

BRITZ OF HEADQUARTERS BY MARCIN BARBER

CHAPTER XI A Wild Ride

Once he realized the futility of resistance, Britz banded himself with efforts to get a line on his direction. He was in an ordinary brougham, drawn by a pair of high-stepping horses. That much he could tell from the dimensions of the vehicle, and the peculiar ping of the hoofs on the hard-rolled park drive. He knew, too, the animals were traveling at a brisk pace. Despite its delicately adjusted springs, the carriage lurched violently at times, the weight of the three men thrust behind him being thrown on the rear seat so suddenly as to threaten disruption of the superstructure. He was lying on the floor, but on a pile of rugs. The silk scarf with which he had been fastened had been loosed from his neck only to be drawn tightly about his mouth. A smaller strip of silk, rolled into a ball, had been thrust between his teeth, gagging him beyond his power to utter a cry. His wrists and ankles were bound with similar scarves. He was as helpless as if in the electric chair. His life, it might be, depended on his self-control and resourcefulness.

Which he could press his ear to the floor. It was a cold application, but it enabled the sleuth to hear more clearly. The carriage floor served as a sounding board that microphoned the smallest noises with expansive emphasis. He could hear, amid all the thudding of the horses' hoofs, the slight suction every time a crack in one of the rubber tires left the asphalt.

Lean names were called from the dark interior and caught him about the middle. Other hands seized his legs, while the pair clutching his ankle tightened their grasp, but he only twined his fingers the more firmly around their slight circumference. By now the carriage was rolling and pitching like a seagoing tug. Had he not been held so stoutly by the six lean hands above, and his own iron clutch below, the motion might have swung his head against the step again with force to crack it in a dozen places. The very fury of the battle made for his safety.

The horses struck a slope that took them out of the Drive. Britz guessed they could not go far without encountering a policeman. If they did not meet a mounted patrolman or a bicycle policeman, the avenue, it was almost certain they would strike an ordinary policeman in one of the by-streets. Britz chewed the gag savagely in the hope of freeing his voice. Finding the bandage too tight to force it out of his mouth, he tried to swallow the silken ball inside his teeth. Gulp as he might, his reversed position distressed him; he could not get the ball behind his tongue. And, owing to the elusive texture of the gag, not all the biting and grinding of his strong teeth could shred it.

He was at that point Britz made his first mistake of the trip. The latch of the left door was jarred loose by an uneven crossing, and the detective felt the door give slightly against his shoulder. He sensed in an eyeflash the door had swung open. Probably an end of the rag had caught under it sufficiently to hold it shut. But it undoubtedly was unfastened, and that evidently without the knowledge of his captors. Had any of the three noticed the unlatching of the door, he would have drawn it close immediately. There was no momentary danger of that. There was not a moment to spare. Britz had little time for thought. With a powerful contraction of his wiry frame, he threw off the men above him long enough to fling himself against the door.

Britz reckoned on the likelihood that his fall from the carriage would be seen by a patrolman—at any rate, that his attempt at escape would cause a commotion sure to result in police interference. He did not expect to get away unaided; he was bound too securely for that. It was more than possible bad bruises, if not broken bones, would be among the consequences. He was willing to take that chance rather than to hazard indefinite captivity with the great Missioner diamond mystery unsolved. In the very moment of turning himself against the door, nothing was stronger in his mind than a yearning to see the Swami. He felt he positively must chat with that mysterious personage about diamonds and steel safes, and other things. Until he made the Oriental's acquaintance, his social development would be stunted.

The detective omitted from his reckoning the astuteness and readiness of his captors. He thought the surprise hinging on his desperate attempt at escape would be of sufficient duration to let him roll to the road. He shocked mentally as well as physically a lancer, when his fall was stopped with a jerk, and the back of his head struck with cruel force against the carriage step. Just for a second's flight, reinforced steel and rubber though he was, he lost consciousness. When his senses returned, he was in the same position—head banging, shoulders resting against the rods of the step, bent painfully over the steel-shod threshold of the carriage floor, legs inside, gripped in a hold not all his struggles could break. His ankles still bound. So, for that matter, were his wrists, with his hands behind him. The scarf hanging from his eyes had slipped partly to his forehead, so that he could see a little; but, in his upside-down position, he could not see the sidewalk; only treetops and the dusk line of the Pallisades were in his line of vision. The gag was fixed as firmly as ever. He tried to call for help, but the cry was smothered in his throat.

HAPPY MOTHERHOOD

The happiness of motherhood is too often checked because the mother's strength is unequal to her care...

CHAPTER XII The Empty Apartment

When Britz groped his way out of the soundest sleep he had known in many a year, it was in absolute ignorance of his whereabouts.

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