

Secret Hiding-Places.

BY JAMES SCOTT.



ANY an old tale of the "Once upon a time" type was heightened in interest by the narration of some incident connected with the secret hiding of a runaway thief, or of the imprisonment of an unfortunate captive. There is no doubt that several of these startling episodes were founded on fact, as revelations made during the demolition of many an old building serve to testify.

I have collected many particulars appertaining to the interiors of old houses, and have been rewarded by becoming acquainted with several interesting items. In some instances I have been compelled to personally complete details of certain parts—for instance, in connection with the ingenious hiding-place explained in Figs. 1 and 2, I had, until recently, a page of a very old book in which was a drawing of the plan Fig. 2, and a few descriptive remarks, other information probably being contained in pages not in my possession. But just as a single bone is sufficient for the scientific anatomist to base the appearance of the whole skeleton upon, so my knowledge of woodwork has enabled me to realize the full extent of the construction of parts not thoroughly explained to me.

The hiding-place to which I have just referred must have been a truly effective, albeit uncomfortable, one. A cupboard, apparently a fixture of the room, and resembling Fig. 1, would be the first thing, no doubt, to attract the attention of any inquisitive searchers for a "wanted" man. But I calcu-

late that, although the runaway may have happened to be concealed within the chamber behind it, the human hounds must have failed to detect, or even to suspect, his presence. Let us follow the man from the time he prepares for hiding himself. First, he would open the door of the cupboard. Then, by pulling the right-hand side of the cupboard forward, he would be permitted to draw one of the interior backs of the cupboard partly outward (as shown in Fig. 1) behind the space provided by reason of the first side having been shifted. These parts are shown in plan Fig. 2, A being the right-hand side and B the inside movable portion of the cupboard. It will be noticed that B also carries a part of the fellow-back with it.

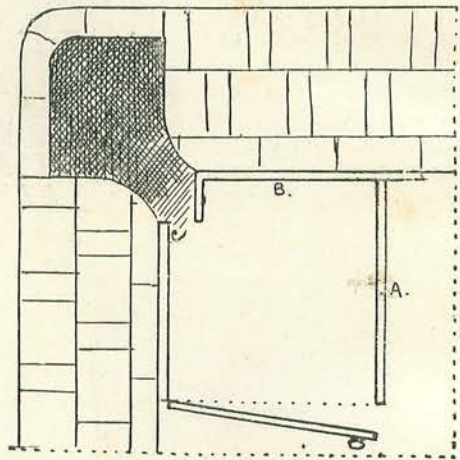


FIG. 2.

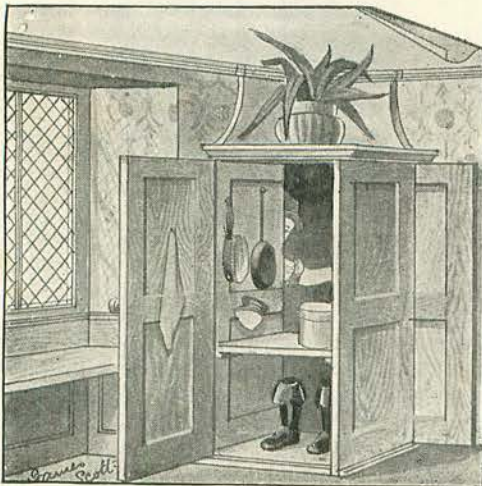


FIG. 1.

This exposes a gap, through which a man might readily squeeze, rather uncomfortably, perhaps, yet still effectively. He would ultimately find himself in a close cavity constructed in the wall and shown by the shaded portion of the diagram. Previous to making his entrance he must have closed the door as well as possible. Springs assisted in connection with the remaining portions. It was a very easy matter for him to replace the movable back, and by doing this it enabled the outer or right-hand side to spring back of its own accord, concealing even the edge of the interior side or back. The shelf shown would be merely laid upon a strip of wood fastened to the right-hand side of the cupboard, in order to permit proper working. Suitable panelling, no doubt, served to hide the crevice which must have existed at point

c, Fig. 2. It is safe to assume that little chance of discovery would offer itself to the searchers, for tapping would reveal nothing, unless one of them happened to strike right up in the corner, which would hardly be the case. How the self-made prisoner fared for a supply of requisite air, history telleth not, but I suppose that some provision must have been made in this direction.

