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Submission Guidelines and General Information

The Mark Twain Annual publishes critical and pedagogical articles about Mark Twain. Biographical and historical articles will generally not be considered, unless such articles have a clear pedagogical focus. Critical articles may be 10-20 pp.; pedagogical articles are generally shorter (in fact, we welcome short "toolbox" teaching items). Book reviews are up to 4 pp. and are assigned by the book review editor. Please send books for review or requests to review a book to Joseph Csicsila, address below.

Please submit two letter-quality copies of manuscripts in MLA style with a stamped, self-addressed envelope, or in electronic form, as specified below. Since The Mark Twain Annual is a juried journal practicing blind submission, please include your name only on a separate title page, and make sure any notes do not disclose your authorship of the article. Submissions are accepted from non-members of the Mark Twain Circle, but upon acceptance you will be expected to join the association. Submissions will be reviewed by two or more members of the editorial board; notification of acceptance or rejection will be made as quickly as possible. Deadline for submission for the 2008 issue is July 15, 2008.

Upon acceptance, you will be requested to provide an electronic copy of your work, PC format, in either Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, or RTF files on floppy disk, CD, or by e-mail attachment to the editor. Essay submissions and queries should be sent to the editor:

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Mark Twain vs. the Burglars: The Cure is Worse Than the Crime!

Wayne R. Gannaway

Under the cover of darkness, early on a fair May morning in 1888, a burglar approached Mark Twain’s cellar door. He pried open the door, reasonably confident that no one happening along the deserted and poorly-lit Farmington Avenue would notice his movements. His invasion was detected, however, by Twain’s burglar alarm, which alerted the writer and his wife as they slept in their second story master bedroom. The furious ringing of the alarm bell roused Twain from his bed, prompting him to open his bathroom door, ignite the gas light fixture on the wall, and examine the annunciator. Upon returning to bed, Twain reported to his wife: “It was the cellar door.” She said, ‘Was it a burglar, do you think?’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘of course it was. Do you suppose it was a Sunday-school superintendent?’” (Autobiography 78-79).

Mark Twain and his neighbors in Hartford shared many concerns about daily life that continue to command our attention today, namely, crime and efforts to thwart it. Burglars aggressively operated throughout Hartford and other cities in the 1870s and 1880s, creating a sense of alarm mixed with intrigue in the public imagination about the criminals’ methods and lifestyle. In response, Twain and his neighbors wrote the Hartford Courant urgently expressing concern about crime in the community. Similar to burglary victims today, they felt violated, vulnerable, and frustrated with the response of the authorities. But Twain observed the tumult through the writer’s lens. The exploits of the burglars, as recounted in the newspapers, were likely the impetus for Twain’s installation of a burglar alarm in his home and shaped his stories about domestic security. Twain’s tortured relationship with his burglar alarm most likely inspired the short story, “The McWilliamses and the Burglar Alarm.” Written in 1882, the misfortunes of Mr. McWilliams anticipated Twain’s real-life skirmishes with burglars and burglar alarms. The story, in which Mr. McWilliams unburdens himself to Twain while traveling on a train, parallels the author’s experience with burglars and with difficulties operating the alarm. Indeed, Twain uses the McWilliams family to provide a portal into the daily life of his family (the Clemenses) in their Hartford home. Both
"The Experience of the McWilliamses and the Membranous Croup," and "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning" (written in 1875 and 1880 respectively) mirror the foibles and drama of the Clemens household. While Twain never pegged a burglar, even with the help of his technology, he does capture the absurdities of domestic life with his writing, spinning the episodes into a compelling narrative that sheds light on a concern of homeowners that continues to this day: safe-guarding the home.

After the Civil War, technological developments, manufacturing systems, and a perceived threat from increased immigration in an expanding, industrialized urban area, intersected to create unease among established communities. The burglar alarm could help households feel safe and preserve their domestic tranquility. Consumers like the Clemenses were taking advantage of an industrial revolution that was in full swing and having a profound impact on domestic life. When Sam and Olivia Clemens built their house in Hartford in 1874, and throughout their seventeen-year tenure there, they enjoyed many amenities that were becoming more available in upper-class homes: hot-air furnaces, gas lighting, municipal water and indoor plumbing, one of the first residential telephones in Hartford, and battery-powered electrical devices like doorbells, call buttons for the annunciator, and the burglar alarm. Clemens never recorded why he chose to install the device at 351 Farmington Avenue. The McWilliamses decided to install a burglar alarm in their new house when, while finishing construction, "we found we had a little cash left over, on account of the plumber not knowing it. I was for enlightening the heathen with it, for I was always unaccountably down on the heathen somehow; but Mrs. McWilliams said no, let's have a burglar alarm" ("McWilliamses and the Burglar Alarm" 315).

