

# Mystery of the Phantom Burglar

by William T. Brannon

**A**WAKENED by the insistent mewing outside his door, Sheriff Jason Ripperdam, whose living quarters were on the first floor of the county jail in Monticello, Ill., got up to let his cat in.

"I'm positive," he told his wife, "that I put that cat in the basement before we went to bed. How'd he get out?"

The sheriff made another trip to the basement with the cat. All the doors and windows were locked from the inside. Shaking his head, Ripperdam went to bed but couldn't sleep.

Monticello, a quiet town with no known criminal element, recently had been plagued by a series of burglaries. But the town's only burglar, Eddie Engel, was securely locked in the county jail, awaiting trial on five indictments. Who else could have been responsible for the new thefts?

Sheriff Ripperdam finally fell asleep only to awaken to a new headache. During the night, a prowler had entered the locked courthouse, ransacking offices and littering them with papers. The only loot was \$23 from the sheriff's desk.

Thoroughly aroused now, the sheriff went to the jail and strode up and down, eyeing the prisoners. Eddie Engel, sitting quietly in his cell, smiled at him. Sheriff Ripperdam shook his head and walked away just as the telephone rang.

"I was passing the courthouse after midnight," said the caller, "and I saw somebody walking up the courthouse steps. It looked like Eddie Engel. Is he still in jail?"

"He sure is," the sheriff replied.

"Guess it was somebody else."

Sheriff Ripperdam hung up, but the phone rang again. Another caller told of passing the courthouse and seeing a man who resembled Eddie Engel. But Eddie Engel couldn't have been the courthouse burglar; the sheriff had personally checked to see that his cell was locked before he went to bed.

And he had put the cat in the basement—but the cat had got out. Had Eddie Engel been out, too?

Sheriff Ripperdam had Engel moved to a cell in the second-floor tier. Then he ordered the guards to keep an eye on him, without letting him suspect he was being watched.

Eddie had been in his new quarters only a short time when he called down to the prisoner who now occupied his former cell: "I forgot an envelope under my bunk. Will you hand it up?"

"Sure."

The guards immediately notified Sheriff Ripperdam, who searched Eddie. He found the envelope which contained a key; it fit the cell door.

"So it was you!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Let's hear how you did it."

"Okay, Sheriff." Eddie then made a full confession.

**W**HEN HE had been locked up two months before, he was sick and the doctor said he had pneumonia. After he had recovered, the sheriff, at the doctor's request, had allowed Eddie to exercise by walking

in the corridor a few hours each day.

Eddie had noticed the sheriff's coat hanging on a chair and had taken his keys. He made a pattern of the key that unlocked the cell door and returned them to the coat. The sheriff hadn't noticed his keys were missing.

On another occasion when he was exercising, Eddie sneaked out through a window. He broke into a hardware store and stole metal saws, files, and blank keys, then managed to return to the jail before he was missed.

In his spare moments, when the guards weren't looking, he used the pattern and tools to make a key. He filed it down until it worked perfectly in the jail door. By that time, Eddie had fully recuperated and his exercising privileges were revoked.

But he had his key and after midnight, when everybody was asleep, he would quietly unlock his cell, go to the basement and slip through a window. After he had broken into a store, he would re-enter the basement, locking the window from the inside.

He watched for his opportunity and one night when the sheriff was sleep-

ing, Eddie lifted the keys to the courthouse. He hoped to find and destroy the evidence against him in the indictments. But he couldn't find it and had to console himself with the sheriff's \$23.

The merchandise stolen from Monticello stores had been concealed in clumps of shrubbery on the jailhouse lawn. It was still there.

"That's about all," Eddie concluded.

"Not quite," said the sheriff. "You've forgotten the cat."

"Yeah, the cat." Eddie glanced across the room at the sheriff's cat curled up on a window ledge. "He jumped out the window behind me the night I went to the courthouse. I chased him all the way around the jail, but I couldn't catch him. So I had to leave him out."

"That's what tripped you up," said the sheriff. "There wasn't any way for him to get out except through a window. I thought I might have left one open, but when I checked, they were all locked. I knew then it was an inside job."

"I never did like cats!" Eddie said as he was escorted back to his cell.



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