

THE HOPPER

by Meredith Nicholson

This short story first appeared in Collier's on December 30, 1916. A striking illustration, picturing an unplanned kidnapping by a former thief and safe-cracker trying to reform himself known as The Hopper, graced the cover of that issue of the magazine. This same picture has now become the cover of Ralph D. Gray's compilation of some of Nicholson's best writings over the course of his long career as one of Indiana's best loved and most prolific authors, but the story itself was not included in the book, A Meredith Nicholson Reader (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, 2007), published by Author House and the Marion County Historical Society. Partly, this was because "The Hopper" story was soon afterwards expanded into a novel, A Reversible Santa Claus, published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1917, but also because two other short stories and a third item originally published in Collier's appear in the "Reader."

In order to satisfy the curiosity of readers as to the fate of the urchin pictured in the arms of the accidental kidnapper, the full story as first published in 1916 is given below (regrettably without the other illustrations by Frederic Dorr Steele used in 1916).

MR. WILLIAM B. AIKINS, alias "Softy" Hubbard, alias Billy the Grasshopper, alias The Hopper, paused for breath and peered out of a fence corner at a roadster whose tail light advertised its presence in a suburban highway.

The Hopper was blowing from a sprint of two miles over rough country, and the proximity of the motor pleased him. He was not so young as in the days when his agility and genius for effecting a quick get-away earned him his familiar soubriquet. The last time his Bertillon measurements were checked (it was in Omaha, during the fall carnival three years ago) official note had been taken of the fact that his hair, long carried in the records as black, was rapidly whitening.

At forty-eight a crook—even so resourceful and versatile a member of the fraternity as The Hopper—begins to distrust himself. His last experience of involuntary servitude had been under the auspices of the State of Oregon, for a trifling indiscretion in the way of safe blowing, and, having done his time, The Hopper skillfully effaced himself by a year's siesta on a pineapple plantation in Hawaii. After a series of characteristic hops, skips, and jumps across the continent, he lifted forty thousand dollars, single-handed, from an express safe in Maine and hid himself for six months in New York. Then, animated by a worthy desire to lead an honest life, he purchased a chicken farm twelve miles as the crow flies from the steeple of Center Church, New Haven, and opened a bank account in his newly adopted name of Charles S. Stevens. He married a lady somewhat his junior, a shoplifter of the second class, whose most recent exploits had been so unfortunate that she gratefully availed herself of The Hopper's tender of his heart and hand.

They had added to their establishment a retired yegg who had lost an eye by the premature popping of the “soup” poured into a post-office safe in Missouri. In offering shelter to Mr. James Whiteside, alias “Humpy” Thompson, The Hopper’s motives had not been wholly unselfish, as Humpy had been intrusted with the herding of poultry in several penitentiaries, and was familiar with the most advanced scientific thought on chicken culture.

The dusk was rapidly deepening. The owner of the roadster was presumably eating his evening meal in peace in the cottage, and The Hopper was aware of no sound reason why he should not seize the vehicle and further widen the distance between himself and a suspicious-looking gentleman he had noted on the New Haven local.

The Hopper’s conscience was not wholly at ease, as he had that afternoon possessed himself of a bill book belonging to a citizen whose strap he had shared in a crowded subway train. When he entered upon his career as a chicken farmer, The Hopper had forsworn crime as a means of livelihood, and he was chagrined that in a moment of weakness he had stooped to purse lifting, a branch of felony that he had always despised as inferior in dignity to safe blowing. It was possible that the short, stocky man he had observed on the New Haven local was not a “bull,” but the uncertainty annoyed The Hopper. Moreover, in all his enterprises he had cared for his personal comfort, and he was humiliated to find that he had been frightened into leaving the train at Banskford to escape from a man who had only looked at him a little queerly.

The Hopper waited for a big limousine to pass, then walked boldly toward the roadster, jumped in, and in a moment was in motion. He was making rapid progress toward home when a sound startled him—an amazing little chirrup close at hand; a gurgling, chortling sound of glee not to be confused with any possible vagary of the engine. “Goo-goo! Goo-goo-goo!”

The car was skimming a dark stretch of road, and The Hopper detected nothing in the seat beside him but a grayish bundle. His hand touched something warm and soft, and his fingers were seized and held by Something. The nature of the Something troubled The Hopper. He steered with his left hand, suffering the right to remain in the clasp of what seemed now to be two very small mittened hands. “Goo-goo-goo! Good car, keep wunning!”

“My God, a kid!”

The Hopper experienced strange sinking feeling in his stomach. In moments of apprehension a crook’s thoughts run naturally to periods of penal servitude, and the punishment for kidnaping The Hopper recalled as severe. Finding himself on the edge of a village, he stopped the car under an arc lamp and inspected his fellow passenger. A pair of very large eyes stared at him out of a hood.

“Gettup! Make um car skedaddle!”

The Hopper made the car skedaddle. Like most of his profession, The Hopper was superstitious, and gloom settled upon him. He had been hoodooed from the moment he

appropriated the strap-hanger's bill book! Only a hoodoo of the most malevolent type could have caused his hurried exit from the train to shake an imaginary "bull." And only the prompting of the blackest of evil spirits could be responsible for this involuntary kidnaping.

"Make um wun! Make um go jippity skip!"

