



MY CHRISTMAS BURGLARY

By "Q"
(Arthur Quiller-Couch)

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: My Christmas Burglary

Date of first publication: 1920

Author: Arthur Quiller-Couch (1888-1960)

Illustrator: William Smithson Broadhead (1888-1960)

Date first posted: Dec. 10, 2023

Date last updated: Dec. 10, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20231216

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Canadian Libraries.

December, Nineteen-Twenty.



A man stood on the threshold

MY CHRISTMAS BURGLARY

By "Q"

(Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.)

ILLUSTRATED BY W. S. BROADHEAD



I HAD come, with high expectations; for Mr. Felix, a bachelor of sixty-five, was reputed to have made for thirty years this particular cabinet his idol.

Any nabob or millionaire can collect. Mr. Felix, being moderately well-to-do, had selected. He would have none but the best; and the best lay stored delicately on cotton-wool, ticketed with the tiniest handwriting, in a nest of drawers I could have unlocked with a hair-pin.

The topmost drawer contained scarabs (of which I am no connoisseur); the second some two dozen intaglios, and of these by the light of my bull's eye lantern, I examined five or six, before sweeping the lot into my bag—Europe and the Bull. Ganymede in the eagle's claw. Agare carrying the head of Pentheus, Icarus with relaxed wing dropping headlong to a sea represented by one wavy line; each and all priceless. In the third drawer lay an unset emerald, worth a king's ransom, a clasp of two amethysts, and a necklace of black pearls graduated to a hair's breadth; these only, and (as I guessed) because they disdained the company of inferior gems. By this time I could see—I read it even in the exquisite parsimony of the collection—that I had to deal with an artist, and sighed that in this world artists should prey upon one another. The fourth drawer was reserved for miniatures, the most of them circleted with diamonds; the fifth for snuff-boxes, gold snuff-boxes bearing royal cyphers, snuff-boxes of tortoise-shell and gold, snuff-boxes of blue enamel set with diamonds. A couple of these chinked together as they dropped into the bag. The sound startled me, and I paused for a moment to look over my shoulder.

The window stood open as I left it. Outside, in the windless frosty night, the snow on the house-roofs sparkled under a wintering moon now near the close of her first quarter. But, though the night was windless, a current of air poured into the room, and had set a flame dancing in the fireplace where, three minutes ago, the sea-coals had held but a feeble glow, half sullen. Down stairs, in some distant apartment, fiddles were busy with a waltz tune, and a violoncello kept the beat with a low thudding pizzicato. For Mr. Felix was giving a Christmas party.

I turned from this hasty glance to pick up another snuff-box. As my fingers closed on it the music suddenly grew louder, and I looked up as the door opened, and a man stood on the threshold—a short, square-set man, dressed in black.

“Eh?” He gave a little start of surprise. “No, no, excuse me, my friend, but you are seeking in the wrong cabinet.”

Before I could pull myself together, he had stepped to the window and closed it. "You had best keep still," he said; "and then we can talk. There are servants on the stairs below and should you attempt the way you came, there are three constables just around the corner. I hired them to regulate the carriage traffic: but now that the last guest has arrived, they will be cooling their heels for a spell, and I have a whistle. I have also a pistol." With a turn of his hand he flung open a door in a dark armoire beside the window, dived a hand into its recesses, and produced the weapon. "And it is loaded," he added, still in the same business-like voice, in which, after his first brief exclamation, my ear detected no tremor.

"By all means let us talk," I said.

He was crossing to the fireplace, but wheeled about sharply at the sound of my voice. "Eh? An educated man, apparently!" Laying the pistol on the mantelshelf, he plucked a twisted spill of paper from a vase hard by, stooped, ignited it from the flame dancing in the sea-coals, and proceeded to light the candles in an old-fashioned girandole that overhung the fireplace. There were five candles, and he lit them all.

