

# The Empty House

By Maurice Level

When he had picked the lock, the man went in, shut the door carefully and stood listening intently.

Although he knew the house was empty, the complete silence and inky darkness made an extraordinary impression on him. Never before had he experienced at one and the same time such a longing for and fear of solitude. He stretched out his hand, felt about the wall and fastened the bolt of the door. A little reassured, he took from his pocket a small electric lamp and looked round. The white patches of light that broke the darkness moved up and down with the beating of his heart. To give himself courage he murmured:

“It’s like being in my own house.”

Forcing a smile, he stepped cautiously into the dining-room.

Everything was in the most scrupulous order. Four chairs were pushed in round the table; the reflections of the legs of another were mirrored in the shining parquet floor. Vague odors of tobacco and fruit floated in the air. He opened the drawers of a sideboard where table-silver stood in orderly piles: “That’s better than nothing,” He thought as he put it in his pocket. But at every movement the spoons and forks jingled, and though he knew that the house was empty and lie could not disturb any one, the noise agitated him and he turned away on tiptoe, leaving untouched a case of silver and enamel fruit knives and forks.

“That is not what I have come to get,” was what he said to himself to excuse his hesitation.

But the same want of resolution kept him standing by the table fingering the silver that weighed heavily in his pocket as he looked at the door of the little salon where the closely-drawn, heavy curtains made the darkness still more dense. He made a supreme effort to dominate this unusual cowardice; and finally he walked calmly into the room with the easy step of a man who is returning to his own home after an evening with friends. He had suddenly lost the sensation of fear, and seeing a candelabra on an old chest he struck a match, lit the candles, and carried the light round to examine the pictures on the walls, the gold photograph frames, the ornaments, the piano, the mantelpiece from beneath which there came the smell of cinders and soot. He glanced at some papers that he raised with a finger, weighed a silver statuette in his hand and put it down again, then with a last look round the room, placed the candelabra on the table, blew out the candles and opened the door of the bedroom.

There was no longer any shadow of hesitation. Under pretext of looking over the house, which was to let, he had some days before been able to find out where every piece of furniture stood, and its nature. At one glance his practised eye had noted the bureau where the old man was sure to keep his valuable documents, the chest where his money ought to be, the bed in the alcove, and the big wardrobe with glass doors and many drawers, the contents of which he would probably find it well worth while to examine. He put out his lamp, stretched out his arm, and without knocking against even a chair, walked towards the bureau. He felt the top, drew his hand along the front, placed one finger of the left hand on the lock and felt in his pocket for his keys.

He had lost a little of his calm. It was not that he had any return of the curious fear of the darkness and silence of the house he had broken into; he now felt the feverish haste of the gambler who fingers his card before turning it up. What would he find? . . . Title-deeds? . . . Bank notes? . . . And how much? What fortune lay waiting for him here behind this plank of wood? . . .

But he could not get at his keys. He had forgotten to take them out of his pocket before putting in the silver, and they had become entangled in it. As he fumbled, the spoons got into the rings of the keys, the prongs of the forks bent and pierced the lining of his coat, scratching his flesh. His impatience increased his clumsiness; he stamped his foot, swore, clenched his teeth and pulled so violently that the stuff gave way, and the keys and silver flew out and scattered over the floor with a sound like that of old iron . . . He was losing his nerve again . . . he had so nearly attained his object, and time was flying! . . . He did not know the exact hour, and it seemed as if he had been there a very long time. For the first time he became aware of the tic-tac of a clock, and the minutes seemed to be galloping along

He knelt down, took a key and tried it, his ear close to the lock; no use. He took another, then a third, still another, trying them with careful movements . . . No good. No use at all! . . . His anger blazed up again, and he laughed harshly:

“Enough of that . . . Why should I spare the furniture?”

And seizing his jimmy, with one skillful movement he had the lock off. Then he opened the drawer and turned on his lamp.

A sigh of joy burst from him as his eyes fell on a collection of notes pinned together in packets. Slowly, methodically, he took them up, counted them, held them up to the light, then smoothed them with the back of his hand. He drew up a chair, sat down and continued to search at ease. Under a bag of gold there was a thick packet of share-certificates made out in the name of the holder, shares that amounted to twenty thousand francs—a fortune! . . .

“What a pity to leave them,” he thought. “But they’re no use to me . . .”

He replaced them. Sure now of his booty, he took his time; weighing the gold coins in his hand, comparing the surfaces and inscriptions on the forty- and fifty-franc pieces before putting them in his breast pocket. There was no longer any haste or agitation; success had ousted every feeling but those of relief and exultation. A heavy cart passed along the street, rattling the windows, shaking the furniture, making the silver on the floor vibrate. The familiar sound brought him back to a sense of where he was, and he took out his watch. Four o’clock—it was growing late! Gathering up the money without counting it, he looked quickly through the other drawers. There was nothing of any value to him. Some loose money had strayed among the papers and letters, and this he put in his vest pocket, murmuring:

“For out-of-pocket expenses.”

