



# A Doting Burglar

by Ben Hecht

LEST regular union members in good standing of the sublime profession of crib-cracking and porch-climbing, wielders of "soup" and jimmy, delicate manipulators of strong-box mechanisms, should take offense at this frivolous juggling with their means of livelihood and burglarious methods, I wish hereby to enter an apology to them, one and all. No burglar that ever lived was like John Heliotrope in this veracious tale which only goes to prove that Truth is stranger than Fiction.

—The EDITOR.

“JOHN,” she said, “do be careful. You don’t know how I worry about you. I sit and think and think and tremble. Oh, John!”

The burglar looked at his sensitive wife and smiled. He was a young burglar, a handsome burglar. He drew himself up proudly to his full, handsome height and gazed down upon the pretty, pleading woman who sat knitting by the window of their snug cottage.

“Sarah,” he said, “don’t be foolish. You don’t imagine for a moment that I—Good Lord! You don’t think that any kidney-footed, red-necked copper is going to nail me! Why!”

With a derisive laugh John Heliotrope strode to his wife’s side and patted her shoulders good-naturedly

“I should think,” he said, “you’d know better by this time than to worry and fret about me.”

A look of admiration and love came into his wife’s eyes.

“I can’t help it,” she whispered, drawing his hand to her lips and kissing it, “You know how I love you. And you never tell me anything, anything. Oh, John, don’t go out to-night, please!”

John shook his head, still smiling. “How about a little necklace,” he whispered, “and a pair of pearl earrings, eh? I haven’t forgotten

to-morrow’s your birthday, darling.”

A soft, throaty laugh was his reward.

“You dear foolish,” his wife murmured. She arose and embraced him.

“You won’t ever forget my birthday, John. If you should I’d think—I’d think that you had forgotten something else.”

She looked wistfully into his eyes.

“I won’t,” he promised; “and, besides, I’ve been rather lazy lately. It’s been almost a week, and I don’t want to get stale.”

Mrs. Heliotrope laughed again.

“You needn’t make any more excuses, John. I never have stood in your way, have I? And if you bring me back a nice necklace or earrings or something, why, I’ll forgive your going away from me like this and leaving me all alone, you naughty boy.”

“Don’t worry about that,” exclaimed the burglar, a humorous ring in his voice. “To-night I work for you. I’ll pick out something extra fine; something you can be proud of and wear to the theater.”

“Do, John. That sealskin coat you brought home last week is sizes too small for me. Why, it’s a little girl’s coat.”

“I know, Sarah,” he answered, “I couldn’t help it. I never was a hand for picking out

women's clothes. Before we were married I never gave a thought to them."

"Well, it's time you learned something about it. If you should run across anything size thirty-two, or even a thirty-four, don't forget. But for Heaven's sake don't bring back one of those old-fashioned jackets like you did last month. They're for grandmothers."

John Heliotrope smiled, and with another kiss upon her lips, darted up the stairs into his room, crying out, "I'll be back in a minute."

Before a bureau in his room the burglar paused. From it he selected two finely edged instruments, one like a delicate cold chisel, the other a curious auger. Then, donning a pair of light kid gloves, he seized his slouch hat and issued into the upper hall. His wife's room stood open before him. After a moment's hesitation he entered it, and an exclamation of anger escaped him. The door of the wall safe stood ajar. He approached it quickly, and kneeling before it, drew forth two red-leather cases. He opened them and stared curiously at an assortment of jewelry, a pearl necklace, rings, pendants, earrings, lorgnettes, collars, chains, watches. They were still dangerous loot, and it would be another month before it would be safe entirely to convert them into an income.

Closing the smoothly swinging steel door, he twirled the knob and locked the safe.

"Sarah," he exclaimed, as he appeared in the sitting-room down-stairs, "you shouldn't leave your safe open like that. It's foolish."

"Why, John. I didn't know."

She stammered and looked at him appealingly. "Forgive me, please."

"I hate carelessness," he muttered, and then, with a smile, came to her side and took her in his arms. "It's all right, now, darling. I've locked it, and everything is safe inside. Don't wait up for me. Go to bed and have a good sleep. I'll be back at dawn."