A very effectual hiding-place is that interpreted by Fig. 3. A recess is allowed to exist in the solid wall, immediately above the



FIG. 3.

mantelpiece. It is secreted from view by means of a looking-glass, hinged in such a manner as to be capable of being easily and quickly opened as a door, permitting sharp ingress into the cavity. The position of the runaway, self-imprisoned in a space of this form of construction, must of course have been extremely irksome and almost intolerably inconvenient. But probably the balance of favour between such a mode of escape and capture was sufficient to induce but little complaint by the prisoner against his bare quarters. The awkward situation might have instilled a ray of joy into him on a wintry day, supposing the grate beneath him to have contained a liberally endowed fire; but I am inclined to believe that, as a rule, the fugitive must have experienced warmth or heat in a most burdensome degree. The chimney, of course, must have been specially constructed to meet such an emergency.

By being artful enough to scratch a tiny portion of quicksilver off the back of

the mirror, the man would have been enabled to observe, through the small peep-hole thus formed, the movements of the enemy, and be accordingly prepared for a conflict, if inevitable.

It is safe to assume that very few, if any, of the searchers would have suspected the existence of this cavity. They might have taken the precaution of tapping the surrounding wall, but, of course, their efforts by that means to discover the place of concealment would have proved unproductive.

Turning now to a third form of deception, we see that (Fig. 4) it was possible for a runaway to raise a heavy panel and pass through into a cavity containing a narrow flight of stone steps, where he could securely hide himself for a length of time, according to his discretion. The cunning rogue, whilst remaining within his hard prison, was possessed of facilities for observation, as will be readily comprehended upon referring to the hole in the wall, usually covered by the old Dutch clock, which was so hinged as to permit of its being bodily turned from the wall from within the place of concealment.

To create the impression that nothing was hollow in the walls of this apartment, sacks of some kind of material, or horizontally fitted boards, may have been used on the other side of the opening; although I must admit that the very bulk and solidity of the panel itself would have sufficed for the purpose of causing but little echo calcu-

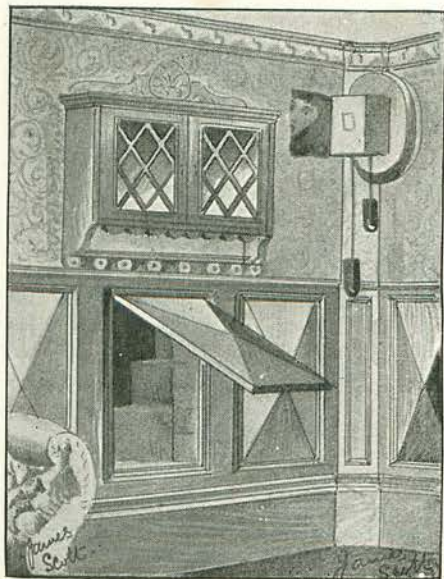


FIG. 4.

lated to arouse suspicion upon being tapped by an inquisitive detective.

No doubt, if the existence of the cavity had been suspected, great difficulty would have been experienced in discovering the secret by which admission was gained thereto. A sliding panel in the back of the cupboard attached to the wall permitted the owner to reach one end of a bar which passed behind the movable panel and down into the skirting board surrounding the room. When this bar was lifted to a certain height, it permitted the panel to be raised.

A cavity somewhat analogous in construction and idea to that illustrated in Fig. 3 is that drawn in Fig. 5. A massive gilt frame, containing a portrait or view, was securely nailed to the wall, which was solid and compact in all portions save that immediately behind the area covered by the painting, where existed a deep recess containing a seat. The entrance to this confined and undesirable residence was effected by the very simple method of raising the painting individually, as represented, which fitted into grooves along the sides of the frame containing it. Very likely, to aid the deception and avoid possible discovery, the top edge of the painting was gilded, and would, when the painting was lowered and firmly secured in place, be flush or level with the top straight portion of the frame.

If anyone became suspicious respecting this picture, and tapped it, it would produce

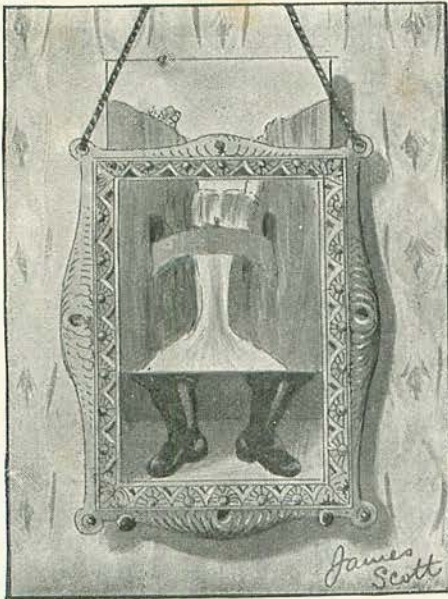


FIG. 5.

a hollow sound similar to that emanating from any class of painting when so knocked; therefore the inquisitive one might not submit his suspicion to any further test. But it is very improbable that a hunter would think of striking a picture, but would remain content with sounding the remaining portion of the wall, which would, of course, fail to reveal the existence of the cavity.

