

BRITZ HEADQUARTERS

By MARCIN BARBER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

SYNOPSIS.

The story opens with a scream from Dorothy March in the opera box of Mrs. Missioner, a wealthy widow. It is estimated when Mrs. Missioner's necklace breaks, scattering the diamonds all over the floor. Curtis Griswold and Braxton Sande, society men in love with Mrs. Missioner, gather up the gems. Griswold steps on what is supposed to be the celebrated Maharane and crushes it. A Hindu declares it was not the genuine. An expert later pronounces all the stones substitutes for the original. Detectives Donnelly and Carson investigate. They decide that the theft of the original gems was accomplished by some one in the house. Miss Eleanor Holcomb, confidential companion of Mrs. Missioner, is suspected. One of the missing diamonds is found in her room. Mrs. Missioner protests that Eleanor is innocent, but she is taken to prison. Meantime, in an uptown mansion, two Hindus, who are in America to recover the Maharane, discuss the arrest.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

"Elinor Holcomb!" cried the lieutenant.

Donnelly and Carson, each with an arm under her shoulder, propped her slinking form.

"Lift your head," commanded the Chief.

The order fell on deaf ears. She seemed as one in the last agony of a mortal illness.

"Lift it for her," came in a voice of mingled sternness and compassion.

Donnelly's hand flew to her chin, tilting her face upward. For an instant she raised her heavy eyelids; then recoiled as from a blow. The crowd of masked spectators floated before her eyes like hideous specters of a horrid dream. A low groan, like the last lament of a tortured soul, came from her lips. She seemed turned into a mass of jelly.

"Take her away," commanded the Chief, and the two detectives carried her out of the room.

"Accused of stealing the Missioner diamonds," was the curt explanation of her presence. In a harsh monotone, the Chief read the various Headquarters orders to the force, and then the men not engaged on old work received their assignments of new cases. As abruptly as he had entered, the head of the Bureau left the room and retired to his private office. Then he summoned Donnelly and Carson.

"Takes it pretty bad, eh?" he asked.

"Like all the swell ones when they're abbed the first time," answered Carson.

"Had to call the doctor twice during the night, the matron tells me," informed Donnelly.

"Did she make any statement on the way to Headquarters?" inquired the Chief.

"Nothing but hysterics," Carson answered.

"And she's in no condition to be questioned now," added Donnelly.

"Anyone been inquiring for her?" the Chief suddenly snapped.

"Yes," flashed back Donnelly. His eyes lit with a crafty glow. "Some guy who says he's a doctor and engaged to marry her has been hanging around here all morning. Wants to know how he can get her out. Looks as if he might be mixed up in it, so I'm having him shadowed."

"Good!" commented the Chief. "If any lawyer calls, tell him she's in no condition to be seen. We don't want anyone to see her until we've questioned her."

It was late in the afternoon before Miss Holcomb was escorted into the inquisitorial chamber. She had fallen into a fitful slumber on the rude iron bed that projected from the wall of her cell, when Donnelly and Carson opened the grated door and called her out of her sleep. She gave a startled gasp when she saw them, a convulsive shudder racked her frame. A sudden influx of painful memories overwhelmed her with a pitiful sense of helplessness as she dragged herself to the office of the Chief.

With a weak show of courage, she eyed Manning resolutely, and then sank into a soft leather chair close to his desk. Donnelly and Carson occupied seats at her elbow.

"What did you do with those stones?" blurted the Chief.

Her lips framed a reply, but it died without utterance.

"Come, come!" he cried impatiently. "We don't want any acting here. I know you're only a tool in this matter. We've got the principal under arrest and I'm giving you a chance to save yourself. You turn State's evidence against him and I'll see that no harm comes to you. He's the fellow we want to land. Now tell me just what you did with the jewels."

In the midst of this outburst, a door opened silently and a sharp-featured, smooth-shaven man of middle age entered and seated himself in an obscure corner of the room. His form seemed to merge into the shadow of the walls as he dropped noiselessly into his chair. Miss Holcomb did not see him enter. Her increasing terror gave her a fictitious energy and she lifted her head with a sharp jerk.

"I didn't steal the jewels," she said. "I had nothing to do with their disappearance."

The mocking laughter of three deep voices sounded in the room.

"Does it well!" chuckled Donnelly.

"Too bad she ain't an actress," joined Carson.

The Chief's heavy eyes narrowed on her as if he would read her innermost thoughts.

"There's no use trying to lie to me," he snarled. "I know who's got the diamonds. The man who hired you to steal them is locked up now. He says he didn't know they were stolen—"

"Who says that?" she interrupted.

