

The Footsteps on the Stairs

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Halton Square, Oldchester, was not at all the kind of place that one would associate with anything romantic or unusual. In fact, it was commonplace and ordinary to the last degree. While the houses in it were not exactly new, they were by no means old; and not one of them seemed to possess the smallest feature of interest. Until quite recently they had been dwelling houses, but were now with few exceptions converted into places of business.

No. 15, on the north side of the square, might be described as only half converted. It was now a business house, but it still remained a dwelling house. When Thomas Boston, general merchant, removed his place of business to No. 15, he removed himself and his family as well. The lower regions of the house were devoted to the purposes of the business, and the upper ones to those of the household.

The latter consisted of Mrs. Boston and a general servant whose name was Angelina and for that reason was known as Sarah. What the business consisted of is not quite so easily stated. The business of a general merchant is like charity in that it covers a multitude of sins. Far be it from us to suggest that Mr. Thomas Boston was a worse sinner than other dwellers in the square, or that his business was other than honest and straightforward. But what it was, few people knew exactly except himself. In fact, it may be doubted if he could have stated its precise nature in a sentence: so why should we attempt it?

Mr. Boston was a general merchant: he dealt in things in general. All was fish that happened to get into his net. He was ready for anything that came. At one time he was running a special line in mouse-traps; at another he was selling margarine on commission; a few weeks later he was making a book on the races; and at the time of our story he was disposing of a special line of brushes and brooms which for some reason had the maker's name carefully removed.

The police seemed to take an interest in Mr. Boston and his business, and they paid friendly calls at moments when they thought that they were least expected. But in this they were mistaken. They were never unexpected. Mr. Boston lived in the constant expectation that the next footstep would be that of a sergeant or perhaps an inspector; and he was always ready to greet them with a cordial word of welcome.

He used to be fond of remarking that you don't catch an old bird on the hop; but why an old bird should not hop like other birds, he did not explain. For some reason or other the police did not seem to be specially pleased with the cordiality with which they were always welcomed at No. 15; but then some people are never pleased. Perhaps they would have liked it better if Mr. Boston had not been quite so ready for them when they called.

Now it is perhaps hardly necessary to say that a man like him, with plenty of sound sense, was not at all the sort of person to indulge in fancies or to imagine things; and that makes it all the more curious that the strange things we have to tell should have happened in his house of all places.

The house itself had nothing remarkable about it. It was just an ordinary house of moderate size, and had been built about fifty years. There was no shop; but the front room on the ground floor served for business purposes, while that behind it had been turned into an office for an elderly man who combined in himself the functions of shopman, book-keeper, corresponding clerk, office boy and messenger on a salary of a pound a week. How he did it, nobody knew

except himself: why he did it, the police thought that they knew. But they were not quite sure; and this was one of the reasons why they took such a friendly interest in the business.

Below these rooms was a basement, reached by an area from the street; and this was used for storing the goods in which Mr. Boston happened to be dealing at the moment. It could also be reached by a staircase indoors. The stairs to the first floor were opposite the front door, and went straight up without a turn. Facing the top of them was a small room which served as a private office for Mr. Boston; and the rest of the floor consisted of living rooms. Opposite the private office, the stairs turned and went on up to the second floor, where the bedrooms and a couple of lumber-rooms accounted for the rest of the house.

Now if you had attempted to go down into the area from the street after dark, you would have found it necessary to be very careful. There was no lamp on that side of the square; and if there did not happen to be a moon at the time, the area was then as dark as it well could be. Anyone down there could not be seen from the road unless some inquisitive policeman happened to turn his bull's eye lantern in that direction.

And if you had looked for the bell pull at the area door, you would not have found one. Why should you? The bell was at the front door, as is usual in all respectable houses. But if you had been curious enough to feel round the edge of the frame of that area door in the dark, you would have found a small button; and if you had pressed it, a whirring sound would have been heard in Mr. Boston's private office on the first floor. It was not a bell; for he was too thoughtful of the convenience of his neighbours—to say nothing of his friends, the police—to wish that the noise of a bell should disturb anyone late at night. And it was apt to be very late indeed when that whirring sound brought him down to the area door to see if it was the postman. It never was; but he did not seem mind.

