

An old friend of my father's, who had amassed a considerable fortune through some lucky speculations, had bought a plot of ground here, and built a large roomy dwelling for himself and family, the latter consisting of his wife and his daughter, a very pretty girl of about 23 years of age.

In response to repeated invitations, and, moreover, it must be confessed, being too pressed for ready cash to go elsewhere, I had at last made up my mind to run down and pay the Phrales a short visit.

The time passed more pleasantly than I had expected in the company of Violet Phrale, and already the end of my holiday was in sight, when the incident,—for it was but little more—that I am about to relate occurred.

I was to leave on Saturday night on my return to town, and had sat up rather late the evening before, so that I fell asleep almost directly my head touched the pillow, and slept uninterruptedly till I was awakened at an early hour the following morning by an unusual disturbance in such a quiet locality.

Hastily throwing on a few clothes, I ran downstairs, and found the whole household in a tumult. It seemed that the housemaid, on entering the dining room preparatory to laying the breakfast table, had discovered the sideboard drawers lying on the floor, with what remained of their contents scattered round them, the furniture also had been pushed about, and the room generally showed signs of having been thoroughly ransacked by some midnight marauder.

My attention was first directed to allaying the fears of Mrs. Phrale, who seemed to be imbued with the idea that the robbers were hidden somewhere about the premises waiting for an opportunity to sally out and slay the whole community. Having persuaded her with some difficulty that no immediate danger was to be feared, I started out with her husband, who appeared to have been rendered almost helpless by the affair, to see if any clue could be found. We came upon one almost immediately in the shape of footprints in the soft grass just outside the window of the dining room, which overlooked the lawn, and the sill of which, moreover, was only a few feet above the ground. A hasty examination showed me that the foot-marks were turned both ways, and that they had been produced, as far as I could judge, by a large man wearing a heavy pair of boots. I next turned my attention to the window through which the robber had apparently made his entry. This was about four feet from the ground, and was made in two parts, the upper of which was stationary and the lower part capable of being pushed up, and was left in place, when closed, by its own weight which was by no means inconsiderable. This could be fastened at night by means of an iron catch on the inside of the upper or fixed part of the window.

The whole matter at first sight seemed so clear, that I straightway proposed to Mr. Phrale that I should ride over to the neighbouring village and notify the authorities to send over an officer. To my surprise, my friend strongly objected to this course, saying that the loss was after all a trifling one, consisting of some knives, forks, and spoons, and a few pieces of plate, and further he did not wish to have his house filled with busy-bodies, and finally, much against my will, I was obliged to submit.

In the interval before breakfast I whiled away the time by interviewing the butler. This individual, who had been in the Phrale's service a little less than a year, appeared to be smitten with remorse, and confessed to me that he had neglected to fasten the catch on the evening previous; other information than this he could not give me, as he slept on the opposite side of the house and had heard nothing during the night. After breakfast I took a walk in order to try and think the matter over. What appeared strange to me was that any person could have opened the window and created such a disturbance in the dining room, which was directly under my bed room, without having wakened me, for I had always been a light sleeper.

On my return to the house I questioned the housemaid closely as to the position of the various articles of furniture, and her answers strengthened a suspicion that had been growing in my mind, that the chaos in which the room was found was a studied disorder intended as a blind. But why should a thief who had entered and left the house so boldly, without taking the trouble even to remove his boots, have gone to the length of moving the furniture round in this careful manner? This seemed to be a point worth considering. I could not help feeling that there was something too clear and plain about the whole matter, and what had at first been but a suspicion became almost a conviction the more I considered it, namely, that the thief was to be found among those composing the household.

I went for a long drive that afternoon with Violet, to take a farewell view of the country, returning in time to have 5 o'clock tea with Mr. and Mrs. Phrale. While we were waiting for the tea to appear, Mrs. Phrale happened to leave the room for a few minutes, and Violet having gone to her own room to remove her hat, Mr. Phrale and I were left alone in the drawing-room where we sat chatting about the city to which I was about to return. Our conversation was interrupted by the entry of Walters with the tea and cake. What possessed me I can never explain, but the idea suddenly flashed into my mind that if I could catch Walters off his guard he might possibly, if he had any connection with the robbery, betray himself by some sign or word. Without stopping