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"OLD" BROOKES

By LILY WANDEL.

(©, 1921, by McClure Newspaper Syndicate.)

"It certainly is terrible to wake up in the middle of the night and find that you are a thief, an honest-to-goodness thief," wailed Dulcie from the bottom step.

"Particularly hard on the family," added Ted, "getting them all out of bed on a cold winter's night. And, say, why does this family always congregate on the front stairs when there's something the matter, eh? Nasty, draughty place, I'll say."

"I always knew she'd get in an awful pickle some day," this from sixteen-year-old Senah, "and now of all persons, this horrid old Mr. Brookes!"

"Mother, won't you make them stop?" begged Dulcie desperately, trying to keep her teeth from chattering, "and suggest something?"

Mrs. Driscom yawned as much as her chin-strap would permit. "All I can think of is a nice warm bed and sleep. I've been up since six."

"You're not a bit like mothers you read about," accused Dulcie tearfully. "I'd think you'd be broken-hearted having a thief for a daughter."

"We're not so broken-hearted," put in Ted, "as we are annoyed, old girl. Devilish inconsiderate of you, discovering at three o'clock in the morning that you'd lifted your boss' diamond scarfpin."

"It's all because you're so careless," supported Senah primly; "any decent person would have discovered it before retiring."

"Your story is so confusing, Dulcie," murmured Mrs. Driscom sleepily. "Would you mind repeating it, but start from the beginning this time."

"Oh, I've told it just as it happened. You see, I was the last person in for dictation, and then Mr. Brookes comes out of his private office—"

"Not that horrid old Mr. Brookes?" interrupted Senah.

"Of course," answered Dulcie irritably, "you know perfectly well there is only one Mr. Brookes in the firm—"

"Well, why don't you say old Mr. Brookes, or something—you've always called him horrid or cranky or beastly."

Dulcie went on, ignoring the younger sister: "He came out and said he'd lost his scarfpin, a platinum one with diamonds, very precious to him. And we all began to hunt. I went into his private office and looked there, and oh, everywhere, because, you see, it was very embarrassing for me—I was the last one in—and—we couldn't find it. Nobody could settle down to work, and we all felt dreadfully uncomfortable and each person kept protesting he had not seen the pin."

"And old Brookes, what did the old crab say?" questioned Ted.

"Oh, that is the worst of it! He said he was sure he'd find the thief!" sobbed Dulcie pitifully.

Dulcie gave a little scream, but her mother pushed her gently toward her bedroom. "I'll not close an eye," wailed the daughter.

And Ted from his room door teased, "Just keep your eye off my scarfpin, sis!"

Dulcie gave a little angry snort and flung herself in bed and promptly fell asleep. It was mother, of course, who lay awake an hour or more planning what to do.

In the morning the little thief was enjoying a hearty breakfast when Ted, having answered the doorbell, came in with a big, long box and placed it on her lap. The rest of the family immeditately rose to its feet.

"For me?" asked Dulcie, turning white and red alternately.

Ted cut the string for her and opened the lid, and Dulcie with cold fingers pushed aside the tissue paper. Red roses! Long-stemmed and dozens of them. Such a thing had never happened before in the Driscom family. They hovered around Dulcie's shoulders, and when she drew a white card from the box, the entire family read the message with her:

"As long as you have taken my scarfpin—I saw it glittering in your hair all afternoon—won't you take my roses, too? And my love and my life and everything I possess, and give me in exchange just the hope of being my wife some day? L. Brookes."

"What I want to know," interrupted Mrs. Driscom sternly, "is how the pin got entangled in your hair? Answer me that, young lady? You were the last one in Mr. Brookes' office—and alone, I understand?"

"Oh, mother," sobbed Dulcie, as red as the roses Senah was picking up, "how can you, and before these children? It was all so dreadful—I mean I misunderstood. I thought he wanted to make love to me—I didn't wait to hear what he had to say! Oh, don't look so dreadfully severe, mother; I just yielded for a tiny second, then I pulled away, and I guess the scarfpin got stuck in my hair."

And mother drew Dulcie's head gently to her shoulder and kissed the hot, tear-stained little face. "It cannot be, dear—not old—"

"Oh, but he isn't old at all, nor horrid! He's not more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and he's very handsome and gentle. You understand, don't you, mother, it was simply protection from Ted and Senah. I loved him from the start, and I knew he did me, and to have peace at home I simply called him the horrid old Mr. Brookes from the beginning!"

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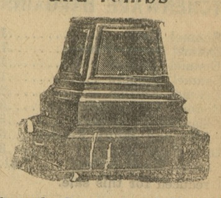

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