

CREEPING UP THE STAIRS.

In the softly falling twilight
Of a winter's evening day,
With a quiet step I entered
Where the children were at play;
I was brooding o'er some trouble
Which had met me unawares,
When a little voice came ringing,
"He is creepin' up the stairs."

Ah! it touched the tend'rest heart-strings
With a breath and note divine,
And such softness wakened,
As a wond'r can define.
As I turned to see our darling,
All forgetful of my cares,
When I saw the little creature
Slowly creeping up the stairs.

Step by step she bravely clambered
On her little hands and knees,
Keeping up a constant patter,
Like a magpie on trees;
Till at last she reached the topmost,
Wh'le o'er all her world's affairs,
She delighted stood a victor
After creeping up the stairs.

Faint heart, behold an image
Of man's brief and struggling life,
Whose best prizes must be captured
With a noble, earnest strife;
Onward, upward, marching over,
Bending to the weight of cares,
Hoping, fearing, still expecting,
We go creeping up the stairs.

On their steps may be no carpet,
By their sides may be no rail;
Hands and knees may often pain us,
And the heart may almost fail,
Still above there is the light,
While no sinfulness impairs,
With its rest and joy forever,
After creeping up the stairs.

IN A FLASH.

When I first remember my Aunt Barbara, she was over forty years of age; but she could never have been accounted a handsome woman. She was a very tall and a very angular, with a long, thin face, the most remarkable feature of which was a Roman nose of commanding proportions. But as she had one of the kindest hearts in the world, her paucity of good looks seemed a matter of trifling moment to those who had the privilege of knowing her well. It was at my request that, some two or three years before her death, she wrote out the following narrative of an actual occurrence in her early life. I put away the manuscript at the time, and did not come across it again till the other day. On looking it over once more, it seemed to me not unworthy of being transcribed for a wider circle of readers than that comprised by the writer's immediate friends and acquaintances.

You ask me to go back in memory (beginning my aunt) to what seems to me now like a period of remote antiquity, when I, Barbara Waldron, was twenty-four years of age, and my sister Bessie five years younger, and endeavor to put down in writing the little story I told you by word of mouth a few days ago.

You must know, then, that in those far-off days my sister and I were keeping house for our brother John, who at that time filled the position of steward and land-agent to Lord Dorrington.

The house we lived in was a pleasant but somewhat lonely residence, about half a mile from the little country town of Leavensfield. The house suited us for several reasons. In the first place, the rent was low; in the next, a large walled garden was attached to it, in which Bessie and I spent many happy hours; and in the third place, there was a side entrance to Dorrington Park, by which my brother could take a short cut to the hall whenever he had business with his lordship, or his lordship had business with him. Our household was a small one, and besides ourselves comprised only Mary Gibbs, a middle aged woman; and niece, a girl of sixteen. John's horse and gig were looked after by a young man by the name of Reuben Gates, who did not, however, sleep on the premises. An important part of John's duties was to receive and pay into the Leavensfield bank the rents due from farmers and other tenants of property held under Lord Dorrington. One such tenant was a certain Mr. Shillito, a corn and seed merchant, who was noted for his eccentricities. It was only in keeping with Mr. Shillito's aggravating way of doing business that he should never pay his rent at the time other people paid theirs; that he should always pay it in gold and notes, instead of giving a check for the amount, as he was quite in a position to have done, and that he should make a point of bringing it himself, instead of naming the time when my brother might have called upon him; and finally, that he seldom arrived with the money till after bank-ing hours.

We come now to a certain autumn evening. Kitty had just brought in the tea-tray. It was growing dusk, almost too dark, to see clearly without the lamp, but Bessie and I liked to economize the daylight as much as possible, especially now that the long winter nights were so close upon us. John had come in for a cup of tea. This evening he was going to drive over to Nethercroft, some ten miles away, dine there with some friends, and stay all night. After dinner there was to be a dance; and I was not without my suspicions as to the nature of the attraction which was taking him so far from home, although he laughingly pooh-poohed the soft impeachment when I challenged him with it. John was in the act of putting down his cup and saucer when he heard a noise of wheels outside, which presently came to a stand opposite the house. He crossed the room and peered through the window.

