
An Officer and a Lady

by Rex Stout

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Bill Farden had had his eye on the big brick house on the corner for some time.

He had worked one in that block--the white frame with the latticed porch farther down toward Madison Street--during the early part of March, and had got rather a nice bag. Then, warned off by the scare and hullabaloo that followed, he had fought shy of that part of town for a full month, confining his operations to one or two minor hauls in the Parkdale section. He figured that by now things would have calmed down sufficiently in this neighborhood to permit a quiet hour's work without undue danger.

It was a dark night, or would have been but for the street lamp on the corner. That mattered little, since the right side of the house was in deep shadow anyway. By an oversight I have neglected to place the scene of the story in the vicinity of a clock tower, so Bill Farden was obliged to take out his watch and look at it in order to call attention to the fact that it was an hour past midnight.

He nodded his head with satisfaction, then advanced across the lawn to that side of the house left in deep shadow.

Two large windows loomed up side by side, then a wide expanse of brick, then two more. After a leisurely examination he chose the second of the first pair. A ray from his electric flash showed the old-fashioned catch snapped to.

Grinning professionally, he took a thin shining instrument from his pocket, climbed noiselessly onto the ledge and inserted the steel blade in the slit. A quick jerk, a sharp snap, and he leaped down again. He cocked his ear.

No sound.

The window slid smoothly upward to his push, and the next instant his deft accustomed hand had noiselessly raised the inner shade. Again he lifted himself onto the ledge, and this time across it, too. He was inside the house.

He stood for a time absolutely motionless, listening. The faintest of scratching noises came from the right.

"Bird," Bill observed mentally, and his experienced ear was corroborated a moment later when the light of his electric flash revealed a canary blinking through the bars of its cage.

There was no other sound, and he let the cone of light travel boldly about the apartment. It was a well-furnished library and music room, with a large shining table, shelves of books along the walls, a grand piano at one end, and several comfortable chairs. Bill grunted and moved toward a door at the farther corner.

He passed through, and a glance showed him the dining room. Stepping noiselessly to the windows to make sure that the shades were drawn tight, he then switched on the electric chandelier. There was promise in the array of china and cut glass spread over the buffet and sideboard, and with an expectant gleam in his eye he sprang to open the heavy drawers.

The first held linen; he didn't bother to close it again. The second was full of silver, dozens, scores of pieces of old family silver. In a trice Bill flew to the ledge of the window by which he had entered and was back again with a suitcase in his hand.

When the silver, wrapped in napkins, was safely in the suitcase, Bill straightened and glanced sharply around. Should he leave at once with this rare booty so easily gathered? He shook his head with decision and returned to place the suitcase on the window ledge in the library; then he came back, switched off the light in the dining room, and entered the kitchen.

By unerring instinct he stepped to the refrigerator. A flash of his pocket-lamp, and he gave a satisfied grunt. He turned on the light. From the recesses of the ice-box he brought forth a dish of peas, some sliced beef, half a chicken, some cold potatoes, and part of a strawberry shortcake. In a drawer in the kitchen cabinet he found a knife and fork and some spoons.

From a common-sense viewpoint the performance was idiotic. Having broken into an inhabited house in the dead of night, rifled the silver drawer and deposited the loot on the window sill, I for one would not be guilty of the artistic crime of tacking on an anticlimax by returning to the kitchen to rob the refrigerator and grossly stuff myself.

But Bill Farden was an old and experienced hand, thoroughly versed in the best burglar tradition. Also, perhaps, he was hungry. He ate as one who respects food but has no time for formalities.

He had finished the meat and vegetables and was beginning on the shortcake, when all of a sudden he sprang noiselessly from his chair to the electric button on the wall. A tiny click and the room was in darkness. He crouched low against the wall, while the footsteps that had startled him from above became louder as they began to descend the back stairs.

There might still be a chance to make the door into the dining room,

but he decided against it. Scarcely breathing, he pulled himself together and waited. The footsteps became louder still; they halted, and he heard a hand fumbling at the knob of the stairway door. The noise of the opening door followed.

Bill's mind was working like lightning. Probably some one had been awake and seen the light from a slit through the window shade. Man or woman? He would soon know.

