

THE FEMININE FIRM OF HALL AND CARROLL

Victor Speer

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A COMPARATIVELY short time after Knapp was sent away thieving began again in Erie. It was not on quite the same wholesale basis, but what was lacking in quantity was present in quality, for the thieves made it a point to steal the finest silver ware and jewellery. Instead of sneak-thieving it was burglary. The marks of jemmies on doors and windows were sufficient to demonstrate this.

"Crowley thought at first that Knapp might have returned and changed his tactics," said Murray. "We drove out to Knapp's and made sure he was not there, although after his escape from the penitentiary no one could tell what had become of him. I was satisfied from the outset that Knapp had no hand in the thieving. Knapp prided himself on his cleverness as a sneak thief. Burglary would be a clumsy way of stealing, according to Knapp's ideas.

"After the second or third job it was apparent that no lone burglar was at work. There was a gang, for some of the jobs necessarily called for a watcher or lookout on the outside while a pal was inside a house. Silver ware, fine clothing, and jewellery began to disappear with a regularity that reminded us often of the day when Knapp was in his prime. Mr. Skinner's house was ransacked and a great quantity of silverware taken, and soon after the Skinner robbery the home of Mr. Bliss was plundered and a big haul of silver ware and jewellery was made.

"Crowley was worried. So were the rest of us. We put in about twenty hours a day, and I verily believe we scrutinised every man in and around Erie. We made every stranger account for himself. We gathered in all our regulars in the suspicious character line. We redoubled our patrol precautions at night. It was of no avail. The burglaries went on just the same. One night a house in one end of the town would be robbed and the next night the burglars would do a job in the other end of the town. The only clue or trace of them that I could get was a peculiarity in the jemmy marks, showing a piece had been chipped or cut out of the jemmy. But to tell the truth we were at our wits' end and could make no headway. There were so many burglaries, yet we could not get on to them.

"Our last hang out at night was the Reed House. We would step in there regularly before going to bed. As we stood talking in the Reed House in the early morning hours or shortly after midnight, I noticed by the merest chance a woman slip quietly down the back stairs and out into the night. For three or four nights I observed her doing this. The clerk told me she was a scrubwoman, who worked late and lived outside the hotel. There was nothing suspicious about that. I asked the clerk where she lived. He said he did not know. It was a pleasant night and I felt like taking a walk, and just for amusement I decided to follow the old scrubwoman. She slipped down the back stairs as usual and went out. I trailed after her. We had not gone five blocks when I lost her. She seemed to have been swallowed up by some hole in the earth that vanished after devouring her. I laughed at the joke on me, unable to trail an old woman, and I went to bed.

"The next morning Crowley was glum. 'Another burglary last night,' he said, and named a house about four blocks from where I lost the old woman. I said nothing, but that night I was at the Reed House, waiting for my old scrubwoman. About one o'clock in the morning she appeared, a flitting figure on the back stairs, and darted out. I was after her in a jiffy. For about fifteen blocks I followed her. Then she suddenly turned a corner and when I came up she was gone. The next morning Crowley was mad as a hornet. 'Another burglary last night,' said he. I was a little hot myself. But that night I turned up at the Reed House, and at one o'clock out came my vanishing

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scrubwoman again and away she went, with me on her trail.

"I have shadowed many people in my life, but that old scrubwoman was one of the most artful dodgers I ever knew. I followed her from one o'clock until after four o'clock in the morning, up streets and down streets, through alleys, across lots, around buildings, and then across lots again. But I stuck to her and there was no corner she turned that I was not close up to spot her if she dodged. Soon after we started a cat suddenly mewed and startled her mightily. Along about dawn she headed away to the outskirts of the town and stopping in front of a double house tossed a pebble up against a window and a moment later went in. I sat down some distance away and thought it all over. I was puzzled. Women burglars were something unknown in Erie or anywhere else, just then. Yet to think that an old woman after scrubbing for hours in an hotel would go out for a stroll and prowl around all night for her health was out of the question. I waited until broad daylight and when she did not come out I went to headquarters.

"Another one last night, Murray,' said Crowley.

"Then it could not have been my old scrubwoman, for I had her in sight every minute. However, I determined to pay her a visit. I took Jake Sandusky of the police force, who now is the Pennsylvania Railway detective, with headquarters at Erie, and went out to the house. On one side of the double house lived Mrs. O'Brien, a respectable woman. She knew nothing of the occupants of the other side of the house, beyond the fact that they were women and had lived there less than a year.

