

## CORMAC HAS A PLAN

The house looked like any ordinary house from the outside. It stood on its own on a small hill and a pretty garden ran down to the road. The Summer blossoms were gone but shiny, evergreen trees and shrubs caught the October sun and fat dahlias still spotted the green with bright colour. Lizzie stood at the window gazing at them, thinking of nothing at all, just gazing. Lizzie looked ordinary too, a small, neat, old lady with silver curls and soft, brown eyes.

But she wasn't ordinary, she was a burglar. Not a top-class, professional burglar but a comfortable, occasional one, content to steal beautiful things which her husband, Cormac, had picked out. He was a burglar too and they had met while trying to steal three velvet, embroidered cushions from the same house.

Sometimes Lizzie wished that they could retire like other business people. They were getting old and slow and she was afraid they would get caught. Her fingers clutched at the curtain as she thought of the two of them spending their old age in prison. And even worse was the thought of losing all their lovely, precious things.

There were lamps of every shape and colour, made from bottles and glass slippers and shaded with silk and satin and lace. There were polished coffee tables piled one on top of another. Tea-sets and dinner-sets balanced on the mantle-piece or wobbled together under tables and behind chairs. Brass and ebony ornaments lay heaped in odd corners and great, shaggy piles of patterned rugs had to be climbed to get from room to room. More were rolled up and shoved under beds. Cormac could never resist just one more rug. Even the bathroom had three.

And the kitchen! It was a big kitchen with a wide fireplace, and plenty of shelves and cupboards crammed full of tins and packets of food, all sorts of food, from plain chicken soup to the most exotic of curries and sauces. Any time they were burgling Cormac just took whatever there was in the cupboards and dropped it all into Lizzie's sack. Lizzie couldn't remember the last time she had peeled a spud or scraped a carrot.

Their days followed a regular pattern, worked out over the years. Every morning Cormac left the house after breakfast, 'job hunting' as he called it. Sometimes he went on his bike, sometimes he took a bus, but usually he just walked. And as he travelled he looked and thought and measured and calculated and looked and thought again until he found something he really fancied. Often he found nothing and then he and Lizzie would spend the day remembering their favourite jobs and inspecting all their treasures.

While he was out Lizzie would happily work in the garden, sowing and weeding and pruning, turning the earth with her thin fingers and singing to herself. (She sang songs from when she was a girl and sometimes they made her sad to be getting so old.) And then when Cormac came home they would eat lunch or dinner or whatever they felt like. And all afternoon they made their plans, in the garden in Summer, and over a blazing fire in Winter. And this was one of the reasons they had never been caught: they spent so long perfecting plans and they worked so well together that they never made mistakes.

Although the village was only up the road and round the corner they knew no one who lived in it. And of course they never shopped there. The milkman brought their milk and the bread man brought their bread and they had everything else they needed. People thought them odd but left them alone. Children sometimes dared each other to knock on their door but as it was never answered they gave it up and invented stories about the two old people instead.

Cormac always laughed his high, thin laugh when he saw them.

"If they only knew," he would say. "He-he-he. They'd be shocked to their socks!"

Every evening after tea, about six o'clock, they went to bed and set the alarm for midnight. And when it went off they got up, swallowed a quick cup of hot tea and dressed for work. They always wore black clothes for work, black trousers and polo-neck sweaters, and they always kept to side roads and lanes. The police had never suspected them, but spent their time chasing after gangs, even when the trail led almost right to their door. But Cormac had a restless streak and sometimes he would frighten Lizzie by going after something really expensive or something too near their own neighbourhood. Lizzie would rather walk an extra five miles than take a risk near home.

She let go off the curtain and shook it straight. A bar of Autumn sun slanted low and golden across the room, lighting up all the glass and delph and Lizzie smiled, looking at each thing in turn. And then Cormac was at the door, wheezing and panting for breath, holding onto the handle. Lizzie gave a little squeal.

"What is it? Cormac! What's wrong?"

Cormac leaned against the door and fanned his face. Grey wisps of hair rose and fell on his shiny head as he tried to steady his breathing. His big hands flopped and flapped helplessly and his nose, big and bright in his face, quivered.

"Cormac," Lizzie cried again. "Speak to me! Is it the police? Oh, come in, come in. Don't stand there gasping where anyone could see you."

