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Orilla's Burglar

She Was Equal to the Occasion

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Orilla Payne felt very lonely indeed as the carriage rolled away from the door and she realized that she was all alone in the big house save for the three servants in the basement.

"Of course I shall miss the pleasure of going, but as for feeling lonely with all these wonderful books about me!" Orilla smiled incredulously, for, poor little country mouse that she was, the Maynards' beautiful home and well stocked library represented a wealth of enjoyment.

"Nothing to be afraid of," murmured Orilla, settling herself on the wide leather couch before the library fire and looking dreamily into the glowing mass of coals in the grate.

"Orilla's beautiful dark eyes grew dreamy and then drowsy and finally closed altogether, and her charming head, crowned with golden brown locks, was pressed against the yellow satin pillow while she slept.

Of course she did not know that the library door opened ever so little and that the sharp face of the housemaid, Jane, was thrust inside an instant before the door closed again.

Orilla's face flushed beautifully and her eyes shone like twin stars as she made eager response to his inquiry.

"What would I do?" she repeated. "Why, I'd go to somebody, some woman who understood and loved little children, and I'd tell her all about poor little Don and ask her to help me. Then if that woman had a nice farm in the country, where Don could have plenty of fresh milk and eggs and play about in the lovely sunshine and tumble in the snow, why, she would ask Don to come there and stay until his father got another job.

"For a few never to be forgotten moments the man and the girl stared at each other, and then Orilla's hand dropped and she asked with a little tremor in her sweet voice: "I—I suppose you're a burglar?"

"I am, now!" breathed the man sharply. "You mustn't interfere with me!" he went on hurriedly. "I came here to steal—understand, steal! I'm not going to have any one stand in my way!" Orilla shuddered.

"I suppose you've just got to do it," she said pityingly. "I suppose you're starving."

"Yes, and what's more, some one I love better than life or honor or anything else is starving—a weak, helpless little motherless boy. That's why I'm stealing, for Don!" He threw a hand sharply against his eyes as if to shut out the sight of a strange house into which he had entered. "I had to come," he added wearily.

"Why did you come to Uncle Peter's house?" asked Orilla, thrilling strangely at this unexpected encounter with a burglar.

"Why? Because Mr. Maynard cheated my father out of what little money he had. I saw my father die a poor and disappointed old man because he had foolishly invested in Peter Maynard's glided wildcat mining ventures. I'm here to take something that should be mine. I don't call it stealing."

"It is, just the same," remarked Orilla calmly. "Two wrongs never did make one right, and if your mother was here she would say so, and that's all."

"Now, will you give me a trial and give little Don a chance to start life fair? You don't want him to be ashamed of his own father," pleaded Orilla.

The man lifted his head and tore the handkerchief from his face and the hat from his head. He stuffed them in his coat pocket and stood looking down at her from shining eyes. "Ah, you are kind," he breathed brokenly. "There were more like you to lend a helping hand—if I can only bridge over this difficulty!"

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His eyes stared at her dully now, and his hands gripped the edge of his coat.

"But little Don," he muttered brokenly. "I've been sick for weeks and lost my position in the office, and I can't get another one, and my little lad is starving. What would you do?" he demanded fiercely.

Orilla's face flushed beautifully and her eyes shone like twin stars as she made eager response to his inquiry.

"What would I do?" she repeated. "Why, I'd go to somebody, some woman who understood and loved little children, and I'd tell her all about poor little Don and ask her to help me. Then if that woman had a nice farm in the country, where Don could have plenty of fresh milk and eggs and play about in the lovely sunshine and tumble in the snow, why, she would ask Don to come there and stay until his father got another job.

The intruder drew a deep breath and smote his hands sharply together. "That would be very nice," he said bravely, "but such things only happen in books. A woman of the sort you speak of would be one in ten for nothing, and I don't know where to look for her. My little boy is hungry, starving! Do you understand me?" he ended fiercely.

"Wait a moment," said Orilla, sitting up among the cushions and growing very animated. "Oh, please pick up the rug and put it over my spinned ankle. It has slipped off. Thank you. Now about the little boy. Have you ever stolen before?"