ONE of the mittened hands reached for the wheel and an unlooked-for jippety skip precipitated the young passenger into The Hopper's lap.

The jolliest baby laughter attended this mishap.

"You set still, little feller," The Hopper admonished. He wished to be severe, to vent his spite for the day's calamities upon the only human being within range. He had stolen a baby, and it was incumbent upon him to free himself at once of the appalling burden; and yet a baby was not so easily disposed of. He could not, without hazarding his liberty, run back to the cottage. If the captive had been of the squalling breed, The Hopper would have abandoned him; but the continued goo-gooing and chirruping tickled his humor, and he highly resolved to do the square thing by the youngster even at personal inconvenience and risk.

The high speed the car had now attained was evidently gratifying to the young person, who evinced his delight by recklessly tumbling about in the seat. "Steady, little 'un; steady!" The Hopper kept mumbling.

By this time some one was undoubtedly looking for both car and baby; the police in all the towns within a hundred miles would be on the lookout. The Hopper decided to run the machine home and ponder the disposition of it and his blithe companion with the care the unusual circumstances demanded.

"Urry up, Mr. Car; me's goin' 'ome to gwan'pa's!"

The youngster was evidently blessed with a hopeful and confiding nature, and the fact that a stranger was making off with him at reckless speed wasn't bothering him a particle.

"Keep alarfin', Shaver, keep alarfin'! Ole Hopper ain't goin' to hurt ye!"

Thus The Hopper, feeling his way cautiously around the fringes of New Haven. In due course he reached home, ran the car in among the sheds behind the bungalow, and put out the lights.

"Now, Shaver, out ye come!"

And Shaver obediently jumped into his arms.

THE HOPPER knocked in a peculiar way on the back door, which opened instantly. A man and woman surveyed him in silence as he kicked the door shut and deposited the blinking child on the kitchen table. Humpy, the one-eyed, jumped for the windows and jammed the green shades close into the frames. The woman waited, scowling, for The Hopper to explain himself. "Well?" she questioned.

The small person had seized a bottle of catchup and was trying to lift it to his mouth. This amused The Hopper, but Mrs. Stevens, alias Weeping Mary, snatched the bottle away.

“Come out with ut quick, Hop!” said Humpy nervously. “Nothin’ was said about kidnagin’, Hop, and I don’t stand for ut!”

“When I heard the machine in the yard I thought somethin’ was wrong, and I guess it couldn’t be no worse,” said Mary, beginning to cry. “You hadn’t no right to do it, Bill. A buzz-buzz and a kid, and when we wuz playin’ the white card! You ought to ‘a’ told me, Bill!”

Her hands shook as she loosened the hood and unfastened the soft blue coat. Her fingers ran over the child’s raiment as she appraised the material with sophistication.

“It ain’t fair, Hop!” protested Humpy, whose lone eye expressed the most poignant sorrow at The Hopper’s derelictions. He was tall and lean, with a long, thin, many-lined face. He had a habit of turning his head restlessly that gave an impression of constant watchfulness.

“Cute little Shaver, ain’t ‘e? Give Shaver somethin’ to eat, Mary. I guess milk’ll be right. Not more’n three, I reckon?”

“Two,” Mary corrected.

“A nice little feller’ you’re a cute ‘un, ain’t ye, Shaver?”

The Shaver nodded his head solemnly.

“Me want me’s pawwidge,” he announced.

“Porridge,” interpreted Humpy with the air of one whose superior breeding made him the proper arbiter of the speech of children of high social station. Shaver poked a finger in Humpy’s surviving optic in token of his appreciation of the tall gentleman’s perspicacity.

THE HOPPER gave Shaver his watch and proceeded to relate succinctly his day’s adventure.

Mary, a plump woman of thirty with a mass of yellow hair, doggedly preparing the porridge, listened carefully.

“A dip!” she cried in alarm when The Hopper had finished his recital.

“You had no right to, Hop!” bleated Humpy, who had tipped his chair back against the wall and was sucking a cold pipe. And then, curiosity getting the better of his shocked conscience, he added: “What she measure, Hop?”

The Hopper grinned ruefully.

“Flubbed! Nothin’ but trash!”

Mary and Humpy expressed their indignation and contempt in unequivocal terms, which they repeated with added emphasis after he had told of the man whose presence on the train had alarmed him. Humpy paced the floor, declaring that the machine and the kid must be got rid of at once.

“Set down, Hump; ye make me nervous. I got thinkin’ to do.”

“And you’d better be damned quick about ut!” Humpy snorted.

“Cut the cussin!” Since his retirement to private life The Hopper had been trying to free himself of profanity and underworld slang as unbecoming in a chicken farmer and likely to arouse suspicions. “Can’t ye see Shaver ain’t use’ to ut? He’s a little juke, a reg’lar way-up-er, Shaver is!”

“It’s kidnagin’, ‘s wot it is,” whimpered Humpy.

“That’s wot it ain’t!” declared The Hopper imperturbably. “I’m goin’ to take Shaver back to ‘is ma—ain’t I, Shaver?”

Shaver kicked The Hopper in the stomach and emitted a chortle expressive of supreme confidence in The Hopper’s ability to restore him to his lawful owners. This confidence was not, however, manifested toward Mrs. Hopper, who had prepared the porridge and now approached Shaver, dish in hand. Shaver, taken by surprise, inspected his supper with disdain and pushed it away with a vigor that sent the spoon rattling across the floor.

