

## The Myth of the Gentleman Burglar

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investigate their methods with scientific thoroughness.

Their modus operandi, which is always the same, consists in introducing themselves into first-class hotels in the character of ordinary travelers, or more often still as domestics; sometimes when they hunt in couples, they pass as master and servant. Having carefully studied the arrangement of the bedrooms, and the system of locks employed, they select their prey. False keys are made and fitted, or an accomplice first saws the screws of the locks level with the door. Then in the dead of night, the hotel rat, having enveloped his head with a black veil so as to be invisible when slinking along the corridors, and with his face hidden by a black velvet mask, creeps—often on all fours—into his victim's room, and rifles clothes and trunks of the valuables that they contain.

THERE is one very noticeable peculiarity about the hotel rat. He generally leaves a "viaticum" behind him; that is to say, a small sum of money, spared from the booty sufficient to enable the victim to pay a week's hotel bill. For it often happens, (and no one knows this better than the hotel rat), that the sleepers who have been robbed prefer to hush the matter up, and in order to avoid a public scandal make no complaint to the police, but go quickly home without saying anything more about the matter.

The hotel rat's greatest triumph has been the invention of the "ouistiti." In the vocabulary of the zoologist, the *ouistiti* is a striated monkey, but in burglar's argot, or slang, it is a little instrument by means of which doors can be unlocked as if by magic, on condition, however, that the inmate of the room has taken the unwise precaution of leaving the key inside the lock, under the impression that this will prevent the insertion of any other key. In the pioneer stage of this particular form of burglary, a bullet-extractor was used, but since all the detectives in the world became familiar with it, the *ouistiti* is disguised under the form of a pedicure's knife, a boot-hook, or a mustache curling-iron, which only assumes practical shape after being unscrewed from the handle and remounted. The *ouistiti* then becomes a pair of elongated pincers by which the thief is enabled to seize the steel head of the key through the keyhole, and thus noiselessly and instantaneously to open the door. Is it necessary to add that this new school of burglary has more to do with the science of the perfect locksmith than with the instincts and accomplishments that are commonly attributable to the perfect gentleman?

To have gained admittance to a first-class hotel is evidence of successful bluff of an outward show of respectability, but of nothing more. In point of fact, most of these hotel rats are former domestics, either male or female, who have acquired a veneer of good manners, and a vague knowledge of the usages of polite society, by waiting at table. It is true that when arrested they often claim titles of nobility, generally those of the families in which they have formerly served; sometimes they have the audacity to insist upon their aliases as genuine even in the presence of the judge. Given an imaginative reporter, catering for a credulous public, and at once you have the "gentleman burglar" served hot!

BUT perhaps it is in one of the famous international gangs who specialize in robberies from jewelers' stores that you expect to find the "gentleman" thief? I do not refer, of course, to those who break into jewelry shops at night, who would really have no occasion for the display of elegant manners, however refined their natural instincts might be. But I will specify two typical cases with which the Paris Police were recently called upon to deal, both of which occurred at jewelry stores in the ultra-fashionable *rue de la Paix*. They illustrate the two classic methods of the sneak thief, and incidentally explain why the victim often per-

sists in maintaining, in spite of the clearest evidence to the contrary, that no common rogue could have robbed him.

In the first instance, a man and a woman entered the jewelry store, and asked to be shown some high-priced gems. They left without buying anything, and as soon as they were gone, the jeweler discovered the loss of a valuable ruby ring and a splendid sapphire brooch set with brilliants. What had happened? The salesman, whose special duty it was to exercise a discreet watch over new customers, had noticed nothing. Then a little incident was remembered which tended to throw light upon the mystery. Just as the lady had been banded the ring to examine, the yelping of a dog apparently being throttled, had been heard coming from the street outside. There had been a man on the sidewalk, in the uniform of a porter, holding two dogs on leads. No doubt these were the pets of ladies who were doing their bargaining in some neighboring establishment, and they had been entrusted to his care. The silly fellow had allowed the leads to get tangled up, and the dogs were having a desperate set-to. One was a poodle, the other a big Pomeranian. The poodle was evidently getting the worst of it.

"Oh, the poor little thing!" had exclaimed the tender-hearted lady in the store, putting the ring down upon the counter; "do go to its rescue, one of you men!"

The attention of everybody in the store had been momentarily attracted to the agonizing scene. This was the thieves' opportunity. The servant in charge of the two dogs was, of course, an accomplice, and in a sense the dogs were too, for they were simply going through a performance in which they had been carefully trained.

In the other case, a couple, giving the names of the Comte and Comtesse de W., hired an apartment in a fashionable hotel near the Opera quarter, which happened to have two exits. The Comte visited F.'s famous jewelry store in the *Place Vendôme*, and having selected a magnificent pearl necklace, asked that it should be sent on approval to the Comtesse, who was unable to leave the hotel. On the excuse that the Comtesse was sick in bed, the salesman to whom the necklace had been entrusted, was discreetly persuaded to remain in an anteroom while the bogus nobleman was showing the pearls to his wife. He heard a sound of chairs being moved about, then of doors being closed, and after a lengthy wait discovered that his customers had disappeared, and that he himself was a prisoner, locked in the deserted apartment. By the time he had made sufficient noise to attract the attention of the hotel servants, the thieves had made good their escape.

IN both instances, the police were not long in laying their hands on the delinquents. Oddly enough, the same explanation was forthcoming from both jewelers: The thieves, they said, were so faultlessly gotten up, and showed such high-bred manners that it was impossible not to have been taken in by them. Yet, what a disillusion when they arrived handcuffed at the police commissary's office. The flashy, shoddy clothes, the flaming red cravats, the sham diamond pins! With "crook" stamped unmistakably upon every feature, these were the sorry scoundrels who had managed to pass themselves off in the *rue de la Paix*, of all places in the world, as secretaries of foreign embassies, and holders of historic French titles! Even the police records, quickly hunted up, which proved that the two men were ex-valets, and that one of the female accomplices had been a lady's maid and the other a dressmaker's mannequin, while all had been in prison times out of number for similar thefts, merely sufficed to convince the victimized jewelers against their will.

Rather than admit their own lack of perspicacity, or acknowledge the negligence and stupidity of their employees, they will continue to maintain among their friends and colleagues in the trade that


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