The footsteps sounded on the floor, advancing, and his eyes, accustomed to the darkness, caught a dim outline. Noiselessly his hand sought the side pocket of his coat and fumbled there. The figure approached; it was now quite close, so close that all Bill had to do was rise swiftly to his feet and close his fingers in their viselike grip.

A curious penetrating odor filled the air and a sputtering, muffled cry came from the intruder. A short, sharp struggle, and the form sank limply to the floor. Kneeling down, Bill pressed the damp sponge a little longer against the nostrils and mouth until the body had quite relaxed, then returned the sponge to the pocket that held the chloroform tube.

He switched on the light and surveyed his prostrate anesthetized victim. It was a powerful-looking woman in a blue flannel nightgown; feet large and red, face coarse in feature and of contomr Scandinavian; probably the cook. Bill wasted little thought on her. The point was that his blood was up now. He had had the taste of danger and his eyes gleamed. He shot a glance at the open stairway door.

A moment later his shoes were off, strung from his belt by their laces, and he was on his way up--silently, warily. The eleventh step creaked a little and he stopped short.

Two minutes and no sound.

He went on to the top of the stairs and halted there, standing a while to listen before risking his electric flash. Its rays showed him a long wide hall with two doors on one side and three on the other, all closed, so he moved noiselessly on to the farther end, the front of the house, listened a moment at the crack of a door and then cautiously turned the knob and entered, leaving the door open behind him.

His ear told him instantly that he was not alone; the room was occupied; he heard some one breathing. His nerves were drawn tight now, his whole body alert and quivering with the pleasurable excitement of it? Like a thoroughbred at the barrier.

A faint reflection of light from the street lamp came in through the window, just enough to make out the dim forms of furniture and the vague lumpy outline under the covers on the bed. He heard a watch ticking; it became less audible when he had moved swiftly to the dressing table and transferred the timepiece to his own pocket. He turned as by instinct toward the door of the closet, but halted sharply halfway across the room.

There was something queer about that breathing. He listened tensely. Most irregular. Surely not the respiration of a sleeper--and he was an expert on the subject. Suspicious, to say the least.

Like a flash he was at the bedside, and his sharp gaze detected a shuddering movement all over the form that lay there under the sheets. His hand flew to the side pocket of his coat, then he remembered that the chloroform tube was empty. In a fit of rashness he pressed the button of his pocket-flash, and there on the pillow, in the center of the bright electric ray that shot forth, he saw the face of a man with mouth wide open and eyes staring in abject terror--a man wide awake and petrified with fear.

Bill had seen such countenances before, and experience had taught him to waste no time in taking advantage of the wideopen mouth. So, moving with swift sureness, he filled that gaping aperture with the corner of a sheet, stuffing it in with conscientious thoroughness. Then, while the man made feeble attempts to get loose, which Bill impatiently ignored, he tied his hands and feet and made the gag secure.

Gurglings barely audible came from the victim's nose; our hero made a threatening gesture, and they ceased. He proceeded calmly and methodically to rifle the room and closet. When he finished ten minutes later, he had deposited in various places about his person two silver cigarette cases, three scarf pins, five rings, a jeweled photograph frame, and ninety-four dollars in cash.

He looked to see that his captive was securely tied, scowled ferociously into his face, tiptoed out of the room and closed the door behind him. He had been in the house not more than thirty minutes, and already two of the enemy had been rendered *hors de combat*, a bag of booty was waiting for him below, his stomach was full, and his clothing was loaded with money and jewelry. His chest swelled with pardonable pride. On with the dance!

Inflated and emboldened by success, he flashed his light impudently up and down the hall, finally deciding on the next door to the right on the opposite side. He advanced, noiselessly turned the knob and entered. The light from the street lamp did not enter on this side, and the room was pitch dark.

For a moment he thought it unoccupied, then the sound of faint breathing came to his ear--quite faint and regular. He took a step toward the bed, then, magnificently scorning danger, turned to the wall near the door and felt for the electric button. He pushed; a click, and the room was flooded with light.