“Me want me’s powwidge bowl! Me want me’s *own* powwidge bowl!” he yelled.

MARY expostulated; Humpy offered advice as to the best manner of dealing with the refractory Shaver, who threw The Hopper’s watch with violence against the wall. That the table service of The Hopper establishment was not to his liking was manifested in repeated rejections of the plain white bowl in which Mary offered the porridge. He demanded his own porridge bowl and seemed willing to starve to death rather than accept so palpable a substitute. He threw himself backward on the table and lay there, kicking. He wanted his mamma; he wanted his papa; he wanted to go to his gwan’pa’s. The desires of his heart were many and varied, and as they seemed unlikely of immediate realization Shaver bawled dolorously.

The Hopper paced the floor with him while Mary and Humpy expressed themselves in bitter terms of the child’s unreasonableness, lack of discipline, and, incidentally, of the stupidity, not to say criminal carelessness, of The Hopper in having projected so lawless a youngster into their peaceful domestic circle. “Ut’s twenty years, that’s wot ut is,” bleated Humpy. Mary thought it might be the chair for all of them. Meanwhile, to their surprise and not a little to their discomfiture, The Hopper won Shaver to a tractable mood.

“You kin have your porridge bowl for breakfast—nice little Shaver!”

Restored to the table, Shaver opened his mouth obedient to The Hopper’s patient pleading and swallowed a spoonful of mush, Humpy holding the bowl out of sight to lessen the shock to the youngster’s esthetic sensibilities. A tumbler of milk was sipped with grateful gasps.

By nine o’clock Shaver was asleep on Humpy’s bed, that gentleman having gallantly offered it for the purpose. Mary detached a locket from the child’s neck and carried it to the kitchen for examination.

“You gotta shake ‘im quick, Bill. It wuz the white card you and me wuz goin’ to play. We wuz fixed nice here,” she went on plaintively, “and to have to begin dodgin’ ag’in, Bill—“

The Hopper listened, nodding his acquiescence, but when Humpy joined in Mary's expostulations he curtly bade the reformed yegg to shut his mouth.

They bent over him as he scrutinized the locket.

ROGER LIVINGSTON TALBOT

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was engraved on the back of the trinket. The Hopper made a calculation and announced two and a half years as Shaver's age.

"They'd be kale in it, Hop, a heap o' kale," said Humpy mournfully. "His folks is rich, I reckon. If we wuzn't playin' the white card—"

Ignoring this evidence of Humpy's moral instability, The Hopper rose and put on his hat. "I'm goin' back to have a look at the place where I got 'im."

"Don't be a fool!" Mary protested.

The Hopper opened the door of a clock over his hear, drew out a revolver, which he examined carefully and thrust into his pocket. Then he possessed himself also of a jimmy and an electric lamp. Mary buried her face in her apron and wept. Humpy planted himself against the kitchen door. The Hopper pushed him aside roughly and stood for a moment with his hand on the knob.

"They's things as is," he remarked, "and things as isn't. I reckon I'll have a look at the place and see how we kin shake the kid. You can't just run up to the house in the machine with a porch full of his folks and constables and sech like. You gotta study the case a little. And I guess I gotta clean up to-night. We can't let daylight in on that machine and Shaver. You don't know nothin', mind ye, if anybody drops along. You just leave this to Hop; that's the ticket."

And having delivered himself of these statements he went out and softly closed the door.

BY the use of various trolley lines, The Hopper placed himself within easy range of the cottage from whose gate he had removed the roadster and studied it with the eye of an experienced strategist. The frantic parents flanked by constables that he visualized on the veranda were not immediately discernible, nor did his closer approach reveal them. The cottage lay as serene behind its shield of trees and shrubbery as though its young heir had not vanished to parts unknown. The Hopper was a deliberating being. He pondered these curious circumstances as he investigated the rear of the premises. The lattice door to the summer kitchen opened readily, and he made his way through unlocked doors to a dining room whose appointments spoke for good taste and a degree of prosperity in the householder.

In a small hamper on the table he found a silver cup, a plate, and a porridge bowl. The Hopper grinned as he viewed these articles in the light of his cautious lamp flashes. Shaver either belonged to the house or had lately been a visitor there, and manifestly Shaver had been deposited in the roadster while his lawful guardians returned to the cottage for the

hamper. Cup, plate, and bowl bore the name engraved on the locket, Roger Livingston Talbot, and so far The Hopper was satisfied with his investigations.

He went upstairs and passed rapidly through a bedchamber which had evidently been deserted in haste. The adjoining room could be none other than Shaver's. A white enameled child's bed with other furniture to match and a generous assortment of toys pointed unmistakably to Shaver as the occupant. A frieze of dancing children and water-color sketches of Shaver's head dabbed here and there on the walls in the most informal fashion hinted at an artistic household. This impression was strengthened when The Hopper, continuing his exploration below, found a studio opening off the living room.

