

BOY OF HEADQUARTERS

BY MARCIN BARBER

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CHAPTER I In the Diamond Horeshoe.

A girl's scream clashed with the soprano's high note in the Jewel Song, and in a moment the Metropolitan Opera House was in confusion. The cry, half suppressed, broke the spell peculiar to the "Faust" night. The somewhat portly Marguerite, her voice soaring like a cage-bird suddenly freed, was decking her mature person with the glistening stage gems left on her scenic doorstep by the saunter of devils, as the singer hung about her neck the rope of pearls with which Mephisto planned to fetter her soul. Mrs. Missioner, swinging her fan with a freer motion, struck the slenderest part of her diamond collar.

The blow was sharp. The golden threads on which the fascination with the jeweled jewels in their perforated settings were strung, snapped. Instantly most of the freed drops of frozen fire that constituted Mrs. Missioner's magnificent necklace—the one with the Maharane diamond—were rolling on the floor of the box. Mrs. Missioner, as the little scream broke from Dorothy March, a debutante she had taken under her wing for the evening, clutched at the few diamonds that fell into her lap. Miss March drew her skirts tightly about her ankles and sprang to the man who sprang to Mrs. Missioner's aid. Before another moment sped, Curtis Griswold was on his knees scooping together the scattered jewels with snow-glove hands. Bruxton, Sande, and the other members of the troupe, were rolling on the floor of the box. Mrs. Missioner, as the little scream broke from Dorothy March, a debutante she had taken under her wing for the evening, clutched at the few diamonds that fell into her lap. Miss March drew her skirts tightly about her ankles and sprang to the man who sprang to Mrs. Missioner's aid. Before another moment sped, Curtis Griswold was on his knees scooping together the scattered jewels with snow-glove hands.

The confusion throughout the house died slowly. By that subtle magnetism that inspires masses of humanity, everybody seemed to know whence the scream had come, and all eyes were turned from the stage to the Missioner box. They saw the usually tranquil mistress of a hundred millions yielding publicly to emotions that her nearest sister on losing her only trinkets might have snared with her. So distracting was the excitement in the Missioner box that for a second the great soprano paused in her cadenzas, and the conductor bated his breath on the baton. There was danger of the orchestra ceasing to play, for the musicians, deterred by discipline from imitating their leader's swift back glances at the auditorium, played steadily on the auditorium. "Someone has fainted" came in the repressed tones from somewhere in the orchestra seats. Marguerite, her fingers at her throat, paused almost imperceptibly, but long enough for a quick look at the focus of excitement. "A faint!" continued the urgent, as she bent her gaze from the box to the conductor.

"What's the matter? Go on! Go on!" the stage manager cried in undertones from the wings. Ushers in the back of the house sought to cover the confusion with the white of their aprons. The moment was big with potential tragedy. One cry of "Fire!" might have sent thousands of startled women and men battling along the aisles in an elemental fury of self-preservation. Men's protestations of the situation without the least regard for the liquid notes of the soprano soaring again in the protechniques of the Jewel Song reclaimed the attention of the house. The conductor, evidently eager to lose no moment, entered loss of pulse, fairly lifted his men through the intricacies of the accompaniment. Promptness of action by the stage manager restored order behind the scenes.

Nothing of all these incidents struck the sense of anyone in the Missioner box. All four of its occupants were concerned for the immediate recovery of the diamonds that had sprung from their stampered neck to her lap, and with the floor. Griswold, still on his knees, picked the larger gems. Miss March sprang further into the corner of the box and dragged her petticoats over more closely until her immature form seemed circled in tulle. "Look in all the corners—look everywhere," Mrs. Missioner urged. "There's one behind the chair," she pointed.

"There's another," cried Dorothy, pointing at Griswold's feet. A glance from the dark stranger in the next box directed the searchers toward still another part of the floor, and every eye was rewarded by the recovery of two, by three, the diamond by one, by gathered, and still the search went on. Fast as they scooped them up, Sands and Griswold poured the glittering treasure into Mrs. Missioner's lap. "Are they all there?" asked the millionaire. "No, no," answered the widow. "There are several more. Please, look again—look everywhere. Dorothy, help me count them."

The women sorted and counted the gems. Indifferently they were able to follow those faces, he would have seen them converse in the corridor behind the box—the box in which the Oriental with the face of a hawk. The hawk watched the Missioner box. So steadily did he direct his gaze at Mrs. Missioner that she was

when the stranger's flashlight struck a spark from his memory. She bowed, coolly as she began the incantation of her head, but in the end, graciously. Her dark neighbor was satisfied with this dubious encouragement.