The Clemenses built their house on the western edge of Hartford, in the Nook Farm enclave nestled in the Asylum Hill neighborhood. Clemens and his neighbors lived in fashionable, well-appointed homes picturesquely situated in broad lawns framed by sweeping driveways and blue-stone sidewalks. Ornamental ponds with spraying fountains and swaths of woodlands softened the bold features of the architecture, creating a peaceful setting removed from the hustle of downtown.

Despite the pastoral setting, they and their neighbors took advantage of new technology to protect their homes. According to the March 12th, 1878 Hartford Daily Courant, "S.L. Clemens, and in fact a large number of the people on the 'Hill' in Hartford, have been recently putting into their houses Jerome's famous burglar alarm and are enjoying the sense of protection which it gives." The editors point out the relative low cost of the device, "about a hundred dollars to a house," the ease of installation and opine about the prospects of humanity: "True, the sight of it in the house is a reminder of the depravity of man; but so are locks and keys for that matter. By the way, what a complex thing civilization will make our life bye and bye!" ("Burglar Alarm" 2). By the time Clemens's burglar alarm "performed its duty, and its whole duty--gravely, seriously, admirably," on that May morning, he would come to endorse the editor's sentiment (Autobiography 78).

Given the regular reports of burglaries in the Courant throughout the 1870s and 1880s, homeowners had good reason to view humanity as depraved. Headlines in the newspaper
highlighted the risk to residents: “Another Attempted Burglary,” “Burglars Around” and, in September 1875, a dispatch entitled “Numerous Burglaries.” The latter report indicated the scope of the problem, “From Willimantic and from Groton come stories of extensive depredations by burglars” (“Numerous Burglaries” 4). In August of 1875, an editorial writer in the Hartford Daily Courant began his call-to-arms bluntly with “Kill them,” going on to compare the spasm of burglaries in New York City to Indian attacks on white settlers, and advising Hartford citizens to take note and prepare: “There is a very good chance, however, that our turn may be coming...Springfield is said to have swarmed with thieves and blacklegs this week, and Springfield is less than thirty miles away. If they do come down here it will be a good thing for people to keep a sharp look-out and a loaded pistol” (“Burglars” 2). The New York Times, taking note of the trouble in a February 1, 1880 article entitled, “Burglars Industrious: Uniting mischief and crime in Hartford,” reported that “An extra Police detail is on duty nights, but in spite of watchful efforts there is yet no clue to operators. Householders are getting excited on the subject, and the trade in revolvers at the hardware stores has been lively of late” (1).

Burglars continued their operations into the 1880s and regularly visited Clemens’ neighborhood. On January 13, 1880, in an article entitled “Robbers About,” the Courant noted that, “While few arrests are made by the police and the fact is urged as proving the good order prevailing in Hartford, yet it cannot be denied that a good deal of ‘professional’ work is going on here and the criminals escape. Within a week there have been several house robberies and other crimes which have had very little attention” (2). The home of Clemens’ friend and neighbor, Charles E. Perkins, was one of three houses burglarized on May 13, 1880 (“A Trio of Burglaries” 3). Francis Goodwin, a neighbor and friend of Clemens, signaled the alarm in a November 29th, 1881 letter to the newspaper responding to the heroic acts of a lone neighbor protecting his home. Titled “The Police Question,” Goodwin’s letter explicitly blames the weak police force: “If it has come to this pass here in our city that personal valor is the only safeguard to life and property, then we ought to understand it, and prepare ourselves accordingly. Certainly the last few months have shown that our police department is quite as weak and defective in the manner of its organization as in any other particular” (3). Less than two months later, the Courant reported a burglary in a mansion next door to Goodwin’s home—his father’s (“More Burglaries” 2).