On the floor where it had slipped from the easel was a sheet of paper on which was written:

DEAR SWEETHEART: *This is a fine trick you have played on me, you dear girl! I've been expecting you back all day. At six o'clock I decided you were going to spend the night with your infuriated parent, and thought I'd try my luck with mine! I put Billie in the roadster and had gone over to the Flemings to tell them we were off for the night. They kept me a few minutes to show me those new Japanese prints Jim's so crazy about, and while I was gone you came along and skipped with Billie and the car! I suppose this prolonged absence means that you've been making headway and want to try Billie's blandishments on your father. You might have stopped to tell me about it, though! Of course no one would have stolen the roadster with Billie inside. So I'm not worrying, but hope all the signs are favorable. I'll take the trolley down to father's and see what an evening session will do. I'll be back early in the morning. Don't worry about me. ROGER.*

The Hopper tore the note into pieces, which he thrust into his pocket. Having taken the precaution to leave all doors slightly ajar, and open a living room window, he prolonged his study of the cottage, and the longer he remained the more puzzled he became.

As he flashed his lamp over the living-room table his eye caught sight of a letter propped up against a lamp. It was inscribed to Roger Livingston Talbot, but one doesn't write letters to a two-year old child. That the note was designed for Shaver's father struck The Hopper as a highly reasonable assumption. He dropped on the floor in a dark corner and, by the light of his pocket lamp, read the following communication, written in the bold hand of one who has dipped ink in haste:

SEVEN O'CLOCK

DEAR ROGER: *I've just got back from father's, where I spent the day talking over our troubles. I didn't tell you I was going, knowing you wouldn't want me to, but it seemed best, dear, so I hope you've forgiven me. And now I find that you've gone off with Billie, and I know, of course, that you have gone to your father's to see what you can do! I am going in to New Haven to Minnie Baker's about that maid she thought we might get, and*

if possible bring the girl home with me. Don't trouble about me, as the trolley is perfectly safe, and, as you know, I rather enjoy prowling around at night. You will certainly get back before I do, but if I'm not here don't be alarmed.

We are so happy in each other, dear, and if only we could get our foolish fathers to cheer up and stop hating each other, how beautiful everything would be! Minnie always has a lot to say, and it may take me a little while to find that maid, you know, but I shall certainly be back by ten.

Love always.

MURIEL.

The Hopper's experience of the epistolary art had been the slightest, but even to a mind unsophisticated in this form of literature it was evident that Shaver's parents were involved in some sort of difficulty that was attributable, not to any lessening of affection, but to a row between their respective fathers.

Anxious and depressed, he thrust Muriel's note into his pocket, and was moving toward the door when some one crossed the veranda with a light, eager step. As he darted toward the window the living-room lights flashed up and a woman's voice called out sharply:

"Stop! Stop right where you are or I'll shoot!"

The authoritative voice of the speaker, The Hopper quickness with which she had appraised the situation and leveled her pistol, brought The Hopper to an abrupt halt in the middle of the room, where he fell across the keyboard of a grand piano with a discordant crash. He turned cowering to find a tall young woman advancing toward him slowly but determinedly.

The Hopper blinked at the leveled gun and glanced beyond it into a pair of fearless dark eyes. In all his experience he had never before been cornered by a woman, and he stood gaping at his captor in astonishment. There was nothing in her manner to indicate that she shared his embarrassment; she seemed to be pondering deeply what disposition she should make of him. For an instant, in the intentness of her thought, the revolver wavered, and The Hopper, without taking his eyes from her, effected a catlike spring that brought him to the window.

"Once more," cried the young woman, at once alert and on her guard, "if you try to escape, I'll shoot! Get into that corner—to the right—quick!"

She had leaped across the room, and the last words were enforced upon The Hopper's attention by a vigorous punch of the gun in his ribs.

He threw up his hands and withdrew to the corner.

"Turn round, please!"

"Yes'm," muttered The Hopper obediently.

SHE sat down without lowering either her eyes or the gun and bent forward.

"I ain't done nothin'; hones' to God, I ain't!" The Hopper protested.

“I was watching you through the window when you came downstairs and read that note,” said his captor calmly. “Don you mind telling me just why you did that?”

“Well, miss, I jes’ thought it kind o’ funny there wuzn’t nobody around, and the letter was stuck on the lamp. They wuzn’t no stamp on the letter. It didn’t seem they wuz no harm in lookin’.”

This was received with a noncommittal “um!” Then, as though she were soliciting from an artist or man of letters a frank opinion of his professional standing, she asked with a meditative air that puzzled him as much as her inquiry:

“Just how good a burglar are you? Can you do a job neatly and safely?”

THE HOPPER, being a modest person, shrugged his shoulders and twisted uncomfortably.

“I reckon as how you’ve pinched me I ain’t much good,” he replied, and was rewarded with a smile, followed by a light little laugh. He was rather pleased that she manifested no fear of him and surprised that she didn’t pick up the telephone instrument on the table and summon help.

“If you’re a good burglar—a man who can really go into a house and steal things without making a mess of it—and if you can play fair, then I think maybe—maybe—we can come to terms!”

“Yes’m,” The Hopper faltered. In his astonishment his hands wavered, but instantly she was on the alert, and the bright little automatic flashed on a level with his eyes.

“Excuse me, miss; I didn’t mean to do nothin’,” he apologized. “It jes’ seemed kind o’ funny what you said.”

He grinned sheepishly and wondered whether, if he confessed to the appropriation of Shaver and volunteered to return the child she would let him go. But he was glad when she resumed the conversation that he had kept silent as to Shaver.

“Are you armed?” she asked, rising and walking toward him.

“I gotta gun in my coat, right side,” he confessed doggedly. “That’s all I got.”