An effectively contrived hiding-place is explained by the drawing Fig. 6. The run-

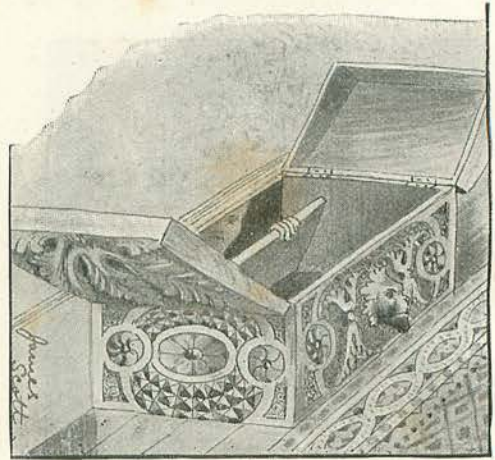


FIG. 6.

away would remove the contents of the heavy oaken chest, and then open a flap which communicated with the space below the floor. A confederate would refill the box, after having securely replaced the trap-door. A notable feature of this invention is that, should the searchers suspect the existence of a trap-door, they would be greatly deceived in their endeavours to find it, supposing that they failed to do so when examining the interior of the box. The skirting of the wall on this side of the room is really capable of sliding backwards and forwards, within grooves, between the flooring and the wall above. The chest fits close up against it, and is united to it, so that when the box is drawn either to the right or left hand side, the skirting travels with it, and, of course, fails to reveal any connection with the space beneath the floor. Allowance is made at the other ends of the skirting for this curious mechanism, and those ends therefore travel in spaces built in adjacent walls.

The skirting would be, of necessity, very evenly painted and free from marks, and likewise travel noiselessly, otherwise it would lead to exposure. By the judicious use of curtains and drapery, its motion might be

concealed. In order to prevent the possibility of the pursuers lifting it—or, rather, trying to do so—it would be constructed of excessively heavy wood; and to also avoid the chance of its being pulled frontwards, the edge of a very thick carpet would be tacked to the floor in such a way as to contact directly with it.

The sixth article (Fig. 7) on my present list has the appearance of a huge sideboard or cabinet. The trap-door is situated within it, and really forms the bottom of the cupboard. When lifted, it would admit a man to the space beneath the floor by means of a

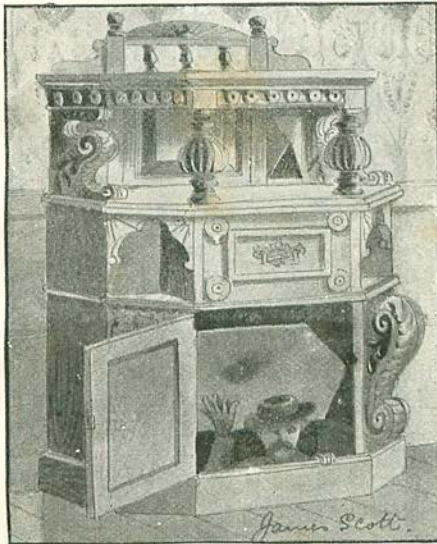


FIG. 7.

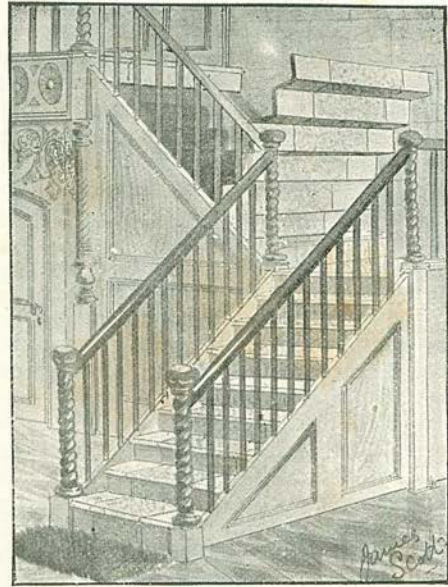


FIG. 8.

being securely locked together from within the space.