They revealed him a clean-shaven, white-haired man, meticulously dressed in black—black swallow-tail coat, open waistcoat, and frilled shirt-front, on which his laundress must have spent hours of labor; closely fitting black knee-breeches, black silk stockings, black polished shoes. They silhouetted, too, in the moment before he swung round on me, an enormous nose, like a punchinello's, and the outline of a shapely head, sufficiently massive to counterbalance and save it from caricature. The size of the head again would have suggested deformity, but for the broad shoulders that carried it. As he faced me, squarely with his back to the hearth, his chest and shoulders narrowing to the hips of a runner, and still narrowing (though he stood astraddle) to ankles and feet that would not have disgraced a lady, he put me in mind of a matador I had seen years before, facing his bull in a ring at Seville. The firelight behind them emphasized the neat outline of his legs. He carried a black coat on his left arm, and in his left hand an opera hat, pressed flat against his left side. In closing the window, in finding and producing the pistol, and again in lighting the candles, he had used his right hand only.



“I fell to distributing the largesse.”

“A gentleman?” he asked, contracting his brows and eyeing me.

“Well,” said I, with an uncomfortable, nervous laugh, that itself accused my breeding, so inferior it was to the situation, “possibly you are one of those who mix up the name with moral conduct——”

“To some extent,” he answered, without seeming to interrupt. “Everyone does, I fancy.”

“At any rate I won’t challenge it,” said I. “But you may, if you will, call me a man of some education. I was at Magdalen once, but left Oxford without taking my degree.”

“Ah!” He inclined his head a little to one side. “Cards?”

“Certainly not,” I answered with heat. “I own that appearances are against me, but I was never that kind of man. As a matter of fact, it happened over a horse.”

He nodded. “So you, too, though you won’t challenge the name, have to mix up moral conduct with your disposition. We draw the line variously, but everyone draws it somewhere. . . . Magdalen, hey? If I mistake not, the foundationers of Magdalen—including, perhaps, some who were undergraduates with you—are assembled in the college hall at this moment to celebrate Christmas, and hear the choir sing Pergolesi’s Gloria.”

“The reminder hurts me,” said I, “—if that be any gratification to you.”

“A sentimentalist?” Mr. Felix’s eyes twinkled. “Better and better! I have the very job for you—but we will discuss that by and by. Only let me say that you must have dropped on me, just now, from heaven—you really must. But please don’t make a practice of it! I have invested too much in my curios: and others have invested more That snuff-box, for instance, which you were handling a moment ago . . . at one time in its history it cost—aye, and fetched—close on two hundred millions of money.”

I began to have hopes that I was dealing with a madman.

“Or rather,” he corrected himself, “the money was paid for a pinch of the snuff it contains. Open it, carefully, if you please!—and you will behold the genuine rappee, the very particles over which France fought with Austria. What says Virgil? ‘*Hi motus animorum atque heac certamina tanta Pulveris exigui jactu*’—yes but in this instance, you see, the pinch of dust was the exciting cause. Sir, the Austrian ambassador, one fatal afternoon, refused to take from the box in your hand that which, three weeks later, and all too late, he would gladly have purchased with many millions. Observe the imperial crown on the lid, with the bees around it, as if to illustrate Virgil’s warning. I bought the thing myself, sir, for six napoleons, off a dealer in the Rue de Fouaire: but the price will rise again. Yes, certainly, I count on its fetching three hundred pounds at least when I have departed this life, and three hundred pounds will go some little way towards my monument.”

“Your monument?” I echoed.

He nodded again. “In good time, my friend, you shall hear about it; for you make, I perceive, a good listener. You have gifts, though you do less than justice to them. Suffice it to say that I am a sentimentalist, like yourself. I never married nor begat children; and I have but a shaky belief in the future state; but my sentimentality hankers after—you may even say it postulates—some kind of continuity. I cannot discuss this here and now, for by the sound of the violins, the dance is coming to an end, and my guests will be growing impatient. But you remember Samson’s riddle? Well, out of my corpse (I trust) shall come forth honey: whereas out of yours, unless you employ your talents better——” He broke off, and stepped up close to me. “Ah, but excuse me,” he said, and reaching out a hand, caught me suddenly by the collar.