Cormac stumbled into the hall, nearly knocking down a stack of mirrors and Lizzie smartly shut the door behind him. She pushed him onto the nearest empty chair.

"Now," she said. "If you don't speak, I'll murder you."

And her eyes raked the room for something sharp to threaten him with. Cormac patted his chest, coughed and caught his voice at last.

"Oh, Lizzie," he said. "Wait till I tell you what I saw this morning. The most beautiful thing - oh, we've got to have it. The most beautiful, lustrous, shining - ahh . . ."

And he smiled and closed his eyes.

"Yes?" said Lizzie, bending over him. "Go on, the most lustrous, shining what? What? Go on!"

Her fists were tightly clenched and her arms swung stiffly forwards and back and she was ready to thump Cormac, or scream, or kick him, when he sat up straight and opened his dreamy eyes.

"A silver tea-set," he said, his voice reverent. "And we're going to have it, Lizzie. I can see it now, set out on our table and you pouring tea into those special, pink cups we've never used."

And his eyelids drooped again as he painted pictures in his head until Lizzie's sharp voice made him blink. She had been staring at him with her eyebrows up.

"A tea-set!" she burst out. "All this fuss and worry about a tea-set! Haven't we any number of tea-sets? And if it's real silver you can't have it anyway. We won't break our rules now, Cormac, not at our age."

"Rules, rules. What have rules to do with Old Whelan's tea-set?"

"Old Whelan? Our neighbour, Old Whelan? Am I hearing things?"

"No," said Cormac, settling himself in the chair. "You are not hearing things. I said Old Whelan. Stop fussing, Lizzie dear. You worry too much - it won't take us a minute to nip up there and grab it."

Lizzie's tight, white fists rose up under his nose. "Are you mad? Are you going loopy in your old age? We've never touched neighbours' houses. Never in all these years. And real silver?"

Lizzie blinked the tears out of her eyes.

"Be sensible, Cormac. Remember our motto - not too dear and not too near. Suppose we got caught! Just think about it for a minute."

I don't want to think about it. You can look as fierce as you like and it's no use talking to me. I want that tea-set. I'll go on my own if I have to, it's a simple job."

Lizzie wondered if a few tears would change his mind and reached into her pocket for a tissue. But after another look at his dreaming face she realised it would be a waste of time. She had seen Cormac like this before.

"I remember the last time you went silly over something unsuitable," she said. "That crystal, champagne bowl - we were nearly caught - those dogs! I can still hear them barking!"

And Lizzie sat down and covered her face with her hands just as Cormac stood up.

"There are no dogs up at Whelan's," he said. "Only the man himself and he's half-deaf. It's perfect. And wait till you see it! Such a neat little milk jug and the most perfect sugar bowl - you'll love it, so you will."

He pictured again the tea-set as he had seen it earlier, shining on a silver tray in Old Whelan's dining-room. Only by chance he had seen it. He rarely bothered looking through neighbours' windows. He might have missed it! At the very thought he shivered and opened his eyes.

"So, Lizzie? Do I go alone or not?"

"Oh, oh, oh," Lizzie said, almost crying real tears. "Oh, I'll have to go, I suppose. You'd only do something really stupid if I wasn't there."

"Good," said Cormac, and he kissed Lizzie's cheek with a loud smack. "What's for lunch? I'm starving."

Cormac was always hungry when he was excited and he hurried to the kitchen to sort out some tins, his fingers hovering over a steak and onion pie. Lizzie, uneasy and unhappy, followed him.

#### **STEALING THE TEA-SET**

All day long and all evening, Cormac chuckled to himself and rubbed his big hands over his head and face. Every time he thought of the gleaming, silver tea-set his heart seemed to grow too large for his chest. Wait till Lizzie sees it, he thought. She won't look at me with those sad eyes then. She'll be glad. She will, and she'll be proud of her old Cormac for finding such a treasure. He checked the clock and he checked his watch and he peered out the window at the deepening Autumn dusk.

Lizzie potted about, unable to discuss plans for the job as she usually did. Idly she dusted a lamp here and a vase there. Now and then she pressed a hand to her heart, thinking of the risks ahead. At the usual time they went for their snooze but neither of them was able to sleep. The evening and the early night seemed to last forever but at long last midnight struck and all their clocks bonged and clicked and trilled together.