

BRITZ

OF HEADQUARTERS

BY GEORGE BARBER

Exclusively in Canada by the British & Colonial Press, Limited, Toronto.

"Yes, there goes the carriage," agreed Dorothy, rising hastily. "So glad to have met you, Mr. Britz. I hope I've been of some assistance about dear Mrs. Missioner's jewels. Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon, Miss March, a very good afternoon." And he was stepping quickly toward the door when her sweet voice arrested him.

"But, Mr. Britz," she cried, "there was something you wished to ask me—something that was to help you find the diamonds?"

"Some other time, Miss March, thank you," said Britz, smiling. "I won't detain you now. Perhaps we'll meet at another matinee soon, with a longer intermission between the acts. Delighted to have made your acquaintance, Miss March. I know you're in a hurry to get back to your seat. Forst audiences don't like to be disturbed, you know. Good afternoon, Miss March, and—thank you so much!"

"Good afternoon, then, Mr. Britz," she flitted down the aisle.

"Yes, thank you so much, Miss March!" murmured Britz as he left the theatre and merged himself with the afternoon tide in Broadway.

He had cause to thank her, he believed. For, in her first talk, she had given him the girl's talk, she had extended for him a thread in the mystery that had occupied much of his thoughts from the moment when Logan's cable saying the paste jewels were made from sketches.

For days he had sought to learn who among Mrs. Missioner's intimates was artist enough to make such delicate draughts of the diamonds as would be required by an artificer for the manufacture of imitations. With that object, he had ascertained Dorothy's intention to go to the matinee in the Forrest and had gone to the theatre to meet her under conditions not likely to interfere with such gentle questioning of her as he meant to do.

His veiled interrogation of the society girl had brought forth the fact that Curtis Griswold could sketch—that the clubman was sufficiently master of his pencil to have his sketch pretty nearly known among his acquaintances. Lorimer and Daubigny, the other society artists she had mentioned, were not, he knew, in Mrs. Missioner's circle.

It was fortunate for Lieutenant Britz, as well as for Elinor Holcomb and Dr. Fitch, and everybody whose hopes shined on the detective's success in solving the great Missioner diamond mystery, that long custom made him thread the traffic of the city's throbbing artery automatically, for so deeply did the sleuth penetrate the possibilities of his newest informant that he had several close escapes from taxicabs, private automobiles, and trolley cars as he crossed Broadway and bent his steps toward Fifth Avenue. The case had cleared a little, but his course was not much plainer than it had been when he dropped into the theatre in quest of further knowledge.

"It won't do to call Miss March as a witness," he mused, walking north in the carriage-crowded avenue, with that briskness characteristic of him when his brain was most active. "She can't absolutely prove anything." It was necessary to obtain tangible evidence of Griswold's ability as a draughtsman. How to do so without alarming the clubman was the present problem.

Britz was by no means prepared to suspect Griswold of the robbery. He realized thoroughly that Dorothy's information was all he had to indicate Griswold any more than Sands, or two or three others. He did not even know whether Miss Holcomb could draw, and it was no part of his purpose to distress the imprisoned girl with questions betraying the smallest belief in the accusation against her. No; Britz, always honest with himself, could not say he suspected Griswold. His method was the opposite of Donnelly's and Carson's. Instead of suspecting everybody, as they invariably did in cases of all mysterious, he would not attach suspicion to anyone without satisfactory proof. That was the secret of his success.

He was more than a detective; he was a prosecutor, judge, jury, and counsel to the defense. He accounted for the fact that he rarely made a mistake in arrest, and that when he caused man or woman to be placed in the prisoner's dock, a conviction almost always followed.

"Griswold, Sands, All, Blodgett!" The names presented themselves to the sleuth's mind in that order as he hastened along with no particular place as an objective—merely walking to stimulate his mental process. It always brightened Britz to pass the panorama of fashion in Fifth Avenue. It was with an almost fatherly feeling he glanced at the rich, the debonaire, the gay sauntering along the sidewalks or rolling in automobiles and carriages up and down the asphalt. The safety of their wealth, sometimes of their very lives, depended on the vigilance, courage, and efficiency of himself and of the few men like him on the police force of New York. So far as the rank and file of the Department were concerned, those careless sons and daughters of opportunity might be the mercy of the almighty birds of prey in the human flock. It was because Britz and his companions worked and watched and waited so patiently, so devotedly, so ceaselessly, that fashion and finance, coquetry and commerce, could bask in the sunshine of metropolitan prosperity.