The arrest—I made sure it was an arrest—took me unprepared, and threw me off my balance. I broke away a pace, drawing back my fist to strike: and in that moment I felt his hand relax with a curious fluttering movement as though his fingers drummed on the back of my neck. I heard

him laugh, too; and before I could hit out he sprang back, holding in his hand a white rabbit!

“An old trick—eh?—and a simple one.” He pressed out the spring of his opera hat, dropped the rabbit inside, dived his hand after it, and drew out two white rabbits by the ears. “But it will amuse my young friends downstairs, and I practise this kind of thing at odd whiles.”

He set the rabbits on the floor, where they gave themselves a shake, and hopped off toward the shelter of the window curtains.



Herrings—red herrings—filled to the brim!

“Now you are the very man I wanted,” said he, “and I am going to make you sing for your supper.” He stepped to the armoire, and drew out a long cloak of scarlet, furred with ermine. “I had meant to wear this myself,” he went on; but stopped all of a sudden at sight of my face, and began to laugh quietly, in a way that made me long to take him by the throat. “Dear me, dear me! I understand! Association of ideas—Court of Assize, eh? But this is no judicial robe, my friend; it belongs to Father Christmas. Here’s his wig now—quite another sort of wig, you perceive—with a holly wreath around it. And here’s his beard, beautifully frosted with silver.” He held wig and beard towards the window, and let the moonlight play over them. “On with them, quick! . . . And the boots.” Again he dived into the armoire, and

produced a pair of Bluchers, the long ankle leathers gummed over with cotton-wool, to represent snow. "It's lucky they reach a good way up the leg, seeing the cloak is a trifle short for a man of your inches." He stepped back a pace and surveyed me as I fitted on the beard.

"There are punishments and punishments," said I. "And I hope, whatever your game may be, you will remember that there's punishment in dressing up like a tom-fool."

"Ah, but you'll catch the spirit of it!" he assured me: and then, rubbing his hands, he appeared to muse for a moment. "I ought," said he, with a glance towards the fireplace. "I really ought to send Father Christmas down by way of the chimney. The flue opens just above here, and I believe it would accommodate you; but I am not very sure if my housekeeper had it swept last spring. No," he decided, "the music has ceased, and we must lose no time. I will spare you the chimney."

He called to his rabbits, picked them up as they came hopping from behind the curtains, popped them into his hat, shut it with a snap, and lo! they had vanished.

"You'll excuse me," I ventured, as he stepped to the door; "but—but the—the few articles here in the bag——"

"Oh, bring them along with you: bring them along by all means! We may have a present or two to make, down below."

From the head of the staircase we looked down into a hall gaily lit with paper lanterns. Holly and ivy wreathed the broad balustrade and the old pictures around the walls. A bunch of mistletoe hung from a great chandelier that sparkled with hundreds of glass prisms, and under it a couple of footmen in gilt liveries and powder crossed at that moment with trays of jellies and syllabubs. They were well-trained footmen, too, for at sight of me descending the stairs in my idiotic outfit they betrayed no surprise at all. One of them set his tray down on a table, stepped neatly ahead as Mr. Felix reached the lowest stair, and opened a door for us on the right. I found myself at a stand on the threshold, blinking at a blaze of light, and staring up a perspective of waxed floor at a miniature stage which filled the far end of the room. Light, as everyone knows, travels faster than sound: were it not so, I should say that almost ahead of the blaze there broke on us a din of voices—of happy children's voices. Certainly it stunned my ears before I had time to blink.



