

The Stories of the Three Burglars

By

Frank R. Stockton

Web-Books.Com

The Stories of the Three Burglars

I am a householder in a pleasant country neighbourhood, about twenty miles from New York. My family consists of myself and wife, our boy, George William, aged two, two maid-servants, and a man; but in the summer we have frequent visitors, and at the time of which I am about to write my Aunt Martha was staying with us.

My house is large and pleasant, and we have neighbours near enough for social purposes and yet not too near or too many to detract from the rural aspect of our surroundings. But we do not live in a paradise; we are occasionally troubled by mosquitoes and burglars.

Against the first of these annoyances we have always been able to guard ourselves, at least in a measure, and our man and the cook declare that they have become so used to them that they do not mind them; but to guard against burglars is much more difficult, and to become used to them would, I think, require a great deal of practice.

For several months before the period of this narrative our neighbourhood had been subject to visits from burglars. From time to time houses had been entered and robbed, and the offenders had never been detected.

We had no police force, not even a village organization. There was a small railway station near our house, and six miles away was the county town. For fire and police protection each household was obliged to depend upon itself.

Before the beginning of the burglarious enterprises in our midst, we had not felt the need of much protection in this direction; sometimes poultry was stolen, but this was a rare occurrence, and, although windows and doors were generally fastened for the night, this labour was often considered much more troublesome than necessary. But now a great change had taken place in the feelings of our community. When the first robbery occurred the neighbours were inclined to laugh about it, and to say that Captain Hubbard's habit of sitting up after the rest of his family had gone to bed and then retiring and forgetting to close the front door had invited the entrance of a passing tramp. But when a second and a third house, where windows and doors had not been left open, had been entered, and, in a measure, despoiled, people ceased to laugh; and if there had been any merriment at all on the subject, it would have been caused by the extraordinary and remarkable precautions taken against the entrance of thieves by night. The loaded pistol became the favourite companion of the head of the house; those who had no watch-dogs bought them; there were new locks, new bolts, new fastenings. At one time there was a mounted patrol of young men, which, however, was soon broken up by their mothers. But this trouble was unavailing, for at intervals the burglaries continued.

As a matter of course a great many theories were broached as to the reasons for this disturbance in our hitherto peaceful neighbourhood. We were at such a distance from the ordinary centres of crime that it was generally considered that professional burglars

would hardly take the trouble to get to us or to get away from us, and that, therefore, the offences were probably committed by unsuspected persons living in this part of the country who had easy means of determining which houses were worth breaking into and what method of entrance would be most feasible. In this way some families, hitherto regarded as respectable families, had fallen under suspicion.

So far, mine was the only house of any importance within the distance of a mile from the station which had not in some way suffered from burglars. In one or two of these cases the offenders had been frightened away before they had done any other injury than the breaking of a window-shutter; but we had been spared any visitation whatever. After a time we began to consider that this was an invidious distinction. Of course we did not desire that robbers should break into our house and steal, but it was a sort of implied insult that robbers should think that our house was not worth breaking into. We contrived, however, to bear up under this implied contempt and even under the facetious imputations of some of our lively neighbours, who declared that it looked very suspicious that we should lose nothing, and even continue to add to our worldly goods, while everybody else was suffering from abstractions.

I did not, however, allow any relaxation in my vigilance in the protection of my house and family. My time to suffer had not yet arrived, and it might not arrive at all; but if it did come it should not be my fault. I therefore carefully examined all the new precautions my neighbours had taken against the entrance of thieves, and where I approved of them I adopted them.