On the instant Bill sprang toward the bed, to forestall any outcry of alarm from its occupant. But he halted three paces away, with his arms half outstretched, at the sight that met his gaze.

There, under the silken coverlet, in the glare from the chandelier, he saw a sleeping child.

It was a girl of eight or nine years; her little white arm was curved under her head, and her soft brown hair spread in glorious curled confusion over the pillow. Her breast moved regularly up and down with her gentle breathing, and her sweet red lips were opened a little by the smile of a dream.

Bill stood still and gazed at her. He felt all of a sudden big and dirty and burly and clumsy and entirely out of place, and turning slowly to glance about the room, he saw that it was well suited to its occupant.

There was a small dressing table, a chest of drawers, a writing desk, and two or three chairs, all in dainty pink with delicately figured covers. On one corner of the desk stood a silver telephone instrument. The wall was pure white, with pink flowers and animals scattered in profusion along the border. A low wide bookcase, with full shelves, stood at one end. A pair of little white shoes were in the middle of the floor; on a chair near by were the stockings and other garments.

Bill looked at them, and at the beautiful sleeping child, and at the child's beautiful room, and he felt something rise in his chest. Slowly his hand went to his head, and off came his cap.

"My little girl would have a place like this," he muttered half aloud.

The fact that Bill had no little girl or big one either, that he was indeed quite unmarried, is no reason to suspect the sincerity of his emotion. Some fathers might argue that it is in fact a reason to believe in it; but we are interested only in what actually happened. Undoubtedly what Bill meant was this, that if he had had a little girl of his own he would have wanted for her such a room as this one.

He moved close to the bed and stood there looking down at its occupant. What he was thinking was that he had never before realized that a creature could be so utterly helpless without thereby incurring the contempt of a strong man. There was something strangely stirring in the thought. Perhaps after all physical force was not the only power worth having. Here was this little child lying there utterly helpless before him--utterly helpless, and yet in fact far more secure from injury at his hands than a powerful man would have been.

No, force was not made to be used against helpless beings like her. What would he do if she should awake and cry out? He would talk to her and quiet her. According to the best burglar tradition, it would even be allowable to take her on his knee, and if a tear or so appeared in his eye it would be nothing to be ashamed of.

But what if she would not be quieted? What if in her fright she should persist in spreading the alarm? Force, then? No. In that case he would simply beat it. He would drop a kiss on her soft brown hair and make his escape. He did? in fact, bend over the pillow and deposit an extremely clumsy kiss on a lock of her hair, probably in order to have that much done and over with.

He turned away, for he felt one of the tears already halfway to his eye. A shiny something on the dressing table caught his attention and he

moved across to inspect it. It was a tiny gold wristwatch with enameled rim. He picked it up and looked at the name of the maker, and his eyes widened with respect.

Expensive trinket, that. Absurd to trust a child with it. No doubt she was very proud of the thing. He put it down again, spared even the impulse to put it in his pocket. He knew it would be useless to debate the matter with himself. What burglar would take anything from a sweet helpless child like--

"Hands up!"

The words came from behind him. They were uttered in a thin treble voice, as crisp and oommanding as the snap of a whip. Bill wheeled like lightning and stood petrified.

The sweet helpless child was sitting up straight in bed, and in her extended hand was a mean-looking little revolver, with the muzzle directed unerringly one inch above the apex of Bill's heart.

"Lord above us!" ejaculated our hero, as his jaw dropped open in astonishment.

There was a short silence. The burglar's attitude of stupefaction became less pronounced, and his jaw came up again to take part in an amused grin as he relaxed, but the steady brown eyes facing him were unwavering in their direct and businesslike gaze.

"I would advise you to put your hands up before I count ten," said the sweet, helpless child calmly. "One, two, three--"

"Really, now," Bill put in hastily, "I wouldn't advise you to shoot, little girl. You might scare someone. I won't hurt you."

"I don't shoot to scare people. I see you don't take me seriously. It may interest you to know that yesterday at the gallery at Miss Vanderhoof's Academy I got nine straight centers from the hip. I am much better with the eye. I am Major Wentworth of Squadron A of the Girls' Military Auxiliary, and I am the crack shot of our regiment. Four, five, six--"

Bill was speechless. He calculated the distance to the bed. Easily ten feet. That revolver barrel was certainly aimed level. Nine straight centers from the hip, and much better with the eye. Coldish business. He hesitated. The brown eyes held his steadily.

