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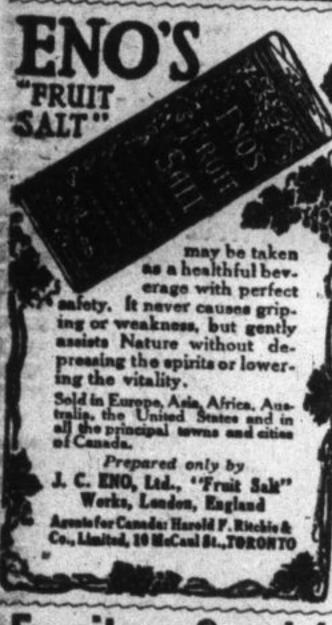
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BY MARCIN BARBER

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The match fell from his fingers as a mystery-and it's all very dreadful, the inner door opened to his searcing too." Sands looked at her. glance. Lances of many-colored light There was eloquence in those jewel vault. The steel box in the cenin miniature. It held stones of every sort in settings of every fashion, rangspread the trays on the Persian rug. The widows guests saw what few

persons other than Mrs. Missioner had A footman of conventioal pattern once. The gems were the collection destal and looked at Mrs. Missioner "I don't suspect anybody," Mrs. interested for philosophical observaof a lifetime. Missioner, in the inter- from a carven face. vals of amassing millions, had de "Let him come up, Blodgett," she voted himself to gathering them from responded. The carven features bluronly hobby, and he pursued it with little main ith the face of a dreamer "Nobody suspected - huh!" He the servants. the enthusiasm of a man to whom an and the eyes of a student entered breathed in dialect. meant little. Globe-girdling trips to greeted him pleasantly, and as she which the financial and industrial pressed the button that filled press attached mysterious importance room with light again, she presented hunts to Missoiner. He bagged rall- she added. "is an expert of experts." roads from habit, he stalked diamonds pathetic had been the bond between death not only the great collection. but the passion of augmenting it, "You have an inventory, of course?

asked Sands. Even his sturdy ind viduality paid passing tribute to the magnificence of the collection. He left the stones of the necklace on the table and strolled over to stare at the rubles and emeralds, the sapphires and tourmalines and amethysts, above all at the unrivaled group of diamonds Mr. Ranscome, think of it-think of graded from a fierfly's sparkle to the gloryburst of radium. Little Miss March true daughter of Eve, sank on the broad rug beside the shining travs and gazed at them in an ecstasy of

Mrs. Missioner drew from a shelf treasures. Item by item she from it, the others checking tray by tray until the last stone was account ed for, the last save the wonderful Maharanee diamond.

"The big stone gone," mused Sands. Then, Doris," and there was conviction in his tones, as he gathered up the jewels scattered on the table, those?" "these others are false, too." "Oh, do you think so?" asked Doro-

thy, her fingers interlacing in repressed hysteria. "Sure of it," said Sands, holding one of the suspected gems to the light.

"I'm not an expert, but I haven't the slightest doubt." "Let me see them." Griswold interposed. He scrutinged three of four for more than a minute. "They look

genuine to me." He offered them to Miss March, whose fingers did not inlock to take them. "We can be certain very quickly said Mrs. Missioner. She was study-

ing Griswold's whitening fingerssteady enough, but deadly white. was a psculiarity of the man that he send for a jeweler." "My dear! At this hour?" cam

in Dorothy's child treble Mrs. Missioner smiled in a way that said there were jewelers of r importance in commercial circles w would be glad to answer a summent from her at any hour-that it was not in vain she was known to dealers as one of the most liberal collectors ! the world. She turned to a rosewood his fist. desk and took up a telephone. "Gramercy, 9-7-4-6," she called. "The

Effingham?-Mr. Ranscome, please -This is Mrs. Missioner, Mr. Rans come. Yes, I am at home. Can you come up for a few minuets?-Thank you," and as she returned the receive to the hook, she explained: "Ranscome is the oldest expert in New York." "While we are about it," said Sands slowly, "we may as well call headquarters." He reached for the tele

phone, but his hand was stayed by Dorothy's fluttering fingers. "Oh, Mr. Bruxton," she "please don't call the police," and as his eyebrows went up, she added, am so frightened."

