

MR. LEDBETTER'S VACATION.

By H. G. WELLS.

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My friend, Mr. Ledbetter, is a stout, round-faced little man, whose natural... of eyes is naturally exaggerated...

ance. He dashed forward. He went up the trellis with quick, convulsive movements, swung his legs over the parapet...

About that past he displays an anxious modesty. "I do not know that I should do it if it became known," he says, and repeats impressively, "I do not know that I should do it."

The business began at Hithergate-on-sea and simultaneously with Mr. Ledbetter's and a summer vacation. The first came for a greatly needed rest, with a bright brown portmanteau marked F. W. L. and a new white and black straw hat and two pairs of white flannel trousers.

He had bewailed and now, as he walked up the silent road he still bewailed the fate that had called him to such an unenviable life as a pedagogue's.

It was nearly 11 and the little seaside town was in a state of comparative quiet. The world slumbered under the moonlight. Only one warm oblong of window blind far down the road spoke of waking life.

The ascent of the balcony it was evident would have to be done in a rush, for it was all in clear moonlight, and visible from the gate into the avenue.

He crouched for a time, all ears and peering eyes. Outside was a scurrying and rustling and for a moment he regarded the entrance. A short minnow, a spitting and a rush into silence spoke reassuringly of cats. His courage grew. He stood up. Everyone was abed, it seemed. So easy is it to commit a burglary, if one is so minded.

He peered about him and suddenly the critical spirit arose again. Burglars did far more than such mere elementary entrance as this; they went into rooms, they forced doors, they made a noise, they were seen.

Horrible thought! This was possibly the late comer's room! Not a moment was to be lost! Mr. Ledbetter stooped beside the bed, thanked heaven for a valance and crawled within its protection not ten seconds too soon. He became motionless, his hands and knees. The advancing candlelight appeared through the thinner meshes of the fabric, the shadows ran wildly about and became rigid as the candle was put down.

"Lord, what a day!" said the new comer, blowing noisily and seeming to deposit some heavy burden on what Mr. Ledbetter, judging by the feet, decided to be a writing table. The unseen then went to the door and locked it, examining the fastenings of the windows carefully and pulled down the blinds, and returning sat down upon the bed.

"What a day!" he said; "good Lord!" and blew again and Mr. Ledbetter inclined to believe the person was mopping his face. His boots were good, stout boots, the shadows of his legs upon the valance suggested a formidable stoutness of aspect.

Mr. Ledbetter passed a large villa standing by itself, a convenient and situated on a quite practicable balcony was a window gazing back, wide open. At the time he scarcely marked it, but the picture of it came to him, wove into his thoughts. He figured himself climbing up that balcony, crouching, plunging into that dark, mysterious interior. "Bah! You would not dare," said the spirit of doubt. "My duty courage restrains me." But he doubted, even while he told himself these things.

count for nothing? Technically he was a burglar beyond dispute. Following out this train of thought he was considering a lucid apology for "this technical crime."

"The position I had assumed," said Mr. Ledbetter, when he took me of these things, "was in my respects an ill-adviced one. A transverse bar beneath the bed depressed my head unduly and threw a disproportionate share of my weight upon my hands.

mittent desire to sneeze or sniff caused me inconvenience. In fact, quite apart from the extreme anxiety of my position, my physical discomfort became in a short time very considerable indeed. But I had to stay there motionless nevertheless."

After an interminable time there began a chinking sound. This deepened into a rhythmic, chink, chink, chink, twenty-five chinks a rap on the writing table and a grunt from the owner of the stout legs. It dawned upon Mr. Ledbetter that this chinking was the chinking of gold. He became incredulously curious as it went on.

"The stillness continued. What had happened? The desire to peep became irresistible. Very cautiously Mr. Ledbetter shifted his hand forward, projecting a pioneer finger and began to lift the valance immediately behind his eye. Mr. Ledbetter's head the stout man stood him up and searched him for weapons. "Why, you are a burglar!" he said. "You're a perfect amateur. You haven't even a pistol pocket in the back of your breeches. No, you don't! Shut up now."

"Kneel," said the stout gentleman, "and hold up your hands."

Mr. Ledbetter, with an effort smiled a wan propitiatory smile. He coughed. "I can't quite understand," he said. "Why? What on earth?" "It's so! No—you scoundrel. Don't you move that hand!" "It's so," said Mr. Ledbetter. "From your watch and so on. No doubt it is."

and there's no time for explanations. What was I going to ask you? Ah! Have you any mates?" "In a few minutes, if you—"

"I don't see how I could prove an alibi," remarked Mr. Ledbetter, trying to show by his conversation that he was an educated man. There was a pause. Mr. Ledbetter perceived that on a chair beside his captor was a large black bag on a heap of crumpled papers, and that there were torn and buried papers on the table.

Mr. Ledbetter staggered through a conservatory, leaving a wake of smashed flowerpots behind him. "Never mind the crockery," said the stout man; "it's soot for trade."

Mr. Ledbetter said nothing, but he felt that the room was swaying. "A miss is as good as a mile. It's lucky for both of us it wasn't. Lord!" he blew noisily. "There's no need for you to grow pale green for a little thing like that."

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of some education," he said, lighting a cigar. "No, don't begin that explanation of yours. I know it will be long-winded from your face, and I'm much too old a liar to be interested in other men's lying. You are, I say, a person of education. You do well to dress as a curate. Even among educated people you might pass as a curate."

"I am a curate," said Mr. Ledbetter, "or, at least—"

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did. Several times Mr. Ledbetter got as far as "my position under your bed, you know—" but then he always had to cut or pass the whisky or do some such intervening thing. After his third failure the fair man got quite to look for this opening, and whenever Mr. Ledbetter began after that he would roar with laughter and hit him violently on the back. "Same old story, same old story; good old burglar," the fair-haired man would say.

Mr. Ledbetter fared for many days, twenty perhaps, and one evening he, together with some tinmed provisions, was taken over the hills and put ashore on a rocky little island with a spring. Mr. Bingham came in the boat with him, giving him good advice all the way and waving his last attempts at an explanation aside.

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and on that note, if you could show clearly that I really was in Jamaica this summer, and had come there by being marooned from a ship, it would be of great service to me. It would certainly add to the load of my obligations to you, a load that I fear I can never fully repay. Although if gratitude, as you say, is the best of us, and he repeated his request for me to burn the letter.



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