"It's old Shillito, come to pay his rent," he remarked a moment later. "Two hours after banking-time, as usual. What a nuisance he is!" He went down stairs, and about ten minutes later we heard Mr. Shillito's trap start off. Ninety pounds all in gold and notes," he said. "I've had to lock it up in my desk till morning."

I may here remark that iron safes for the custody of money and other valuables were by no means so common in those days, especially in out-of-the-way country places, as they appear to have since become.

"But the money will be quite safe in your desk, won't it, John?" asked Bessie.

"Safe enough without a doubt, seeing that no one but ourselves knows of its presence there. Only, as a matter of

business, should prefer to have it in the coffers or the bank." Presently he added: "The old fellow was half seas over, as he generally is; and I have no doubt, with so many houses of call by the way, that he will be soaked through and through before he reaches home. I wonder whether he goes to bed sober a night in his life?"

A few minutes later John kissed us and bade us good-night. Bessie and I went to the window to see him start but by this time it was nearly dark. He waved his whip at us as soon as he had settled himself in his seat, then he gave the reins a little shake. Black Beryl's heels struck fire from the stones as she sprang forward, the gravel scrunched beneath the wheels, and a moment later the shadows of evening had swallowed up horse and gig and driver. My sister and I pulled down the blinds and drew the curtains round for Kitty to bring in the lamp.

The evening passed after our usual quiet fashion. We worked a little and read a little and played some half-dozen duets, and chatted between times, till the clock pointed to half-past 10, at which hour we generally retired for the night. My last duty every evening was to go the round of the house and satisfy myself that all lights were out, that the fires were safe, and that all the doors and windows were properly secured. When this duty had been duly accomplished to-night, the drawing room lamp was extinguished, and then Bessie and I took our bed-candles and marched up stairs, leaving darkness and solitude behind us. Mary Gibbs and Kitty had retired long ago.

My sister's room and mine adjoined each other, with a door of communication between, which generally stood partly open at night for the sake of companionship. The windows of both rooms looked into the garden, which ran in a wide strip along that side of the house, and was shut in by a wall some seven or eight feet high, beyond which there were three or four meadows, and then the boundary wall of Dorrington Park.

It was close on to 1 o'clock—as I found out afterward—when I awoke suddenly from a sound sleep. The instant I opened my eyes the room was illuminated by a vivid flash of lightning, and it was in all probability a peal of thunder that had broken my slumbers. Another flash followed after a brief interval, succeeded again by the deafening accompaniment. My sleep was effectually broken. I arose, flung a shawl over my shoulders, and crossing to the windows drew back the blind and peered out. As long ago as I can remember, lightning has always had a singular fascination for me. As a child I loved to gaze upon its vivid splendors, and in this respect at least years have left me unchanged. A board creased as I crossed the floor.

"Is that you, Barbara?" asked my sister from the other room.

"Yes, dear. I am going to look out for a few minutes. Is not the lightning beautiful?"

"Very beautiful; only I wish it were anywhere rather than here," answered Bessie who at such times was just as nervous as I was the reverse.

The flashes followed at intervals of about a minute. I had witnessed three or four, when suddenly I gave a start, and an exclamation broke involuntarily from my lips. The last flash had revealed to me the figures of two men in the act of climbing over the garden wall. One of the men was a stranger to me; but the other, instantaneous as was the revelation, I recognized the somewhat peculiar face and figure of a man named Dethel, whom my brother had employed temporarily during the last week or two in the garden, our regular man being laid up with rheumatism at the time. There was something in the looks of the man in question which had set me against him from the first; but if we were all to be judged by our looks alone, what would become of us? For ought I knew to the contrary, Dethel might be an honest, hard working fellow, with a wife and children dependent upon him; but for all that, on the days he was working for us, I carefully refrained from going into the garden.

