

The Free Press Short Story

The Dominant Twin and the Burglar

MELCENA BURNS DENNY

"HERE!" said my twin from the steepladder. "The secret portal is sealed, the secret gun is buried, the secret grape spots are hidden under pink and gray roses. Our dining-room is papered!"

"The silver. He's gathering it up." "Well, it's plated. Let him have it."

"It's mother's—don't you remember?" I whispered. "We put on mother's wedding silver."

Janet straightened like a lance, and whipped her yellow braids back so that she could listen better. It seemed on age before we caught another sound, and then—crack, snap, snap! The burglar was walking again.

Instantly Janet was out of bed. "Who's there?" she cried aloud. "What are you doing?"

For a second there was silence, and then—bang! It sounded as if the burglar had fallen across the table. Forks clattered and jumped, bowls crashed. The sound was awful. There—crack, rattle, crash! If there were two burglars in our dining-room, they were now beating each other with their loot.

"The villain!" cried Janet. "I'll scare them away. Where's something?" Setting my curling tongs, she made for the door.

"Don't you dare open that door!" I cried in terror.

But Janet opened it and raised her voice in a threatening soprano. "What are you after?" she challenged. "Leave every single thing in this house alone, or I'll fire!"

I was dumfounded at Janet's ultimatum, for she had nothing except my curling tongs to fire with. But she stood there in the awful gray of the dawn, a warlike little figure in a red kimono. With my heart pounding, and my backbone strangely flexible, I got out of bed and clung to the bedpost.

"Let him alone," I implored in a trembling voice. "Doesn't everybody say to let a robber take what he wants? He's desperate, or he wouldn't be here. He'd shoot at the first alarm."

But plainly Janet meant to alarm him. Disregarding me entirely, she threw open the door into the little hall. We could see the blackness of the up-closed stairway leading down into the dining-room.

"Who are you?" cried Janet. "Answer!"

"There was no sound from the robber. "Shame on you!" exclaimed Janet in loud indignation. "If you've got any manhood in you at all, stop acting like a sneak. Come out and show yourself!"

the car looked up at us. It was grand-father.

"What's the matter?" he exclaimed irascibly. "What tricks are you youngsters up to now?"

"We could see mother lean forward in the car.

"Hello, mother," I cried, with the effort of my life to appear gay. "What did you buy me?"

"Why don't you come down?" demanded grandfather.

"We are accidentally locked in our room. Dorothy threw the key out the window—there it is at your feet. Pick it up, grandfather!"

"A gun!" exclaimed mother.

"Some one is in our dining-room. He has been making the strangest noises. Maybe it's a robber, and maybe it's a crazy man, or it may be a cat. But you ought to have a gun."

"I have, now," said grandfather. "I bought it to shoot hares. It's reached into the car and brought out a gun. Now where's your robber?"

"Unlock the front door, and go into the dining-room through the stair closet. We papered over the little low door opening into the dining-room, the one we call the secret portal. The robber won't expect you to come that way. Just give the secret door a hard push—

It was all so maddening, so mysterious. Apparently mother was the most puzzled of us all. But grandfather led the way down the stairs and marshaled us into the dining-room.

"Oh, what a sight meet our eyes! It was the heat of our terrific fire that did it, of course. Our lovely paper had literally torn itself off the walls in the night. It had dropped from the ceiling in cracked and brittle festoons. It clattered the floor, it had peeled in ragged ribbons from the spaces between windows. Our demoralized table was a mess of figs, spilled silver, broken bowls and scattered silver. Even as we stood in our first amazed and stupefied silence—

"Boo, hoo! Boo, hoo!" sobbed Janet. Her intrepid spirit was breaking.

But the man said it was properly bedroom paper, and then when you said to go ahead and buy paper for the whole house—yes he! But what! And rugs, and new curtains, and paint, and that new car outside!"

"Why, grandfather?" cried my twin and I in concert. And Janet continued alone, "I knew it! I knew it! I always knew it!"

"Knew what?" said grandfather curiously.

"Knew that you were the kindest man alive," declared my twin, embracing him with unshakable courage.

"Crops were good," said grandfather briefly.

Though his hand patted Janet, the beautiful look on his face was meant for mother, who had kept the heart of his home warm for seven years.

Once there was a happy Chinese home in the Yangtze valley.

It was probably not very grand, but it seemed very good to the son and heir of the house, aged eighty.

There was always mother to give you food when you were hungry, quick you up in bed when you were tired, and bathe your bruises when you fell down. And there was Father, coming home each evening, who was so big and strong, and could put anything right if it went wrong.

It seemed as safe as houses, that home in the valley. But when a great river loses its temper, and comes pouring disaster over its banks, houses are not safe.

One terrifying morning the waters came sweeping down upon them. The little family just had time to turn something (perhaps a door or a bit of roof) into a raft. They were carried off on the flood. The two parents were washed away, drowned like thousands of others in that fearful happening.

But the whirling river spared the little boy, and after carrying him for some miles threw him up like a bit of drift-wood on to a bank near Hankow.

There a forlorn, bewildered, hungry, sodden bundle was discovered by some British sailors. They could not leave a boy of eight to fend for himself, and though they could not understand his language, they could guess his story.

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