The room was lined with children—scores of children: and some of them were gathered in little groups, and some of them, panting and laughing from their dance, had dropped into the chairs, ranged along the walls. But these were the minority. The most of the guests lay in cots, or sat with crutches beside them, or with hands dropped in their laps. These last were the blind ones. I do not set up to be a lover of children; but the discovery that the most of these small guests were crippled hit me with a kind of pitiful awe; and right on top of it came a second and worse shock, to note how many of them were blind.

To me those blind eyes were the only merciful ones, as Mr. Felix beckoned Father Christmas to follow him up to the stage between the two lines of curious gazers. “O-oh!” had been their first cry, as they caught sight

of me in the doorway: and “O-oh!” I heard them murmuring, child after child, in long-drawn fugue, as we made our way up the long length of the room that winked detection from every candle, every reflector, every foot of its polished floor.

We gained the stair together by a short stairway draped with flags. Mr. Felix with a wave of his opera hat, called on the orchestra to strike up “A Fine Old English Gentleman,” (meaning me or, if you like it, Father Christmas: and I leave you to picture the fool I looked). Then, stepping to the footlights, he introduced me, explaining that he had met me wandering upstairs, rifling his most secret drawers to fill my bag with seasonable presents for them. Five or six times he interrupted his patter to pluck a cracker or a bon-bon out of my beard, and toss it down to the audience. The children gasped at first, and stared at the magic spoil on the floor. By-and-by one adventurous little girl crept forward, and picked up a cracker, and her cry of delight as she discovered that it was real, gave the signal for a general scramble. Mr. Felix continued his patter without seeming to heed it: but his hand went up faster and faster to my beard and wig, and soon the crackers were falling in showers. I saw children snatch them off the floor and carry them to their blind brothers and sisters, pressing them between the wondering, groping hands with assurance that they were real. . . . Mr. Felix saw it, too, and his flow of words ceased with a gulp, as though a flowing spring gurgled suddenly, and withdrew itself underground. “I am a sentimentalist,” he said to me quickly, in a pause which nobody heeded; for by this time crackers were banging to right and left, and the children shouting together. Their shouts rose to one yell of laughter as, recovering himself, he dived at my neck, and produced the two struggling rabbits. His opera hat opened with a snap, and in they went. A second later it shut flat again, and they were gone, into thin air. He opened the hat with a puzzled frown, plunged a hand, and dragged forth yard upon yard of ribbon—red, green, white, blue, yellow ribbon, mixed up with packs of playing cards that, with a turn of the hand he sent spinning into air, to fall thick as leaves in Vall’ombrosa.

“Your turn!” he panted as, at the end of the ribbon he lugged out an enormous cabbage, and trundled it down the room. Catching my bag from me, he shook his cloak over it once, and returned it to my hands, bulging, stuffed full to the brim with toys—dolls, tops, whips, trumpets, boxes of animals, boxes of tin soldiers. . . .

“Father Christmas, now! Make way for Father Christmas!”

The infection took me, and stumbling down from the stage by the stairway, I fell to distributing the largesse left and right. The first bagful

carried me less than a third of the way down the room, for I gave with both hands, and, when a blind child fumbled long with a toy, dropped it at his feet, and tried another, and yet another till his smile suited me. The dropped toys lay where they had fallen. The spirit of the game had made me reckless; and I halted with a cold shiver as my fingers touched the gems at the bottom of the bag, and looking down the room, I was aware that my store was exhausted, and as yet two-thirds of the children had received no gift. I turned—all in a cold shiver—to retrace my steps and pick up the toys at the blind children's feet, and as I did so, felt myself a bungler past pardon. But in the act of turning, I cast a look back at the stage; and there stood Mr. Felix, nodding approval and beckoning. So, as in a dream, I went back. "Capital!" was his only comment. Taking my bag, he passed his cloak over it again, and again handed it to me, stuffed to the brim.

Thrice I returned it to him; but the third refill was a scanty one, since by this time there lacked but half-a-score of the taller children to be satisfied. To these, too, I distributed their gifts, and when every eager pair of hands had been laden, I wheeled about for the next word of command.