Of some of these my wife and I did not approve. For instance, a tin pan containing iron spoons, the dinner bell, and a miscellaneous collection of hardware balanced on the top stair of the staircase, and so connected with fine cords that a thief coming up the stairs would send it rattling and bounding to the bottom, was looked upon by us with great disfavour. The descent of the pan, whether by innocent accident or the approach of a burglar, might throw our little boy into a fit, to say nothing of the terrible fright it would give my Aunt Martha, who was a maiden lady of middle age, and not accustomed to a clatter in the night. A bull-dog in the house my wife would not have, nor, indeed, a dog of any kind. George William was not yet old enough to play with dogs, especially a sharp one; and if the dog was not sharp it was of no use to have him in the house. To the ordinary burglar-alarm she strongly objected. She had been in houses where these things went off of their own accord, occasioning great consternation; and, besides, she said that if thieves got into the house she did not want to know it and she did not want me to know it; the quicker they found what they came for and went away with it the better. Of course, she wished them kept out, if such a thing were possible; but if they did get in, our duty as parents of the dearest little boy was non-interference. She insisted, however, that the room in which the loveliest of children slept, and which was also occupied by ourselves, should be made absolutely burglar proof; and this object, by means of extraordinary bolts and chains, I flattered myself I accomplished. My Aunt Martha had a patent contrivance for fastening a door that she always used, whether at home or travelling, and in whose merit she placed implicit confidence. Therefore we did not feel it necessary to be anxious

about her; and the servants slept at the top of the house, where thieves would not be likely to go.

"They may continue to slight us by their absence," said my wife, "but I do not believe that they will be able to frighten us by their presence."

I was not, however, so easily contented as my wife. Of course I wished to do everything possible to protect George William and the rest of the family, but I was also very anxious to protect our property in all parts of the house. Therefore, in addition to everything else I had done, I devised a scheme for interfering with the plans of men who should feloniously break into our home.

After a consultation with a friend, who was a physician greatly interested in the study of narcotic drugs, I procured a mixture which was almost tasteless and without peculiar odour, and of which a small quantity would in less than a minute throw an ordinary man into a state of unconsciousness. The potion was, however, no more dangerous in its effects than that quantity of ardent spirits which would cause entire insensibility. After the lapse of several hours, the person under the influence of the drug would recover consciousness without assistance. But in order to provide against all contingencies my friend prepared a powerful antidote, which would almost immediately revive one who had been made unconscious by our potion.

The scheme that I had devised may possibly have been put into use by others. But of this I know not. I thought it a good scheme and determined to experiment with it, and, if possible, to make a trap which should catch a burglar. I would reveal this plan to no one but my friend the physician and my wife. Secrecy would be an important element in its success.

Our library was a large and pleasant room on the ground floor of the house, and here I set my trap. It was my habit to remain in this room an hour or so after the rest of the family had gone to bed, and, as I was an early riser, I was always in it again before it was necessary for a servant to enter it in the morning.

Before leaving the library for the night I placed in a conspicuous position in the room a small table, on which was a tray holding two decanters partially filled with wine, in the one red and in the other white. There was also upon the tray an open box of biscuit and three wine-glasses, two of them with a little wine at the bottom. I took pains to make it appear that these refreshments had been recently partaken of. There were biscuit crumbs upon the tray, and a drop or two of wine was freshly spilled upon it every time the trap was set. The table, thus arranged, was left in the room during the night, and early in the morning I put the tray and its contents into a closet and locked it up.

A portion of my narcotic preparation was thoroughly mixed with the contents of each of the decanters in such proportions that a glass of the wine would be sufficient to produce the desired effect.

It was my opinion that there were few men who, after a night walk and perhaps some labour in forcibly opening a door or a window-shutter, would not cease for a moment in pursuance of their self-imposed task to partake of the refreshments so conveniently left behind them by the occupants of the house when they retired to rest. Should my surmises be correct, I might reasonably expect, should my house be broken into, to find an unconscious burglar in the library when I went down in the morning. And I was sure, and my wife agreed with me, that if I should find a burglar in that room or any other part of the house, it was highly desirable that he should be an unconscious one.

Night after night I set my burglar trap, and morning after morning I locked it up in the closet. I cannot say that I was exactly disappointed that no opportunity offered to test the value of my plan, but it did seem a pity that I should take so much trouble for nothing. It had been some weeks since any burglaries had been committed in the neighbourhood, and it was the general opinion that the miscreants had considered this field worked out and had transferred their labours to a better-paying place. The insult of having been considered unworthy the attention of the knights of the midnight jimmy remained with us, but as all our goods and chattels also remained with us we could afford to brook the indignity.