Clemens himself became a victim in May 1888, when a thief entered his house with the family asleep inside. The Courant announced the episode: “Burglars Again Operate: Three hill residences entered. A large amount of property stolen—Mark Twain among the victims” (“Burglars Again Operate” 8). Although his burglar grabbed only inexpensive items and fled without ransacking the house, Twain lashed out at the authorities. In letters to friends and to newspaper editors, he complained about the dearth of street lighting along the road fronting his house, and the lack of police in the city. Responding to the lack of lighting on his street in July 1888, in correspondence to a friend, Twain proposed a letter to the City of Hartford government: “I beg that you will not let any tacit right of mine & of my neighbors be considered for a moment, if you wish to move that electric light. Put it where it will make
the most show & do the least good; that seems to be the only things that you are after, thus far, in your electric-lighting plans. For fifteen years, in spite of my prayers & tears, you persistently kept a gas lamp exactly half way between my gates, so that I couldn’t find either of them after dark" (to Franklin G. Whitmore 19 July 1888). The issue was still on his mind in September, when in a letter to a friend, he proposed an open letter to derelict criminals, proclaiming “Burglars out of employment are invited by the City Government of Hartford to consider the unusual inducements which it offers before completing engagements for the winter. Street lights turned off at 2 a.m.” (to William M. Laffan). Twain spreads his invective beyond public lighting, to include the police, continuing in an unsent letter to the City of Hartford, “And what is your police department worth, except as a political machine? For ten years Hartford has been a burglars’ paradise. House-breaking is the most thrifty of all our industries, & the only one which you seem to coddle & protect. And when did you people ever catch a burglar?—I mean a live one.” He went on, doubting whether the force could police a “prairie dog’s nest,” before signing off with, “Yours, in indestructible affection, S.L.C., Farmington Ave” (to Franklin G. Whitmore 19 July 1888).

Twain’s frustration with the City of Hartford prompted him not just to strike back with pen, but also to spend his own money to make things the way he thought they ought to be. In a journal entry in the fall of 1888, Twain charges his neighbor, Franklin Chamberlain, with whom he had strained relations, and the city, which, he claims, “has done me many a mean trick in 16 years,” with conspiring to move the electric street light away from his property, “thus leaving our gates smothered in Egyptian darkness.” To set matters right, Twain paid to install his own electric light close to his house, hired a night watchman, and “took measures to transfer my citizenship to some other town” (Notebooks Vol.3, 428).

In good light or bad, the Clemenses’s home presented a tempting target for would-be burglars. The nineteen-room, three-story brick house festooned with multiple projecting bays, gables, porches, and large windows offered multiple points of entry to the adventurous and opportunistic burglar alike. Positioned as it was looking over the Park River and a meadow and perpendicular to and up hill from Farmington Avenue, at night burglars could avoid the casual glances of passers-by or policemen. Inside the house, the burglar would expect a fair booty: expensive jewelry and watches, cash, as well as the more typical silverware, fine clothing, and food and liquor. Indeed, as Mark Twain’s writing career accelerated, he demonstrated his wealth by expanding the kitchen wing, re-painting the house and decorating the interior with fine carpets, Oriental rugs, furniture from New York and Europe, and works of art. Certainly the public and the press paid attention to Twain and his noteworthy house; no doubt the burglars did too.

While on the outside the Clemens home may have been a beacon of opportunity to burglars, on the inside, the intruder would find himself frustrated by a complicated arrangement of passageways, doors, and chambers. In designing the interior of the house, Olivia Clemens and the architect, Edward Tuckerman Potter, included conventional features that enhanced a sense of security, such as family bedrooms on the second floor. Architectural critics and lifestyle writers advised that homeowners sleep on the upper floors of the house,
"to give a pleasant sense of security from outside intrusion and to afford convenient outlooks from the windows" (Gardener 204). Building archaeology research of the kitchen wing revealed insights into how the family's privacy and security—both from burglars as well as faithless servants—was built into the house design in a manner typical for wealthier residents. Servants had just two avenues to get from their modest quarters in the kitchen wing to the more genteel areas of the house: a kitchen passageway to the dining room and a second floor passageway to the hallway. Barriers, in the form of passageways, doorways, and pass-throughs, ensured that the sights, smells, sounds, and personalities of the kitchen would not intrude upon the family's activities in the dining room. By the middle of the twentieth century, modern occupants doubled the number of thresholds that led from the kitchen wing to the main house (Paske and Stachiw).

