

The Mystery

at 23

By GEORGE STILLWELL



"Go back into that house and get out to the back yard. Climb the fence into our yard and come in by the kitchen door. Got that, dad?"

"Every bit of it, Jack," replied Mr. Ladd promptly.

He dived into the open doorway of No. 23, missing the girl who was holding the door, but plunging into the stocky man standing behind her.

He was only just out of sight. The girl had only just closed the door when Mrs. Ladd appeared on the scene on her own side of the railing. She had managed at last to get the spring-lock out of its snarl. Then, flinging open the door, she had charged out to the porch like a war-horse snuffing the battle—not afar off, but close by.

"Where is he, Jack?" she demanded. "Where is your father? Why doesn't he come in?"

"What do you mean, mother?" There's nobody here except myself."

"Don't talk rubbish, John Ladd. I saw a man dart across the porch next door just as I got that dratted door open. At the same time I heard your father cough."

"I didn't hear it," protested Jack.

"Well, I did."

Jack thought quickly. He must cover his father's retreat somehow. A happy suggestion came to him. It was perfectly true that he had not noticed the wheezy cough of his fugitive parent.

"I know how it was, mother," he said. "I must have coughed. That's what you heard."

"Don't be idiotic!" she replied. "It was your father. Do you think I've been married to him nearly twenty-four years without knowing his cough when I hear it? I thought it was out here. But it may have been at the back."

"Oh, no!" interposed Jack in a hurry. "It wasn't at the back; I'm sure of that."

"How do you know? I'm going to see."

"No. Let me go, mother. There might be burglars out there, you know. Suppose they were to attack you! I should never forgive myself."

Although Jack said this with due gravity, and as if he believed thoroughly in the possibility, he could not shake her resolution.

"I can't help it, John," she said. "I'm sure I heard your father cough somewhere. If he isn't at the front, he must be at the back. I'm going to satisfy myself, anyhow."

Worked up as the estimable lady was over the mysterious family in No. 23—who might be burglars, and probably were—her eagerness to have an understanding with her husband over his staying out so late rehearsing at the Classic Club overpowered every other consideration.

"You may go to the back yard with me if you like, John," she said with a shake of the head which would have sent terror to her husband's soul if he had seen it. "But you needn't fear for me. I have my bread-knife. Lead on!"

"Very well."

He took his mother's left hand. The corrugated-edged bread-knife was in the other. They went through the hall and kitchen to the back door. Jack stopped and held up one hand impressively as he whispered:

"Hush!"

"What is it?"

"I think I hear somebody."

"Who—your father?"

"Not likely. But it may be if you're sure you heard him cough."

"Well, I did hear him."

Mrs. Ladd had nailed her colors to the mast.

With elaborate caution Jack opened the kitchen door and peered into the yard. It was absolutely black, with the silence as positive as the darkness.

"I don't think there is anybody here," he said after a moment of looking and listening.

"There must be," insisted Mrs. Ladd. "The cough I heard came from your father. He wasn't at the front of the house. Therefore, he must be at the back. I'll walk into the yard and strike one of these wax matches. They'll burn in the open air well enough. There's no wind."

But it took her longer than she had anticipated to make a match blaze up in the yard. True, there was no wind to speak of. But there was just enough of a tremulous little breeze to cause the flame to flicker, even when she hollowed her hand about it.

Jack watched her intently for about five seconds. Then he caught sight of a large, red, flushed face under a black-tipped derby hat as the owner tilted toward the kitchen door.

"Hurry, dad! Get to your room."

quick! I'll hold her here for a while," whispered Jack.

Mr. Thomas Ladd managed to get into the kitchen without being seen by the excellent lady, who was fiddling with the lighted match. He reached his bedroom, and with a "Whoof!" of relief began to take off his clothes.

CHAPTER III.

"ANOTHER BOLD BURGLARY."

"Well, John, it seems I was mistaken," said Mrs. Ladd, when at last she made a match burn and had looked all over the yard. "But no one can tell me I didn't hear your father cough."

"There are other people who cough like him perhaps," ventured Jack.

"Not a bit of it. That was your father, I tell you. And when he does condescend to come in he'll get a piece of my mind. You see if he doesn't."