The people who called and used that little button always came on very private business indeed; and Mr. Boston always went down himself. And so thoughtful was he of the comfort of the neighbours that he had covered the fanlight over the front door with thick felt, so that no light should show through when he went downstairs to the area door to let in his visitor. And the stairs were never lighted late at night for the same reason: he always used an electric torch.

Now it happened one night in November that Mr. Boston was working very late indeed in his office. In fact, it was not night but morning, for the clock had just struck three. It was odd that he should be up so late, for he did not seem to be very busy. Indeed, he was simply smoking a cigar and reading a newspaper. If you had looked over his shoulder, you would have seen the subject that was interesting him. He was reading about a burglary that had taken place the previous night at a country house about twelve miles away, when the thieves had got off with a large quantity of plate and jewellery. And he was expecting a caller before the night was out.

Suddenly a soft whirring sound was heard in the office. Mr. Boston laid down his paper and smiled. But he did not rise. He waited till the sound came a second and a third time. Then he knew that the visitor at the area door was "all right." It was someone who knew the ropes.

Mr. Boston rose, slipped his feet into a pair of thick felt slippers—for why should he disturb people by treading noisily on the stairs?—took up a small electric torch, tested it to see that it was working well, slipped a revolver into his pocket, and went downstairs. He reached the area door in perfect silence, but he did not open it at once. He first made a slight scratching noise on the door with his finger nail: and in reply came three very soft taps from the other side. Then he smiled again, and opened the door.

No one was there! Mr. Boston instantly closed the door. He had no wish to attract attention; and it at once struck him that his visitor had heard the approaching footsteps of some quite

unnecessary policeman and had taken cover in the disused coal cellar, the door of which was always kept unfastened for such emergencies. He would only have to wait a minute for the coast to become clear again.

He waited perhaps two minutes, and then came a very soft tap on the door. Mr. Boston repeated the scratching signal; and in response came the three taps. He opened the door; but again no one was there. He closed the door quickly and silently, scratched his head and looked puzzled. He had never had it happen twice before. There must have been another interruption just as he was opening the door. He waited again for perhaps ten minutes, but nothing more happened and he went back upstairs to his office, where he sat up till five o'clock. As his visitors had sufficient common sense not to run the risk of calling later than that hour, he then went to bed.

In the morning he thought it over and could not make it out at all. Someone must have rung the buzzer; and someone must have been at the door when he gave the signal and heard the three taps in answer. And the visitor must have meant business, for he stayed to seek admission a second time. But why did he try no more? Besides, he could not have got away in the couple of seconds that it took to open the door, unless he went into the cellar—a device that was only known to the people whom Mr. Boston regarded as “all right.” And in that case why had he gone away without trying once more to leave behind what he had presumably brought? As a rule, his late-at-night visitors were only too anxious to unload themselves of the goods that they brought—a fact which enabled him to drive many a good bargain.

The whole thing was very puzzling; and he turned for relief to the morning paper. And it was a curious thing that the very first article to which he turned was the latest news of the big burglary.

But there was no news. The police had got a clue—as they generally have—but the burglars had got the goods. They had got clear away; and as all the stations had been watched and it was known that no doubtful characters had entered or left the district the burglary was evidently the work of local men. The stolen valuables could not be very far off. And then following the usual remarks about the importance of suppressing the receivers of stolen goods and thus deprive burglars of a market for their ill-gotten spoil. Mr. Boston read all this with a broad smile. Of course a general dealer had no interest in stolen goods.

Nothing further occurred during the day, except that a badly disguised detective called during the morning to buy a broom, and wasted nearly an hour in talking about things in general. But in the evening, just as it was growing dusk, Mr. Boston happened to go to the door and glanced down into the area. He was surprised to see a man standing at the door, apparently tapping quietly. And the man had a large bundle partly hidden under a large cloak. Could anybody have been mad enough to come at such a risky time? It must be somebody new to the business; and he would need to be handled very cautiously. Perhaps it would be safer to have nothing to do with him.

Mr. Boston glanced round the square to see that no one was approaching, then looked into the area again, and saw—no one! The area was empty.

What in the world did this mean? Had the fellow gone into the cellar without any reason? This must be looked into. So he once more glanced the square, saw that all was quiet, and then fetched a scuttle and shovel and went down to the area and into the cellar to get some coal. No one was there!