Donnelly and Carson nudged each other in bolsterous glee.

"She wants to know who says it!" piped the former.

"Ain't she the slick one!" laughed his partner.

The Chief's face hardened until a menace seemed to lurk in every one of its deep-cut lines.

"Now, you know who says it," he informed her. "I don't have to mention any names. It's simply a question of you going to jail or of sending him to jail. I don't take any stock in what he says. He can't tell me he didn't know you stole the jewels. I ain't as easy as all that! Now, I'm giving you a chance to make a full confession and save yourself. Will you confess?" His tone carried the weight of a threat, but her unresponsive mind was unable to grasp its significance.

She stared blankly before her, as if her eyes were chained to some distant spot.

"Will you confess?" the Chief repeated with added menace.

As if roused from a long abstraction, she gazed appealingly at her tormentor.

"I have nothing to confess," she murmured weakly.

The Chief drew back in studied anger. His fist banged the desk as if the blow was meant to convey a sudden resolve.

"Very well!" he burst forth. "Go right ahead and be the good girl you want to be. Look here, little girl, I was just kiddin' you when I said we had the principal under arrest. He's here with a quick change of tactics. You're the only one that's locked up. I don't believe there's anyone else mixed up in the case at all. I believe you did the job alone. If there's anyone behind you, you'll have to show me. There's only one thief involved, and that's you."

An expression, as of a hunted animal, crept into her face. She turned to the left and met the fixed stare of Donnelly. Averting her head, her eyes looked into those of Carson. Directly in front, close to her face, the cold gleam from the Chief's eyes fell on her. She turned around, only to look into an impenetrable background of gloom, sinister and depressing.

"I haven't done anything," she pleaded. "I don't know who took Mrs. Missioner's diamonds." As if cut by a sudden thought, Miss Holcomb bent forward in her seat. "She can't believe I did it," she moaned.

"You bet your life she believes you did it," the Chief announced. "And I know you did it. So what's the use of denying it?"

"I do deny it, I do deny it," she protested. "How can they think me capable of it?"

The Chief opened a drawer of his desk and brought forth the accusing diamond. He held it close to her face, permitting the rays to distribute themselves on her features.

"Pretty fine stone!" he commented. "A peach of a shiner! Looked good to you, didn't it? Came so easy it was a shame to take it—eh? Now how did it get mixed up with your trinkets?"

"I don't know," she moaned.

The Chief turned from her wearily. "You take her in hand, Donnelly," he said.

The detective bent over the woman, his face so close that she felt his warm breath against her cheeks.

"Don't try any nonsense down here," he snarled. "We got the goods on you, and we ain't going to stand any fooling. Now, where are those diamonds?"

She eyed him in mild protest.

"I don't know, sir," she murmured weakly.

Donnelly shoved his clenched fist under her chin. His face contorted into an expression of tigerish ferocity; he snarled. "We got the goods on you, and we ain't going to stand any fooling. Now, where are those diamonds?"

"You're a liar," he snapped. "You think you're a slick one, but you'll be sorry you were ever born if you don't cough up the goods. We know how to handle customers like you down here. We're used to 'em. We get 'em every day. Now, just save yourself a lot of trouble by telling the whereabouts of the diamonds."

"They ain't going to do you any good," interjected the Chief. "They don't wear diamonds where you're going to. The less trouble you give us, the less trouble we'll make for you. And we can make more trouble for you than you can make for us."

A look of such utter helplessness overspread her face that even the detectives realized the utter futility of their attack. She seemed as one under the influence of a torpidifying drug. Her capability for new feelings had been crushed out of her by the crowded incidents following her arrest. All



The Chief Drew Back in Studied Anger.

she felt was a dull pain of body and mind.

"Don't sit there like a white mummy," burst forth Donnelly. "Come, now," he added impatiently, "don't exhaust our patience; we haven't treated you roughly, but we know how to bring you out of your silence."

He seized her wrist, his clenched hand squeezing it until she uttered a sharp cry of pain.

"Are you going to answer my questions?" he blurted.

She sank back in the chair with a despairing moan. Her heavy eyelids dropped, a tremor contracted her brow, then her head fell limply to one side.

"I guess we won't gain anything by going any stronger with her to-day. Take her back!" commanded the Chief.

Donnelly and Carson shook her into consciousness. They stood by her as she dragged herself through the dark corridor and down two flights of narrow iron stairs to her cell.

When she was out of the room, the silent visitor came out of the obscurity of his corner and seated himself in the chair vacated by Miss Holcomb.