A dark-blue limousine standing at the corner of Forty-fourth Street caught his attention. For a moment he studied it as he slackened his pace. Then he stopped short, retraced his steps, crossed to the east side of the avenue, and, through the windows of a waiting cab, trained his gaze on Sherry's fashionable restaurant in front of which the costly automobile stood. Dimly, through the filmy lace curtains, he saw the figures of those lingering over afternoon tea, with a few early diners. He could not distinguish their faces, but something in the bearing of a woman at the window held his glance. Then a waiter, moving silently about the table, chanced to part the curtains with his elbow, and in the momentary gap between the folds of film Britz saw clearly the blonde beauty of Mrs. Missioner, and the clear-cut features of Curtis Griswold.

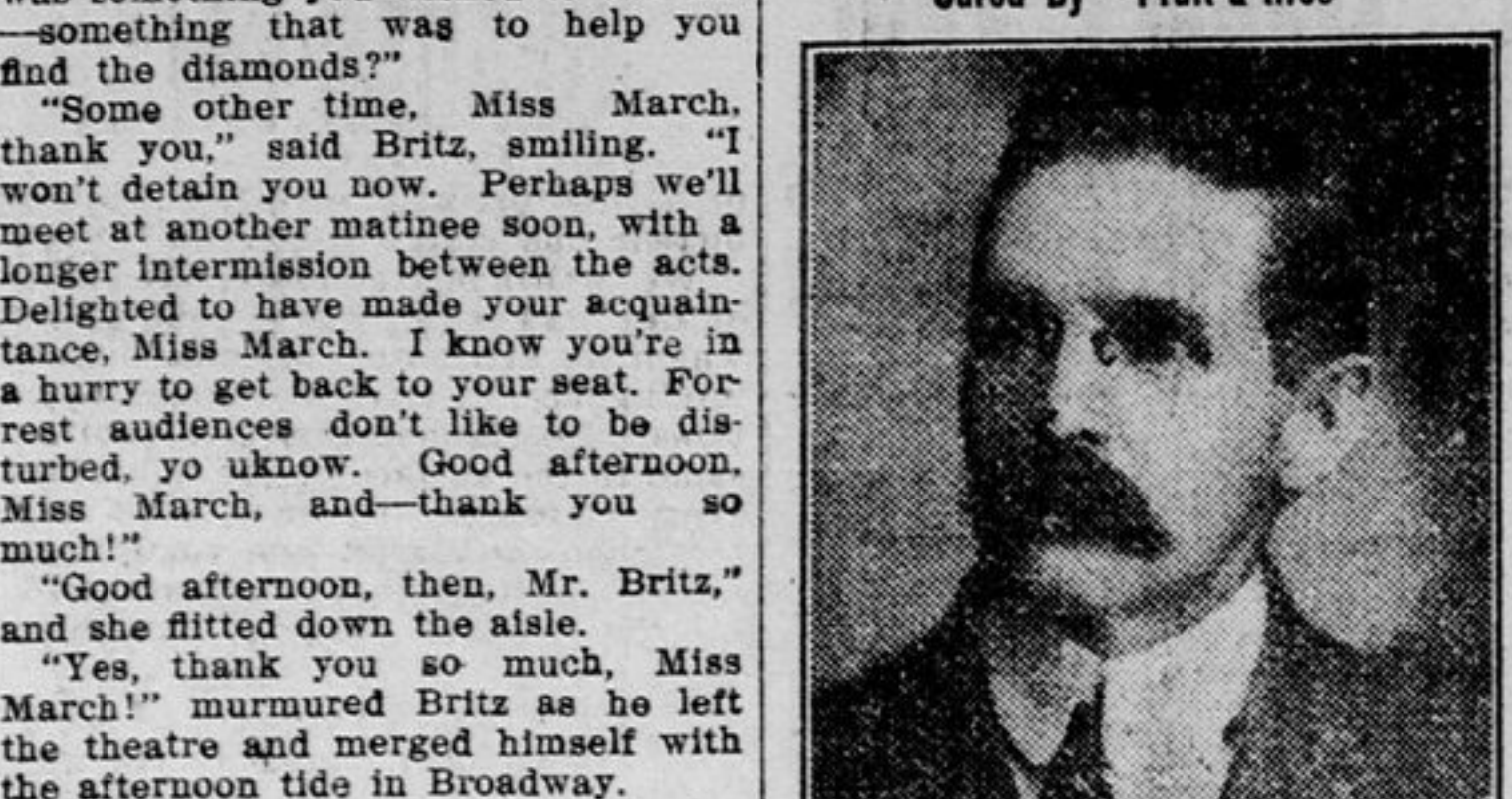
Britz settled himself to wait. The cabman, whose vehicle he was using as a redoubt, looked at him inquiringly, but the detective's eyes were fixed on the limousine.