But as he looked out, he caught a momentary glimpse of the same man, with the bundle under his cloak; and he was again tapping at the door the basement. Mr. Boston only paused to put down the coal scuttle, and then stepped out of the cellar. The man had completely vanished. But

it was impossible for anyone to get up the steps to the street in so short a time. The whole affair was most bewildering.

Mr. Boston sat up late again that night. He was still expecting a visitor; and this time he was not disappointed. About two in the morning the buzzer sounded; and, after the usual precautions, the visitor was admitted to the basement. As he proved to be an old business friend, he was taken up to the private office, where he produced from various strange places in his clothes a collection of jewels that quite agreed with the descriptions in the newspapers of that week.

The business transactions that then took place between the two men were strictly private and confidential; so it is not for us to inquire what they were. All we know is that they were arranged, after some grumbling on the part of the visitor. When he had gone, Mr. Boston pulled the rug from under his desk, lifted up a small trap-door in the floor, and put a parcel out of sight. Then he replaced the rug, extinguished the light, and went to bed.

About an hour later he woke up suddenly and distinctly heard the buzzer sounding in his office. He was not expecting another visitor; and he was very comfortable in bed: but business is business and must be attended to. So he hastily rose, put on some clothes, and went down to the basement. Then followed an exact repetition of the strange incidents of the previous night. It seemed certain that someone was there, but nobody was visible. If Mr. Boston had not been a strict teetotaller, he would really have begun to wonder if he had not better become one.

Nothing unusual now happened for about a week. Mr. Boston had branched out in another line of business and was exploiting a new soap which was warranted to wash everything except the human skin. And somehow the police seemed to have taken quite an interest in soap, if one might judge by the number of constables in plain clothes who called to buy it.

And then a very puzzling thing occurred. It was Tuesday night about ten o'clock. Mr. Boston was sitting in his office, smoking a final cigar before going to bed. He was not expecting any visitor, and there was no reason to stay up late. His wife and the servant had gone upstairs half an hour before. He was just putting his desk straight before following their example, when he suddenly paused and listened.

Someone was coming up the stairs from the basement! What could this mean? And who could it be? As we have already explained, the office was on the first landing, and from the door anyone could see down the stairs to the ground floor and up the stairs to the second floor. Mr. Boston quietly took his revolver out of the table drawer, saw that it was loaded, opened the door, and waited. The steps could be distinctly heard. They came the stairs from the basement, and then along the ground floor passage. Now they would have to come up to the first floor, and then he would see who this intruder was.

He held the revolver in readiness. There were some valuable goods in hiding under the floor of his office; and the men with whom he did business would not stick at a trifle. It would not do to take any risks. And now the steps began to come up the stairs to the first floor. But—it was very strange—he could not see anyone, although the light from his office shone on the stairs and he had also flashed his electric torch on them. The steps came up the stairs, seemed to pause for a moment outside his office door, and then went on to the second floor. And yet he saw no one!

After a moment's hesitation, he went up after the invisible intruder; and at the farthest end of the passage on the second floor he caught just a glimpse of the man in the cloak whom he had seen about a week before in the area tapping at the basement door. The man seemed to melt away into nothing just as he caught sight of him. He thought it as well to visit each room and make sure that no intruder was there; but he found no one. Nor did he make any discoveries

when he went downstairs and explored the basement. All was quiet and everything was in its usual order. The whole affair was a complete mystery.

We have already said that Mr. Boston was not a man of imagination. He dealt with solid facts and tangible realities. Thus an experience of this kind was entirely out of his line. He could form no theory about it: he was simply bewildered. He had heard the man come upstairs; he actually caught a glimpse of him; and yet there was nobody. He could only remark that he was eternally blest if he could understand it—only “blest” was not the exact word that he used.