A false flight of steps is fitted below those which meet the eye; and the object of their presence is, of course, to deceive any searchers who might examine the interior of the cupboard situated underneath the stairs, and who would then see what they would naturally imagine to be the undersides of the genuine stairs. The deception is further increased by the fact that the same number of steps meet the eye both outside and within the cupboard; that is, of course, referring to those parts alone with which we are more immediately concerned. Were the searchers to undertake the measurement of the stairs, etc., they would become acquainted with the facts I have pointed out; but it is safe to assume that they would

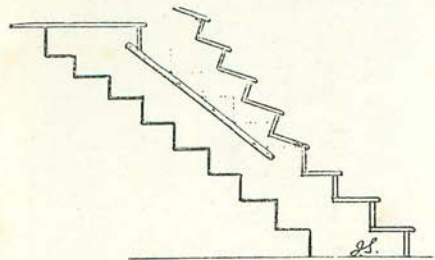


FIG. 9.

hole through the latter. For the purpose of avoiding chance discovery, the article would be intentionally heavy, so much so, that two or three men could not possibly remove it. It might even be screwed to the floor.

A very safe hiding-place is that built within a staircase (Fig. 8). There is no doubt that all cupboards beneath stairs would be keenly examined by those in pursuit of a runaway, and that all suspicious contrivances not neatly concealed would be of little avail for the purpose desired. But, as will be understood from the description of this particular form of deception, no one would think of being extra inquisitive after having made a cursory inspection of the place. A portion of the stairs lifts up bodily on hinges, and permits quick entrance to the secret cavity below. The self-made prisoner is then enabled to easily reclose the movable steps, which are supported firmly upon a thick strip of wood affixed to the wall, etc., and are capable of

accept the evidence of their eyes as conclusive (Fig. 9). Tapping upon what they believed to be the underside of the proper

stairs would produce a hollow sound; but as a similar response must be expected when legitimate stairs are tapped, that point would not be considered a valuable clue. The quarters would be truly uncomfortable, as the necessities of the position would demand that the prisoner should lie at full length in the cavity. Perhaps, however, some provision was made whereby slight relief was afforded.

It appears that the schemers of the past did not confine their ingenuity solely to devising contrivances within doors, as is exemplified by the water-butt depicted in the adjacent illustration. This form of reservoir is fast disappearing, and is being extensively replaced by the more healthy and cleanly zinc tank. It must have been a cute man who devised the article to which I am now drawing attention. In sketch, Fig. 10, I show a man entering the butt from its bottom end whilst the tap is pouring forth a volume of its contents. Notwithstanding the simple character of the invention, I fear that but few people would guess the form assumed by so innocent and genuine-looking an article. It was evidently a large one, and perched high up with the intention of preventing a person from taking a peep into its interior. By turning on the tap, and observing water issue forth as a result, the searchers would, no doubt, feel satisfied that no one was concealed within the butt. If they were not fully convinced, they would further test the matter by reaching at arm's length, and inserting a stick in the butt; and would, I am sure, when



FIG. 10.

they discovered that the stick became wetted, believe they were right in discarding the idea that the butt was used as a secret hiding-place.

Now let us follow the artful fellow who is intent upon gaining admission into this perfectly cool, albeit badly ventilated, retreat. First, he would release a hinged half of the bottom end of the butt, and a portion of the supporting plank (Fig. 11), and would raise himself into a conical cavity as illustrated

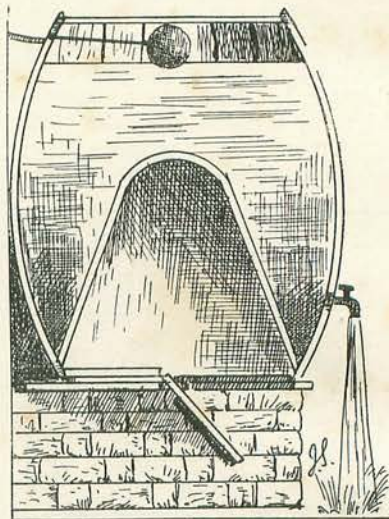


FIG. 11.

in the diagram, wherein he would squat on his haunches for a period according to that suggested by discretion, after having closed the trap-door. The water entirely covers the cone, but could not possibly touch the secreted man, unless by accident. The top of the cone is at too low an elevation to encounter the chance insertion of a stick, used as a medium to ascertain whether the upper part of the butt contained water. Altogether considered, I am inclined to give more points in favour of the effectiveness of this particular kind of prison than to any of the others described by me, which have been selected from a large number as being the most interesting and curious among them.

The arrangements delineated in Figs. 6 and 7 might also have served as a means of ingress to the apartment of a traveller, whom a villainous landlord of an isolated inn might have felt desirous of visiting, during the night, with hostile motives.

It must be remembered, too, that although probably being greatly availed of by highwaymen and other wrong-doers, these and other secret hiding-places may have been found extremely useful to religious men during the times of persecution, which every noble-minded man must regret were once so paramount.