Smiling and tearful, Mrs. Heliotrope watched her knight fare forth, and a great love and admiration welled in her heart at the sight of his stalwart figure moving into the darkness.

John Heliotrope swung down the street calmly and blithely, with the air of a man sure of himself and proud of his achievements. He was in a high mood for adventure. The spring night

quicken his blood and he stepped briskly on, drawing in long breaths of the tree-smelling dark. Before a garage he stopped, and after a few moments jesting with the owner, piloted his car dexterously out of the interior.

As he whirled down the street in his rakish car, John Heliotrope meditated sweetly upon life. He thought for a moment upon his wife, and tenderly imagined his return at dawn, laden with gifts; visualized her joy, her kisses, her gratitude.

She had invited a number of friends for a birthday party. There would be meat and drink and laughter. As he pondered upon these things Heliotrope drew from an inside pocket a note-book. Bringing his car to a stop under an arc light, he turned his attention to the interior of this book. There were certain addresses and notations inscribed therein. Having refreshed his memory thus, he started off again and was soon rolling down a stretch of dimly lighted avenue on each side of which loomed elegant formal homes.

He lessened the speed of his car, and with a keen eye upon these domiciles progressed more slowly down the road. In front of one, almost concealed in its own darkness, he came to a stop. At this point his entire demeanor changed. The dreaminess and nonchalance were gone from him. He stepped out nimbly, walked directly into the darkness engulfing the house, and with a sharp glance about him proceeded at once about his business.

Twenty minutes later he returned, leaped into his car and drove off. A puzzled light was in his eyes, and a look of indignation. He twisted the wheel viciously in turning a corner, and seemed altogether out of sorts.

"Of all the damned nuisances," he kept muttering to himself. Failure had befallen him. Double-barred windows, peculiarly fastened doors, unusually protected porch screens had resisted his sinister advances. At every turn he had been met by some newfangled burglar-proof contrivance, and as he pondered upon his fruitless labors of the twenty minutes a rage slowly possessed him and he swore.

His next call was at the curb of a brightly lighted corner. Again, leaving his car, its engine running, he penetrated a polite wilderness of trees and shrubs, achieved a point directly under a masonry porch, and with an agility purely

Darwinian, mounted one of the stone pillars. Arrived on the porch, he brushed his trousers and fell to work upon the French doors confronting him. An exclamation of joy escaped him as the doors yielded under his skillful fingers. John Heliotrope found himself inside a large, heavily carpeted room. With a small flash he lighted up little circles of this room and progressed into other fields.

It was barely ten minutes later that a shot startled the neighborhood and that John Heliotrope dropped courageously from the cement porch to the soft earth below and fled with great haste toward his car. Behind him came a man dressed in a white nightgown and flourishing a long revolver. The man, however, stopped at the edge of the porch and unloaded his weapon into the darkness. Leaping into his car, the burglar started off at full speed, bent low over the wheel and cursing outrageously as he flew through the night.

To follow John Heliotrope in his further nocturnal adventures would be to record merely a series of heart-breaking episodes, fruitless, inutile performances in which the vaunted skill, courage, penetration of this artful creature came to naught.

Fate seemed utterly opposed. Fortune's lips seemed entirely disinclined to smile. With the first dim light of dawn breaking over the streets, John Heliotrope sprang into his car, emitted a final round oath, and dashed off. For the sixth time he had been foiled. His plans, matured during a week of study and observation, had for the sixth time encountered the unforeseen, a kennel of dogs, fierce, exultant, vastly lunged. Behind him, as he sped empty handed down the road, another car flew, a car containing a load of outraged citizenry. Through the quiet, faintly lighted streets the chase led. Bullets whistled by John's ears, thudded against the back of his machine. With a gasp of joy he heard the noise of the pursuer growing less, turned for an instant, and perceived it a mere dot in the distant road. He was safe. He turned off at a right angle and drove on at diminished speed. There came to him a sudden realization of his complete failures. It was too late to try again, and in any case to try an uncharted house was madness.

He drove on, thinking now of his wife, of her party, of her disappointment. Home and bed

called him. The night had been tedious, dangerous. He felt weary.