The perturbed lady went back to the kitchen, where she threw the bread-knife upon the table. It was seldom that her husband stayed out so late as this. When he did it was always on account of the stage performances that were the chief end and object of the Classic Club.

Thomas Ladd had been one of the founders of the organization twenty-five years earlier. That was before his marriage. At that time he was considered the handsomest "juvenile lead" on the Philadelphia amateur stage.

His bride was a serious-minded young woman. She never cared for the play. But she liked to see her good-looking husband, in jack-boots, slashed silken sleeves, and slouch-hat with drooping feather, flourishing a rapier and delivering the heroic sentiments of the romantic drama.

Even when he was uttering cynicisms in modern plays she used to think him quite as attractive. He was a man who could wear evening clothes without finding himself with too many hands and feet too big for the scene.

Nowadays he was cast for heavier parts. His Macbeth and Ingomar had both been praised, and he could do a gruff, middle-aged Wall Street king to the life.

Mrs. Ladd still attended performances at the Classic when he appeared. But it was only out of the goodness of her heart. She knew it would hurt him if she didn't. Perhaps she was proud of his histrionic achievements even now. If she was she carefully hid the sentiment.

"Well, I can't sit up for him any longer," she announced with a worried glance at the nickel clock on the mantelpiece. "You'll have to leave the front door unbolting. He has his latch-key. Good night!"

She went slowly up-stairs. Jack found himself listening for the explosion that he knew would come when she found his father in bed.

"I shouldn't care to be in dad's place," he grinned to himself.

And just then the storm broke. Mr. Ladd was getting a piece of his wife's mind.

"He's getting a good large piece, too," muttered Jack as his mother's eloquence increased. "Poor dad!"

Softly he opened the front door and went out to the porch. He seated himself on the railing at the farther end, where he could not hear the rattle of the domestic tempest within.

It was very dark. He was the width of his own house away from the railing which separated it from No. 23. But with the aid of the distant street-lamp he could dimly make out the front door of the mysterious neighbors.

"They're queer people," he mused. "I wish I knew what business dad has with them. And mother believes they are burglars! Pshaw! Just because two men and two women in ordinary dark clothing were seen near a house that was robbed she jumps to the conclusion that these are the people. Why, there are lots of men and women that look like them! This is a world of coincidences."

Stretching himself, he decided that he would go in to bed, when the creaking of a long-disused door will make when it is opened caused him to plaster himself against the house.

The creaking was at No. 23.

Jack stared hard. A shadow emerged from next door. This was followed by three more.

"They're all going out," he murmured. "There's the whole lot of 'em. What's the game?"

The little girl in black had been the first to emerge. She was followed by the woman who Mrs. Ladd had decided was her mother. Then came the boy. The stocky man was the last. He tried the door after

he had closed it noiselessly.

The three others stood perfectly still until he had satisfied himself that the door was secure. Then all four silently descended the steps and opened the gate.

Jack gasped. Where could they be going at that time of night? It was past eleven.

"By Jove! The man and boy are carrying something that looks like baseball-bats tied up in cloth. No they're not thick enough. Yet, ye gods! Can they be jimmies? Would they carry burglars' tools as openly as that?"

Then he laughed silently at his own foolishness.

"I'm blessed if I ain't as bad as mother for getting queer ideas about folks! I feel as if I ought to apologize to them. I will if I ever get to know them."

The family from No. 23 was walking past. Jack clung closer to the wall so that they should not see him.

Hark! One of them was speaking. It was the stocky man. His words reached Jack in a low, cautious rumble:

"We ought to get back before two o'clock."

"Yes," came from the boy. "If we have luck."

They glided on, their footfalls making no sounds on the flagstones.

Jack Ladd clung to the railing, draping himself over it like a wet towel. He felt weak.

"If they have luck!" he breathed. "I heard him say it. What can that mean? I've a good mind to follow them. No, I can't do that. But I'll keep awake till they come back if I have to sit up all night."

Jack Ladd's resolve was not remarkable when it is considered that his father had spent an hour or more in No. 23, and had been out of the house only a short time.