She cautiously extracted the gun with her left hand and backed away from him. “If you’d lied to me, I should have killed you; do you understand?” she said, thrusting his gun into her sweater pocket.

She announced this as though homicide was a common incident of her life. She caught a gleam of humor in the eyes she was watching vigilantly, and abated her severity. “You may sit down—there.” She pointed to a much bepillowed davenport, and The Hopper sank upon it, still holding his hands up.

“You may put your hands down now, Mr.—?”

“Stevens,” The Hopper supplied readily. His status was now to all appearances that of a gentleman paying a social call upon a lady who, in the pleasantest manner imaginable and yet with undeniable resoluteness, kept a revolver pointed in the general direction of his person.

“We were speaking of that letter you read a while ago. I suppose you didn’t understand it? You couldn’t, really. Well, my husband and I married against our fathers’ wishes; both our fathers were opposed to the marriage.” The Hopper frowned darkly to express his distress at this unfortunate situation. “My father is just as silly and stupid as my father-in-law; they are collectors, you know, and terribly jealous of each other—collectors of ceramics, pottery, and that sort of thing.”

“Yes’ m,” The Hopper assented.

“For years, whenever there have been important sales of such things, Mr. Talbot—that’s my father-in-law—and Mr. Wilton—that’s my father—have been bidders; and they’ve both been all over China looking for rare pieces. The trouble has been that they like the same sort of thing, and when one has got something the other wanted, it has caused the harshest ill-feeling. This has been going on for years, and recently they have grown more bitter. Of course, when we—Roger and I—ran off and got married, that didn’t help matters any, but just within a few days something has happened to make matters worse than ever.”

The Hopper’s face betrayed his deepest interest and sympathy, and, aware of this, his captor suddenly lowered the revolver and then, after a glance to satisfy herself that he appreciated her confidence, placed it on the table.

“Thank ye, miss,” he mumbled.

“Last week,” she continued, “my father-in-law bought one of those pottery things—a plum-blossom vase made in China hundreds of years ago—and very, very valuable. It belonged to a Philadelphia collector who died not long ago, and Mr. Talbot bought it from the executor of the estate, who happened to be a friend of his. Father was furious, for he thought the collection was going to be put up at public sale and that he’d have a chance at it. Just a little while before that father picked up a jar—a perfectly stunning piece of the red Lang-Yao—that collectors all over the world have coveted for years. It may seem queer to you that men can be so crazy about such things, but I suppose, Mr. Stevens, that sometimes you have wanted things very, very much and—er—“

She paused, plainly confused by her tactlessness in suggesting to a member of The Hopper’s profession the extremities to which one may be led by covetousness.

“Yes, miss,” he remarked hastily, rubbing the back of hand across his nose, and grinning indulgently as he realized her embarrassment.

“Well, this morning, without telling my husband where I was going, I took the trolley and ran away to papa’s, hoping to persuade him to end this silly feud. I didn’t have very good luck with him, and he sent me home in his machine, and when I got here shortly after dark I found that my husband and baby were gone. So I went in to New Haven to see a friend. But you know that, for you read the note I left for my husband. I suppose Roger and the baby will spend the night at Mr. Talbot’s, and having Billie ought to be of help in bringing him around to a sensible view of things. You ought to see Billie, Mr. Stevens—he’s the cunningest, cutest baby in the world!”

The Hopper sat pigeon-toed. He had been called a clever man in his day, but his ingenuity was taxed to its utmost by the demands of the present situation. He resolved to continue his policy of silence as to the young heir's whereabouts. Muriel was hurrying on with her story.

"I don't want to telephone to Mr. Talbot's for fear of spoiling Roger's conference with his father. I hope you think—I hope you feel that I am doing right?"

These people were guileless children! He was half pleased, half ashamed, to be the recipient of her voluble confidences. "I reckon your kid's all right, miss," he remarked consolingly.

"Oh, I'm not worrying about that!" she exclaimed. "Roger will take beautiful care of him. But it occurs to me that maybe your turning up here this way may be—providential!"

She uttered the last word triumphantly and with a smile that seemed at once to illuminate the universe. The Hopper had been called many names in his varied career, but he had never been invested with the attributes of Providence.

"I reckon I ain't as bad as some be, miss; I mean to be on the square,"

"I've heard there's honor among thieves," she said, "and it's possible"—she lowered her voice to a whisper—"it's possible I might become one—almost."

The Hopper was surprised. His eyes opened wide, and he crossed his legs nervously and then uncrossed them.

"If—*if*—" she said slowly, bending forward with a grave, earnest look in her eyes and clasping her hands upon her knees—"if we could get hold of father's Lang-Yao jar and that plum-blossom vase Mr. Talbot has—if we could do that—"

The Hopper swallowed hard as this suggestion that he commit two felonies sank into his consciousness.

"Father's place is on the Sound," she continued with apparently no idea whatever of the enormity of the thing she proposed, "and Mr. Talbot's is right next to it. Father keeps his most precious things in a safe in the pantry, and I can give you the combination. That ought to make it very easy!"

With a pontifical nod The Hopper assented to this sanguine view of the matter.