"You are fond of your jewels as ever, I see," he said in a low tone, as one claiming a share in intimate memories. "Yes," she answered with an abstracted air. She was harking back to days long gone, and evidently her recollection was not unpleasant. "I cannot blame you," said the Oriental. "Everyone knows you have the most wonderful jewels in the world—one of them, at any rate."

Little Miss March listened wide-eyed. Sands bent toward Griswold with a brief whisper. "These," returned Mrs. Missioner, "are among my very best diamonds. But they are nothing to the Maharane, and that is gone."

A leaping flash in the Oriental's eyes soon faded to a gleam of polite interest. "You are brave," was all he said, "to wear them in public. Many a woman, save in her own bathroom, would content herself with duplicated stones." "Duplicated?" There was unmistakable contempt in Mrs. Missioner's tone. "I trust," the Easterner continued, "you will recover the Maharane, too."

Mrs. Missioner had no time for more than another slow bending of her head when the usher who had gone to the orchestra hurried into the box. "I've looked thoroughly, sir," he said to Sands, "and I can't find the diamond anywhere."

The millionaire slipped a banknote into the man's hand. "Try again," he said quietly. "There's a good deal more than this in it for you if you find it." Griswold, as he moved to let the usher pass, stepped backward with such abruptness as to throw his heel sharply down upon something that slipped under his tread like a pebble kernel. In the very moment when Mrs. Missioner, resuming her talk with the Oriental, with emphasis, "I leave imitation to others," that blundering heel crushed into and against the unyielding hardwood of the floor, what had been the most conspicuous diamond in all the richly jeweled collarette—crushed into a tiny heap of pallid powder lay there save, where a great flake had slipped from the pressure and remained to betray what the little pile of dust has been.

"Jove!" exclaimed Sands. "The Maharane is gasped Dorothy. The widow paled. The light in the Oriental's eyes flared to a flame. With a smile, inscrutable as his thoughts, he leaned across the low partition, picked up a pinch of the powder and the telltale flake and laid them deliberately on Mrs. Missioner's outspread fan. "Your maid is more cautious," he said, his smile softening slightly. "or it may be your jewel has made a mistake."

Mrs. Missioner did not faint. She only clutched the soft hand of little Miss March so tightly that the debutante with difficulty suppressed a scream. This time there was silence in the Missioner box, for Griswold, even as he began to stammer an apology for his awkwardness, let the words die on his lips as he saw the cruel pallor of the widow's face. The silence of Sands was grim, that of the Oriental saucily self-effacing.

"Then," said Mrs. Missioner at last, in a low, tense tone, "this is—this is—"

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

Mrs. Missioner hadn't said, but she answered naturally. "My secretary—Miss Holcomb."

"Oh!" said Donnelly. Carson's lips rounded in mute repetition.

Sands, impatient of the detective's awkward questioning, shook himself lion-like, and went to a window. Griswold stung his foot idly, and smoked in shorter measure. Ransome looked nervously at the inquisitor, then swung his gaze back to the jewel trays. Dorothy listened with wide-eyed interest.

"I have known her many years," said Mrs. Missioner quietly, adding with warmth, "She is a young woman of high character."

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

"I say, I have known her many years," said Mrs. Missioner.

"Oh, you have? And are you sure you know her thoroughly?" Donnelly manifestly was enjoying his work. "Everybody seems to be above suspicion," said Carson, as he became a supercilious interrogation point.

"Mr.—what did you say your name was?" replied the widow.

"Donnelly, ma'am—Detective Donnelly, of the Central Office."

"Thank you. The exact shade of Mrs. Missioner's meaning was indeterminate. She may have been genuinely grateful for the information. There was nothing uncertain about her next words. "If you think Mr. Donnelly is above suspicion, can he be connected with the disappearance of my jewels in any way, you are on the wrong course. She is above suspicion."

There was a man in Mulberry Street who might have told her nobody was above suspicion in the eyes of the ordinary Central Office man. But Mrs. Missioner had not yet met him, and when she did, both were too interested for philosophical observations.

Donnelly did not reply. He held whispered consultation with his mate. Then he asked if he might question the servants.

"Certainly, if you think it necessary," 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 always the way, until we begin to get on the trail, and then everybody becomes suspicious. I think I'll question the servants, ma'am. Shall I have 'em in here?"

Mrs. Missioner bowed and sent Blodgett to summon his comrades.

"One at a time, please," said Donnelly. The first to enter was the housekeeper, a stout woman in a black gown with white mouching about her withered neck. She knew nothing of the jewels save that madam always locked them in the safe herself, unless Miss Holcomb was there to do it for her. Yes, Miss Holcomb put them away 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.

"Everybody seems to be above suspicion, 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 immediate care.

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