Moving from the peripheral locations to the inner sanctum of the family chambers was not straightforward or efficient. For the cook to deliver food to the butler's pantry, she carried it into the sink room and passed it to the butler through a pass-through. The butler, platter of food in hand, then closed the sliding door to the pass-through, shutting out the noise and smell of the kitchen, and proceeded to assemble the meal for a suitable presentation in the dining room. Although supervised by George, an African American and the Clemens's long-time butler, the butler's pantry was an enclave of household valuables used daily by the family and, thus, needed to be secured. From the kitchen, the cook could only get to the butler's pantry via a passageway door leading to the dining room, and then open the door to the pantry. If she did make the journey to the butler's pantry, she would need to go through the passageway and have a key to unlock the door; she would need to enter during the day—in the evening, Clemens put the passageway to the dining room on the alarm. Similarly, a servant in the cellar fetching wood for Clemens's fireplace in the Billiard Room could not enter the main house directly. Instead, he would carry it up a narrow, cramped staircase from the laundry room to the kitchen. Here again, the door into the kitchen from the staircase was wired into the burglar alarm system. To further thwart unscrupulous servants or burglars, the Clemenses could also lock up especially valuable silverware, china, and beer, bourbon, and other spirits in the butler's closet, only accessible from within the butler's pantry. The burglar alarm provided the best opportunity for monitoring all these doors, windows, and discrete containers.

The front lines for the burglar alarm system were spring-loaded, brass contacts located at vulnerable doors and windows. Window contacts were mortised into the top sash; when the alarm was set, a burglar opening the window caused the lower sash to push in the contact, closing the circuit and activating the alarm bell. For doors, the spring contacts resembled a brass push button. If a burglar forced in the door, the button would spring out, completing the circuit and activating the alarm. A more unusual contact arrangement placed the triggering device under a carpet, rug, or matting on the staircase, under a window, or any location likely in the path of the intruder; the burglar, once stepping onto the alarmed surface, would depress the contact and set off the alarm. Today, after the house has served as a home to a boys' school, public library, apartments, and a museum, only the spring contacts in the
kitchen and one in the porch door of the master bedroom remain in place. But in his autobiography, Twain notes that all of the doors and windows were connected with the alarm, “from the cellar up to the top floor” (Autobiography 78).

Once the homeowner had been alerted to a breach in the security, he consulted his annunciator to determine the location of the alarm. More generally used in conjunction with the call bell system to indicate to servants where they were being summoned, with the burglar alarm, the annunciator served a similar function. The annunciator is enclosed in a finished wood case, often embellished with ornate moldings and finials, with the room indicators displayed in a glass face. Since each spring contact is wired to its own metal post that activates the room indicator, covering every vulnerable window, door, and coal chute, an annunciator could grow congested with wires. In a letter to the New York Evening Post in 1880, Twain facetiously claimed to have had his strange and coveted shrub, the “Shakespeare mulberry” [sic] connected to the alarm (Letters 205). With so many of his chambers wired to the alarm, Twain’s fictional character, Mr. McWilliams, observes that “By this time the annunciator had grown to formidable dimensions. It had forty-seven tags on it, marked with the names of the various rooms and chimneys, and it occupied the space of an ordinary wardrobe” (317-318). Frequently the bell or gong was part of the annunciator assembly, but sometimes it was a separate fixture; Mr. McWilliams described it as the “size of a washtub placed above the head of our bed.” An unfortunate location given that, according to Mr. McWilliams, “the first effect of that frightful gong is to hurl you across the house, and slam you against the wall, and then curl you up, and squirm you like a spider on a stove lid” (318).

With so many wires running through the house leading to the annunciator, much could go wrong with the burglar alarm; contacts would stick, wires frayed, and the bulky chemical batteries needed constant recharging. Other problems were the fault of the operator. Observing his neighbor, Francis Goodwin, Twain writes that even with the system operating properly, turning it on and off without disrupting normal daily activities was a problem. After his cook set off the alarm every morning at five o’clock reporting to the kitchen, Goodwin became “so habituated to it that it didn’t disturb him. It aroused him, partly, from his sleep sometimes—sometimes it probably did not affect his sleep at all, but from old habit he would automatically put out his left hand and shut off that alarm” (Autobiography 315-16). McWilliams had the same problem when, “Every morning at five the cook opened the kitchen door, in the way of business, and rip went that gong!” McWilliams’ sleep was disturbed, “for, mind you, when that thing wakes you, it doesn’t merely wake you in spots; it wakes you all over conscience and all, and you are good for eighteen hours of wide-awakeness” (“McWilliamses” 318).