And now, here was this man, and another with him, effecting a surreptitious entry of the premises at 1 o'clock in the morning! Such a proceeding could have but one end in view. Two questions at once put themselves to me. Firstly, were these men aware that my brother was from home for the night, and that only three helpless women and a girl were left in the house? Secondly, had they by some means become cognizant of the fact that a few hours previously Mr. Shillito had paid my brother a considerable sum of money, which must necessarily still be somewhere on the premises? In my mind there was little doubt that both these facts were fully known to the men. My brother's movements were as open as the day, and Dethel had doubtless ascertained from Reuben, the groom, that his master would be from home on this particular night; while as for Mr. Shillito, everybody knew how he talked in his loud-voiced way about his most private affairs when he had taken more to drink than was good for him. At the bar of more than one tavern that evening, every one who might chance to be in hearing would not fail to be informed that Mr. Shillito had just paid John Waldron his half year's rent.

These thoughts flashed through my mind almost as quickly as that flash which revealed so much. Breathlessly I waited for the next flash. It came, shattering the darkness for an instant, and then it, too, was swallowed up. The men were no longer visible. Between the two flashes they had time to drop on the inner side of the wall, where the thick clumps of evergreens which clothed that part of the grounds would effectively screen them from view. At that very moment they were doubtless making their way stealthily toward the house. What was to be done? Never had I realized so fully as that moment how helpless a creature a woman is. Drawing my shawl more closely around me and putting on a pair of list slippers which I wore about the house in cold weather, I crept noiselessly out of the room. At the top of the stairs I halted and listened; but all was silence the most profound. The corridor out of which the bedroom opened was lighted at the opposite end by a high

narrow window which looked into the garden. To this window I now made my way, and there, with one ear pressed to the cold glass I stood and listened. Presently I heard the faint sound of footsteps, and then the subdued voices of two people talking to each other. Directly under the place where I was standing was the back drawing-room, which opened on the garden by means of a French window; and although this window was secured at night by shutters, I had an idea that the security in question was more fancied than real, and was of a kind that would be laughed to scorn by any burglar who was acquainted with his business. If the men had made up their minds to break into the house—and with what other object could they be there?—the probability was that they would make the attempt by the way of the French window. Even while this thought was passing through my mind the voices of the men sank to a whisper, and a low, peculiar grating sound made itself heard. Evidently they had already begun to force the fastenings of the window. I crept back to my room, feeling utterly dazed and helpless.

"Is that you, Barbara?" Where have you been?" asked my sister.

Going into her room, I sat down on the side of the bed and told her everything in as few words as possible. She was of a somewhat timid and nervous disposition, and my news visibly affected her. She sat up in bed, trembling and clinging to my arm.

"Perhaps," she whispered, "if we lock our bed-room doors and keep very quiet, they will go away without coming near us."

"Why, you goose it is not us they have come after, but Mr. Shillito's ninety pounds," I answered.

"And there's poor mamma's silver service down stairs; I hope they won't find that," said Bessie.

I hoped so, too, but there was no judging how much Dethel had contrived to ascertain respecting us and our affairs. I went to the corridor window again and listened. The noise made by the men was now plainly distinguishable. It seemed as if they were trying to file or cut their way through some obstruction. After listening for a few moments, I went back to my room and began almost mechanically to put on a few articles of clothing, asking myself again and again as I did so whether it was not possible to do something—though that something ought to be known no more than the man in the moon. The nearest house was a quarter of a mile away; and even if I could have stolen out unnoticed by way of the front door, before I could have reached the farm and brought back help the burglars would have effected their purpose and decamped. Our pecuniary means at that time were very straitened. For some time back John had been paying off some old family debts; and the loss of the ninety pounds—which as a matter of course, he would feel bound to make good—would be a great blow to him. If I could only have got at the money, and have hidden it where the burglars would not be likely to find it, I felt that I should have accomplished something. But the bag was locked up in John's strong mahogany desk, and was as utterly beyond my reach as it had been in the coffers of the Bank of England, while yet it could hardly have been placed more conveniently ready to the hands of the thieves. To them a strong mahogany desk would seem a trifling obstacle indeed.