The queer thing about it all was that it seemed to have no sort of meaning. And the same could be said of the next thing that happened at No. 15 Halton Square. This time it was the servant who had the surprise. Angelina—called Sarah for short—had a young man, and was allowed every Tuesday evening off for the express purpose of spending the time with him. This arrangement was one that Mr. Boston, with the approval of Mrs. Boston, specially insisted upon. It would never do to have any followers hanging about the place after dark. They might get in the way of the business; and incidentally they might get to know too much about it. So Sarah—otherwise Angelina—had one pleasant evening a week in company with the young man, who was understood by Mr. Boston and fully believed by Angelina to be a clerk in a stockbroker’s office. If Mr. Boston had known that he was really a young member of the local detective force, and was much more interested in him than in Angelina, that young lady would doubtless have received a month’s wages instead of notice and have been sent about her business without any further delay.

Now it happened that Sarah—or Angelina, just as you please—came home punctually on Tuesday evening fling at ten o’clock, according to orders; and the young man accompanied her as far as the corner of the square. There they bade one another good night, and she made her way across the quiet square and up to the front door of No. 15. She was just about to enter when someone seemed to brush past her and go into the house. But she saw no one. It was not mere imagination, or even a draught caused by opening the door suddenly; for she felt a distinct push which almost made her drop a small parcel that she was carrying. In fact, she exclaimed, “Who are yer shovin’ of?” before she realised that no one was there.

She looked round two or three times before she could assure herself that there was no one. Then she shut the door, and started to go up to the living rooms on the first floor. And then she had a very queer experience. It seemed to her that part of the stairs in front of her was blotted out, just as if some person were walking up in front of her. And she distinctly heard a sort of shuffling tread on the stairs. But no one was there.

When she reached the first landing, she found Mr. Boston at the door of his private office, looking puzzled. He asked her if anyone had come in with her, and explained that he thought he heard the footsteps of two people instead of one. For some reason or other, Angelina thought fit to be very indignant at the suggestion, and he found it well to ask no more questions. But Sarah—we mean Angelina—was very much scared for all that: and she was still more scared a little later when she heard the footsteps again outside her bedroom door. She had locked the door as usual; but she took the precaution to push the chest of drawers against it as well.

Next day the police called on Mr. Boston: in fact, quite a lot of them called. And they called all at once, with an inspector at their head. They came to search the premises; and they had a warrant from the magistrate to enable them to do so. Mr. Boston could not understand at all why they came; and he said so. They seemed to be interested in soap and brooms, for they turned over all the stock in the basement to see what was underneath. And they spent quite of lot of time in hunting about the coal cellar.

Then they went upstairs and turned out all the rooms in the rudest and most inconsiderate fashion. They even looked inside Mrs. Boston's wardrobe and shook all her newest dresses; which seemed a very foolish thing to do. They searched the private office, but they found nothing that interested them. It never occurred to them to move the rug under the desk.

But they met with an incident that they could not make out at all. One of them happened to look out of an upstairs window and saw a man with a large parcel half hidden under a cloak going down into the basement. He told the inspector, who sent a man out to the street to see that the new-comer did not get away while he and another policeman went down to see who it was and what the parcel contained. But they found no one in the area or in the basement, though it was certain that he could not have got back to the street. At last they gave it up as a bad job and went away.

Mr. Boston now made up his mind to move from Halton Square. How could the business of a respectable general merchant be carried on if he was to be worried in this way? Besides, it looked so bad to have the police paying so many friendly visits. And it really hindered business; for Mr. Boston's friends had a decided objection to running the risk of finding a policeman on the premises when they called late at night about a little deal in brooms or soap.

But the removal never came off. Mr. Boston went off instead. And it happened in this way. Just as it was getting dusk one evening soon afterwards, he was looking out of his door when he saw a man in a black cloak, with a big bundle hidden under it, slip very cautiously down into the area. He did not go down to attend to him for two reasons. One was that a police sergeant was standing at the corner of the square: and the other was that Mr. Boston thought it was just one more of those queer occurrences and not a real man at all. So he took no notice.

But the sergeant had also seen the man; and he knew nothing about any ghost or anything of that sort having been seen. So he went down into the area to ask what was in that bundle. Now it most unfortunately happened that it was a real man this time; and when the sergeant had called another policeman and they had opened the bundle, Mr. Boston had the surprise of his life; for it was full of watches and gold and silver from a big robbery that had taken place a week before.

Of course Mr. Boston did not at all understand what it meant; but the judge and jury did; and he got seven years' holiday at a seaside place called Portland.