As the trap cost nothing my wife did not object to my setting it every night for the present. Something might happen, she remarked, and it was just as well to be prepared in more ways than one; but there was a point upon which she was very positive.

"When George William is old enough to go about the house by himself," she said, "those decanters must not be left exposed upon the table. Of course I do not expect him to go about the house drinking wine and everything that he finds, but there is no knowing what a child in the first moments of his investigative existence may do."

For myself, I became somewhat tired of acting my part in this little farce every night and morning, but when I have undertaken anything of this sort I am slow to drop it.

It was about three weeks since I had begun to set my trap when I was awakened in the night by a sudden noise. I sat up in bed, and as I did so my wife said to me sleepily,—

"What is that? Was it thunder? There it is again!" she exclaimed, starting up. "What a crash! It must have struck somewhere." I did not answer. It was not thunder. It was something in the house, and it flashed into my mind that perhaps my trap had been sprung. I got out of bed and began rapidly to dress.

"What are you going to do?" anxiously asked my wife.

"I'm going to see what has happened," said I. At that moment there was another noise. This was like two or three heavy footsteps, followed by a sudden thump; but it was not so loud as the others.

"John," cried my wife, "don't stir an inch, it's burglars!" and she sprang out of bed and seized me by the arm.

"I must go down," I said; "but there is really no reason for your being frightened. I shall call David, and shall carry my pistol, so there is really no danger. If there are thieves in the house they have probably decamped by this time—that is, if they are able to do so, for of course they must know that noise would awaken the soundest sleepers."

My wife looked at me and then slowly withdrew her hands from my arm.

"You promise me," she said, "if you find a burglar downstairs in the possession of his senses you will immediately come back to me and George William?"

I promised her, and, slipping on some clothes, I went out into the second-story hall. I carried no light. Before I had reached the bottom of the back stairs I heard David, my man, coming down. To be sure it was he and not a burglar I spoke to him in a low voice, my pistol raised in case of an unsatisfactory reply.

"I heard that noise, sir," he whispered, "and was going down to see about it."

"Are you ready if it's thieves?" I whispered.

"I have got the biscuit-beater," he replied.

"Come on, then," said I, and we went downstairs.

I had left no light in the library, but there was one there now, and it shone through the open door into the hallway. We stopped and listened. There was no sound, and then slowly and cautiously we approached the door of the library. The scene I beheld astounded me, and involuntarily I sprang back a step or two. So did David; but in an instant we saw that there was no need of retreat or defence. Stretched upon the floor, not far from the doorway, lay a tall man, his face upturned to the light of a bull's-eye lantern which stood by the mantel-piece. His eyes were shut, and it was evident that he was perfectly insensible. Near by, in the wreck of the small table, glasses, and decanters, lay another man, apparently of heavier build. He also was as still as a corpse. A little further back, half sitting on the floor, with the upper part of his body resting against the lounge, was another man with a black mask over his face.

"Are they dead?" exclaimed David, in an undertone of horror.

"No," said I, "they are not dead; they have been caught in my trap."

And I must admit that the consciousness of this created a proud exultation of spirit within me. I had overmatched these rascals; they were prostrated before me. If one of them moved, David and I could kill him. But I did not believe there would be any killing, nor any moving for the present.

In a high whisper, which could have been heard distinctly all over the house, my wife now called to me from the top of the stairs. "What is it?" she said. "What has happened?"

I stepped quickly to the stairway.

"Everything is all right," I said in a loud, distinct voice, intended to assure my wife that there was no necessity for caution or alarm. "I will be with you presently."

"I am glad to hear that nothing is the matter," said Aunt Martha, now for the first time opening her door. "I was afraid something had happened."

But I had business to attend to before I could go upstairs. In thinking over and arranging this plan for the capture of burglars, I had carefully considered its various processes, and had provided against all the contingencies I could think of; therefore I was not now obliged to deliberate what I should do. "Keep your eye on them," said I to David, "and if one of them moves be ready for him. The first thing to do is to tie them hand and foot."