"If these people really are crooks I'm quite sure dad doesn't know it, and I'll have to tell him what I heard them say. At all events, I'll see what time they come home and whether they bring any booty with them. If they have luck! By Heavens! This is simply awful!"

He went up to his bedchamber, a front room on the third floor. He would have a clear view of the street from the window.

"I would rather have sat in the Morris chair in the parlor," he thought. "But I know mother would come snooping down to see why I hadn't gone to bed. She never can settle down for the night till she knows we are all under cover. That's the way mothers are."

Jack seated himself in a rocker at the window. It would not do for anybody outside to see a light in his room. It would surely make them suspicious. So he did not light the gas.

"Too bad, too. I could have read while I was waiting. As it is, I can't do anything but just wait."

There was no use grumbling. He had entered upon a task that he felt must be done. It must be regarded in the way a soldier accepts sentry-duty—as most important, even though monotonous. Jack felt a little like a hero. It was rather a comfortable feeling, too.

It was midnight when he began his vigil. How slowly the time passed! How hard it was to keep awake! Why did a fellow's eyes close of themselves unless one kept his thoughts strictly upon them? Jack asked himself this question so persistently that he almost fell asleep while trying to find a satisfactory answer.

Pulling himself together resolutely, he stared at the stars. A happy idea came to him. He would try to pick out the various constellations; he had learned many of them at school.

"Let's see," he murmured as he leaned back in the rocker to gaze at the firmament more conveniently. "Those three stars in a row are the belt of Orion. Orion? Who was he? Is it a leash of hounds he is supposed to be holding? Or goats? I don't see anything that looks like it."

"There's Ursa Major. I know him, all right. Wait a minute! I'm all mixed up with him and Charles's Wain and the Dipper!"

"Oh, the deuce! I've forgotten. And that bunch of little stars over there; is it six or seven? They think so I can't count 'em, and—"

He stopped talking to himself about the stars in order to yawn. When he had finished yawning his eyes were closed. How comfortable this rocker was! A fellow could put his head back, and—and—and—

Boom!

The deep-toned bell of a church-clock woke him up with a start.

"Hello! One o'clock! They said they would be back at two. I wonder whether they're having luck."

He got up from his chair and stood before the window, his hands in his pockets. Somehow he feared that he had been nearly asleep.

"Luck, eh?" he mused. "That might mean getting into a house and finding a lot of jewelry and solid silverware without being caught. Or it might mean—well, anything! It seems absurd to brand such nice-looking people as burglars just because we don't happen to know what they are. That girl next door looks as innocent as—as—Laura."

"Oh, it's all piffle! They're all right. Maybe we shall be minute when we get acquainted. I'd be funny if they should go to our church and mother got to know the two ladies in the missionary society. Stranger things than that are heard of every day."

Another yawn broke off his reflections.

The rocking-chair looked irresistibly cozy. He seated himself and stretched his arms over his head. Then he was perfectly quiet for an unknown interval.

Jack has never confessed that he lost consciousness an instant as he sat in that rocker. But when he came to himself with a start he shivered, as people do who have been sleeping in chair near an open window at night. It was a jingling sound that disturbed him from his uneasy doze.

He was on his feet before he knew how he got there.

There were low voices outside. Two of them were of women; their clear tones came up from the street to his third-story window almost distinctly, as if he had been on his own front porch.

"Don't make a noise," he heard "It would be bad if we woke anybody next door."

TO BE CONTINUED

MYSTERIOUS HOLES ON ILLINOIS FARM

Pond Which Was Known as "Bottomless Pit" Is Strangely Drained of Water.

While a "bottomless pit" on the farm of John Gerson, Jersey County, Ill., has been changing itself, a new pit, not bottomless, but with less bottom every day, has been added to the natural attractions of the place. Gerson visited Jerseyville and told merchants there of the queer doing of nature on the Gerson homestead. As a result, many visitors have gone to the farm, which is fourteen miles west of Jerseyville.

Those who visited the place relate that at a place near Gerson's barn a circular patch of ground, twenty feet in diameter, has given way and has sunk to a depth of about fifty feet. In the middle of the big hole thus formed is a hole somewhat larger than a silver dollar and steam is rising from this opening, it is declared.