"Seven, eight, nine--"

His keen eye saw the muscles of the little wrist begin to tighten. Up went his hands above his head.

"That's better," said the sweet, helpless child approvingly. "I would have pulled the trigger in another half second. I had decided to get you in the right shoulder. Now turn your back, please, but keep your hands up."

Bill did so. Almost immediately came the command to turn about again. She had clambered out of bed and stood there on the rug with her pink nightgown trailing about her feet and her soft brown hair tumbling over her shoulders. She looked more tiny than ever. But the muzzle of the revolver wavered not a fraction of an inch as she stepped sidewise to the wall and pressed her finger against a button there. Nothing was said while she repeated the operation three times. More silence.

"Look here, little girl," Bill began earnestly, "There's no use gettin' your arm all tired with that toy gun. I ain't going to hurt you."

"You may call me Major Wentworth," was all the reply he got.

"All right, major. But come, what's the use--"

"Stop! If you move again like that I'll shoot. I wonder what's the matter with Hilda. She sleeps very lightly." This last to herself.

Bill looked interested.

"Is Hilda a big sort of a woman in a blue nightgown?"

"Yes. Have you seen her?" The brown eyes filled with sudden alarm. "Oh! Where is she? Is she hurt?"

"Nope." Bill chuckled. "Kitchen floor. Chloroform. I was eatin' strawberry shortcake when she come in."

The major frowned.

"I suppose I must call my father. I hate to disturb him--"

"He's incapable, too," announced Bill with another chuckle. "Tied up with sheets and things. You see, major, we're all alone. Tell you what I'll do. There's a suitcase full of silver down on the library window sill. I'll agree to leave it there--"

"You certainly will," the major nodded. "And you'll leave the other things too. I see them in your pockets. Since my father is tied up I suppose I must call the police myself."

She began to move sidewise toward the silver telephone on the desk, keeping the revolver pointed at Bill's breast.

I transcribe Bill's thought: the little devil was actually going to call the police! Action must come now if at all, and quickly. He dismissed the idea of a dash for freedom; she would certainly pull the trigger, and she had a firm eye and hand. Bill summoned all his wit.

"My little girl's mama is dead, too," he blurted out suddenly.

The major, with her hand outstretched for the telephone, stopped to look at him.

"My mother isn't dead," she observed sharply. "She's gone to the country."

"You don't say so!" Bill's voice was positively explosive with enthusiastic interest. "Why didn't you go along, major, if I may ask?"

"I am too busy with the Auxiliary. We are pushing the campaign for preparedness." She added politely: "You say your wife is dead?"

Bill nodded mournfully.

"Been dead three years. Got sick and wasted away and died. Broke my little girl's heart, and mine, too."

A suggestion of sympathy appeared in the major's eyes as she inquired:

"What is your little girl's name?"

"Her name?" Bill floundered in his stupidity. "Oh, her name. Why, of course her name's Hilda--"

"Indeed!" The major looked interested. "The same as cook. How funny! How old is she?"

"Sixteen," said Bill rather desperately.

"Oh, she's a big girl, then! I suppose she goes to school?"

Bill nodded.

"Which one?"

It was a mean question. In Bill's mind school was simply school. He tried to think of a word that would sound like the name of one, but nothing came.

"Day school," he said at last, and then added hastily, "that is, she moves around, you know. Going up all the time. She's a smart girl." His tone was triumphant.

Then, fearing that another question might finish him, he continued slowly:

"You might as well go on and call the cops--the police, I suppose. Of course, Hilda's at home hungry, but that don't matter to you. She'll starve to death. I didn't tell you she's sick. She's sick all the time--something wrong with her. I was just walkin' past here and thought I might find something for her to eat, and I was lookin' around--"

"You ate the strawberry shortcake yourself," put in the major keenly.

"The doctor won't let Hilda have cake," Bill retorted. "And I was hungry myself. I suppose it's no crime to be hungry--"

"You took the silver and other things."

