

# Twelve O'clock Tea.

By CATHERINE STONEMAN LONG.



IT was nearly midnight, but Mrs. Burdick still sat at her desk writing. It was very quiet in the library save for the sound of her pen, which went scratching briskly across the page. Outside the window, the wind whirled about the corners of the house, and occasionally there came fierce, sudden gusts of rain against the window-pane, but the suggestion of storm and discomfort without only made the warmth and luxuriousness of the room the more pronounced. A cat slumbered peacefully before the grate fire, and the soft light, filtered through the red gas globes, gave the apartment an appearance of comfort and good cheer.

At last, with a sigh of relief, Mrs. Burdick threw down her pen and pushed her paper aside. Her article for the Woman's Club to-morrow was finished. "An hour before John will be in," she sighed impatiently, glancing at the clock. "That is what it means to be the wife of a travelling man. Waiting until all hours of the night for him to come home!"

The air of the room was heavy with the perfume of some hyacinths nearby, and she was thoroughly tired. A delicious sense of drowsiness, born of the sense of a duty well discharged, began to steal over her. The clock softly chimed the hour, the cat aroused itself, purred gently for a moment, then relapsed into slumber again, and all was still.

Suddenly Mrs. Burdick became vaguely conscious of a change in the conditions surrounding her. She had, in the midst of her half dreams, one of those premonitions of danger which come to all of us sometimes from no testimony of the senses, but rather from some mysterious source within. She new instinctively that an element of evil had entered into this peaceful scene, and she became at once wide awake.

Then there came to her ears a sound other than that of the storm without. It was that of stealthy footsteps on the bare floor of the adjoining room. They came nearer, then paused a moment, and a cautious hand was laid upon the knob of the door behind her. Mrs. Burdick was not a particularly courageous woman, and a cold perspiration started out upon her body. It seemed to her as if all the blood had rushed to her head and was trickling out at the roots of her hair. She had sometimes wondered what she would do if she were to find a burglar in the house. She had supposed that she would probably scream and faint away, according to conventional procedure. She experienced a sense of surprise to find herself doing nothing of the sort, but turning her chair swiftly about to face the intruder.

In the doorway stood a man. He was tall, slight and youngish-looking, with a drooping yellow moustache which did not hide the lines of a sneering smile upon his lips. He wore a shabby overcoat, buttoned tightly over his narrow chest, and a brown derby hat, also somewhat the worse for wear, drawn well down over his eyes. In his hand he held a revolver, the shining length of which he was pointing directly at her, while he fastened upon her a cruel, triumphant gaze.

Mrs. Burdick tried to think what an up-to-date woman like herself should do under such circumstances, but she could remember no precedent by which to be guided. She reminded herself, however, that none of her ancestors had faltered in the Revolution, so she took a firm grip upon her failing senses and sought for her voice, which seemed to have descended somewhere into her shoes.

"Good-evening," she remarked at length pleasantly, and looking the intruder squarely in the eyes.

The man appeared to be somewhat surprised at this unexpected greeting;

but in a moment he showed a line of even, white teeth in a broader smile, and responded "Good Evening," at the same time allowing the hand holding the revolver to drop by his side.

"I suppose you have called to see my husband?" she said as calmly as if it were a common occurrence for strange men to appear unannounced in her library at midnight. "I am sorry he is not in. I am expecting him in a short time, however, on the Fast Mail. Perhaps you will be seated and wait until he arrives."

The man laughed aloud. "Well, you are a game one," he said, "and no mistake. But that's too thin. You don't expect him at all to-night. I took pains to make sure that he wouldn't leave New York until to-morrow morning."

"Oh, very well," said she quietly, although her heart was thumping wildly. "Perhaps you are better posted as to his whereabouts than I am, but I certainly received a letter from him this morning, telling me to expect him to-night. However, since you didn't call to see him, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what is your business here?"

"Not a bit," said the man. "I'm after your diamonds and your silver. I know you've got 'em both. I've seen you wear the diamonds, and I found out how much silver you've got from the cook that left here last week. I'll thank you to show me where they are—the quicker the better—and then I'll skip out before the night watchman comes along this way."

"And if I refuse?" she asked steadily. The man tapped his revolver significantly. "It would be better for you not to," he said.

Mrs. Burdick made no further remark, but sat leaning back in her chair, looking curiously at the man, who stood now quite near her.

"Well," he said at length, with a surly frown, "why don't you start? What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing," said she. "I was only looking at you, and I must say I am surprised."

"Why?" Because you don't look at all as I expected you to."

"Expected me to! What do you mean? Why did you expect me to look like anything? You never even heard of me!"

"No; but I suppose— Well, you really are a burglar, aren't you?"

"You bet I am, and I'm a good one, too. I can show you several tricks of my trade if you don't show up those sparklers pretty quick. Hurry up, will you?"

The lady made no movement to rise. "Well," she said at length reflectively. "I've looked for you under the bed every night for a good many years, and I always thought you would be a sort of villainous-looking fellow, with matted black hair and dirty hands. But you— Why, you look almost like a gentleman!"

A wave of hot color swept over the man's sallow face. "How do you know but what I have been one and am one yet?" he asked sarcastically, laying the revolver upon the desk, against which he leaned with folded arms. "Maybe you've been one, but you're not one now. Gentlemen," said Mrs. Burdick haughtily, "don't wear their hats in the presence of ladies, nor bring mud into their houses on their feet," she added, glancing with indignation at his dirt-encrusted soles.

The burglar removed his hat and laid it on the desk, after which he lifted first one foot and then the other and gazed critically at them.

"Ten thousand pardons!" he exclaimed, as he carefully gathered up several pieces of mud and threw them in the grate. "There wasn't any door mat at the window where I came in, and I was in a hurry."

"Besides," she continued, her rising wrath sweeping away her fear, "no gentleman would come in my house at

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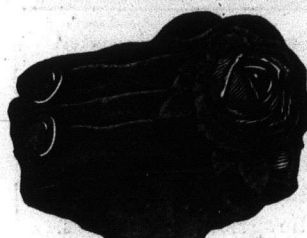
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