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MY BURGLAR FRIENDS.

BY M. QUAD.

Any newspaper reporter, or at least any attached to a daily journal, will tell you that there are certain seasons of the year when people refuse to commit suicide, when there are no victims of murder, when railroad trains refuse to smash, and burglars and thieves insist on remaining inactive. No reporter is required to furnish just a certain amount of matter each day, but most reporters are anxious to furnish all they can; and so when these dull times come the journalist takes longer tramps, writes of matters which would be overlooked in "good times," and does his best to keep up the show of local news.

Years ago, when I was a member of the local staff of a New Orleans daily, we had a bad summer of it. Accidents were hardly known; few new buildings were going up, and we had to "draw out" on things to make even half a show.

We finally started the interviewing business. One of the boys gave the experience of a gambler, another the adventures of a river pilot, and in time we had worked up everybody but the burglars. It was left to me to hunt up some one who could enlighten me on the mysteries of midnight visits in search of "swag" and "sugar." I believed I could find a man, or half a dozen of them, I had in my mind a saloon near the river where a suspicious crowd was always congregated, and I knew that two fellows known as "Big Sam" and "Awful Dave" had just come out of state prison and were hanging around the place.

Were I to enter the saloon, day or night, inquire for one of those worthies, order the drinks, and then frankly tell him who I was and that I wanted him to give me the foundation for a general article, why, of course, he would do it. So I argued, and when the time came around that such a sketch would "help out," I made my arrangements.

I went down to the saloon one Friday afternoon, and had the luck to find both men in. After beating around the subject for a spell I came directly to the point. I did not ask them to criminate themselves in any way, but to furnish me an insight into their mode of "putting up" and executing "jobs."

"Well, now, you've got us," replied Dave. "We couldn't begin to tell you. It all depends on what you mean to do. You might go into a house by the hall floor one time, by the window another, and next time you might not go in at all. We go accordin' to circumstances. Circumstances often knock all plans on the head."

I wanted to get them talking on the subject, and did not much care what they said, as I calculated to put my imagination at work and give in some adventures which would be considered "tall" even by old professionals. I learned from the men what articles constituted a burglar's "kit," what they cost, and some other facts of interest, and thought I had secured about all needed information, when Dave detained me.

I was an innocent ass, 18 years old, and though living in the city several years, had not sense enough to warn me that the company of such men after night was dangerous. It did not occur to me that I did not understand that the men were too willing to oblige me in a matter of no interest to them, and I agreed to return to the saloon at 10 o'clock.

"We can give you some big things in this 'line' if you will go to a little trouble. We know where there's a 'crack' lying low just now, who can talk to you all night, and he'll give you some almighty big points."

I replied that I would go to considerable trouble to interview the man, and asked how the meeting could be brought about.

"Easiest thing in the world," he continued. "Come back here at 10 o'clock to-night and we'll go with you. Mind, now, if you go to 'blow' on us to the detectives you'll get yourself in a muss!"

I was free of duty after 9 o'clock that night, there being no meetings, lectures or outside business on the diary. I mentioned the fact of my engagement to the city editor, and he warned me that I had better break it. The men might have some designs against me, or they might lead me into trouble. He said so much that I gave up the idea, and slipped my revolver from my pocket to the table drawer.

Having an hour to while away before bed-time, I set out for the theater. I was not four blocks from the office, when I ran against the two convicts. They recognized me in a moment, and insisted that I should descend into a basement saloon and take a glass or cigar. They anxiously inquired if I intended to keep the appointment, and appeared disappointed when I informed that other engagements prevented.

"It was only a step—only two or three blocks," remarked Dave. "We are both hard fellows, but we wouldn't never think of harming you. We were just doing it to oblige."

The two talked so much that I forgot the words of the city editor, and at length resolved to accompany them. I proposed to use only an hour's time, but they said this was enough not only to hear "Crack's" story, but to examine his "kit" of burglar and safe blowing tools. Blessed fool that I was, to think that two burglars were to take me to the hiding place of another, and give me all their secrets, knowing that I might "blow" on them in half an hour after!

But I thought only of the item. Already I could see a long column headed: "Burglars and safe blowers. How they work—startling revelations," etc., and I cared only for the item.

We went to the saloon where I had met them in the afternoon and Dave went out and left me talking with his companion. It was almost 11 o'clock before he came back, and then after making many excuses, he stated that everything was all right and that we should proceed at once.

