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BRITZ OF HEADQUARTERS

BY MARCIN BARBER

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

CHAPTER XV. At Ward's Island.

"It's rather a remarkable coincidence, I'll admit," said Britz to Fitch, as they stood on the deck of the little ferry boat that bore them toward the island; "but it's possible your little old friend had something to do with the making of the imitation Maharahee diamond. You realize thoroughly, I'm sure, the importance of that link in our chain of evidence. It may be difficult to fasten the responsibility for manufacturing all the other fraudulent diamonds of the necklace upon the guilty person, because diamonds of that size can be imitated in any one of several large cities; but the man who made the fake Maharahee is a past master of his craft; a man so skillful that even the most expert artificers of Europe and America do not pretend they can equal him."

"What makes you think the curio dealer had anything to do with it?" asked Fitch. "How could it be done? I thought the Maharahee was made quite recently."

"I don't know how long it's been," the detective replied. "It may have been only a few months, and the diamond, if it is possible, may have been copied any time within the past year. That big office building has been less than a year in construction, and it well within the bounds of fact that the curio dealer received the commission for the work twelve months ago, or possibly more."

"Oh," said the physician, "there is one flaw in your theory. He was not a fakir. All the imitations I gathered about him convinced me that he was not engaged in the manufacture of bogus jewels. His grand purpose in life was to make real diamonds."

"Precisely," said Britz. "It is that fact, much more than anything else, that leads me to think he may be in the employ of the persons we are trailing. Doesn't it occur to you, that the false Maharahee, in order to deceive Mrs. Missioner and all her friends for so long a time, must have been such a beautiful piece of work that it could not have been intended as an imitation? In other words, didn't the man who made the imitation Maharahee believe he was manufacturing a genuine diamond?"

The physician was struck by the force of the detective's logic. He realized instantly the possibilities of this new clue. He glanced at the Headquarters man with unmistakable admiration for his cleverness, as he said: "Lieutenant, I owe an apology to at least one member of the force—yourself. For many years I've had the idea that the last thing any policeman required to succeed in his work was real intelligence. I accepted the popular conception of the force, including the Detective Bureau, which is that 'the finest' are men of brawn and little else. I now perceive that brain is an essential to a real detective, and I am free to admit that you display not only intelligence, but a high order of intellect."

Britz's features relaxed into his inscrutable smile. "It's well not to generalize, doctor," he returned. "The Lexow investigations and other legislative probes, as the newspapers are so fond of calling them, have certainly put the force in a bad light in many ways. First, too, the performance of some of my colleagues are not calculated to inspire the thinking portion of the public with any great confidence in our ability; but we are not all dubs. I'm glad you recognize my endeavor to tread out this case along logical lines. After all, successful detective work is only applied common sense."

The little boat gostered its nose against the jetties pier, and the two investigators sprang ashore. As soon as they entered the asylum grounds, their positions were reversed. Fitch became the mentor, Britz the willing pupil, for in that abode of darkened reason were medical men whose hourly association with that phase of existence made them welcome gladly visitors from the outer world—especially members of their own profession. Fitch, as he ran up the steps of the visitors' entrance, was received royally in the office by three or four physicians and surgeons who had known him in his Bellevue days. There was no jealousy of his success among them. He had shot ahead of several of them, and it was pretty well understood among the island doctors that Lawrence Fitch was rapidly forging to the fore as a fashionable physician. What was more important in their eyes was the fact that he had gained real distinction in his profession. Several minor but helpful discoveries of his had been recorded gratefully in the "Lancet," and more than once his name had been mentioned with flattering recognition at meetings of the County Medical Society.

Fitch was now in his element. He clasped warmly the hands held out to him, clasped two or three of his closer cronies on the back, and presented Britz to the little group with a few words of introduction that won respect for the man from Mulberry Street.

"Got a patient here, Larry?" they asked him jokingly. "No," said Fitch, "not exactly a patient; but it's possible you have a case here. I'm a little bit interested in it." He recited the history of the curio dealer, with an urgent request that everything in connection with the old man be revealed to him. Britz, accustomed as he was to glean his facts tollomely, was unmistakably surprised by the readiness with which each of Fitch's friends promised, and hastened to put their promise into execution.

One of the younger doctors showed Britz familiar with the old diamond-maker's case, and seemed thoroughly to understand his delusion. "He is now in my ward," he said. "He has been there six months; rather unusual case; harmless but hopeless. Can't rid himself of the idea that diamonds are baked up all around him, and that all he has to do is to make one with his own hands to possess the whole of that wealth in jewels. He does his best to make it, too. Unfortunately the ingredients he demands include several dangerous chemicals, and of course he cannot be trusted to go pounding away with a pestle and mortar when his brain is so far gone that he is likely to forget the combination."

The other medical men looked interested. "What do you do with him, doctor?" asked Fitch. "Oh, I substitute harmless things—a little bismuth and sodium phosphate, and a dash of French chalk, and he thinks he has everything he needs. All the stuff he wants that is not dangerous I let him have. He is happy enough mixing and mashing the paste and hammering away all day long. He rolls the mess into dirty little grey balls, and thinks they are diamonds."