At the same time a pond a short distance from the barn, which because of its depth has been known as the bottomless pit, has been mysteriously drained of water. Its depth, as now shown, is about twenty feet.

Gerson told his visitors that a week ago he noticed that the circular patch of ground was rising and falling, as if a powerful mole were at work beneath. The next day the sinking of the earth at this point began, he said, and when the hole was fifteen feet deep his two sons entered by a ladder and examined it, but they left when it appeared that the bottom was vanishing beneath them.

DIVORCED FROM MAN SHE NEVER MARRIED

Anyway, the Ceremony Was an Illegal One, Trained Nurse Tells Judge.

Minneapolis, Minn.—Getting a divorce from a man she had never married was the unusual experience of Laura O'Brien, a trained nurse, who secured a decree in the District Court.

"Why, I hardly knew the man," she told the court in substantiation of her complaint.

"I was divorced last winter from Charles J. O'Brien and four months later Benjamin Kniffen called on me. He asked me to go to a theater. His request seemed like an irresistible command. Instead of taking me to a theater he took me to a church."

"It's all right," he told me as he held me by the arm and led me into the pastor's study. 'Do as they tell you.'"

"There were three persons besides us present. A man in black told us to join hands. Questions were asked and answered and a marriage certificate was handed me."

"At that moment I realized what I had done. I was not married to this man; could not be legally under my divorce decree. I left him at the altar. Next day a note from Kniffen said he was on his way to Canada."

Judge Fish annulled the marriage.

BRIDE, 70, IS STILL BASHFUL

Says "Wait Till We're Alone" When It Comes to the Kiss.

Alton, Ill.—When Mrs. Jane Delp, 70 years old, became the bride of Philip Polect, 74 years old, she refused to allow the bridegroom to kiss her—others were looking.

"Let us wait until we are alone," said Mrs. Polect. "I am still bashful." Her pleadings were complied with.

The bridegroom said proudly that he had preferred his bride over many younger women he might have had, just for the trying.

By marrying Polect, Mrs. Polect said she forfeits a pension of \$12 a month as a soldier's widow. Polect draws a pension. They are residents of Leaslip. Each had been bereft by the death of a former marital partner. They said it was so lonesome living alone that they decided to be company for each other.

Newfoundland's Fisheries.

The mackerel fishery has been practically extinct in Newfoundland waters for the last quarter century, owing to the migration of these fish to the American seaboard. So enormous was the extent of the fishery in former times that over 1,000 vessels of different nationalities carried on the pursuit there.

Fate Not to Be Avoided.

Fate is a mighty successful bill collector, and you are wise in paying your debt the minute it is due. If you wait for her to foreclose the mortgage she always adds the interest and costs.—John A. Howland.

In the army of the Haytian republic chairs are provided for the use of sentries when on duty.

His Notes

"Excuse me if I seem to crowd you," muttered the man with the bundles.

"Oh, that's all right," answered the polite man.

"These darned bundles are a nuisance all right," continued the bundle carrier. "But the more I have of them the better chance I possess to please the family by bringing them what they wanted."

"You see, I haven't a very good memory, and can't remember what they want me to bring home, so I have taken to making notes in my notebook, and I fear I am not a very good note maker. To be a good note maker a man has to begin early in life, I suppose."

"The idea is to scribble just a little reminder, that is all. You don't have to go into elaborate details. But I can't read my own writing very well. I get part of it all right, and the rest of it wrong. Yesterday when I got home the folks were mad when they saw me bringing a bottle instead of a book. Soon as they asked me whether I had Libber's Book I knew instantly that the bottle was wrong. But I couldn't catch it. They had already seen the thing."

"What's that?" my wife wanted to know. "Why if he hasn't brought us a bottle of hair oil instead of a speller!"

"I had written down 'Byers' Advanced Speller' and took it to read 'Byers' Hair Stimulant.' Today's note called for 'Locke's "Septimus" and "Snaith's "Araminta," and I didn't know whether they were drugs or books."

"I got 'Squabs Magnesium' all right, because this here Squab sticks to the drug business and doesn't get out any books, which makes it easy. But when fellows like Byers get out both books and drugs it makes it pretty bad for house husbands like me."