"I know." Bill's head drooped dejectedly. "I'm a bad man, I guess. I wanted to buy nice things for Hilda. She hasn't had a doll for over ten years. She never has much to eat. If I'm arrested I suppose she'll starve to death."

The sympathy in the major's eyes deepened. "I don't want to cause unnecessary suffering," she declared. "I feel strongly for the lower classes. And Miss Vanderhoof says that our penal system is disgraceful. I suppose little would be gained by sending you to prison."

"It's an awful place," Bill declared feelingly.

"You have been there?"

"Off and on."

"You see! It has done you no good. No, I might as well let you go. Turn your back."

Bill stared.

The major stamped her little bare foot.

"Turn your back, I say! That's right. I do wish you wouldn't make me repeat things. Walk forward near the dressing table. No, at the side. So. Now empty your pockets and turn them inside out. All of them. Put the things on the dressing table. Keep your back turned, or--as you would say in your vulgar parlance--I'll blow your block off."

Bill obeyed. He could feel the muzzle of the revolver pointed directly at the back of his head, and he obeyed. He lost no time about it either, for the anesthetized Hilda would be coming to soon.

Methodically and thoroughly the pockets were emptied and their contents deposited on the dressing table: a gentleman's watch, two silver cigarette cases, three scarf pins, five rings, a jeweled photograph frame, and ninety-four dollars in cash. The articles that were obviously Bill's own she instructed him to return to the pockets. He did so.

"There!" said the major briskly when he had finished. "You may turn now. That's all, I think. Kindly close the front door as you go out. I'll attend to the suitcase on the window sill after you're gone. I wouldn't advise you to try any tricks on me. I've never got a man on the run, but I'd love to have a crack at one. That's all."

Bill hesitated. His eye was on the neat roll of bills reposing beside him on the dressing table. It traveled from that to the gold wristwatch he would not take because it belonged to the sweet, helpless child. Would he take it now if he had a chance? Would he!

The major's voice came:

"Go, please. I'm sleepy, and you've given me a lot of trouble. I shall have to revive Hilda, if it is possible. I have doubts on the subject. She refuses to keep herself in condition. She eats too much, she will not

take a cold bath, she won't train properly, she is sixty-eight pounds overweight, and she sleeps with her mouth open. But she's a good cook--"

"She is that," Bill put in feelingly, with his memory on the shortcake.

"--and I trust she has not expired. There is my father, too. To put it mildly, he is a weakling. His lack of wind is deplorable. He sits down immediately after eating. It is only three miles to his law office, and he rides. He plays golf and calls it exercise. If you have gagged him scientifically he may have ceased breathing by now.

"In one way it would be nothing to grieve over, but he is my father after all, and the filial instinct impels me to his assistance against my better judgment. You do not seem to be in good condition yourself. I doubt if you know how to breathe properly, and it is evident that you do not train systematically. There are books on the subject in the public library; I would advise you to get one. You may give my name as reference. Now go."

Bill went. The door of the room was open. He started toward the back stairs, but the major halted him abruptly and made him right about; she had switched on the lights in the hall. Down the wide front staircase he tramped, and from behind came the major's voice:

"Keep your mouth closed. Head up! Arms at your side. Breathe through your nose. Chest out forward! Hep, hep, hep--the door swings in. Leave it open. Lift your foot and come down on the heel. Turn the corner sharply. Head up!"

She stood in the doorway as he marched across the porch, down the steps, and along the gravel path to the sidewalk. A turn to the right, and thirty paces took him to the street corner. Still the major's voice sounded from the doorway:

"Hep, hep, hep--lift your feet higher--breathe through your nose--hep, hep, hep--"

And as he reached the street corner the command came sharply:

"Halt! About face! Salute!"

A glance over his shoulder showed him her nightgown framed in the doorway. There were trees in between. Bill halted, but he did not about face and he did not salute. It was too much. Instead, after a second's hesitation, he bounded all at once into the street and across it, and was off like a shot. And as he ran he replied to her command to salute by calling back over his shoulder, as man to man:

"Go to hell!"

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