In the block where he lived his chagrin came back to him with increased violence. He frowned ominously upon the innocent domiciles of his neighbors, but a sense of fatality kept him in his seat. His own house was darkened. She, Sarah, was asleep, dreaming of necklaces and earrings, no doubt, he reflected bitterly. Passing it, he proceeded to the garage, stored his machine in a dispirited manner, and returned on foot to the cottage which he called home. As he walked, certain ideas coursed through his brain, and a certain determination brought a glint into his eyes.

He approached the cottage cautiously. There were obstacles, fearful obstacles. First there was the complete and elaborate system of burglar alarms which he himself had had installed against just such inroads. He had pointed out to his wife that the valuables with which the cottage was laden made it a rich field for his profession. Consequently bringing his inside information to bear upon the business, not a window was without its silver strips, not a door without its bells and devices. He had taken steps even to insure the basement approaches against marauders. The windows on the second floor, the skylight on the roof, all were equipped with these satanic devices.

He paused before his home, and for the seventh time that night swore. He racked his mind trying to remember a single vulnerable point he might have overlooked in his outfitting. There was none. Were he to pry open any window in the house it would ring and jangle; any door it would bark and shriek; any brick, it would cry out his presence to the neighborhood and to his wife. Twice he circled the cottage, gazing upon all points of ingress, weighing his chances, and twice he returned to his starting-point, desperate and angered.

The chimney! The thought came to him with a clear, joyous bounce in his heart. The chimney had been overlooked. It was a broad, Santa Claus chimney, leading into a great fireplace which had not been used for several weeks. In ten minutes he had gained the roof. In another five he had started down this inspiration of a chimney. An inconceivable blackness assailed him. His ears became clogged, his eyes laden, his mouth full,

his hands heavy with soot.

At last, however, his feet touched bottom. He wedged his head out and stood in the sitting-room of his home, dripping with ashes and chimney refuse. Brushing himself quickly over the empty grate he tiptoed out of the room, up the stairs, and into the corridor on which his wife's chamber opened. He tried the door. It was locked. Again his previous caution mocked him. Not a door in the house but had experienced his cunning locksmithship. No two tumbler bolt this, but an intricate Yale, doubly secured.

For another ten minutes he worked on it with no success. The dawn had come, and the air was beginning to shine with the sun. Casting his eyes frenziedly about, he encountered a glistening object on the floor, a key. He picked it up quickly and recognized it at once.

"The careless fool," he murmured professionally. He fitted it into the lock, and the door opened noiselessly. Asleep in the bed lay his wife. He gazed upon her composed features and a fearful hesitation came into his heart; such a cowardice as he had never before experienced in his labors. His tread was panther-like, his eye furtive and filled with terror. Slowly he made his way to the wall safe: slowly and with infinite patience he turned the knob; listened to the click of the tumblers. It opened. Before him lay two red-leather cases on a shelf. Opening one of them he extracted a great pearl necklace, a pendant of rubies, two rings laden with diamonds, and replaced the case. He locked the safe, he tiptoed out, he locked the door, he tiptoed down the stairs after replacing the key on the floor. Once in the sitting-room he drew his first happy breath.

He opened the front door with his key, and a great jangling and tumult filled the house. A moment later he heard his wife calling, "John, John, is it you?"

"Yes, darling," he cried back.

An apparition in lacy nightclothes descended the stairway and stood facing him.

"Why, John, look at yourself. Where have you been. Heavens alive!"

His wife stared at him, her mouth open, a look of fright and amusement on her face.

"John," she repeated, "what has happened?"

Through the caked soot he grinned at her, and pulling from his pocket a pearl necklace, a pendant of rubies, a handful of rings and trinkets, held them aloft.

A gurgle of delight came from her.

"Your birthday," said John. "My respects and gifts."

Opening wide her sleepy eyes, Mrs. Heliotrope rushed toward him.

"Don't," he warned, "you'll get all sooty. I've had a hell of a time. Quick, put them in the safe. Or no. I'll put them there, you're too careless."

The birthday party was a success. Resplendent in silks and jewels, Mrs. Heliotrope sat facing her husband at the table, her guests smiling sympathetically at the devotion and gratitude which illumined the glances she cast upon her handsome husband. It was not until a week later that John Heliotrope thought it safe, however, to summon the Anti-Burglar Protective Association and have an asbestos burglar alarm installed in the chimney of his home.