"I wouldn't be hasty, Sands," said Griswold. "The newspapers follow the sleuths, you know." The millionaire hesitated "Have you thought of anything better to do?" he returned. Then, as the

widow's silence made itself felt - he turned to her. "Your pardon, Doris." Perhaps your own wishes are but it seems such a natural thing to do." "I'm not thinking of the newspapers," replied Mrs. Missioner, "but maybe we'd better wait for Mr. Ranscome. You see," and there was perplexity in the glance that swept the group, "this is no ordinary theft."

Griswold quickly. He had lighted his Blodgett. "I think she said then amining the saie again. He passed cigarette, and, leaning back in a cozy stopped with her hand on Dorothy's his hand over the door and its frame corner of the inglenook, was smoking with little abrupt puffs that contrasted with the ease of his position. He studied the widow covertly through weaving wreaths.

"If a burgiar could reach this room, must reorganize my household," she murmured. She was gazing into the was tinkling his way to the library fames. Her shoulders drooped, and Sands, noticing her weariness, switch- hostess and her guests, the footman ed off the lights. The rainbow sparkle having been bidden to show the policeof the jewel trays varied fantastically men in, heard heavy breathing outside the pattern of the rug on which they but the background of dusk rested

"And there is no one you suspect?" "There is no one in the house I can

"You are to be congratulated." Gris-"And, of course, having such at once." His slow logic had carried fume. One could fell nothing in Little Miss March glanced at him admiringly. Swift or slow of wit, the man of action appeals.

"I think Mr. Sands is right, Mrs. Missioner." she said softly.

"Advise me." said the widow, her satin slipper tap-tap-tapping the fender of burnished brass. "I am not Jesting when I say I am in the hands of my friends. All this is more than

slashed the comparative gloom of the smiles of his, much more than in his compartment as Mrs. Missioner speech. Not without cause did Wall brought forth tray after tray from the Street know him as "Silent" Sands. ter of the safe was an Aladdin's cave Griswold suggested. "It is the best way to recover stolen property."

"Not always." Sands objected ing from the product of twentieth cen- "Almost always," Griswold pursued. | jewels. tury jewelers back to the loved works The police usually are useless in a of Byzantine artificers. Little Miss case like this." Turning to Mrs. March gasped again as the widow Missioner, he continued. "I can re commend an excellent agency." "Mr. Ranscome, madam."

seen-all the Missioner jewels at stood on the threshold as if on a ped-

extra numeral or two on a check almost on his toes. Mrs. Missioner

for pleasure. And, despite her fond- cident in the opera box, the discovery you convict, you know. Never heard ness for social conquests the multi- of the supposed Maharanee diamond's -hut !- of a case without suspectsmillionaire considered trivial, so sym- worthlessness, and her suspicion as to eh?" the other stones of her necklace. Missioner and his wife that at his During her recital. Ranscome's glance caressed the gems in the scattered consciousness. It fell short. tray, and it was by a visible effort that he wrested his eyes from them go one I can suspect," she said. to look at the stones on the table. "Are they real?" asked the widow. The little man seemed not to hear

"Did you say, madam, the Maharanee diamond?'

"Yes," she answered, and waves o pain rippled across her face. "Oh it!" she clasped her hands so tensely the rings upon them bit her flesh "Think of it, Mr. Ranscome!"

"The Maharanee!" he murmuredsay, rather, groaned in an undertone. "A glorious jewel, a wonderful jewel. a queen's jewel! Gone, did you say? Absolutely gone-not a trace of it?" the smaller stones on the table, stroking their gioss with sensitive fingers. He held three or four to the light, then, with a disdainful gesture, smeared the glistening pile broadcast across the board. "None." replied the widow. "And

"These, Mrs. Missioner." said the expert, as if waking from a dream, and fro. "are the most beautiful imitations I have ever seen.

reached for the telephone Sands

CHAPTER III

A Searching Examination. When the millionaire stopped talking over the telephone, he turned to the widow with an air of finality.