"And Mr. Talbot keeps his more valuable pieces in a cabinet built into the bookshelves in his library. It's on the left side as you stand in the door, and you look for the works of Thomas Carlyle—about a dozen volumes, only not books at all, you know—it's only the backs of books painted on steel—and if you press a spring in the right-hand side the whole thing swings out. I suppose you've seen that sort of hiding place?"

"Well, not jes' exactly, miss. But having a tip helps; and if there's no soup to pour—"

"Soup?" inquired Muriel, wrinkling her pretty brows.

"Where you don't have to blow out the front of the box it's a lot handier," The Hopper elucidated.

She took up a sheet of paper and scribbled while he again eyed the window and again put from him the thought of escape.

“There! That’s the combination of father’s safe.” She turned her wrist to look at her watch. “It’s nearly twelve o’clock, and you can catch a trolley in ten minutes that will take you right past father’s house. The butler’s an old man who forgets to lock the windows half the time. And there’s one in the conservatory with a broken catch—papa’s very careless about such things.”

THE HOPPER listened with growing interest, asking questions, fixing in his mind a very accurate picture of the home of Shaver’s maternal grandfather. Muriel then described the Talbot house.

“There’s a French window—a long glass door, you know—on the veranda. I think you might get in *there*.” She indicated the point of attack with her pencil. “Of course I shouldn’t want to ask you to do anything that might—might cause you trouble. I should hate that awfully!”

“There’s always the chance, miss,” The Hopper admitted with feeling. Muriel had hypnotized him as completely as Shaver had. He stood beside her, passively watching her amplify her sketch, and noting her slim, nimble fingers.

“Father’s always a sound sleeper! A burglar went all through the house once and carried off his clothes and he never knew it. But Mr. Talbot has insomnia terribly—you’ll have to be careful there.”

“They got any o’ them fancy burglar alarms?” asked The Hopper, examining her sketches carefully.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you about that! You’ll have no trouble at Mr. Talbot’s, but at father’s there’s a switch in the living room corner right where you’ll see a bust—a white marble thing, you know—and you can turn off the alarm there. But be careful about stumbling over that polar-bear skin in the living room. People are always sticking their feet in its jaws,

“I guess I can manage it, miss.”

The terms Muriel used in describing the loot he was to filch from the two houses were much stranger to him than Chinese, but it was fairly clear that at the Talbot house he was to steal a blue and white thing and at the Wilton place a red one, and the form and size of these articles she illustrated graphically and gracefully with her hands.

“Oh, if you can do it—if you can help me!” she cried, clasping her hands. “If we can only get possession of the two pieces, then we can bring those two silly old men to terms!”

“I reckon it might work, miss. I’ll do my best to land ‘em.”

“And you’ll let me know just as quickly as possible—“

“I’ll drop by in the mornin’, miss.”

He departed with her cheerful “good luck!” ringing in his ears.

MURIEL’S statement as to the vulnerability of the conservatory window at the Wilton house proved true in every particular, and without difficulty.

He drew down the curtain, took a candle from a silver candelabrum, and fell to work upon the safe. He was surprised to find himself more nervous with the figures in his hand than on memorable occasions in the old days when he had attempted safes by force. Two attempts failed, but the third time the knob caught, and in a moment the door swung open, disclosing shelves filled with vases, bottles, bowls, and plates. An array of silver struck The Hopper as a much more tangible asset than the pottery; he lifted the lid of a jewel box, and diamonds flashed dazzlingly. These things were his for the taking.

But The Hopper steeled his heart against temptation, drew his candle along the shelf, and scrutinized the pottery carefully. There could be no mistaking the sang de bœuf jar, whose brilliant glaze brightened in the candle glow. He lifted it tenderly, checked off the various points of Muriel's description, and locked the safe.

The creaking of the stair steps caught his ear as he again crossed the dining room. Some one was descending slowly and cautiously. The Hopper noiselessly gained the conservatory door and lost no time in seeking the outer air, but he lingered, crouching on the steps and peering through the door. The quick flashes of an electric lamp preceded the entrance of an elderly man, with white hair and short, pointed beard, fully dressed and with a golf cap pulled low on his head. Muriel's father, beyond a doubt; The Hopper recognized him from a photograph he had noted on the table in the living room of Muriel's cottage.

Wilton's actions were not those of a gentleman who has been alarmed by the presence of a thief in his house. He held his lamp against an implement that bore a remarkable resemblance to a chisel, which he thrust into the upper left-hand pocket of his coat. As he walked toward the conservatory door, The Hopper removed himself in haste to a hedge fifty yards distant and hid behind the shrubbery to await developments.

Wilton's figure was a blur in the starlight as he stepped out into the walk and started furtively across the grounds. With the precious jar gripped under his arm, The Hopper crept after him to a tall hedge beyond which the gables of a big house were faintly limned. This, according to the diagram supplied by Muriel, was the Talbot home. The Hopper distrusted things he didn't understand, and he was at a loss to account for Wilton's actions. He lost sight of him for several minutes, then heard the almost imperceptible click of a latch.

He crept forward to the hedge that divided the two estates and found a small gate through which he passed. Wilton had disappeared, but The Hopper crawled over the lawn toward the house and established himself behind a tree whose branches brushed the eaves. Several minutes passed; then a sound reached him—a sound which, to his professional ear, indicated nothing less than the forcing of a window catch. It was done rather neatly, The Hopper reflected. He grew nervous as he heard a window slowly move in its frame.