"Let us have a look at him," said Fitch. "Sure thing! You won't mind if I don't go with you? I have an amputation on in about ten minutes, and as there is a green nurse helping me, I don't want to take any chances in letting her monkey with the ether cone. So you won't mind, will you, if I ask you to run right along by yourself? Stay as long as you like."

Britz and Fitch were glad enough of an opportunity to question the old man without an auditor, and with a brief, "So long!" to his colleagues, the doctor piloted the detective through dreary stretches in that home of hopelessness to the ward where the curio dealer was found.

In a sunny corner of the long bleak room, the bareness of which was relieved slightly by a few boxes and pots of geraniums and fuchsias on the window sill, seated at a bench covered with odd-looking leather, was a little old man the physician and the Headquarters sleuth sought.

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In the patient's face was a rapt look that told them he was as far away from his present environment as if he had been in the little dirty curio shop where young Dr. Fitch first had seen him. His pliant hands had been plunged many times into a dough-like lump plastic as a sculptor's clay at one end of the bench. A row of jars at the back of the bench was flanked by a phalanx of vials. An earthen bowl full of water stood at his right hand. Directly in front of him, scattered in workmanlike confusion, were several palette knives and mixing brushes. Ceaselessly his fingers plucked tiny pellets from the plastic lump, rolled and patted them, dipped them in the bowl of water, coated them with the many-colored contents of the vials and jars, and thrust them upon the bench with industry purposeful of performance, but purposeless of achievement.

At times a spectral smile seemed to glow upon his cadaverous features—a faint gleam like the spectre of a corpse-light. The sunlight, refracted from the rows of jars and bottles played queer tricks with the contour of his face and gave his tireless hands a ghostlike appearance. He was a poor little shriveled remnant of a man, the dried core of what had been a dabbler in the occult, and which along normal channels might have been a distinguished scientist. No one looking at him could ever have pictured him as possessed of the greed of gain. Britz, which he made no pretence of being a psychologist, comprehended at a glance the ostension of the former curio shop proprietor conveyed little to his distraught scientific mind. Beyond doubt, the old man, as Dr. Fitch had had the ship to him as a patient, to an end Fitch and Britz took a look at him for a moment, and then he went at last he gazed up a chair of perplexity flitted across his face, his fingers halted, but they did not step in their studious task, and he looked at them inquiringly. With a slight shake of his head he apparently gave up the attempt to puzzle out their identity, and once more bent his eyes on the bench he firmly regarded as the threshold to Golconda.

"Guess you don't remember me, Mr. Martin," said the doctor. The old man appeared not to hear. Britz and Fitch exchanged glances, and the detective took up the attempt to awaken a response from the aged inmate's mental vacuum.

"Pretty busy man, eh?" said Britz. He had touched the right chord. Any reference to the industry that absorbed his fading faculties was sure to attract the intelligence of the old curio dealer. He nodded briskly, and went on with his work more zealously than before.

"Got to finish a contract on time," the Headquarters man pursued. Another vigorous little nod, followed by a swift search of the detective's face on the part of the old man's sunken eyes.

"Rather interesting work you're doing," pursued the detective. Thereupon Mr. Martin rejoined: "It is the only work that can interest me. I have given my life to it."

"Find it profitable?" inquired the sleuth. For an instant those gray fingers paused in their manipulation of the clay pellets.

"Well, it depends on what you call profitable, young man," answered the ward of the State. "There are things more important than monetary gain."

"Oh, yes, I know, I know," said the detective hastily. "I suppose your work is purely scientific," answered Britz. "It is art, philosophy, philanthropy—everything. It is the crystallization of the beautiful. Love is beauty, and beauty is life. All man kind needs is beauty in greater measure and higher degree to attain perfection of happiness."

"And you are engaged in forwarding that theory?" "Yes," said the old man simply. "I have taken upon myself the task of glorifying every home in the world, with the prisoned sunlight of the centuries. Every abode of man, however humble, should be illuminated by the light of diamonds. The diamond is

the most exquisite expression of creative love we have. The only trouble is that we have not enough of them. It has remained for me—it has remained for the poor old student of mysteries to find the key to the true jewel wealth of the universe. For thousands of years men have been seeking diamonds in the ground. I take them from the air.

In similar vein he ran on, his words betraying the strange groping of a clouded mind that in its time had been puffed with the truth by most men. There was something extraordinary about the little old fellow's brain, it had not cracked; rather, it had been attenuated by overstrain. It was after a process of patient questioning covering so long a time that it ended in twilight, that Britz led the tireless worker back to days before his arrival in the asylum. The protruded inquiry taxed all the detective's skill in word-hauling, for each time he lifted the patient's prostrate intelligence above the horizon of sanity, it was only to see it slip back in a few seconds.

Fitch, scientist though he was, long conversant with the phenomena of the mind as he had been, marvelled at the faculty taxed all the detective's skill in word-hauling, for each time he lifted the patient's prostrate intelligence above the horizon of sanity, it was only to see it slip back in a few seconds.