"I knocked at the door. There was no answer. I banged again, loud and long. I heard a scurry of feet inside and finally the door opened. A big, fine-looking girl, about twenty-three years old, stood in the doorway. I walked right in.

"What is your name?' I asked her.

"Mary Ann Hall,' said she.

"Do you live alone?' said I.

"I live with my mother,' said Mary Ann.

"Call your mother,' I said.

"Mary Ann opened wide her mouth and let out a bawl like a donkey's bray.

"Ma-a-a-aw!' she bellowed.

"Out from the adjoining room pranced my old scrubwoman as sprightly and spry as any being of sixty years I ever saw.

"What's your name?' I asked.

"Mrs. Julia Hall," said my old scrubwoman, and if ever there is a gallery for the portraits of sixty-year old coquettes I will contribute the picture of Julia Hall.

"Who else lives here?' I asked.

"The answer was the opening of Mary Ann's mouth in another prolonged bellow.

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"Ma-a-ag-gie!" she shouted.

"Out from the adjoining room trotted a second old woman, a little bit of a body about fifty years old, with a face like an eagle's. She had a loose ringlet that flipped around her cheek, and she constantly blew at it out of the side of her mouth to fleck it back to her ear.

"Ladies," said I, 'sit down.'

"To my astonishment all three promptly sat on the floor I observed that the chief articles of furniture in the room were a cook stove, a rough kitchen table, and one dilapidated rocking chair.

"Mrs. Julia Hall," I say, and I can see her coy leer as she sat on the floor, 'you were out all night, last night.'

"I always am," she said.

"Yes, Julia cannot sleep in the dark," spoke up the eagle-faced woman, who hastened to add apologetically, 'I am Mrs. Maggie Carroll, her friend.'

"I never sleep in the night," said Mrs. Hall. 'I work or walk all night, and when daylight comes I sleep.'

"It's an affliction," said Mrs. Carroll. 'She had the fever when she was a child.'

"I talked on with these three strange creatures squatted on the floor. They puzzled me. I mentioned the burglaries to them. They knew nothing of them, they said. Mrs. Carroll was particularly vehement in protestations of ignorance. I crossed over and sat down in the dilapidated rocker beside the range. There was a kettle on the stove, but no fire. Suddenly the chair collapsed with a crash. Over I went with my heels in the air. One of my feet struck the kettle and it fell to the floor and the lid rolled off. The three women had laughed uproariously when the chair broke down; Mary Ann haw-hawing, Mrs. Hall tittering, and Mrs. Carroll cackling. But when the kettle fell and its top rolled off there was sudden silence. I looked at the three women and then at the chair and then I saw the kettle. Its top was towards me and inside I observed what I thought was a stove lifter. I reached for it and drew it out. It was a jemmy! Moreover, it was a nicked jemmy!

"I stood up and eyed the three women. Mrs. Carroll feigned weeping, but Mrs. Hall tittered and made saucer eyes, as if bent on conquest, even on the penitentiary's verge.

"Mary Ann," I said, 'you might save me the trouble of searching the house by hauling out the plunder.'

"At this Mrs. Hall struck Mary Ann a resounding whack on the head and bade her: 'Squat where you be, you hussy!'

"I searched the house. I found silverware, jewelry, linen, fine clothes in amazing quantities. The Skinner silverware, the Bliss silverware, the plunder from many houses, all was recovered. I found also a complete set of pass-keys and a house-breaking kit of burglar's tools.

"We arrested the three women. All three were tried. Two, Mrs. Julia Hall and Mrs. Maggie Carroll, were sent to Alleghany for four years, and Mary Ann was let off. While in gaol Mary Ann gave birth to a bouncing baby. I asked Mrs. Hall about her tramp through the night when I was following her. She laughed in a flirtatious way that was ludicrous. From Mrs. Carroll I learned that she and Mrs. Carroll were to have done another job that night, and Mrs. Hall was to meet Mrs. Carroll at two o'clock in the morning. But Mrs. Carroll had spied me trailing Mrs. Hall, and had mewed suddenly like a cat, a signal to Mrs. Hall that she was being followed. That was the cat's cry that had startled Mrs. Hall, and caused her to prowl around all night and not go home till morning.

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"They were the only pair of professional women burglars working alone that I ever met red-handed. They had been caught first in Ireland and were sent to Australia, when they got into trouble again and jumped to the United States. Mrs. Julia Hall was the genius of the two. I often thought that she was foolish to use a nicked jemmy. Her cracked smile would have broken into almost anything."