"Then I get mixed on my own errands, too. I can never remember to go to the dentist and get my tooth filled."

"Naturally," said the polite man, with rare discernment.

"Yes, and I realize it must be attended to, so I just make a note of it. 'See dentist get filling.' But would you believe it? Every time I read that notation I read it wrong. The word 'dentist' looks like Bemis, and Bemis is an old friend who keeps an emporium near my place of business, and whenever I read my notes, instead of reading 'See dentist get filling' I read 'See Bemis get full.'"

"A most natural mistake," agreed the polite man.

"And I have been doing that for some time now."

"And that's why you fear you may be taking home a package the family will not want, I suppose," suggested the polite man, as he got up and prepared to leave the train at the next station.

The Fly Guy.

"Yes, sir," said Pluckem the barber, "A dollar-ninety, please."

"Great Caesar's grandmother's ghost!" exclaimed Sharpner Hee, as he stepped from the chair. "Would you mind itemizing?"

"Not a tall," said Pluckem agreeably. "Forty cents for a hair cut, sixty for a shave, fifty for a single and forty for a tonic. One-ninety."

"Oh, them," murmured Hee, and paid over the one-ninety while his eyes wandered up toward the ceiling, where a thousand flies were singing and playing leapfrog.

"Ain't it terrible," said the barber apologetically. "I'd give a good deal to know how to keep 'em out."

"Would you give me my dollar-ninety back?" asked Sharpner Hee. "I'm somewhat of a fly guy—that is to say, a flyologist, and I can tell you right off how you can avoid having another speck of trouble with them."

"Oh, that's all right," said Pluckem eagerly, and handed back the dollar-ninety.

"You get a ladder," explained Hee, as he put on his hat, "and you climb up and catch 'em one by one and bring 'em down and haircut 'em, shave 'em, tonic 'em and singe 'em, and then you charge 'em each forty for the haircut, sixty for the shave, fifty for the singe and forty for the tonic, and the next day not a one of 'em'll come back."

And he stepped jauntily but rapidly out, while Pluckem swallowed a cupful of lather in his chagrin.

Forgotten Detail.

A clergyman, who was a widower, had three grown-up daughters. Having occasion to go away for a few weeks he wrote home from time to time. In one of his letters he informed them that he had "married a widow with six children."

This created a stir in the household. When the vicar returned home, one of the daughters, her eyes red with weeping, said:

"Where's the widow you married, father?"

"Oh, I married her to another man. I ought to have told you that."

Nearly Always, Willie.

"Pa, I know which is the most warlike nation."

"Well, my son, which is it?"

"Vaccination, pa. 'Cause it's always in arms, isn't it?"

A "Piker."

Banker—"I stole but \$10,000 and I had the opportunity to steal a million."

Lawyer—"But you didn't. And \$10,000 is a State's prison offense."

Mountain as a Gift.

The Church Army has in the course of its existence, received many novel gifts and now it has been favored with the offer of a mountain. A friend in Wales has written offering to the society what he describes as a small mountain. The explanation is that the mountain contains a large quantity of stone which the donor thinks may be useful in providing employment in quarrying to the men under the society's charge.—London Evening Standard.

Hunting Record of a "Yaller Cur."

L. N. Barker of the northern part of this county owns a coon dog, commonly known as "yaller cur," which in the last four winters has caught furred animals to the value of \$674.85. The dog bears the marks of numerous encounters with raccoons. Its face and body are seamed with scars and only the stubs of its ears remain.—Morocco correspondence Indianapolis News.

Large Sale of Razors.

A Sheffield (England) writer, in commenting on the desirability of the American market for razors, declares that more razors are bought in America for each man than in any country of the world.

Thinking One's Self Old.

If at 30 you expect to be an old man or woman, at 55 you will be one, because the mind makes the material correspondence of whatever it sets itself permanently upon.—Health Record.

"Fitting Glasses is an Exact Science"

Headaches and Eyestrains

Many who for years have suffered intensely from chronic sick headaches of all kinds without benefit, have found immediate and permanent relief in properly adjusted glasses, because eye strain was the cause. We remove the cause and our cure is lasting. Satisfaction Guaranteed.

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