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and make him return the diamond to me. He thought he left nothing to tell me who he was. He thought I never would be able to find him in this big town. He felt sure the old curio dealer would not venture far enough away from his stock to track such a fine gentleman. But he forgot one thing. I have kept it all these years, and through it I will find him yet!"

Abstractedly he thrust his hand into an inner pocket and fished out a bit of cardboard. Excitedly he waved it in front of the detective's eyes. Britz resisted for a moment the impulse to snatch it from his grasp, but he gripped himself sharply. Awaiting developments was one of the detective's strong points. As he expected, the old alchemist was in a state of mind to share his knowledge with anybody. After a few more flourishes, Martin laid in Britz's hand a man's visiting card, face down.

Studiously avoiding any appearance of haste, Britz turned it up and read the single line engraved upon it. Without the tremor of a muscle, and with only one swift significant look, he passed the card to Fitch.

The doctor, a little less self-reliantly at a drawing on the back gazed earnestly at the inscription on the face, then wonderingly before the card fluttered from his fingers, he read the line aloud.

"Mr. Bruxton Sands."

CHAPTER XVI.

The Assistant District Attorney

While Britz was struggling with the tangled threads of contradictory circumstances that constituted the fabric of the diamond mystery, the District Attorney's office was not inactive. With the slow stealthiness of a cat approaching its prey it combined the disconnected fragments of evidence gathered by the police into the semblance of a perfect case, and prepared to present it to a jury. The Grand Jury had indicted Elinor Holcomb, and again she was dragged into the glare of a courtroom, this time to plead to the indictment. There remained only the verdict of a petit jury to open the curtains of State Prison for her. Her lawyer was served with the fateful notice of trial, and she was made to realize the great struggle was about to begin.

Assistant District Attorney Mott was taking a last survey of the depositions in the case, mentally picturing the curtain of guilt he would weave before the jury. To his mind the evidence was conclusive. It pointed irresistibly to Miss Holcomb as the thief. Experience had taught him that this was not an easy task to convict a woman on anything but the most direct evidence, yet he felt that the net of circumstances had drawn about her so tightly as to leave her helpless in its meshes. It was an instant's warning, he pushed away the bench, dropped his face into his hands and gave way to grief that moved equally the man long hardened to dissection of the body and the veteran crime hunter accustomed to vivisection of the soul. Few things are more terrible than to see an old man weep. It is a dual surrender, for man is the prerogative of youth and womanhood. Britz and Fitch with difficulty controlled their own emotions just for a moment, for tears streamed over the athen countenance of the broken amateur alchemist, and his wasted form writhed and rocked in convulsive sobs.

"I have had my punishment," said Martin when at last he could speak. He spent itself; "but, oh, the long years—the long years of remorse! Urged by poverty, that enemy of seekers after truth and beauty, I succumbed to the temptation the stranger held out to me. I made the great diamond as he desired—and I gave it to him for his gold!"

The doctor glared swiftly at the detective and started to speak. Britz raised a warning hand, and Fitch checked his exclamation. Seating himself for the first time the Central Office man—the probe of mysteries—laid his hand encouragingly on the diamond-maker's shoulder, and said:

"There, now; don't let it distress you so much. Other men have done things far worse than that!"

"Nothing could be worse," screamed Martin, springing from the low stool on which he sat and facing his visitors in an agony of abasement. "I sold the delight of my eyes, the light of my life, the star of my soul—the queen of all jewels, the purest, truest, most beautiful diamond the world has ever known!"

"Yes," said the detective, "but don't forget it was yours to sell. You had a right to do as you pleased with it."

"I had no such right," cried the alchemist. "That diamond was the product of my laboring hours. I brought it forth from the air, the sunshine, the silver water, the milk of the moon, as an Aphrodite is fashioned of dew and mist. It was not a mere stone; it had thought and sense and soul; it was a microcosm of the marvelous!"

Fitch could not hide his astonishment at the learning and poetry the feebly agitated old man displayed. Britz himself, had not his thoughts been focused rigorously on his purpose, would have stopped to wonder at them. As it was he struck the iron of the alchemist's remorse at white heat.

"What did the stranger want with it?" demanded the detective. "I don't know," said Martin. His voice still trembled, his features worked, his hands fluttered and knotted themselves in the intensity of his emotion. "He came to me a stranger; he went away the same, and with him went my queen of jewels, my beautiful, beautiful diamond of diamonds! But I will find him yet, he shrieked. 'For centuries I have been on my path. He thought all things between us when he lured me into parting with my treasure. He said because he had suggested the outline and color of the stone he had a right to make me give it to him with my money; but it was I—I who thrust into the glorious gem the fire from heaven. I penned the sunbursts in the priceless prism, and it is mine! It is mine by right of creation!'"

This outburst excited the old man but in a little while there was an other outburst of his emotions. He fairly shouted with joy. "I will come up with him yet, and when he do, I will give him back his money"

"You really don't believe her innocent?" he asked. "I do," came the swift retort. "It is just a guess, or is it based on evidence?"

"Conclusive evidence of Miss Holcomb's innocence," solemnly announced Britz. Mott eyed him incredulously. "You really don't believe her innocent?" he asked. "I do," came the swift retort. "It is just a guess, or is it based on evidence?"

(To be Continued.)

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