"I have taken it on myself," he told her, "to inform the Detective Bureau, after bolt until it switched to the inner This is no time for Sherlocking. There'll be a couple of detectives here rectangle into which the big door in half an hour."

Mrs. Missioner looked at him adturned pale only in his hands. Twill miringly. But her eyes turned 'io Griswold with a light it would have in the air, as Donnelly doubled himself taken a women to read, a woman until the equator of his waist line al more experienced than little Dorothy

Ranscome, ignoring the counterfeits. stood in absorbed study of the jewel hands fluttered aloft. The catch in trays' kalsidoscopic contents. That his voice, characteristic of him when peculiar pallor returned to Griswold's in the presence of the rich, was brushhands. With fingers that bent and ed out of his throat by a burst of prostraightened ceaselessly, he drummed fessional zeal. He recognized a situa-

"The robbery is the more incomprehensible," said Mrs. Missioner thought- "Where were the jewels stolen fully, "because of the extraordinary precautions I have taken against burglars. I cannot understand how the thief got to the necklace."

"Your safe seems strong enough," Ranscome ventured. Stepping around the trays, he passed his hand over the outer door and looked at the twentyfour steel bolts curiously.

Missioner. "It was built on the lines derously. of the great safe in the Gramercy National. It differs only in size and worth a pot of money, ma'am," in the absence of a time lock." Ranscome, staring at the safe, shook

his head. Sands walked over to him widow. and, thrusting both hands in his pockets, stood gazing at the bolts. Griswold, smoking quietly in the inglenook, mustered a show of interest in from Donnelly. Carson echoed it the safe from time to time, but always his glance returned to the glittering trays. "I wish you'd put those away.

Dorie," said Griswold suddenly, "With all this mystery in the sir, I don't "fre to see them lying around." Mrs. Missioner lauged.

"Surely they're safe among us," she answered, graciously including Rans-Inquiry reached toward her from

"I think," she went on, Miss March wants some tea and-I think we all need something to drink."

It was when Blodgett, tray-laden. that the detectives arrived. The ne door, where Donnelly and Carson, of the Central Office, were gripped in a panicky pause. Next moment, a large man with a small head, and another so aggressively average as to be awkward questioning, shook himself a nendescript, came in. Donnelly, the lion-like, and went to a window. Gris big man, turned out his toes to be wold swung his foot idly, and smoked walked. A charm the size and snape in shorter measure. Ranscome looked creetly divided between sincerity and of a double eagle, bearing a Bacchante nervously at the inquisitor, then whose pose would have been inde orous if it had not been impe

many glauces about Carson. There said Mrs. Missioner quietly, adding was nothing to tell. "We've come up here, Mrs. Mission-

er." said Donnelly, addressing Miss March, "to find your daimonds. "Oh, thank you!" murmured the frightened me at first, but Bruxton Mrs. Missioner. Won't you be seat-

Mrs. Missioner-no, thanks!" an manifestly was enjoying his rôle to swered the sleuth, with all the airy ease of a highly embarrassed man. "We'll just -huh!-walk around a little, thanks-just walk around!" "Puzzling!" echoed Dorothy. "It's Carson, neutral echo of his coffeague's words, did walk around. Donnelly, smiling. as if, having announced the action, he had done his share, stood still.

Dorothy and Griswold exchanged glances. Sands stared stolidly at the sleuths. Mrs. Missioner, with a per missive inclination of her head, began chatting with Ranscome. Even as she said, "Miss Holcomb can be con he spoke with her, the veteran expert could not drag his eyes from the

"Now," then, Mis' Missioner," said Donnesly briskly. "Who huh! do you suspect?" There seemed to be Street who might a sort of astigmatism in his breath- body was above suspicion in the exing. Carson faced the group with an of the ordinary Central expression that said bluntly he sus- But Mrs. Missioner had pected everybody.

Missioner replied, resuming her talk tions. with Ranscome.