"Of course not," came indignantly from under the white handkerchief. Orilla smiled wisely. "I'm very glad of that, and I'm very sorry you are so skeptical, because there really is such a woman as you describe, only she's a girl yet. She's right here. I'm Orilla Payne, and I live in Rosedale, on the loveliest farm, and I am visiting my cousins, the Maynards. I'm going home tomorrow, and I'll take Don with me if you will trust me, and it can all come out as I have planned. I have the dearest mother in the world, and she will just love little Don, and there's Lydia, our old nurse, who doesn't have half enough to do and who grumbles all the time because there are no children in the family to make a little boy happy."

"Now, will you give me a trial and give little Don a chance to start life fair? You don't want him to be ashamed of his own father," pleaded Orilla.

The man lifted his head and tore the handkerchief from his face and the hat from his head. He stuffed them in his coat pocket and stood looking down at her from shining eyes.

"Ah, you are kind," he breathed brokenly. "There were more like you to lend a helping hand—if I can only bridge over this difficulty!"

Orilla smiled understandingly. "I know life is made up of crossing bridges," she said quaintly, then she listened.

"Uncle Peter is coming," she said quietly. "I hear his latchkey. He will come in here. You are my friend. You are paying me a visit, although you are staying rather late. What is your name—quick?"

"Donald Findlay," he gasped, sinking into a big chair. The door opened, and the kindly face of Peter Maynard appeared. "In here, Orilla?" he asked pleasantly. "Yes, Uncle Peter. Come in and meet my friend Mr. Findlay," said Orilla quickly.

"Findlay?" repeated Mr. Maynard as he came forward with outstretched hand. "The name is familiar, sir, and your face—your face is familiar too."

"Perhaps you know his father, Uncle Peter?" dared Orilla. Peter Maynard's eyes narrowed as he scanned the young man's pale countenance.

"I knew a Dr. Findlay," he said reminiscently. "My father was Dr. Findlay. He is dead," said Donald abruptly. "Pardon the question, Mr. Findlay, but did your father suffer hardship?"

"He died poor," was the crisp reply. "If there was anything I could do," muttered Maynard helplessly. Donald's handsome face was proudly aloof. Orilla caught her breath, and she once more plunged her little finger in the plea of another's business.

"I think if you could give my friend some work to do," suggested Orilla practically, "it would be worth more than anything else. He really is very expert—expert in office work—and he's been ill a long time, and he has a little motherless boy to take care of. Somebody has to give him a start, you know."

"Just the thing!" cried Maynard, turning about with gleaming eyes. "How about it, Mr. Findlay? I need a private secretary, and I'm sure you'll do. Does it appeal to you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Maynard," he said gravely. "If you will permit me, I will call at your office tomorrow and I will present my credentials. After that, if you care to employ me, I shall be very grateful."

Peter Maynard sighed with relief. Whatever prickings of conscience he may have had concerning his shady dealings with Dr. Findlay now, though he, could be assuaged by this kindness to Findlay's son. So the elastic conscience of the financier relaxed a little and he glowed with all the warmth of a good deed done, of a wrong righted.

After a little general conversation Maynard left the room for a few moments, and Donald Findlay arose to take leave of the girl who had changed the whole course of his life.

"What can I say to you?" he whispered brokenly. "What can I do for you in return for your great goodness to me this night?" Orilla opened a dainty satin work bag and took out a little fat beaded purse and slipped it into his reluctant hand.

"That is for little Don," she said soberly. "Please take it for his sake. And you will let him come to the farm for a few weeks?" she pleaded.

He looked down at her with that rare smile in his eyes. "As if I could refuse you anything after this evening's adventure," he said softly. "Good night, best and kindest of girls. May God guard you. That will be the prayer of Don and his father!" He bent swiftly and kissed her hand. He left the room by the front door, openly and honestly as was his right. He blushed as he remembered that the girl there on the sofa was the one who had saved his manhood.

"She's so sweet," he murmured as he trudged home to little Don and the beginning of a new life.

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