

THE CRIMINAL

By Harold Melbourne.

"Eel" Brady, alias Jim Harris, alias Tom Martin, alias several other things, always worked alone. That was a peculiarity of his. Another peculiarity was that he generally got away with whatever he set out to accomplish. "Country houses" were his specialty.

He had done well at the Halstead house at Greenwich. He had done well at the Bradley house at Roslyn. He had done extremely well at the Maxwell house at Englewood. And now he had decided to have a go at Highland Falls.

This particular place consisted of merely a handful of houses, overlooking the Hudson river, next to West Point and opposite Garrison. But each of the houses was the residence of a wealthy family. Some of these families were very wealthy indeed.

"Eel" Brady had a fancy for the Churnsides, the Christopher Churnsides, who occupied perhaps the handsomest house in the colony. There were only two in the family, the husband and the wife. Mr. Churnside was an invalid. He was past middle age. Mrs. Churnside was in constant attendance. There was no entertaining at Green Gables.

So "Eel" Brady took the Hudson river boat to West Point and had a pleasant afternoon looking around the military academy. He was alone—as usual. In his handbag he had a kit of tools and something to eat and to drink. Also a couple of sacks.

He hung around until one o'clock in the morning, fully three hours after all the lights had been extinguished at Green Gables, and at least two hours after all the lights had been extinguished at the houses on either side and at most of the residences in the vicinity. People go to bed early at Highland Falls. That is why they go there in the first place.

So "Eel" began proving how he had earned his nickname. Without making a sound he crept up to the house. He tried one window. It was locked. He tried another. It was also locked. He tried still another. It was open. What a bit of luck! Time and trouble saved.

He crawled into the room. It was the dining room. On the sideboard were massive silver dishes and covers, and trays and bowls. In the drawers, which were unfastened, were silver knives and forks and spoons. Here was a haul! Something worth while. Well, I guess!

"Eel" picked up all that he could lay his hands on, placed the things in a sack and dropped it out of the window. But still he was not satisfied. Lots of fellows would have been quite contented even if they had had to divvy up with a pal, or even with a couple of pals, as was generally the case.

The visitor tiptoed into the next room, the drawing room. He looked at the tapestries on the walls and knew that they were valuable, but realized he could not take them. He looked at the marble statue and the suit of armor with admiration—and regret.

Then he looked at the curio-cabinet in the corner. It was filled with gorgeous trinkets, antique watches and snuffboxes, and bonbonnières and fans, enameled and jeweled. On this one were pearls, on that one were rubies, and on many were diamonds. And the door of the cabinet was unlocked! Gee! What sort of a house was this, anyway?

"Eel" stuffed his pockets with these treasures until his trousers and his coat fairly bulged with booty. Coming to Highland Falls had been an inspiration. And all from reading a brief paragraph in the "society column" of a daily paper! "Eel" considered society reporters very useful members of the community. He had great faith in them.

And what next? Did he return to the dining room and slip out of the window? Not at all. Nothing of the kind. He passed into the hall and crept up the stairs. The appetite had grown by what it fed on. It always does.

He turned to the door at the right. The room was a bedroom and was empty. Nothing of any interest. He turned to the door at the left. Another bedroom and also empty. He turned to the door in the center, at the head of the stairway. This must of course be the apartment of Mr. Churnside, and most probably of Mrs. Churnside also.

The intruder's heart was beating very fast. He pulled a revolver out of his right hip pocket, and a bottle of chloroform and a rag out of his left hip pocket, the only pockets in his clothes that had not been filled with jeweled nicknacks downstairs.

He turned the handle of the door. The shades had been pulled down in the dining room and drawing room windows, and "Eel" had used his little electric flashlight. But here the shade was half-way up and the curtains were half-way back, and a patch of moonlight streamed into the room. He could see quite clearly.

The first things he looked at were the two beds, placed side by side, with a space between for a table on which were a clock and two medicine bottles and a glass. The time was half-past one. He had been on the job for only thirty minutes and had already made a wonderful haul—with the prospect of even more.

"Eel" looked at the face of the man in the bed at the right. Mr. Churnside was about sixty, with thin white hair and pinched, pale features. He was breathing heavily. Then "Eel" looked at the face of the woman in the bed at the left. Mrs. Churnside was about thirty, with dark-brown hair and soft, rounded features. She was breathing lightly.

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