All this time, metaphorically speaking, I was wringing my hands, knowing full well how precious were the fast-fleeting moments, but only feeling my helplessness the more I strove to discern some loop-hole of escape. Oh, the wretchedness of a feeling! I hope never to experience it again in the same degree as I experienced it that night.

The lightning if not quite as vivid as it had been a little while previously, still came in as frequent flashes, and by its light my sister and I made a hurried toilet. Our house stood a little way back from the high-road, from which it was divided by a tiny lawn and a low screen of evergreens. Once or twice in the course of the night one of the mounted constabulary would ride slowly past as he went his rounds; but I was without any knowledge as to the particular time, when he might be expected, or whether, in fact, the time at which he might be looked for at any specified point did vary from night to night. Still, there was just a possibility that he might put in an appearance at any moment; so I stationed Bessie at the window to keep a lookout for him, and be in readiness to raise an alarm the moment she heard the tramp of his horse's hoofs. For once in a way the lightning was something to be thanked for; each flash lighting up the high-road for a considerable distance on both sides of the house.

When this was done, it seemed as if everything possible had been done; and yet it was next to nothing. With both hands pressed to my eyes, I stood thinking as I seemed never to have thought before. Then it was that—as sudden, swift and startling as one of those flashes which were momentarily illuminating the outer world—an idea shot through my brain which, for an instant or two, seemed to cause my heart to stand still. And yet, at the first blush it was an idea that had about it something so preposterous, so ludicrous, even, that had the need been at all less imminent, I should have discarded it at once as little better than the inspiration of a mad woman. But, preposterous as the idea might seem, for the life of me I could think of no other, and every minute now was invaluable. There was no time for hesitation. I must discard it or adopt it, and that without a moment's delay. "I will try it; it can but fail," I said to myself, with an inward groan.

On the toilet-table was a jar of white tooth-powder, which had been replenished the previous day. I shook out a quantity of this powder, shut my eyes, and proceeded to rub it thickly over my face, arm and hands. That done, I drew the white coverlet off the bed, and draped myself with it loosely from head to foot; then I unbundled my hair, which in those days was ebony black and receded below my waist, and shook it round my face and over my shoulders in "most admired disorder." I was

now ready for the role I had made my mind to enact.

Bessie has told me since that she thought I had taken leave of my senses. Just at the moment my toilet was completed, and as I turned and advanced toward her, another long, quivering flash lighted up the room. A low shriek burst involuntarily from my sister's lips, and she shrank away from me as though I was something altogether uncanny.

"O Barbara, dear, what is the matter?" she cried. "Why do you frightened me so?"

"It is not you I want to frighten, but the men down stairs," I replied. Then in a few hurried words, I told her my plan.

She would have tried to dissuade me; but there was no time to listen. Leaving her there watching by the window, ready to raise an alarm in case the mounted constable should pass on his round, I stole swiftly and noiselessly down the carpeted staircase, and only paused when I reached the corridor below. I could hear a subdued murmur of voices, and a moment later I was startled by the noise of falling glass. The burglars had succeeded in effecting an entrance. They and I were separated only by the drawing-room door, which, although locked, was an obstacle that very few minutes would suffice to overcome. With an indrawing of my breath I sped quickly past the door along the length of the corridor until I reached the opposite end, where there were two more doors, one of them being that of my brother's office, which also was locked, and from the lock of which I now withdrew the key. I have omitted to state that the window of John's office was secured by two stout bars, which was probably one reason why the thieves had chosen to effect an entrance at a point more readily adapted for their purpose. The second door at the end of the corridor shut off a short passage leading to the kitchen. This door I succeeded in opening without noise. I had decided to take my stand a little way on the inner side of it, and there await the course of events. By this time the men were busily at work forcing the lock of the drawing-room door. A thin thread of light which shone from under the door was still as frequent as before, they did not find it sufficient for their purpose.