A clock could be added to the burglar alarm that would arm and disarm the system at a time chosen by the homeowner, “by turning the time-set (which is a metallic ring marked with the hours) to any hour, say eleven o’clock, the burglar alarm will be disconnected and silent till that hour” (Electricity 476). Twain’s device had such a feature, but entries in his journal indicated that this too caused problems. In a January 1882 entry, he records: “7:30
p.m., black [on the metallic ring] shows. (This is wrong). Turned it 12 hours, at 11 p.m., & made black continue to show—(this is right and puts the alarm on).” On November 24th he wrote: “Wrong at 11 AM—black showed, & rang alarm. I have set it right for afternoon—brass shows” (Notebooks Vol.2, 402-403). Finally, in February 1883, Clemens directed the installer “to come prepared to make the alarm clock behave itself. I still have to turn it around twelve hours every night. It has never worked well, neither did its predecessor” (to Charles L. Webster). McWilliams’s efforts to synchronize the device were equally unsuccessful. The device worked until the day after the warranty expired, at which time, “The alarm went to buzzing like ten thousand bee swarms at ten o’clock in the morning.” Despite numerous visits and prodigious bills from the burglar alarm expert, “his clocks all had the same perversé defect: they would put the alarm on in the daytime, and they would not put it on at night; and if you forced it on yourself, they would take it off again the minute your back was turned” (“McWilliamses” 323).

According to his family and friends, and by his own admission, Clemens was easily confused and frustrated by mechanical devices. Susy, his eldest daughter, wrote as a youngster on the subject:

“Some of the simplest things he can’t understand. Our burglar alarm is often out of order, and papa had been obliged to take the mahogany room off the alarm altogether for a time, because the burglar alarm had been in the habit of ringing even when the mahogany-room window was closed. At length he thought that perhaps the burglar alarm might be in order, and he decided to try and see; accordingly he put it on and then went down and opened the window; consequently the alarm bell rang, it would even if the alarm had been in order...Momma tried to explain to papa that when he wanted to go and see whether the alarm would ring while the window was closed he mustn’t go and open the window. But in vain, papa couldn’t understand, and got very impatient with momma for trying to make him believe an impossible thing true.” (Autobiography 74)

Recollections of William Dean Howells, frequent guest and fellow writer, indicate that, indeed, Twain was working against the burglar alarm. Describing his bedtime routine in the mahogany room, after staying up late with Twain, Howells recounts, he would “come in at night after I had gone to bed to take off the burglar alarm so that the family should not be roused if anybody tried to get in at my window” (Howells 5). Clemens himself agrees with Susy’s characterization of his mechanical skills, conceding about her account, “This is a frank biographer and an honest one; she uses no sandpaper on me.” But he countered that the device was not without blame, noting that “that burglar alarm which Susy mentions led a gay and careless life and had no principles” (78).

For almost any barrier or entrapment erected by the homeowner, burglars had a tool to overcome or circumvent it, and their tactics ranged from elaborate to banal. In an 1875 New
York Times article, “Something About Sneaks: How they perform their work,” a burglar-informant confided to a reporter that “There are several kinds of sneaks alone. There’s a hall sneak, who never ventures beyond the hat rack. There’s the basement sneak, who don’t want nothing but the spoons and such.” In most cases, according to editors of The Manufacturer and Builder, the sneak thief’s “favorite method is based upon the carelessness of housekeepers who do not secure the outer doors” (“A Burglar’s Kit” 253). Indeed, Clemens was aware of such opportunistic pilferers, once chastising George the butler for leaving the front door ajar and “the place silent and the servants absent. I reproached him for leaving the house unprotected, and said that at least one sentinel should have been left on duty” (“In Memory of Olivia Clemens” 15). Other sneak thieves would gain entrance under false pretense, by befriending a servant or masquerading as an agent or plumber. Mr. McWilliams confronted what the literature at the time called a “second story sneak”: a more adventurous thief, according to the Times reporter’s burglar-informant, “would climb up your second-story window or some other way, while you were down at dinner, and go through your bureau drawers with great [care]” (“Something About Sneaks” 2). In Twain’s story, McWilliams’s intruder entered through a second-story window—the first time. Subsequent sorties by burglars began on the third floor, where the resigned homeowner found the visitor “about to start down a ladder with a lot of miscellaneous property. My first impulse was to crack his head with a billiard cue; but my second was to refrain from this attention, because he was between me and the cue rack” (317). If a ladder was not available, a burglar could hoist himself up to a veranda or climb a trellis to an unlatched second story window.