Carson instantly complaisant, banished suspicion from his look. Now, you know, there's always had meant nothing more than jewel him to her friends. "Mr. Ranscome," sioner," Donnelly persisted. "Somesomebody, ma'am-huh!-Mis' Misbody suspected in every case. Think Briefly the widow recounted the ac- a moment. Have to suspect before

> The "eh" was meant to be a javelin hurled straight at the widow's inner "There is no one to be suspected-Carson, the reticent, unbosome

himself. "Somebody," he said assertively "did it." "Oh, well-huh!-ma'am," chugge

Donnelly, "we'll just look aroundjust look around a little." And Carson looked. Feet at right angles, Bacchant

dancing desperately as the fob rose and fell, the large man from the Central Office moved toward the safe Mrs. Missioner shuddered at thought of the peril to her jewels from hi plate armor soles. Her imploring eye sweep brought ready response from Sands and Griswold, and in a second's With the flat of his hand, he spread fraction they were piling the trays on chairs and tables. Ranscome, help ing, handled the morocco cases with loving touch.

Donnelly stopped short at sight of the gems in the trays. An interroga tive snort vibrated somewhere inside him, but found no oral expression. He passed on to the safe. With a master ful grasp, he swung the great door to

"We'll soon know," he said reassur ingly, "who to-huh!-yes, who .

suspect. Carson!" The echo crossed the room with whispering tread. Both detectives began an examination of the door. Eyes close to the daintily tinted steel, they dragged their combined gaze along its front from top to bottom, from side to side. Then they shifted their eyes to the thick, edge of the door, and their scruting bored its way past bell papel. That done, they examined the fitted as thoroughly. During most of this procedure, the Pacchanie stood

most touched the poles. The big man straightened abruptly Bacchante's heels came down and her tion that enabled him to play inquisttor in a nome of wealth.

from?" he asked "I don't know," said Mrs. Missioner. "When did you miss them?"

Again the widow recited the incident of the opera box. "Who was in the party?" Mrs. Missioner told him. She did

not mention the Oriental in the next box. It dld not occur to her. "It should be strong," returned Mrs. Donnelly stroked a heavy jaw pon-"I understand your diamonds half inquired

> "They are What do you value them at?" "Haif a million dolors."

An appreciative "Huh!" broke "Isn't there anybody you can think pursued the big detective, "who

could have taken them? "Nobody who would," answered Mrs. "Did anybody else have the combi-

nation of the safe?" "One," responded Mrs. Missioner. She answered defensivery, like a witcome with an extra smile. She drew ness under hostile cross-examination. off her, glopes decisively and, rising as voinnteeering nothing. Donnelly "Not a burglary, you think?" asked if from folds of corjecture, rang for seemed not to hear her. He was exagain, turned the handle that shot the bolts, noted their strength and smoo'l ness, turned them back, and whoch on Mrs. Missioner abruptiv. "There's been no forcing here

said sagely. "It's an inside job. Mrs. Missioner's eyebrows went up "Yes'm,' the detective went on, "an inside job. Who did you say had the combination?"

Mrs. Missioner hadn't said, but answered naturily: My secretary-Miss Holcomb." "Oh!" said Donnelly. Carson's lips rounded in mute repetition.

Sands, impatient of the detective's swung his gaze back to the jewel trays. Dorothy listened with wide-

with warmth. "She is a young woman of high character."

"I say. I have known her many years," said Mrs. Missioner. "Oh, you have? And are you sure "Why-huh!-no, Miss Missioner you know her thoroughly?" Donnelly the utmost. Carson's face became a supercilious interrogation point. "Mr .- what did you say your name

was?" replied the widow. "Donnelly, ma'am-Dectective Don

nelly, of the Central Office." "Thank you." The axact shade of Mrs. Missioner's meaning was indeter minate. She may have been genuine ly grateful for the information. There was nothing uncertain about her next words. "If you think, Mr. Donnelly," nected with the disappearance of my jewels in any way, you are on the wrong course. She is above sus

