you suppose wrong. She won't have nothing to do with notes—trust her. It's all in gold and diamonds."

"Diamonds? How do you know they're diamonds?"

Miss Welsh glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. The conversation was carried on in the back garden at Acacia Villa, which was extensive and secluded. The time was evening, that season which is popularly supposed to be conducive to sentimental intercourse.

"Perhaps I know as much about diamonds as here and there a few."

Her tone was peculiar, almost suggestive. For an instant Mr. Bennett meditated making a clean breast of it, and asking Miss Welsh to come in on sharing terms. But he had an incurable objection to collaboration. Besides, in this case sharing terms would probably mean that he would have to go through the form, at any rate, of making her his wife.

"Where does she keep them? In a safe, I hope."

He did not hope so, though he said he did. At the very best, a safe, to a professional man, means the wasting of valuable time.

"She keeps them in her bedroom, in the chest of drawers, in a red leather box, in the little top drawer on the left-hand side."

Mr. Bennett felt a glow steal all over him. He began to conceive quite a respect for Miss Cecilia Jones. "And the gold—where does she keep that?"

"In tin boxes. There are ten of them. There are over a thousand sovereigns in each. There are five boxes on each side of the chest of drawers." Mr. Bennett possessed considerable presence of mind, but he almost lost it then. Ten thousand pounds in sovereigns! He would never regret the affection he had lavished on Miss Welsh—never to his dying day. Would it be a bad speculation to marry her? But no; the thought was rash. He would reward her, but in quite a different way. He made a rapid calculation. Ten thousand sovereigns would weigh, roughly, about a hundred and thirty pounds avoirdupois. He might turn them into a sack—fancy a sack-full of money! But a hundred and thirty pounds was no light weight to carry far. He must have a vehicle at hand. What a convenience a "pal" would be! But he had worked single-handed so far and he would work single-handed to the end.

When he had ascertained his facts he acted on them at once, thus revealing the artist again. Spare no pains in making sure that the crib is worth the cracking, then crack it at once. On the night following this conversation the crib was cracked; he had arranged for the marriage to take place the next day but one—or Miss Welsh thought he had—so that if he had wished to avoid a scandal he really had no time to lose. We have seen him enter the house. Now we understand how it was he knew his ground.

He paused for an instant outside the drawing-room door; it was through the drawing-room window he had effected an entrance. All was still. He moved up the staircase two steps at a time. There was not a stair that creaked. At the top he paused again. From information received, to adopt a phrase popular in an antagonistic profession, he was aware that Miss Jones slept in the front bedroom.

"There's three bedrooms on the first floor. When you gets to the top of the stairs you turns to the left, and if you go straight on you walks right into Miss Jones's room."

Mr. Bennett turned to the left. He went straight on. Outside Miss Jones's door he paused again. The critical moment had arrived. He felt that all his properties were in order—a bottle and a sponge in his right-hand pocket, a revolver in his left, a stout canvas bag fastened round his body beneath his coat. The lantern was shut. He opened it sufficiently to enable him to see what sort of handle there was on the door. Having satisfied himself on that point he closed it again. Then he proceeded to effect an entrance into Miss Jones's bedroom.

He took the handle firmly in his hand. It turned without the slightest sound. The door yielded at once.

"Not locked," said Mr. Bennett beneath his breath. "What a stroke of luck!"

Noiselessly the door moved on its hinges. He opened it just wide enough to enable him to slip inside. When he was in he released the handle. Instantly the door moved back and closed itself without a sound.

"Got a spring upon the door," Mr. Bennett told himself—always beneath his breath. "Uncommonly well oiled they must keep it, too."

The room was pitchy dark. He listened acutely. All was as still as the grave. He strained his ears to catch Miss Jones's breathing.

"A light sleeper!"

A very light sleeper. Strain his ears as he might, he could not catch the slightest sound. Mr. Bennett hesitated. As an artist he was averse to violence. In cases of necessity he was quite equal to the occasion, but in cases where it was not necessary he preferred the gentler way. And where a woman was in question, under hardly any provocation would he wish to cut her throat. He had chloroform in his pocket. If Miss Jones was disagreeable, he could make his peace with that. But if she left him unmolested, should he stupefy her still? He decided that while she continued to

sleep she should be allowed to sleep, only it would be well for her not to wake up too soon.

