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BRITZ

OF HEADQUARTERS BY MARCIN BARBER

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The match fell from his fingers as the inner door opened to his searching glances. Lances of many-colored light slashed the comparative gloom of the compartment as Mrs. Missioner brought forth tray after tray from the jewel vault.

"You have an inventory of course?" asked Sands. Even his sturdy individuality paid passing tribute to the magnificence of the collection.

"The big stone gone," mused Sands. "Then Doris," and there was conviction in his tone as he gathered up the jewels scattered on the table.

"My dear! At this hour?" came in Dorothy's child treble. Mrs. Missioner smiled in a way that said there were jewelers of no importance in commercial circles who would be glad to answer a summons from her at any hour.

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

"At once." His slow logic had carried him to the fact that even now the thief might be on the road to escape.

"Advise me," said the widow, her satin slipper tapping the floor almost on his toes.

"Let him come up, Blodgett," she responded. The carven features blurred into the background.

"Did you say, madam, the Maharane diamond?" "Yes," she answered, and waves of pain rippled across her face.

"The robbery is the more incomprehensible," said Mrs. Missioner thoughtfully. "Because of the extraordinary precautions I have taken against burglars."

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

"We've come up here, Mrs. Missioner," said Donnelly, addressing Miss March. "I think your diamonds."

"Why—huh!—no, Miss Missioner," Mrs. Missioner—no, thank! answered the sleuth, with all the airy ease of a highly embarrassed man.

"Now, then, Miss Missioner," said Donnelly briskly. "Who—huh!—do you suspect? There seemed to be a sort of antagonism in his breathing."

"The eh" was meant to be a javelin hurled straight at the widow's inner consciousness. "There is no one to be suspected—no one I can suspect," she said.

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

"I understand your diamonds are worth a pot of money, ma'am," he said. "They are valuable," said the widow.

"Oh, she is, she is!" returned the sleuth. "And how may I ask, ma'am, do you know that?"

"Thank you," the exact shade of Mrs. Missioner's meaning was indeterminate. She may have been genuinely grateful for the information.

"Donnelly did not reply. He held whispered consultation with his mate. The butler, under-butler, second footman, pantry-boy, parlor-maid, chamber-maid, and kitchen-maid, and the majestic Blodgett himself were interrogated persistently, minutely, doggedly, even bullishly, and in the end the result of what they had to tell was at zero.

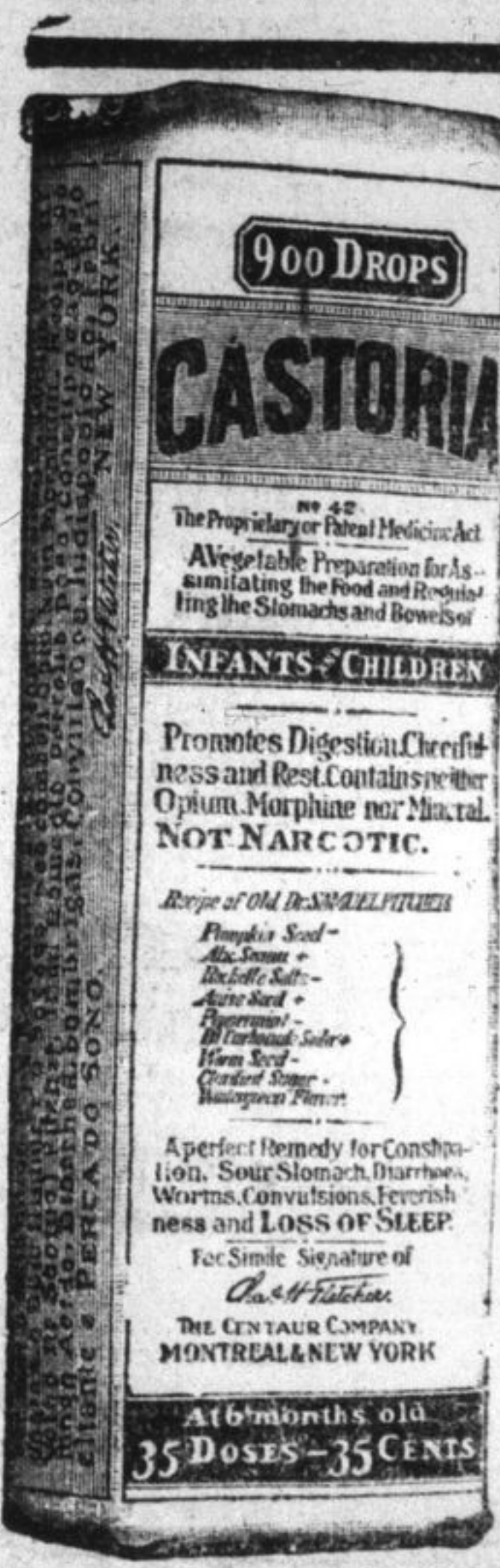
"How long has your maid been away?" "About a month," the widow told him. "Have you had the real sparklers since then?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Missioner doubtfully. "How can I be sure? I do not know when the substitution was made. I thought I had the genuine necklace to-night."

"This advance agent of yours—this All—where is he?" "Blodgett," called the widow, "send All here."

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