"You notice that huh! Carson?" | whispered consultation with his mate. the earth's corners. It had been his red into the background. A round said Donnelly, wheeling on his mate. Then he asked if he might question

sary," assented the widow. "But I should warn you that I cannot bring myself to suspect any of them. "Everybody seems to be above suspicion." snapped Donnelly. "It's al

ways the way, until we begin to get

on the trail, and then everybody be

comes suspicious. I think I'll qustion the servants, ma'am. Shall I have 'em Mrs. Missioner bowed and sent Blodgett to summon his comrades. "One at a time, please," said Donnel

ly. The first to enter was the house keeper, a staid woman in a black gown with white ruching about her withered neck. She knew nothing of the jewels save that madam slways locked them in the safe herself, unless Miss Holcomb was there to do it for her. Yes, Miss holcomb put them away pretty often. Took them out pretty often, too, when madam wished to wear them. No, none of the maids had access to the safe. It was out of the question to think any of them would meddle with madam's jewels. Yes, some of the maids had followers, but always respectable young men, who worked for a living. No. she herself would not venture to disturb any of madam's possessions which madam had not placed under her immediale

The answers of the other servants were equally straightforward. The butler, under-butler, chef, second footman, pantry-boy. parlor-maid, chanber-maids, and kitchen-maid, and the majestic Blodgett himself were interrogated persistenly, minutely, doggedly, even builyingly, and in the end the net result of what they had to tell was at zero. That is to say, as far as Mrs. Missioner and her friends and the diamond expert were concerned. Donnelly thought otherwise. Carsons mind was a receptive blank.

"Are these all the servants?" asked he large detective. "All at present," answered Mrs. Missioner. "My own maid is away on leave. Oh, yes, there's Ali."

"Is Allie the name of your maid?" "No. Ali is a man-an Indian." "And what's his job?" this agree-"He is a courier."

Donnelly was puzzled. "When I travel, he looks after the ransportation and baggage." Missioner explained. The detective stroked his jaw and

whispered with Carson again. "How long has your maid "About a month," the widow tole "Have you had the real sparklers

"The real-" "Sparklers-shiners-diamonds?" "I don't know," said Mrs. Missioner doubtfully.

"How can I be sure? I do not know when the substitution was made. thought I had the genuine necklace to-night."

Exactly why Donnelly and Carson examined the safe a third time must remain a mystery to everyone outside the ranks of headquarters sleuths. Perhaps they were seized by a comon idea. Perhaps they did it to gain time At any rate, there was a world o wisdom in the big Central Office man's expression as he faced Mrs. Mission

"This advance agent of yours-this Alf-where is ha?" "Blodgett," called the widow, "send

All here." The presence faded into the perspective of the passage and in a few minutes maderialized on the threshold "Ali is not in the house, madam,"

the footman reported. "Ask Mrs. Janason when he will re-"Mrs. Janason does not know, madam. She did not know he was out

until I inquired for him." "Ask Miss Holcomb if she sent him anywhere." "What tribe does this Indian belong to?" Donnelly inquired importantly

"Choctaw? Cherokee? Sioux? Maybe he's an Apache?" Mrs. Missioner smiled. It was not an unpleasant smile, but it jarred an unconscious "Huh!" out of the detective. All the others save the serious Ranscome wailed too, and Griswold laughed aloud.

"He fen't that kind of an Indian." Sands enlightened the sjeuth. "He's a native of India-a Hindeo." "Of course," rumbled the Central Office man indignantly. "I know