A beautiful bronze paper-weight lay on the table. He had been wise enough to leave the share-certificates and some jewelry, but this—might he not take this as a charming little souvenir? . . . He was stretching out his hand when a noise startled him; the clock was striking, four sharp little strokes. He stood still, his hand out, his fingers open . . . the silence, broken for a moment by the decisive sounds, seemed suddenly to become oppressive, solemn. There was not a vibration within the four walls, not even the imperceptible murmur of hangings when the folds stir, not a crack from the dry boards that seem to sleep by day and wake into a sort of attempt at life during the night . . . Nothing but the beating of his own pulses, the sound of the quickened tide of the blood that throbbed in his temples . . . Fear gripped him again, a stupid, unusual fear—surely there was something abnormal about the nature of this silence? Why did he feel that he dare not disturb it by even a gesture?

He had ceased pressing the button of his lamp and stood there in the darkness, his shoulders bent, his neck stretched forwards, his nostrils dilated, his ears straining as he bent towards the mantelshelf where the little clock had ticked so quickly . . . The ticking had ceased! Well, the clock had stopped, that was all. Was there anything terrifying about that? . . . Nevertheless, a shiver ran down his back; some immediate and terrible danger seemed to be threatening him, and he seized his knife, turned on the lamp and wheeled quickly round.

In the alcove, half hidden in the shadow, he saw the face of an old man. The mouth was half open, and two terrible eyes were looking fixedly at him. There was no expression of fear; the eyes looked unflinchingly into his own, the hand that was stretched out over the sheet did not tremble, the leg that hung down below the covering was steady. Some one was going to take him by the throat; in a moment he would feel on his face the breath of this pale and silent adversary.

Without daring to move his head, he turned his eyes to look for the door. The bank-notes had fallen to the floor, forgotten; he had but one idea—to flee! But from the menace in the eyes he saw that he would never manage to reach the door, that the old man was opening his mouth to cry for help, and that once the cry had sounded, it would be too late to escape; and without a second's hesitation, like a beast defending itself, he rushed to the bed, raised the knife and with a gasp of rage thrust it twice in the body up to the hilt. There was no moan, not a sound; a pillow fell softly to the ground and the head slipped sideways on the bolster, the lips half open, the chin on the chest.

Still trembling with fear and passion, he drew back and looked at his victim. The light of the lamp was too small to allow him to distinguish either the rent made by the knife in the disordered shirt or any trace of blood. Apparently the stroke had gone straight to the heart, for the expression of the face had not changed. The first thrust, well-aimed and lightning-swift, had stopped life as if it had been a shot from a revolver. Proud of his skill, he muttered menacingly:

“So you were at home watching me? Well, you have seen, haven't you?”

But as he bent over the quiet face and noted that the expression was the same, it flashed into his mind that the knife might only have pierced the coverings, that perhaps the old man was still alive, still watching him with the same supreme irony.

He raised the knife again and drove it in, drew it out and brought it down with savage frenzy, and intoxicated by the dull sound it made as it entered the chest, he continued to strike, exciting himself by oaths and exclamations that he forgot to stifle. The shirt was now in rags, the flesh one large wound. But untouched by the knife, the face still kept its impassive calm, its terrifying stare. He lost his head, and flinging his lamp away, seized the old man by the throat to give a last certain stroke.

But his right hand remained up in the air and the cry of rage did not pass his lips, for under the other hand he felt, not the damp and throbbing flesh from which life was escaping in a flow of blood, but flesh that had no last quiver of life in it, which was cold with the awful iciness that is like nothing else in the world—dead flesh, dead for long hours! . . . His arm fell.

He had never been afraid of crime. His knife had often been red: his face had been wet with the warm stream that leaped from severed arteries: he knew the smell of blood, the death-rattle that comes when life is flowing from the body . . . Death caused by his own hands was nothing . . . But this! . . . And instinctive respect for the Dead suddenly rose from some obscure depth in his murderer's soul, and a superstitious fear of the Great Mystery froze him . . . He had believed the house was empty, and, he had shut himself in with a corpse! . . . A corpse . . . this, then, accounted for the unearthly silence and the pall-like mystery of the darkness! .

Somewhere in the far distance a clock struck five, and without daring to turn his head towards the abandoned spoils, with his hat in his hand and vague memories of prayers rising in his terrified mind, he stumbled over the furniture and fled from the house . . .