"You wish to see me?" she inquired. "There is something more you wish to know?"

She was not in the mood for discussion of the detective's quest this evening. The afternoon tea in Sherry's, the short ride home, including the turn in the park, with her two most persistent admirers, this cozy home-coming in the dusk of a winter day, however unreasonable the weather, had made her meditative. Even as she spoke to the detective and sank dreamily into a conversation chair beside the fire, her eyes strayed from Sands to Griswold, from Griswold to Sands, with

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"Fruit-a-lives" will always cure even the most stubborn cases of Rheumatism in his eyes as he waited for Griswold's next words. "You'd starve to death in a studio," the clubman continued scornfully.

"A crisp little laugh from Britz was the only reply. He crossed the floor and made a microscopic examination of the safe. Then he circled the room, tapping the walls again, moving pieces of furniture to look behind them, turning up corners of the rug, and gazing reflectively at the ceiling. The Indian servant, appeared noiselessly at the door, started slightly at sight of the detective, and vanished as silently. Britz pretended not to see the Hindoo, but, in his movements about the room, he paused at the threshold, and glanced quickly down the passage. There was no one in sight.

All that time, Curtis Griswold, having ripped off the sheet on which Britz had drawn the rude diagram, was sketching idly as he talked in an undertone to the widow. His words held her attention. She took no note of the detective's wandering, but the heavy silence of Sands, the soundless appearance and disappearance of the Hindoo. Ripples of laughter revealed that she, at least, was amused by what Griswold was saying. It was when Britz, having finished his detailed examination of the room, stopped close beside him that they looked up.

"You are an artist, Mr. Griswold," remarked the sleuth, his eyes on the paper under the clubman's pencil.

Griswold was genuinely surprised. For the first time, he seemed to become aware of the shape his idle tracing on the pad had taken. In the course of his brief chat with Mrs. Missioner, he had sketched clearly, accurately, artistically, not only the room, but the great safe at its farther end—sketched them far better in those few minutes than Britz could have done in as many hours. His drawing, almost automatic, showed the subconscious skill of—to say the least—an excellent amateur.

"Why that's so," he said, holding up the drawing indifferently. His prowess with the pencil was an old story to the widow and his rival. Griswold tossed the pad and pencil on the table, and resumed his talk with Mrs. Missioner, turning the coldness of cold shoulders toward the detective.

But Britz was not to be shouldered aside so easily. He addressed himself to the widow, winning her instant attention with his first query: "Has Miss Holcomb ever told you much about her last year in Smith?" he asked.

Mrs. Missioner's eyebrows arched. "Nothing important enough to remember, Mr. Britz," she said, staring incredulously. The detective had already assured her warmly of his belief in Elinor's innocence. Could it be he was not going to clear the girl after all?

"You know nothing of her engagement to a Harvard undergraduate, then?" the widow shook her head. "Before her father lost his fortune, I mean," said the sleuth.

Neither before nor after, Mr. Britz replied. "Miss Holcomb, being naturally beautiful, received a great deal of attention, but I never heard of a betrothal."

Lieutenant Britz, still standing before the hearth, moved to let Mrs. Missioner pass. The widow pushed aside the heavy hangings of a window and entered into the twilight backed by him in the park. Britz, having moved, took another step. Those gray eyes of his shifted so rapidly they were upon the three others almost simultaneously. So men gradually, so slowly did he approach the table that no one noticed his hand upon it. Resting that hand upon the edge, he went on:

"I am sorry you are not more minutely informed concerning Miss Holcomb's university days." Slowly his fingers extended until the tips rested on the tiny pad. "In a case like this the smallest knowledge may be of value."