I quickly lighted a lamp, and then took from another shelf of the closet a large coil of strong cotton rope, which I had provided for such an occasion as the present.

"Now," said I to David, "I will tie them while you stand by to knock over any one of them who attempts to get up."

The instrument with which David was prepared to carry out my orders was a formidable one. In the days of my youth my family was very fond of "Maryland biscuit," which owes much of its delicacy to the fact that before baking it is pounded and beaten by a piece of heavy iron. Some people used one kind of a beater and some another, but we had had made for the purpose a heavy iron club a little over a foot long, large and heavy at one end and a handle at the other. In my present household Maryland biscuits were never made, but I had preserved this iron beater as a memento of my boyhood, and when the burglaries began in our vicinity I gave it to David to keep in his room, to be used as a weapon if necessary. I did not allow him to have a pistol, having a regard for my own safety in a sudden night alarm, and nothing could be more formidable in a hand-to-hand encounter than this skull-crushing club.

I began with the tall man, and rapidly tied his feet together with many twists of the rope and as many knots. I then turned him over and tied his elbows behind him in the same secure way. I had given so much thought to the best method of securing a man by cords, that I do not think this fellow could possibly have released himself when I had finished with him.

David was obeying my orders and keeping a strict watch on the prostrate men; but his emotions of amazement were so great that he could not keep them down.

"What is the matter with them, sir?" he said. "How did they come so?"

"There is no time for talking now," I answered. "I will tell you all about it when the men have been secured." I now turned my attention to the man who was partly resting against the lounge. I first tied his feet, and before letting him down to the floor, so as to get to his arms, I removed his hat and his mask, which was made of black muslin. I was surprised to see the beardless face of a young and very good-looking man. He was well dressed, and had the general appearance of a person belonging to theatrical circles. When his arms had been tied, I told David he might lay down his biscuit-beater, and help me with the third man, who was badly mixed up with the *débris* of the refreshments. We hauled him out and tied him up. He was rather a short man, but very heavy, and I could see no signs of his having been hurt by the smash-up he made in falling.

We now proceeded to search the insensible burglars for arms. Upon the tall man we found a large revolver, a heavy billy, which seemed as if it had seen service, and a long-bladed knife. The stout man carried two double-barrelled pistols, and upon one of the fingers of his right hand wore a brass ring with a murderous-looking iron protuberance upon it, which, when driven forward by his powerful arm, was probably more dangerous than a billy. Upon the younger man we found no arms at all, and his hip pocket contained nothing but a small handbook on civil engineering.

I now briefly explained to David the nature of the trap which had caught the burglars. He gazed upon me with a face glowing with amazed admiration.

"What a head you have got, sir!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe there is another man in this State who would have thought of that. And what are you going to do with them now, sir; hang 'em? That's what ought to be done with them, the hounds!"

"All I shall do," I answered, "will be to keep them till daylight, and then I shall send word to the sheriff at Kennertown, and have him send officers for them."

"Upon my word," exclaimed David, "they are in the worst kind of a box."

Now my wife called me again. "What in the world are you doing down there?" she called; "why don't you come upstairs?"

This annoyed me, for I was not yet ready to go upstairs. I wished to resuscitate these fellows, for their stupor was so profound that I began to fear that perhaps they had taken too much of the drug and ought to be brought to their senses as speedily as possible. This feeling was due more to my desire that serious injuries should not occur to the rascals while in my house than to any concern for them.

"My dear," said I, stepping to the bottom of the stairs, "I have some things to attend to down here which will occupy me a few minutes longer; then I will come up to you."

"I can't imagine what the things are," she said, "but I suppose I can wait," and she went into her room and closed her door after her.

I now began to consider what was to be done with the burglars after they had been resuscitated. My first impulse was to rid the house of them by carrying them out of doors and bringing them to their senses there. But there was an objection to this plan. They would be pretty heavy fellows to carry, and as it would be absolutely necessary to watch them until they could be given into the charge of the officers of the law, I did not want to stay out of doors to do this, for the night air was raw and chilly, and I therefore determined to keep them in the house. And as they could be resuscitated better in a sitting position, they must be set up in some way or other. I consulted David on the subject.