Scarcely breathing, I waited. I was too excited, too wrought up, the tension of my nerves was too extreme to allow of any personal fear. It was all terribly real, yet with a strange vague sense of unreality underlying it, I felt as if I should not have been surprised had I woken up and found the whole affair resolved itself into a dream, while yet fully assured in my mind that it was nothing of the kind. Suddenly the noise at the door ceased; the lock had been forced. The thread of light disappeared; for a few moments all was silence, and the most profound. Then arose a faint creaking, which at any other time would have been inaudible, that told me that the drawing-room door was being opened and that the crucial moment had come. I pressed one hand over my heart, and for a few brief seconds an almost overpowering longing seized me to get back to my room to cost and lock myself within. But it was to late; by this time the men were in the corridor. I knew it, although I could not see them.

"Where's the door we want?" I heard one whisper to the other.

"On the right—the first door we come to."

As they advanced a step, I did the same.

"What noise was that?" asked one of them quickly.

"Don't be a fool there was no noise,"

"I tell you there was. Where's the glim?"

But the lightning was quicker than the bull's eye. It came, smiting the darkness and flooding the corridor with the blinding intensity of its glare. Then I saw the men and the men saw me, but the darkness had hidden us from each other again before they had time to make sure that their eyes had not deceived them.

One of them gave a gasp and whispered to his master: "What was that tall white thing at the end of the passage? Seemed to me like a ghost."

"Ghost be dashed! There ain't no such things—here's the glim."

"We soon see what it is."

"As he was, the light of his bull's eye was turned full upon me."

I advanced a couple of paces, and the men fell back in speechless surprise and terror. I have often tried since to picture to myself the appearance I must have presented when seen at such a moment and by what uncertain light, with my ghastly death-like face, my dilated eyes, my black, snake-like locks, my tall figure all in white, and with one extended arm and finger pointed direct at the men. I cannot wonder at their fright.

At this juncture came another flash, and a terrible peal of thunder started the air and shook the house. At the very instant, impelled thereto by something within me that I was powerless to control, I burst into a wild peal of manic, blood-curdling laughter. One step nearer I advanced; but that was enough. With a loud yell of terror, the men turned and fled by the way they had come. I heard a crash of shattered glass; and after that I remembered nothing more till I came to my senses to find Bessie supporting my head and pressing her smelling-salts to my nose.

But John's ninety pounds were saved,

and it is hardly necessary to add that those men were never seen again.

A King's Cradle.

Near the scepter and purple robes was the cradle of the King of Rome, weighing one quarter of a ton. The material was said to be silver-gilt. At the head hovered the figure of an angel holding aloft a metal wreath, from which depended the rich silk draperies that could be made to completely envelop the cradle, or be drawn aside and looped back behind the angel figure. I suppose the imperial babies developed as much prettiness in this satin-lined cradle as do the neglected infants of modern Palestine in their hard stone mangers.

The Mystery of Flowers.

The name of the Peony is derived from Peon, a celebrated Greek physician, who taught the Greeks that this pretty flower was of divine origin, emanating from the light of the moon, and a valuable cure, therefore, for epilepsy, which was supposed to be a moonstruck malady. The peony was thought to have power over the winds, to protect the harvest from storms, and to avert tempests.

The floral kingdom furnishes plants which flower unfailingly on certain days, and superstition has seized on this fact and associated some with the qualities of great persons who happened to be born on the day they plant flowers. The cyclamen opens in Southern Europe on St. Romuald's day, and is dedicated to this romantic recluse, who abandoned a noble career for a monastic life, because he witnessed his father kill a kinsman in a duel. The rose bay willow herb the French called St. Anthony's fire, because of its brilliant red hue, and its having appeared first in the eleventh century, when the plague of erysipelas was raging, and according to it the power of intercession with disease which its patron, St. Anthony, was believed to possess.

The early Christians, attracted to some flowers by their peculiar beauty, gathered a number of these into a