Slowly, ever so slowly, the fingers contracted, drawing the pad with them. Perhaps if you make an effort, you can recall something about the prisoner's past, Mrs. Missioner? The pad was in his hand. Deftly, he tore off the top sheet and inclosed it in his fingers. As the widow started to speak, and entirely unobserved by Griswold or Sands, the detective slipped that agile hand into his pocket. When the hand came out, it was empty.

"No," said the rich woman with more emphasis than would be expected of her large good-nature. "I can recall nothing. I am sure there is somewhere if you seek to forge links in a chain of evidence against Miss Holcomb. I have told you all I know—all I could possibly know."

"That being the case," said Britz briskly, "there is nothing more to say. With your permission, I will send a draughtsman to make plans of the room and diagrams of the safe. He hesitated. "I suppose these little art gems of mine," he resumed with a dry smile, "may as well meet the fate they deserve." With a quick movement, he threw all the sheets of paper on the table and the pad as well into the heart of the fire.

"Guess I'll say 'Good-afternoon,'" and with a bow to Mrs. Missioner and the coolest of looks to the men, he left the room, the widow's detached "Good-afternoon, Mr. Britz" floating after him.

Was he mistaken, Britz asked himself as he walked quickly along the passage, or did he see a pair of eyes beneath a lowering turban peep at him from the corner of a cross-corridor? He made a mental note to let the Hindoo servant watched more closely as, treating Blodgett's loquacity with exasperating indifference, he tripped down the steps of the Missioner mansion, and hurried along a path in the dark. Once in the shelter of the shadows, the detective quickened his pace, heading south.

His hands clasped behind him, and his thoughts kept time with his steps as he swung along under the scraping January boughs. On the whole, he was very well satisfied with his day's work. Not that he had any idea of calling a halt for the night. He allowed himself plenty of sleep, but he wasted little time on recreation. Work was his relaxation. He had an inflexible specific against fatigue. When his duties became wearying, he crowded on more steam or switched to another phase of the case. A change of points was as restful to Britz as a change of air.

Grudging as he was to himself in the matter of praise, he had to admit, however, he had spent his afternoon profitably. From little Miss March he had learned that Griswold was a draughtsman, and from Griswold himself he had tangible proof of that fact in the shape of the tiny sheet of paper along the park drive in the direction which, owing to the swirling excitement of the last sixty seconds, he could not ascertain. All he knew was that he was a captive; that he had been seized in a way unusual to city highwaymen, and that for the present, a struggle for release would be simply a useless—perhaps worse than useless—expenditure of his strength.

THE LINDSAY POST

that she be looking at the plan which was formed, would the thief content himself with the almost overpowering circumstantial evidence already accumulated against Elinor, or would he venture to throw further suspicion upon her? And if the criminal contemplated pursuing the prisoner beyond the threshold of the Tombs, would he operate through the stupidity of Donnelly and Carson, or would he bend his energies on the District Attorney? Britz considered briefly on the chance that the thief would be bold enough to appear as a witness for the prosecution, then dismissed it as too improbable to affect the present development of the case.

The detective flung himself on a bench and pondered the day's developments until the first ting of his Jurgensen, the gift of a grateful captain of industry, told him it was long past his dinner hour. Then he arose, lit a cigar, broke the match meditatively into a dozen bits, and once more took up his southward stride. On two points he had made up his mind. The first was that, since Griswold's delicately manipulated crayon had drawn him far enough into the case to be a possible factor, he would have the clubman trailed more thoroughly than had been done thus far. At Griswold's heels. The second, Britz's second decision came from the real or fancied glimpse of the turbaned head flicking around the corner of the passage. He would make a little visit to the home of the mysterious Oriental who had called Mrs. Missioner's attention to the falsity of the supposed Maharane diamond she wore in the opera box, and he would not go as Britz, of Headquarters.

He stopped under the low-hanging bough of a great oak tree to get a better light. As he was about to strike a match, his use for that particular article suddenly ceased for

in another minute, no more than a bound, gaged, helpless, with three men sitting on him, bowling rapidly in a cab along the park drive in the direction which, owing to the swirling excitement of the last sixty seconds, he could not ascertain. All he knew was that he was a captive; that he had been seized in a way unusual to city highwaymen, and that for the present, a struggle for release would be simply a useless—perhaps worse than useless—expenditure of his strength.

To be continued

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