that?" he asked. Carson knew noth-

ing whatever about that. It would

have been disloyal to know more than

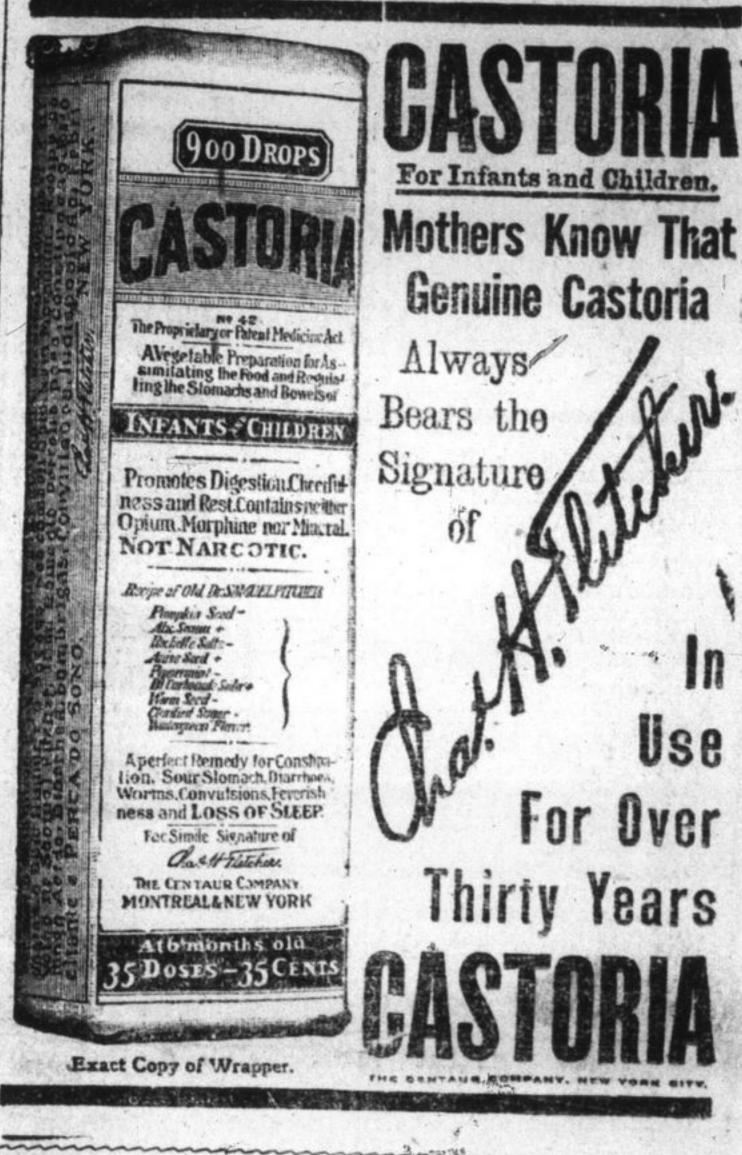
that. What I want to know is what kind of a Hindoo?" "I should say he was a Sepoy." remarked Griswold. There was a malicious gleam in his eyes. "Sepey-huh?" Donnelly turned to Carson. "What do you know about

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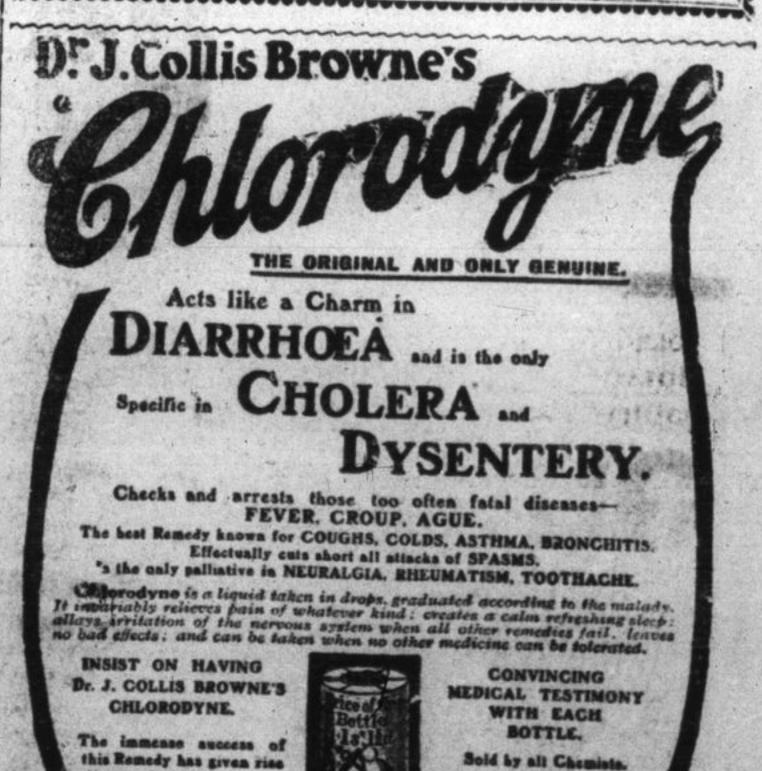
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