I was inclined to hang back now, as the hour was so late, but I had not the moral courage to back square out, and passed up the street with them. I do not know how far we walked. We passed up one street, down another, turned here and there, and I finally got lost. We got into a

quarter of the city where I had never been more than to ride through in a carriage. I thought it odd that we should look for a "crackman" in the aristocratic quarter of the city, but the men kept plying me with questions in regard to my profession, and I had no opportunity to express my doubts or surprise.

"You've got your revolver, of course?" inquired Dave, as we passed along.

"No, I left it at the office," I replied, but was next moment sorry that I had admitted the fact, as I saw Dave give his companion a sly nod with his elbow. New Orleans was not well policed in those days. One seldom saw a blue coat off the business streets either day or night. Had we encountered one now, I should surely have left the burglars to continue on alone, as I had become nervous and afraid. But we did not even meet any pedestrians. The night was cold and chilly, and at that late hour most of the citizens were in bed.

"Here we are! Now walk softly, and keep your mouth shut!" whispered Dave, as we entered an alley.

It was quite dark, but I could see that we were passing down between the large residences, the abodes of wealthy men. Dave led the way, and he presently halted at a gate, unlocked it with a key, and in a moment we were on the lawn in the rear of one of the houses.

"Why, how's this? This isn't—"

"See here, mister reporter!" whispered Sam, whipping out a long knife and catching me by the collar. "There's no use fooling you any longer; you've got to go with us!"

"I won't do it! I'll shout if you don't let me go!" I replied.

"You will, will you?" hissed Dave, also displaying a knife, and fastening his fingers on my arm. "If you want to die right away just raise one squeal!"

I was so weak that I sat down on a stone dog used as a lawn ornament, and while Dave held me there Sam for a moment called out a long knife and catching me by the collar, and then Dave continued:

"Sam and you are going into the house after swag, and I'm going to watch. If you make one cry or hang back I'll put this knife into you. If you go to raise an alarm in the house, Sam will kill you even if he has to swing for it."

It was nearly midnight now. I could hear no sound from either quarter, and I knew that a shout, or half a dozen of them, would not bring the help I needed. He first tried the door. It was locked, and he inserted a pair of nippers into the key-hole. A low oath escaped his lips, for the key had been removed, and he had no false ones.

Softly as a cat, he next tried one of the windows, but that was fast, and another was tried with the same result. Then his "jimmy" came into play. Pulling the iron bar, which had a "claw" at one end, from under his coat, he inserted the "claw" under the door, and he next tried on the lever end. The sash went up a little, making scarcely any noise, and in two minutes the nail which held it down had given way. Had there been a spring in the sash, he could not have raised it without alarm.

With his hands he raised the sash to its full height, slipped something between it and the casing to prevent a fall, and he then turned to me and whispered:

"We are going in now. If you try to play dirt on me, I'll murder you, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

There was no escape, and I followed him in over the sill, hoping every moment to hear sounds to show that the people had been alarmed. We had entered a sewing room. A machine stood in one corner, and several half-finished garments were lying on chairs. I saw this only after Sam had opened his dark lantern. We moved softly to the door leading out, and I watched him as he opened it. Although I was close beside the door, I heard no sound as he turned the knob. When he knew the bolt was free from its catch, he lifted up on the door, so that it should not squeak, and in a moment we were in a sitting room.

Sam held up the light, until he saw the room was not occupied, and then we passed on to a door leading into the hall. This was opened without noise, and Sam led the way to the foot of the foot of the stairs. He seemed to know that all but the servants slept above.

"Now, just as you see me do—mind how!" he whispered, as we got ready to ascend.

He went ahead, holding his lantern so that the light shone down behind him. With his left hand on the railing, he mounted two steps at a time, stepping on the extreme edge of each stair that he touched, so that there should be no squeaking. I followed on, not daring to disobey him, and directly we were at the head of the stairs.

Here we found another hall, with doors leading into a parlor and into bedrooms. What guided him I do not know, but Sam passed by two or three doors and stopped at another and softly touched the knob. Passing the lantern over to me, with a warning shake of the hand, he grasped the knob and turned it until he found that the door was locked. Out came the nippers, and were inserted into the key-hole, without the least noise. They grasped the key, and Sam twisted his arm over to unlock the door. I expected to hear a click when the bolt was withdrawn, but there was no sound. I was amazed at his wonderful skill. He then grasped the knob again, whispered to me to blind the light, and in ten seconds he had swung the door back.

