

MRS. BARRINGTON'S BURGLAR

A Midnight Episode in Which Love and Adventure are Strangely Interwoven

BY TEMPLE BAILEY



"I'm not afraid--life doesn't hold much for me."

MRS. Barrington's voice came out of the dark.

"Please," she said, quietly, "put those down."

The Burglar dropped the two diamond rings and a brooch and flashed his light in Mrs. Barrington's face.

"I am not afraid," she sat up on the couch. She wore a pale blue dressing gown, and her hair fell in two long black braids to the floor. "I am not afraid. Life doesn't hold much for me, and if you want to shoot me, it will save my doing it."

The lantern shook in the Burglar's hand. "What makes you talk like that?" he asked, sharply.

"What makes you steal?" was the weary demand.

"Necessity," he flung back at her.

"Money necessity?" was her query.

"Yes."

"If I were a man," she told him, "I wouldn't admit that I couldn't earn an honest living. It is we women who, when we come to pawning our diamonds, stare poverty in the face."

The Burglar picked up the rings. "You were going to pawn these?" he asked.

"Yes, and after that—the deluge."

"But you can't live on what you get from these for a long time."

"Can't I?" her laugh was mirthless. "My dear invader of homes, I have debts. My landlady has been patient for months. She can't let me stay much longer. I have a bill at the little restaurant around the corner. I ate there until I was tired of the awful cooking and ashamed to run up my account any further—and I owe the butcher and the baker and the candlestickmaker—I smuggle things into my room and cook over the gas jet—and if you hadn't come tonight you wouldn't have found the rings and pin, for I was going to pawn them tomorrow—although one is my engagement ring, and the other ring and the pin were my mother's."

THE Burglar came a step nearer. "Where's your husband that he isn't taking care of you?"

"He's dead," she said, simply, "and he didn't take care of me when he was alive. He—he drank—and made away with the money my father left—"

she blushed deeply. "I shouldn't have told you that—you can't be interested in my family history."

"I—I am interested in you," the Burglar said, abruptly. "It is hard lines for a woman."

"Yes," she agreed, "I have eaten crackers and tea for two days—and—and it's monotonous to say the least." She rose and touched an electric button and the lights flared up.

The Burglar put up his arm quickly. "What made you do that?" he cried, and turned his back

as he wheeled sharply away from her."

"I wanted to see what you look like," Mrs. Barrington said. "Turn around."

But when he had turned, facing her defiantly, she was silent for a moment before she spoke.

"So you are a gentleman."

"Yes," he caught his breath quickly. "By birth and training, but—I think tonight I have forfeited my right."

"It's your first attempt?"

"Yes," his blue eyes met hers steadily.

She gave a satisfied nod.

"You are telling the truth? What made you do it?"

"I told you before—necessity."

She shook her head. "Not for food and lodging. Your clothes are too good for that. You wanted a big sum."

"Yes," he stood looking down at her for a moment, and then he burst out, "If you will let me stay I'll tell you about it."

She sank into a little low seat, and indicated a big chair opposite."

I OWE a lot," he confided, "college debts. Dad has always paid everything, but yesterday I had a letter from him and he has had some big losses and he's ill, and mother said that any worry might kill him—and there I was with every tailor and tradesman threatening me, and nowhere to borrow—and tonight I got desperate, and—and this wild scheme came into my head and I thought if I could only get enough to tide me over that after things were straightened out I could send the money back—I must have been mad."

Her wide eyes studied him. "I know that kind of madness. One day when I had gone without food for hours, I went into a bakery and stood with the crowd, and tucked two rolls into my muff."

"Oh, by Jove," the boy ejaculated, "you poor little thing."

"So you see," she was trying to speak lightly, "we are two of a kind."

He was eyeing her keenly. "I'll bet you didn't eat those rolls," he said, at last.

She blushed. "No," she confessed, finally. "I walked all the way back and put them on the bakery counter and no one ever knew—"

"You see," his voice was triumphant. "I knew you wouldn't steal. But I—"

"Perhaps," she comforted him, "you would have brought my rings back, too."

"I hope so"—then he stopped, suddenly.

"Look here," he said, awkwardly, "I've got a little money in my pocket, and I'm going to get you something to eat—it is awful to think you may be starving."

"Not quite," she told him, but her eyes were eager.

"This seems such a luxuriant apartment," he looked about him with a puzzled air, "that one can't think of your being hungry amid such surroundings."

"It is expensive," she confessed, "but when I came here I didn't know that I should not have an income. My lawyers thought they might be able to save something—and so my bill piled up, and—then I couldn't leave until I had paid."

"I see—"

"If you will get me something to eat," she went on, "there is a little all night place around the corner—and if you go down the fire escape no one will hear you—for the people below have gone to a week end party—and the landlady is deaf—"

WHEN he came back he had hot soup in a pitcher and rolls and butter.

"I only had fifty cents," he apologized, "but this looks all right—"

"It's delicious." She poured it into two dainty cups. "I haven't many dishes, and we can fill these as often as we like." She tasted hers. "Do you think I am awfully greedy?" she demanded, "but if you only knew how hungry I am—"

"I think you are wonderful," his voice broke boyishly, "to take back those rolls. I shall never know whether I am really honest or not—you see I shall always be smirched with the thought of what might have been."

"How old are you?" she asked him, suddenly.

"Twenty-three—"

"And I am twenty-two. And I feel a hundred—"

"You don't look sixteen."

"It's the way my hair is fixed. Oh, this soup is delicious, it is ambrosia and nectar and everything worth while—"

"I am glad to do something for you—" his eyes were taking in the beauty of her—

"I want you to do something for me," she said, suddenly. "I am going to pawn the diamonds tomorrow morning, and I am going to pay my just debts. Then you are to pay your debts with what is left, or if it isn't enough, you shall at least put off your creditors for a time. Then we will both go to work. And some day you shall pay me—"

"Do you think I would take money from you?" he demanded, hotly.

"It is better to take my money than steal my jewels," she flung back at him. "Ah, forgive me—" she begged, as his face burned a deep red. "You must take it, you must. It will do me good to go to work, and it will make me happy to save you from yourself."

SOMETHING in her face held him silent for a moment, then he burst out. "On one condition I will take it."

"Condition?"

"That you let me prove myself a man—and then let me take care of you for the rest of your life—that you'll let me try to make you happy."

"Oh," her startled eyes condemned him. "You have known me only a few hours—"

"I feel as if I had known you a lifetime," he said, "and anyhow we can prove whether I mean it in the years to come—"

She gave a little tremulous laugh.

"Oh," she cried, as she held out her hands to him, "it would be lovely—to be happy."

"Please God, I'll try to make you so," he said, in a moved voice.

"And so you are really a Burglar after all," she murmured. "for while you didn't steal my jewels, you are going to steal my heart."



"Do you think I am awfully greedy?" she demanded.