According to nineteenth-century reformer and author, Helen Campbell, “The average sneak thief laughs at the [homeowner’s] flimsy barriers, and can undo every one of them with a few simple instruments which he carries in his vest pocket” (679). All minimally-prepared burglars ensured they had a jimmy or two on hand. Essentially a pry bar, creative burglars customized the tool to open just about any household barrier. Even in the hands of a novice, the claw-jimmy made quick work of opening latched shutters and locked doors; turned against a plaster wall, another variety could hack open an impromptu passageway; and the sectional jimmy allowed the burglar to easily conceal the tool until he was ready to start work, at which time the sections could be screwed together (“On Burglar’s Tools” 108). “In each case,” according to the editors of the New York World, “the jimmy is the magic wand that opens the way” (“Science of Burglary” 82). A locked door could also be finessed open. Burglars often used skeleton keys, carried in bunches, of various patterns and sizes, to manipulate the door lock. As the editors of the New York World point out, “Skeleton keys are remarkable only for their simplicity...Those that are hollow at the end are used for pin locks, with which bureaus are commonly fitted. The others are capable of twisting the spring of any common door-lock” (83). In hopes of thwarting the intruder, homeowners sometimes lent the key in the lock “thinking that no other key can be used. The thief is ready for this emergency” (“A Burglar’s Kit” 282-283). In such cases, according to a burglar interviewed for the New York Times in 1875, he “would take hold of it from the outside with a pair of nippers and turn the bolt without trouble” (“Burglary as an Art” 7). Other tools typically
found in the burglar’s tool bag included chisels, wedges, hammers, drills, punches, jacks, clamps, noiseless matches, and rubber-soled shoes for stealthy stalking within the house.

No doubt, the Clemenses felt a measure of security with electric lights illuminating the veranda and front of the carriage house, and the large, heavy mahogany front door, wired to the alarm and under lock and key (to Franklin G. Whitmore 1896). Burglars, on the other hand, prudently showed little interest in forcing the front door, as aptly described by the editors of the New York World:

“It must be an amusing thing to the burglar to note the precautions taken to prevent his entrance by the street door after he has walked through the skylight on the roof without the slightest resistance, or dropped through the coal hole leading to the cellar from the sidewalk, to find that no doors bar his passage from there to the rooms above. These are the popular ways of getting into houses. The basement door at the rear, if there is one, is another.” (“The Science of Burglary” 82)

The thieves were aware of the burglar alarm at the T. Sedgwick Steele residence on Asylum Avenue in May 1880. Although the Steele family alarmed all the doors and windows on their house, the Courant reported that the burglars by-passed the snare “by merely cutting out a panel in the basement door. This was apparently done with a chisel and traces of blood on the woodwork indicated that the burglar injured his hand in his work. The thieves were apparently hungry for they carried off a large piece of roast beef and some steaks and chops, but left the latter in the yard” (“Trio of Burglaries” 3). Clemens likely read this report, perhaps in preparing to write his own short story about Mr. McWilliams and his burglar alarm woes, and the odd facts of the case seem to have left an impression on him. In his autobiography, written more than twenty years later, Clemens recounts a similar burglary, incorrectly attributing it to the Francis Goodwin residence. He apparently conflated the episode with the more conventional burglary of the Goodwin’s father’s residence, where the intruder gained access by climbing the veranda roof to a second-story window; there is no record of a burglary at Francis Goodwin’s residence.

On one occasion, the burglar alarm provided the last defense for morality in the household. Nearly every summer during their tenure at the Hartford house, the Clemenses packed up their trunks and spent the warm summer months in the cooler climes of Quarry Farm, the home of Olivia’s sister, located near Elmira, New York. The servants were left in charge of the Hartford house, with the alarm quietly in the background. Clemens records no incidents during the many summer retreats, except in July 1877, when a puzzling pattern of alarms exposed a crime of passion and a household in disorder. On his way to New York for business, Clemens stopped in Hartford to investigate conflicting reports about the alarm going off and “From 3 o’clock yesterday till 12 last night I put in a good part of the time questioning & cross-questioning the servants...& the Chief of Police” (Mark Twain’s Letters 99). Despite a theory by the police implicating George in a conspiracy to commit burglary
and blame a mysterious intruder, and assertions by Lizzie, a young servant, that a burglar had set off the alarm, Clemens quickly surmised that "there has been no burglar in the house, but only one or both of Lizzie’s two loafers" (99). In a letter to Olivia, Clemens reported that he established that "Patrick [the coachman] & Mary have seen [Lizzie] sitting on the balcony of the N.E. room [master bedroom] with her loafer in the daytime, & been scoffed at by them. The two loafers played billiards all day, 4th of July, on my table" (99). Under interrogation by Clemens, Lizzie admitted that her "lover had been coming to call at unconventional hours," and, in the act of slipping out of the house, he kept setting off the alarm. Before banishing the disgraced servant from the household, he summoned her lover and gave him a choice of marrying Lizzie or being arrested for trespassing; Twain’s friend, Reverend Joseph Twichel, and a policeman awaited the decision in adjacent rooms. After being cajoled, humored, and plied with cigars, the reluctant groom agreed to marry Lizzie. Following a brief ceremony performed by Twichel, and a celebration of champagne by the small party, Clemens sent the couple away with a small dowry of cash and a marriage license (103-105).

