

Real Life Stories
Burke The Burglar

He was a real old-time burglar. His kit and gun were always ready. His picture adorned many a rogues' gallery. He had courage born of many desperate "jobs." Twenty years of his life had been spent in prisons, here and there. He was a big strong fellow, with a hard face and a terrible tongue for swearing, especially at sheriffs and jail guards. But in spite of all his violent wickedness the Spirit of God awakened him. His name was Valentine Burke. This is the substance of his story as told by D. L. Moody to a friend.

It was years ago when Moody was young and not long in his ministry. He went to St. Louis to lead a gospel meeting, and one of the big daily papers announced that it was going to print every word he said— sermon, prayer, exhortation.

Moody said that it made him quake inwardly when he read this; but he made up his mind that he would weave in a lot of Scripture for the paper to print, and that might count, if his own poor words failed.

This he did, and his printed discourses were sprinkled with Bible texts. The paper tried its best at putting big, startling headlines at the top of the columns. The people were either going to hear Moody, or read what he said.

Burke was in the city jail, waiting trial for some offense. Solitary confinement was wearing on him, and he spent his time railing at the guards, or cursing the sheriff on his daily rounds. It was Burke's delight to curse a sheriff.

Somebody threw the daily paper into his cell.

The first thing that caught his eye was the big scare line:

HOW THE JAILER AT PHILIPPI GOT CAUGHT

It was just what Burke wanted, and he sat down with a chuckle to read the story of the jailer's bad luck. He had once passed through a town in Illinois called Philippi, and concluded that that was where the capture took place. But somehow the story had a strange ring to it, not the usual newspaper style. It was Moody's sermon of the night before.

"What rot is this?" said Burke to himself:

PAUL AND SILAS

A Great Earthquake:

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

"Have the papers got to printing such stuff?" He looked at the date. Yes, it was the morning paper, just off the press.

He threw it down with an oath, and strode about his cell like a caged lion. After a time he picked up the paper and read its blessed story. It was then a strange something, from where he knew not, came into the burglar's heart, and cut him to the quick.

"What does this mean?" he said to himself; "twenty years and more I've been a burglar and a jailbird, and I never felt like this before. What is it to be saved anyway? I've lived a dog's life and I'm getting tired of it. If there is such a God as that man is telling about, I believe I'll find out even if it kills me."

Away toward midnight, after hours of bitter remorse over his wasted life, and with broken prayers— the first uttered since he was a child at his mother's knee— Burke learned that there is a God— One who is able and willing to blot out the darkest record with one stroke. He found the wondrous secret of the cross, how on it Jesus Christ bore his many sins and put them all away forever.

That night God saved the burglar. He believed the word of Christ and received everlasting life. Then he waited for day, a new creature, crying and laughing by turns.

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Next morning when the guard came round, Burke had a pleasant word for him, and the man eyed him with wonder. When the sheriff came, Burke greeted him as a friend, and told him how he had been led to Christ by reading Moody's sermon.

"Jim," said the sheriff to the guard, "you had better keep an eye on Burke; he's playing the 'pious dodge' and the first chance he gets he'll be out of here."

When the trial came up, through some legal technicality, the case was dismissed and Burke was released.

Friendless in a great city, known only as a daring criminal, for months he lived a life of desperate loneliness and sorrow.

Men read his face when he asked for work and upon its evidence turned him away. But he was brave and sustained by the mighty power of God, he struggled on.

Seeing how his sin-marred face told against him, he asked the Lord "if He couldn't make him a better-looking man, so that he could get an honest job."

And God answered that prayer. For Moody said that a year from that time, when he met Burke in Chicago, he was as fine a looking man as he knew. This was of the Lord, who did it for him in answer to his childlike faith.

After seeking in vain for a long time to find steady work, Burke went to New York, hoping, far from his old haunts, to find peace and honest employment. But he did not succeed, and came back to St. Louis, much discouraged. He was, however, still kept by the God who had found him in the prison cell.

One day there came a message from the sheriff that he was wanted at the courthouse. With a heavy heart he went, "Some old case they've got against me," he said: "but if I'm guilty, I'll tell them so; I've done with lying."

The sheriff greeted him kindly.

"Where have you been Burke?"

"To New York."

"What have you been doing there?"

"Trying to find an honest job."

"Have you kept a good grip on the religion you told me about?"

"Yes," answered Burke, looking him straight in the eye. "I've had a hard time, sheriff, but I haven't lost my faith."

"Burke, I had you shadowed every day you were in New York. I suspected that your religion was a fraud. But I want to say to you that I know you have lived an honest Christian life, and I have sent for you to offer you a deputy-ship under me. You can begin at once."

From that time the tide began to turn. He set his face like a flint. Steadily and with dogged faithfulness Burke went about his duties, until the best men in the city came to know and recognize him. Moody was passing through, and stopped off to meet Burke. He was found in a closed room upstairs in the courthouse, serving as a trusted guard over a bag of diamonds. He sat with the bag of gems in his lap and a gun on the table. There were \$60,000 worth of diamonds in the sack.

"Moody," he said, "see what the grace of God can do for a burglar. Look at this sack of diamonds! The sheriff picked me out of his force to guard it!"

He cried like a child as he picked up the stones.

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Some time after this, Some Christians in St. Louis had made ready for the coming of an evangelist. He was to lead a series of meetings, but he was prevented from coming. There was sore disappointment until someone suggested that they send for Valentine Burke to carry on the meetings. He led night after night, and many sinful men and women were saved from lives of crime and shame by the wonderful grace of God.

Burke's gentle and faithful life of service was greatly blessed of God in the city where he had been such a sinner. And when at last his work was done and his life here ended, the rich and the poor, saints and sinners, came to the funeral. It is a blessed story of God's mercy and salvation, of His power to save sinners. *Are you one of them, dear reader?*

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