Satisfying himself by guarded investigation that Wilton was already inside, The Hopper crept upon the veranda that extended along the front of the house and peered through the window. The fitful flashing of a lamp in the far corner of the room marked Wilton's presence by the bookshelves. The connoisseur was opening the secret panel that hid the coveted vase, and The Hopper's wits worked rapidly as he attempted to adjust himself to this

unforeseen situation. This had not been in Muriel's program, and The Hopper was weighing his further duty in the matter when events began to multiply with startling rapidity. The lights in the library were thrown on suddenly, revealing the thief standing by the open panel. A short, stout man in pajamas—an elderly man with a gleaming bald pate—with a yell flung himself upon the intruder with a violence that bore them both to the floor.

As they toppled, The Hopper sprang from the veranda, tore off his coat, wrapped the Lang-Yao in it, and dropped it in the grass. In an instant he had returned to the open window and become a close spectator of a spirited rough-and-tumble fight. The shorter gentleman, who was the more conspicuous by reason of his baldness and the blue stripes of his pajamas, appeared to be revolving about the person of his neighbor. First one and then the other would be on top. The legs of each pawed the air in moments of freedom. Wilton, though taller, lacked the Talbot's liveliness of attack. Finally, Talbot, finding himself going under, emitted a yell that terminated The Hopper's enjoyment of the struggle.

Upstairs some one shouted to know what was the matter. Enough was the matter to satisfy The Hopper that a prolonged stay in the neighborhood might be highly detrimental to his future liberty. He crawled through the window and seized a blue-and-white vase that had been drawn to close to the edge of a shelf filled with pottery. Regaining the window, he turned for a last look at the struggling men who, apparently, had not noticed his dash into the library. A young man in his night clothes rushed into the room as The Hopper jumped out; a pistol cracked, and he landed on the veranda amid a shower of glass from a shattered pane.

A woman of unmistakable Celtic origin yelled murder from a third-story window. The thought of murder was disagreeable to The Hopper. He effected a neat running pick-up of the Lang-Yao, and, with a specimen of the most beautiful glazes known to ceramic art under each arm, sprinted for the highway.

IT was difficult to communicate to hostile listeners Muriel's charm; the perfectly natural way in which, having caught him in her own house, she enlisted his services in the settlement of the Wilton-Talbot feud. Mary couldn't understand it; in her view of the matter he was merely a fool—a fool in the first place for running off with the child, and a greater one for returning to the house only to enmesh himself more deeply in difficulties. Humpy most annoyingly counted upon his fingers as he reckoned the "time" that was in store for all of them.

"Cut ut, Hump!" The Hopper finally snarled. "I guess the girl got me to do ut, and ef I do time she's in fer ut too. And I saw her pap breakin' into a house, and I guess I'm a State's witness for that. I reckon they ain't goin' t' put nothin' on Hop! I reckon they ain't goin' to say much about kidnapin'. It were a slip, liftin' th' poke, but it's kind o' funny about that that—purty damn funny!"

He took out the bill book he had purloined in the subway and eyed the name on the flap carefully. Humpy tried to grab it, but The Hopper, frustrating the attempt, read his

colleague a sharp lesson in good manners. At this point a cry from the front of the house brought them to their feet. Shaver was awake and demanding attention.

THE HOPPER set off at seven o'clock in the roadster with Shaver (who was quite cheerful in the prospect of seeing mamma and papa and all his gwan'pas immediately) and fifty thousand dollars' worth of ceramics. By this time the confiding young Talbots probably knew that their offspring had disappeared. As it was wholly likely that the New Haven police had been notified, The Hopper chose his route with care to avoid disagreeable encounters. He presently landed the car at the rear of the young Talbots' five acres, caught a glimpse of two big automobiles in front of the house, and decided to reconnoiter the kitchen.

The moment he reached the door he heard male voices in the living room. "I tell you it's John Wilton that stole the child! A man who will enter a neighbor's house in the dead of night and attempt to rob him—rob him, yes, and murder him in the most brutal fashion—would not scruple to steal his own grandchild!"

"You talk about my stealing when you robbed me of my Ling-Tao! Bribed my servants to sneak it out of my safe! I want you to understand once and for all, Wilbur Talbot, if that jar isn't returned within one hour—one hour, sir—I shall turn you over to the police!"

"Liar!" bellowed Talbot, who, though small of stature, had a voice of great resonance. "You can't mitigate your crime by charging me with another! I never saw your jar; I never wanted it; I wouldn't have the thing on my place!"

Shaver lifted a startled face to The Hopper. "Don't you be afraid, Shaver; you trot right in there to your ma."

He led the child to the living-room door and pushed him into the room where Talbot senior paced the floor with angry strides declaiming upon his wrongs, while his son kept step with him. Wilton—a patch over his left eye—was trying to disengage himself from his daughter's arms with the obvious intention of doing violence to his neighbor.

"I'm sure papa never meant to hurt you; it's all a terrible mistake!" Muriel moaned.

"He had an accomplice," Talbot bellowed, "and while there in my own house the plum-blossom vase was carried off, and if Roger hadn't pushed him out of the window after his accomplice, I'd—I'd—"

A piercing scream from Muriel checked him. "Look! Look! It's Billie come back!" She sprang to the door and clasped the delighted Billie to her bosom.

