

NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS.

By John Lubberton

CHAPTER I.

When Zenas Bortley moved from the city to a suburban village, in search of better air for the children and for his own asthmatic lungs, he told his wife that now she could have the pleasure of knowing her next-door neighbors—an experience she never had been granted in the city. Mrs. Bortley, born and reared in a thickly settled portion of the metropolis, believed her husband's statement, for had not Zenas always been a country boy until he came to New York to make his fortune? Had he not described to her, again and again, the ideal society of his native village of Grasshopper Falls, where everybody knew everybody else—where one man was as good as another so long as he earned his living, paid his bills, and went to church on Sunday, and where every woman was a lady if she had a black silk dress, no matter how plain, in which to receive calls? Had not Zenas' own mother, wife of the bookkeeper of the local lumber company, been asked by the congressman's wife to help entertain some distinguished guests from another state? And it had been so delightful when Mrs. Zenas had been ill or feeble, in her little flat in the city, to hear her husband tell how in the country any man whose wife was feeling poorly could borrow a neighbor's carriage or sleigh and take the dear woman out for an airing. Mrs. Zenas never had an outing except in a horse car, for her husband, though strong in affection and self-sacrifice, had but a small salary, and the olive branches, which were the family's only riches, always needed something which cost about as much as a carriage for an hour or two.

So the Bortleys went to the country, and a blessed change they found it. The children began to grow like weeds, their mother's cheeks became fuller of roses than the garden, and Zenas himself, though he was obliged to breakfast early and sup late in order to make a full day at the store in which he was entry clerk, found his asthma disappearing with unexpected rapidity. His cottage cost less per month than a city flat; he had a little garden which, thanks to his boyhood's experience, yielded many vegetables, which tasted better than any he had ever bought from a grocer; the children had a swing under an old apple tree, and rolled in the grass to their heart's content; the pastor of a church called after seeing the heads of the families in his congregation, and Zenas was invited to join the local club of his political party, and also to subscribe to a course of lectures to be delivered in the local academy of music during the following winter.

Yet Zenas was not happy. The neighborly affiliation which he had promised his wife did not come about. He waited for it a few weeks, for he was a dignified little fellow, and had some knowledge of the manners of good society, but when his wife reminded him that the summer had nearly passed and no one had called who had not some semi-business purpose, he informed himself, with a mighty pull at all his faculties, that something ought to be done. What most irritated him was that his next-door neighbor—a handsome woman whose husband, so the agent of Bortley cottage had said, would be obliged to be away from home for some time—had never called. Mrs. Maytham, the lady in question, was distinguished looking, as well as handsome; her house was a palace, compared with the house which Zenas had hired, and she drove almost daily behind a fine pair of horses. She was a good woman, too, or Zenas was no judge of human nature, and, as she had no children, the little man, who could not imagine that any one regarded boys and girls except with the adoration which he bestowed upon his darlings, was sure that if Mrs. Maytham could know his brood, she would in her loneliness have an unfailing source of consolation. As for Mrs. Bortley, Zenas' loyal soul profoundly pitied any one and every one who did not know that estimable woman.

Yet the two women did not become acquainted. Mrs. Maytham did not call, and when Mrs. Bortley felt hurt, her husband suggested that, perhaps, the older resident was from one of the southern states, in which calls must first be made by newcomers upon the old families. Mrs. Bortley acted upon this suggestion, but was unfortunate to select an hour when her neighbor was out; she made a supplementary effort when her husband explained that country people usually became acquainted by borrowing small necessities from one another, but when Mrs. Bortley begged the loan of a cup of ground coffee one morning she saw only her neighbor's servant,

and the same result attended the payment of the loan. In vain, too, did she display her children, who really were pretty and well dressed, when her neighbor walked alone through the well kept garden, which the Bortleys coveted for its rare display of flowers. Mrs. Maytham seemed to ignore the very existence of the well-beloved children, for whom an emperor might have been glad to exchange his crown.

Zenas, however, had no idea of giving up, and the unexpected lack of now acquaintances—a peculiarity of suburban villages—aided to his determination to know his nearest neighbor. While watering his late lettuce one Saturday afternoon, and felicitating himself upon his success during hot weather with this succulent but capricious vegetable, he suddenly climbed a tree and inspected his neighbor's kitchen garden. Just as he had suspected, the only lettuce there had run to seed. In a moment Zenas was upon the ground again, and pulling some finely blanched plants, which he took to his neighbor's kitchen door, saying to the cook:

"I hope I don't intrude, but good lettuce is scarce at this time of the year, and, as mine is very fine, I thought perhaps your mistress would enjoy some."

The servant took the crisp present without a word. After moving several steps toward home Zenas stopped suddenly to admire a brilliant clump of tritomas. As he stood gazing he heard a window blind open and a voice calling, in a low tone:

"Bridget!"

"Mem?"

"Who was that?"

"Misther Bortley, mem."

"The owner of that gang next door?"

"Yes, mem."

"Umph!" The last expression was emphasized by so vigorous a closing of the window blind that the catch fastened with a sharp snap. A moment before Zenas had felt bent as well as short; a moment after the wound to his pride had straightened him until, as he strode across the fence, he felt as tall as Goliath of Gath. He hastened to the house to tell his wife, but he checked himself; he adored that wife of his; he was always encompassing her with his love, that she might be shielded from the slings and darts of an unappreciative world; she should not know that any one had alluded to her and her nestlings as a "gang."

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 beside, he came to regard his 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, he 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 still was 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 Grasshopper 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 eye 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 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 pined in her loneliness and probable gloom that he prayed earnestly for her—prayed what he would he could not forget the time in which she had called his adorable family a "gang."

CHAPTER II.

As the dog-days dragged on Zenas' 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 affright 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 in abject terror, and was conscious of the outbreak of the cold sweat of which he often had 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 2 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 tree to be denuded some moonlight night by unbidden gatherers. Well, if the man were bent on stealing fruit from the Maytham place, let him steal; it was a shame such things should be, but Zenas was not one of the village's three policemen, and, as he would rather have his own single pear tree stripped than attack a midnight prowler, he could not be expected to protect his neighbor's property—the property of a neighbor who had called his family a "gang."

But, horror! 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 town talk that the Maytham house was expensively furnished, and contained much solid silver ware, beside 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 the 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 within 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 the burglar attack him there would be nothing to do but 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 \$1000.

Terror and excitement had made him so wild that exhaustion speedily followed, with its consequent 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

spoliation be a judgment upon the woman who had been so kind, 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 propped was a great tree of "strawberry" apples, which the Bortley children had been eyeing wistfully for a fortnight, as the blush on the fruit had deepened to crimson. Such a tree commanded a high price, as Bortley had learned to his sorrow. Well, if the tree were robbed, his 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 just 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 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 it 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, appearing 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 tossed aside, and the struggle by natural arms began again. Zenas recalled as if by magic all the long-forgotten fistic lore of the schoolyard 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, practised 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, he saw, clad all in white, and with hair dishevelled, his handsome neighbor.

"Madam," he gasped, "this—this burglar—tried to get into—your house. I saw him—he tried to shoot me. His pistol is somewhere—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 is 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?"

"Yes, madam, and sorry I am to hear it, for I've heard of your husband's—"

"Agnes!" moaned the captive, "find my pistol—quick—and shoot the fellow. Put it close to his arm and fire, then break the other in the same way—that will make the devil loose his hold. I hear men running—they are coming this way!"

"Help! Murder! Help!" roared Zenas, who also heard quick footsteps on a sidewalk not far away. Then he said quickly, "Madam, before you can find that pistol I can