"You might put 'em up with their backs agin the wall, sir," said he, "but the dirty beasts would spoil the paper. I wouldn't keep them in a decent room like this. I'd haul 'em out into the kitchen, anyway."

But as they were already in the library I decided to let them stay there, and to get them as speedily as possible into some position in which they might remain. I bethought me of a heavy wooden settle or bench with back and arms which stood on the side piazza. With David's help I brought this into the room and placed it with its back to the window.

"Now, then," said I to David, "we will put them on this bench, and I will tie them fast to it. We cannot be too careful in securing them, for if one of them were to get loose, even without arms, there is no knowing what trouble he might make."

"Well, sir," said David, "if I'm to handle them at all, I'd rather have them dead, as I hope they are, than have them alive; but you needn't be afraid, sir, that any one of them will get loose. If I see any signs of that I'll crack the rascal's skull in a jiffy."

It required a great deal of tugging and lifting to get those three men on the bench, but we got them there side by side, their heads hanging listlessly, some one way, some another. I then tied each one of them firmly to the bench.

I had scarcely finished this when I again heard my wife's voice from the top of the stairs.

"If any pipes have burst," she called down, "tell David not to catch the water in the new milk-pans."

"Very well," I replied, "I'll see to it," and was rejoiced to hear again the shutting of the bedroom door.

I now saturated a sponge with the powerful preparation which Dr. Marks had prepared as an antidote, and held it under the nose of the tall burglar. In less than twenty seconds he made a slight quivering in his face as if he were about to sneeze, and very soon he did sneeze slightly. Then he sneezed violently, raised his head, and opened his eyes. For a moment he gazed blankly before him, and then looked stupidly at David and at me. But in an instant there flashed into his face the look of a wild beast. His quick, glittering eye took in the whole situation at a glance. With a furious oath he threw himself forward with such a powerful movement that he nearly lifted the bench.

"Stop that," said David, who stood near him with his iron club uplifted. "If you do that again I'll let you feel this."

The man looked at him with a fiery flash in his eyes, and then he looked at me, as I stood holding the muzzle of my pistol within two feet of his face. The black and red faded out of his countenance. He became pale. He glanced at his companions bound and helpless. His expression now changed entirely. The fury of the wild beast was succeeded by a look of frightened subjection. Gazing very anxiously at my pistol, he said, in a voice which, though agitated, was low and respectful:—

"What does this mean? What are you going to do? Will you please turn away the muzzle of that pistol?"

I took no notice of this indication of my steadiness of hand, and answered:—

"I am going to bring these other scoundrels to their senses, and early in the morning the three of you will be on your way to jail, where I hope you may remain for the rest of your lives."

"If you don't get killed on your way there," said David, in whose nervous hand the heavy biscuit-beater was almost as dangerous as my pistol.

The stout man who sat in the middle of the bench was twice as long in reviving as had been his companion, who watched the operation with intense interest. When the burly scoundrel finally became conscious, he sat for a few minutes gazing at the floor with a silly grin; then he raised his head and looked first at one of his companions and then at the other, gazed for an instant at me and David, tried to move his feet, gave a pull at one arm and then at the other, and when he found he was bound hard and fast, his face turned as red as fire and he opened his mouth, whether to swear or yell I know not. I had already closed the door, and before the man had uttered more than a premonitory sound, David had clapped the end of his bludgeon against his mouth.

"Taste that," he said, "and you know what you will get if you disturb this family with any of your vile cursin' and swearin'."

"Look here," said the tall man, suddenly turning to the other with an air of authority, "keep your mouth shut and don't speak till you're spoken to. Mind that, now, or these gentlemen will make it the worse for you."

David grinned as he took away his club.

"I'd gentlemen you," he said, "if I could get half a chance to do it."

The face of the heavy burglar maintained its redness, but he kept his mouth shut.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