The Hopper suffered Shaver to hold the center of the stage until he had concealed his basket behind the kitchen door. Muriel, having satisfied herself that Billie, alias Shaver, was intact—that his person even bore the marks of maternal care—transferred him to his father. As she turned her tear-stained face to the door she beheld The Hopper awkwardly twisting the derby which, with a white shirt, he had donned as proper for a morning call of ceremony.

"You!" she cried, stifling a sob.

“Yes’ m,” responded The Hopper, rubbing his hand across his nose.

Wilton and Talbot senior, surprised into silence, stared at The Hopper in bewilderment, while young Talbot asserted his rights as a father.

“Where did you find this child? He was kidnaped, snatched away from the door—“

“I reckon as how he was,” The Hopper admitted. “I live over Shell Road way—Stevens in the name—Charles S. Stevens—butter ‘n’ eggs—an’ I found this little shaver in the road over there settin’ up all by himself in a machine. I took him to my house an’ done my best to find where ‘e belonged, but the cops never heard o’ no lost kid. Then this mornin’, when I called ‘em up ag’in, I found out about you folks, an’ me an’ Shaver come on right over here.”

Muriel, half laughing, half crying, continued to stare wonderingly at the imperturbable Hopper, who seated himself in an easy chair and elaborated his account of the finding of the child with a convincing air of virtuous contentment.

“Nice mans; let Billie play wif ‘ims watch,” Shaver testified, clutching The Hopper’s legs affectionately.

At this Talbot, remembering his grievances, broke out afresh:

“My God!” he cried bitterly, “every infernal thing that can happen to a man happened to me yesterday. It wasn’t enough that you robbed me and tried to kill me, but when I was in town I was robbed in the subway by a pickpocket! A thief took my bill book containing valuable data I had just received from my agent in China giving me a clue to porcelains, sir, such as you have never dreamed of! Some of your work, too, I dare say! Don’t you contradict me! You don’t contradict me? Roger, what do you say to that?”

Wilton was choking with indignation at this new accusation and therefore unable to contradict him. The Hopper coughed timidly and rose.

“Beg pardon, gents,” he began, edging forward and thrusting out his hat to attract the enraged orator’s attention. “Beg pardon, but mebbe this is the book ye’re talkin’ about. Kind o’ funny; I picked that up in the train yestidy. I wuz goin’ to turn ut in to the agent, but I clean fergot ut. Them things didn’t look very valible.”

Talbot snatched the bill book and dug out the contents. His brow slowly relaxed and he grumbled something about a reward, but at that moment Billie appeared in the door dragging The Hopper’s basket and babbling volubly to attract their attention. “Pitty dishes; look, mamma, pitty dishes!”

The Hopper sprang across the room, seized the basket, and turned toward them, tipping it so they might see the contents. “Excuse me, gents,” he began, stepping back as the two connoisseurs cried aloud and started toward him. “I reckon I’m goin’ to have somethin’ to say about this here crockery. I stole ‘em—I stole ‘em for the lady there—she thinkin’ ef you didn’t have ‘em no more ye’d quit rowin’ about ‘em. Ye can call the bulls and turn me in ef ye likes; but I’m not goin’ to have ye fussin’ and causin’ the lady trouble. I ain’t goin’ to stand fer ut!”

“Robber!” shouted Talbot. “You entered my house; it was you—“

“Stand back, gents, stand back and stop callin’ names!” commanded The Hopper with a flourish of the basket. “I guess if I’m yanked fer this I’m not the only one that’ll do time for housebreakin’.”

This statement, uttered with great calmness, had a sobering effect upon Wilton, but Talbot pranced around The Hopper, shaking his stick.

“If you gents come any nearer I’ll smash the basket!” The Hopper declared. “I reckon this chopstick junk’s caused enough trouble; ef ye come an inch nearer, I’ll bust ‘em!”

They cowered before him. Muriel wept softly. The Hopper was deeply moved by her suffering.

“You gents ain’t got no right to be rowin’, and yer ain’t goin’ to have these things to row about no more. I’m going to give ‘em away. They’re goin’—they’re going to belong to Shaver! They’re goin’ to be little Shaver’s peaceable er I’ll smash ‘em right here!”

He held the basket aloft threateningly. The tense silence was broken by a laugh—an amazingly cheerful laugh—from Wilton, who turned toward his neighbor and put out his hand.

“Talbot, let’s stop being fools,” he said soberly. “This man suggests that we turn both these pieces over to Billie—and, by George, I’m willing!”

“Please, father!” urged Roger as his father shook his head impatiently.

“Well,” Talbot assented grudgingly as a rueful smile crossed his face. “I guess it’s all in the family anyway.”

THE HOPPER was effecting a hasty exit when Muriel and Roger ran after him. “We’re going to take you home!” cried Muriel. “We want to see the place where Billie spent the night. And now that the trouble’s all over we want to do something for you—both our fathers will want to do that when they get through gloating over their treasures.”

“Well, I gotta set up some new incubators this mornin’, and I’d thank you for a lift home,” said The Hopper.

“Oh, you must come see us often! We’re going to be friends always. Billie’s ready to cry because you’re going.”

“Thank ye, miss,” said The Hopper, grinning and poking Shaver in the ribs with his hat. “But ye mustn’t get me into no more housebreakin’” (with a wink); “it’s mighty dangerous, miss, fer amachures, like me and yer pa!”