As it went back, I heard the deep breathing of persons in sleep. Sam took the lantern, pinched my arm and we entered the room. Sinking down to the floor he opened the lantern, passed its light around, and made out that we were in the bedroom of the proprietor. A dress and other articles

of female wear were lying on a lounge and a coat and pair of pants were on a chair. We moved up to the chair, crawling like cats.

Sam handed me the light, and he carefully inspected the clothing. From the coat he took a large wallet and from the vest a gold watch. He placed both articles in his bosom and refused to meddle with the pantaloons. Silver change or a bunch of keys might have rattled enough to give an alarm.

I was in hopes that our adventure was ended, and that we should now leave the house. But Sam had other views. He had just motioned for me to move toward a dressing case in the other corner of the room, when the sleeping man drew a long breath and turned over. The springs of the bed groaned in a fearful way, and I fully believed that the man was waking up. My heart was almost in my mouth, and I prayed that he might not, as I knew that Sam would not hesitate to murder him.

Neither one of us hardly breathed for five or six minutes, then the regular breathing of the sleeper notified us that he was fast asleep again. Sam placed the lantern on a chair, opened it so that its light fell directly on the dressing case, and on that alone, and then he put his mouth to my ear and whispered:

"Go over there and get the jewelry! Remember, if you wake him up, I'll kill you both."

As I crawled away he stood, knife in hand, and stooped over the sleeping man. If he had not been nearer the door than me I should have attempted to escape out of the room. But I realized that any alarm would arouse the sleepers and that murder would be committed. I had a double interest, now. If I was not careful, I should be the cause of a terrible crime, and so I crept across the room as softly as possible, and was presently at the case. I had my mind made up not to take anything from it, but I knew that Sam was watching me, and that I must make a show of searching.

Right on the top of the case was a set of diamonds and a lady's gold watch. These I covered with a handkerchief and then pulled out the drawers. Sam glared at me through the semi-darkness in a warning way, and raised his knife over the sleeper. He told me by his look and action that if I made any noise he would murder the man. I pulled the drawers out, made a show of searching, and then crept back to Sam and reported that I had found nothing. He passed me the light, went across the room, and in a second had discovered the watch and diamonds and stowed them away.

Coming back, he beckoned to me that we were ready to go. For some reason, he did not care to enter the other rooms, perhaps thinking he had secured all the most valuable "swag" in the one room. We observed the same caution going down stairs as in coming up. On the way down it suddenly flashed over me that the men would murder me as soon as they were clear of the hall, and they would not dare to let me escape to be a witness against them. They had wanted a tool to act the part which I had acted, and I when through with me, they would remove all chance of my ever appearing against them.

I trembled so that I came near falling. I must escape them, but how? I had almost determined to slam a door against Sam as we passed through the house, and then scream out, when as we passed down the hall, we encountered Dave. He conversed with Sam for a moment, and then we all passed along into the dining-room. They were after the silver plate. Dave walked right up to the door of the closet, which was at the head of the stairs leading down to the rooms of the servants. The key had been forgotten and was in the lock. As he carefully swung back the door we saw the plate glisten, and Dave passed me the lantern.

Sam crept to the table, removed the cloth, and then spread it on the floor. Dave passed over the closet, which was no more than three feet square, and he passed out one thing after another until only an ice pitcher remained. He seemed to have doubts of its purity, and began cutting at it with his knife. Sam watched him for a moment, and then passed in to satisfy his curiosity. I was beside the door, and Sam's hand rested on the casing. Now was my chance. Like a dart of lightning, I grasped the door, and as he drew them out I turned the key, braced my shoulder against the door, and sung out, "Tobbers! thieves! police!" as loud as I could.

It seemed an hour to me before any one moved, though it was not three seconds before a man-servant leaped out of bed. Same and Dave had no show. With both in the closet, there was no room for a rush at the door. They kicked until splitting a panel, and fired through, hoping to kill me. Within sixty seconds two men-servants and the master of the house were in the dining room, one of the men having a shot-gun.

"I am —, of the Daily —," I hurriedly explained to them. "I have got two burglars in here! Come quick!"

Fortunately, the men understood me right, and offered me no violence. While the master informed the prisoners that he would give them a dose of buckshot through the door if they made any further demonstration, one of the men alarmed the neighbors and afterwards the police, and in about half an hour my friends were invited to walk out and accept the handcuffs. A more savage pair I never saw. Dave sat at one of the officers and was in turn badly wounded, and Sam had his nose broken by a blow from a baton. They were aware the most fearful vengeance on me, promising to roast me alive. But I went on the witness stand, saw them leave for the penitentiary for twenty years each, and then I made a resolution to let the interviewing business alone in the future.

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