But Mr. Felix had skipped down from the stage, letting the curtain fall behind him. He stood with his back to me, waving both arms to the orchestra, and as the musicians plunged at the opening bars of the Toy Symphony, the curtain rose, almost as soon as it had dropped; and rose upon a scene representing a street with shops decked for Christmas, and snow upon their eaves and window ledges.

Then, still to the strains of the Toy Symphony, a Harlequin ran in, with a Columbine, whom he twisted upon his bent knee, and tossed lightly through the upper window of a baker's shop, himself diving a moment later, with a slap of his wand, through the flap of a fishmonger's door, hard by. Next, as on a frozen slide, came the clown, with red-hot poker, the Pantaloon tripping over his stick, and two Constables wreathed in strings of sausages. The Clown boxed the Pantaloon's ears; the Pantaloon passed on the buffet to the Constables, and all plunged together into the fishmonger's. The Clown emerged running with a stolen plaice, passed it into the hands of the Pantaloon, who followed, and was in turn pursued off the scene by the Constables; but the fishmonger, issuing last in chase, ran into the Clown, who caught up a barrel of red herrings and bonneted him. The fishmonger extricated himself, and the two began to pelt each other with herrings, while the children screamed with laughter. . . .

It was a famous harlequinade; and, as usual, it concluded the entertainment. For after a harlequinade, what can stand between a child and happy dreams?—especially if he go to them with his arms full of Christmas

presents. Five minutes after the curtain had fallen I found myself standing beside Mr. Felix in the hall, while he bade good-night to his guests. Carriages of his hiring had arrived for them, and the coachmen apparently had received their orders. A dozen well-trained nurses moved about the hall and, having dressed the little ones—who by this time were almost too drowsy with pleasure to thank their entertainer—carried them out into the portico, where the liveried footmen stood by the carriage doors. Slam! went the doors, and one after another—with scarcely a word of command—the carriages bowled off over the thick snow.

When the last guest had gone, Mr. Felix turned to me.

“The play is over,” said he. “When I am gone, it will be repeated year after year at Christmas, at the Cripples’ Hospital. My will provides for that; and that will be my monument. But for a few years to come I hope to hold the entertainment here, in my own house. Come, you may take off your robe and wig and go in peace. I would fain have a talk with you, but I am tired, as perhaps you may guess. Go, then—and go in peace!”

Motioning the footman to fall back, he walked out with me and down the steps of the portico, but halted on the lowest step by the edge of the frozen snow, and with a wave of the hand dismissed me into the night.

I had gained the end of the street, and the bridge that there spans the river, before it occurred to me that I was carrying my bag, and—with a shock—that my bag still held the stolen jewels.

By the second lamp on the bridge I halted, lifted the bag on to the snow-covered parapet, thrust in a hand, and drew forth—a herring!

Herrings—red herrings—filled to the brim. I dragged them forth, and rained handful after handful overboard into the black water. Still, below them, I had hoped to find the jewels. But the jewels were gone, at least, I supposed that all were gone, when—having jettisoned the last herring—I groped around the bottom of the bag.

Something pricked my finger. I drew it out and held it under the lamp-light. It was a small turquoise brooch, set around with diamonds.

For at least two minutes I stared at it, there, under the lamp, and slipped it half-way into my waistcoat pocket; but suddenly took a new resolve, and walked back along the street to the house.

Mr. Felix yet stood on the lower step of the portico. Above him, still as a statue, a footman waited at the great house-door, until it should please his master to re-enter.

“Excuse me, sir——” I began, and held up the brooch.

“I meant it for you,” said Mr. Felix quietly, affably, “I gave precisely five pounds for it, at an auction: and I warn you that it is worth just thrice that sum. Still, if you would prefer ready money, as in your circumstances I daresay you do”—he felt in his breeches pocket—“here are the five sovereigns, and—once more—go in peace.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *My Christmas Burglary* by Arthur Quiller-Couch]