In the aftermath of the affair, Clemens bolstered security, informing Olivia that he was "going to keep the officer on duty there every night till we [get] home. It will be best, now that [Lizzie’s] affair is in all the papers" (Letters 112). Apparently Clemens managed the press reports effectively, since the Courant’s report of the episode, entitled "Bold Attempt at Robbery," offered an account sharply at odds with his own sleuthing and, assuming he helped pen the account, demonstrated his command of the burglar’s methods. According to the published report, after a stranger claiming to be a gas meter inspector was turned away from the Union Hotel on Farmington Avenue, "he gained access in Mark Twain’s house on the same pretense. The family were away and the man succeeded in deceiving the servants. In the evening one of the servant girls, on going to bed, discovered the man secreted in one of the rooms. On being discovered he darted out of the room and escaped. The house was thoroughly searched and he could not be found. He evidently intended to rob the house after the servants were asleep" (2).

With as many summers as the family was away, it is surprising that Clemens reports only one episode involving the burglar alarm while vacationing in Elmira. Burglars watched for signs of families packing for summer vacation and other events that left the house empty for any amount of time: "This information is gleaned from the newspaper accounts of weddings, balls, dinner parties and advertisements, by watching the houses and from gossipy servants" ("A Burglar’s Kit" 282). Burglars approved of such routines, for "their richest harvest is made in the summer, when vacant houses are to be found in every block" (Thompson 428). The July 14, 1881 edition of the Courant advised that nervous Hartford residents preparing for vacation "can have their houses looked after by the police by giving notice at police headquarters." But in the same edition, the paper noted "that the residence of Colonel Jacob L. Green, president of the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance company, No. 113 Woodland Street had been broken into since it was closed for the summer, the occupants going abroad. A policeman who was sent to investigate the matter, found that every room in
the house had been ransacked and the contents of closets and bureaus strewn over the floor” ("Ransacking an Unoccupied Residence" 2). Mr. McWilliams no doubt empathized. Desiring “new patent springs in the windows to make false alarms impossible,” McWilliams made the house available to the alarm firm to install the improvements while he and his family began their summer vacation. After two days of working, but not completing the enhancements, the installers left for the summer, “after which the burglars moved in and began their summer vacation. When we returned in the fall, the house was as empty as a beer closet in premises where painters have been at work” (“McWilliams” 322-23).

Who was the burglar in Hartford in the 1870s and ’80s? In all likelihood, he was not the sensitive, pipe-smoking intruder Mr. McWilliams describes in Twain’s story. Upon being asked why he broke into the house “in this furtive and clandestine way, without ringing the burglar alarm,” the robber “looked confused and ashamed, and said with embarrassment: ‘I beg you will not mention it where my parents may hear of it, for they are old and feeble, and such a seemingly wanton breach of the hallowed conventionalities of our Christian civilization might all too rudely sunder the frail bridge which hangs darling between the pale and evanescent present and the solemn great deeps of the eternities. May I trouble you for a match?’” (316). Clemens, in his autobiography, similarly envisioned a benevolent burglar plundering his own home: “They all have families—burglars have—and they are always thoughtful of them; always take a few necessaries of life for themselves, and the rest as tokens of remembrance for the family. In taking them they do not forget us. Those very things represent tokens of his remembrance of us also” (80).

As reported in the Courant, the public’s perception of the typical burglar was quite different. According to the paper’s report of the Clemens burglary, “during the last two or three days two tramps have loitered around the scene of the burglaries...and they made application for fund[s] at Mr. Clemens’s.” Pundits and publishers of the time believed circuses were partially responsible for attracting such tramps. The burglaries, the writers for the Courant presumed, “were either perpetrated by men belonging to the circus or by roughs who follow the company and take advantage of the opportunities which its presence in town affords” (“Burglars and the Circus” 2). Other burglars were more serious and seasoned practitioners. Prior to his escape from the state prison in Wethersfield in 1875, James C. Rice, in an interview with a reporter from the Courant, provided a candid assessment of his cohorts: “There isn’t much courage required. All the odds are with the burglar. He goes in wide awake and prepared. He is cool for anything. If he arouses anybody the person he may encounter is confused and is taken at a disadvantage.” Although many assaults occurred in the process of burglaries, Rice pointed out that “I wouldn’t take a life—if I could help it. Of course if I got into a tight place and it came to a point where somebody had to get hurt, I should look out for myself if I could!” (“At Large Again” 2).