He moved across the room. Instinctively, even in the thick darkness, he knew the position of the chest of drawers. He reached it. He quickly discovered the little top drawer on the left-hand side.

In a remarkably short space of time he had it open. Then he began to search for the red leather box. He gleamed the lantern into the drawer, so that its light might assist his search.

While he was still engaged in the work of discovery suddenly the room was all ablaze with light.

"Thank you. I thought it was you."

A voice, quite a musical voice, spoke these words behind his back. Mr. Bennett was, not unnaturally, amazed. Then sudden blaze of light dazzled his eyes. He turned to see who the speaker was.

"Don't move, or I fire. You will find I am a first-rate shot."

He stared. Indeed, had cause to stare. A young lady—a distinctly pretty young lady—was sitting up in bed holding a revolver in her hand, which she was pointing straight at him.

"This room is lighted by electricity. I have only to press a button, it all goes out." And, in fact, it all went out; again the room was in darkness. "Another, it is alight again." And, in fact, that with the rapidity of a flash of lightning.

Mr. Bennett stood motionless. For the first time in his professional career he was at a loss only as to what he ought to say, but he ought to do. The young lady was so pretty, with long, fair hair, which ranged loose round her face, a pair of great big eyes, which had a most effective effect on Mr. Bennett as they looked into his sweet mouth; through her rosy lips gleamed a pearl-like teeth; and a very pretty—she reminded—nose and chin. She had on the most beautiful dress, which, in her case, was a gorgeous piece of feminine millinery, laced all down the front with the daintiest pink bows. Mr. Bennett had never seen such a picture in his life.

"I am Miss Cecilia Jones. You are Mr. Bennett, I presume—George Bennett—the George Bennett that Hannah says. Hannah is a hypno-artist. Well, I am experimenting on her, the poor dear, and she tells me everything, you know. I would like to have you hypnotize me."

Mr. Bennett did not know what she meant. He was only conscious of the most singular sensation he had ever experienced. To assist his understanding, possibly, Miss Jones gave a practical demonstration of her meaning. With her disengaged hand she made some slight movements in the air, keeping her eyes fixed on Mr. Bennett all the while. Mr. Bennett vainly struggled to escape her gaze. Suddenly he was conscious that, as it were, something had gone from him—his resolution—his freedom of will—he knew not what.

Miss Jones put down her hand.

"I think that you will do. How do you feel?"

"Very queer."

Mr. Bennett's utterance was peculiar. He spoke as a man might speak who is under the influence of a drug, or as one who dreams—unconsciously, without intention as it were.

"Oh they always do feel queer at first. Are you considered a good burglar, as a rule?"

"As a rule."

Mr. Bennett hesitatingly put down his hand and drew it across his brow. It was the hand which held the lantern. When the lantern was put down he found that it was hot. He let it fall from his hand with a clatter to the floor. Miss Jones eyed him keenly all the time.

"I see you are not quite subjective yet; but I think that you will do. And of course I can always complete the influence if I will. It only illustrates what I have continually said—that it is not necessarily the lowest mental organizations that are most in crime. I should say that yours was above, rather than below, the average. Have you yourself any ideas upon that point?"

As he answered, Mr. Bennett faintly sighed.

"None!"

Miss Jones smiled, and as she smiled he smiled, too. Though there was this feature about Mr. Bennett's smile—there was not in it any sense of mirth. Miss Jones seemed to notice this, for she smiled still more. Immediately Mr. Bennett's smile expanded into a hideous grin. Then she burst into laughter. Mr. Bennett laughed out, too.

"After all, you are more subjective than I thought you were. I don't think I ever had a subject laugh so sympathetically before."

As Miss Jones said this—which she did when she had done laughing—she turned and adjusted the pillows so as to form a support to her back. Against this she reclined at ease. She placed the revolver on the bolster at her side. From a receptacle in the nature of a tidy, which was fastened to the wall above her head, she drew a small leather case. From this she took a cigarette and a match. With the most charming air imaginable she proceeded to light the cigarette and smoke.

Mr. Bennett watched all her movements, feeling that he must be playing a part in a dream. It was a perceptible relief when she removed her eyes from his face, though they were such pretty eyes. Yet, although she was not looking at him, he felt that