Britz rose from his seat, donned his topcoat and hat, and made his way to the tier of cells one of which held Miss Holcomb. He encountered Donnelly and Carson on the way.

"What time are you going to arraign her?" he asked.

"Right now," Donnelly replied. "We got the magistrate to hold court an hour longer for us."

A turnkey swung open the iron door of the cell. The detectives found Miss Holcomb huddled in a corner, the wan light of the corridor falling on her tear-bathed face.

"Don't take me back! They want to harm me! I haven't done anything!" she cried, when she saw the visitors. Britz stepped forward with other detectives back. He scraped his shoulders through the cell door and sat on the rude cot, facing the woman.

"Miss Holcomb," he said pleasantly, "there will be no further inquisition in the Chief's office, no more third-degree methods will be applied to you. It is necessary under the law to bring you before a magistrate within twenty-four hours after your arrest. Now, brace yourself, please, for the ordeal."

Remanded to the Tombs, Lieutenant Britz, seated at the flat-top desk of his office, peered steadily at the ceiling, as if he expected to find written there the solution of the great mystery into which he had been called. A worried expression was on his face, as if anxiety had taken possession of his mind.

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session of his soul. He became submerged in deep meditation, in which he sought to arrange in consecutive order the information gathered by Donnelly and Carson. The conviction forced itself on his mind that Miss Holcomb's arrest was based on circumstances from which more than one inference might be drawn. The fact that she knew the combination of Mrs. Missioner's safe did not mean, of course, that she took the jewels. On the surface, it looked as if hers was the exclusive opportunity to possess herself of the gems, outside of Mrs. Missioner herself. But Britz felt that the depth of the case had not been sounded; in fact, that the surface had not even been penetrated.

The only thread that connected Miss Holcomb with the theft was the diamond found in her room. But to Britz's experienced mind, this circumstance pointed rather toward innocence than guilt. For, he argued, if she had taken those jewels, she would not have been so careless as to leave one of them in her bedroom. That diamond, Britz was convinced, was placed there intentionally and with sinister purpose by a hand other than Miss Holcomb's.

Britz rose from his seat, donned his topcoat and hat, and made his way to the tier of cells one of which held Miss Holcomb. He encountered Donnelly and Carson on the way.

"What time are you going to arraign her?" he asked.

"Right now," Donnelly replied. "We got the magistrate to hold court an hour longer for us."

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If you are innocent, you have absolutely nothing to fear. You will have an opportunity in court of consulting with your friends and engaging a lawyer. Your interests will be protected."

Instinctively, although in the gloom of the surroundings she could make out only a dim outline of his face, she felt a confidence in the detective that braced her like a tonic.

"I have a carriage waiting for you, Miss Holcomb," Britz informed her. "It will enable you to avoid the many curious eyes in the street."

She murmured her thanks as she stepped out of the cell and followed Britz and his companions through a maze of corridors to the street. They were driven rapidly to the Jefferson Market court and ushered into the private room of the magistrate. A crowd of reporters was already on hand for the hearing. The curious eyes aimed pitilessly at her inspired in her a terror that made her shrink behind the broad shoulders of Donnelly. The magistrate motioned her to a seat close to his desk, and said:

"Madam, it is your privilege to engage counsel, would you advise you to do so at once, for anything you say may be used against you?"

"I have done nothing wrong," she murmured.

"You had better get a lawyer," the Magistrate urged.

As if in response to his advice, the door opened abruptly and two men entered. One was sharp-faced, gray-haired, nervous, with the unmistakable air of the lawyer. The other was a young man, his face marked with heavy lines of worry, as if he also had passed a sleepless night. At sight of him, Miss Holcomb sprang forward and threw herself in his arms.

"Oh, Lawrence!" she exclaimed. "How I have missed you!"

"Don't worry," he soothed. "Everything will turn out all right. I believe in you implicitly."

Donnelly and Carson asked for a week in which to work up the case against the prisoner. The other was a young man, his face marked with heavy lines of worry, as if he also had passed a sleepless night. At sight of him, Miss Holcomb sprang forward and threw herself in his arms.

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"Oh, Lawrence!" she exclaimed. "How I have missed you!"

"Don't worry," he soothed. "Everything will turn out all right. I believe in you implicitly."

effort must be made at the present time to clear her."

"What?" exclaimed Dr. Fitch. "Permit my fiancée to suffer the tortures of this prison and live under the stigma of this terrible accusation?"

"It is necessary," assured Britz. "The two detectives who arrested her seem to