Once inside the house, the burglar will steal nearly anything he can get his hands on, but, according The Manufacturer and Builder, “They take few chances, and rarely go up stairs, unless they get into a house in the summer, when the family is away” (“A Burglar’s Kit” 253). In monitoring the progress of his burglar by watching the annunciator in the bathroom,
Clemens considered the motives of the intruder meandering in the cellar and, reassuring Olivia, he points out that, "if he had the common sagacity enough to inquire, I could have told him we kept nothing down there but coal and vegetables. Still, it may be that he is acquainted with this place and that what he really wants is coal and vegetables. On the whole, I think it is vegetables he is after." Responding to Olivia's inquiry about going down to the cellar to determine what the burglar is after, Clemens reassures her that he could "not be of any assistance. Let him select for himself." The burglar advanced to the ground floor, setting off the alarm from the kitchen to the dining room, prompting Clemens to further soothe Olivia's concern: "He has arrived. I told you he would. I know all about burglars and their ways. They are systematic people." Clemens goes on to tell Olivia that, if the burglar comes up to the family's quarters, they shall "climb out the window." The trespasser, however, ended his foray on the ground floor, escaping out a window in the mahogany room, prompting Clemens to conclude, "He is disappointed, I think. He has gone off with the vegetables and the bric-a-brac and I think he is dissatisfied" (Autobiography 80-81). Investigating the next morning, Clemens "tracked the burglar down the hill through the trees; tracked him without difficulty, because he had blazed his progress with imitation-silver napkin rings and my umbrella and various other things which he had disapproved of" (Autobiography 81).

Mr. McWilliams's burglars had more success. After battling the malfunctions of the alarm by disconnecting the system room-by-room, night after night, McWilliams suffered his gravest insult: "The burglars walked in one night and carried off the burglar alarm! yes, sir, every hide and hair of it: ripped it out tooth and nail; springs, bells, gongs, battery, and all; they took a hundred and fifty miles of copper wire; they just cleaned her out, bag and baggage, and never left us a vestige of her to swear at--swear by, I mean" ("McWilliams" 323).

Clemens records no additional burglaries during the family's final three years in the house, nor in the period between 1891 and 1903, when the house was left largely vacant. But he would have another opportunity to savor the burglars' actions in 1908, when two broke into Stormfield, his Redding, Connecticut, home. Although Clemens had no burglar alarm installed, early in the morning, the butler heard a ruckus on the ground floor and, upon investigating, discovered thieves and fired upon them. The intruders fled with silverware engraved with Olivia's maiden name but were captured a short time later. The precious booty was recovered days later when a neighbor found it hidden under a rock. Clemens seemed to delight in the alarm the burglary caused his daughter, Clara, and the servants, noting that "the women-folks in the house are not getting along well at all. [Her] sleep is broken, & is pestered with dreadful dreams nightly, in which a swarm of masked burglars are riddling her with bullets. It fetches her out of her slumber with a shriek" (to Dorothy Sturgis). Installing a burglar alarm a short time later calmed the nerves of the household.

In the end, McWilliams gave up on the technology of burglar alarms and both he and his creator made their peace with the burglars. Although Clemens wrote a young friend proclaiming that "we are buying a couple of bulldogs & hoping they will call again," he
expressed a heartfelt empathy for the burglars that harkened back to the graciousness with which Mr. McWilliams dealt with his intruders: "Those poor burglars have gone to jail. I haven't anything against them, I bear them no malice & put no blame upon them, for it is only circumstances & environment that make burglars, therefore anybody is liable to be one. I don't quite know how I have managed to escape myself" (Aquarium 238). For his part, Mr. McWilliams "took the whole thing out and traded it off for a dog, and shot the dog. I don't know what you think about it, Mr. Twain; but I think those things are made solely in the interest of the burglars. Now there is the history of that burglar alarm—everything just as it happened; nothing extenuated, and naught set down in malice...Good-by: I get off here" ("McWilliams" 324).

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