

# BRITZ OF HEADQUARTERS

BY MARCIN BARBER

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been assigned especially on the case. Every word they uttered hinged on their evidence in the return verdict against Miss Holcomb, and with the exception of two or three unusually sapient newspaper men who disapproved the opinions of Donnelly and Carson because they knew Britz was doing the real work, and because Britz had as yet made no revelations, the reporters quoted them at great length.

Therefore, practically all the New York papers published stories in which Efflor Holcomb was tried, convicted, and sentenced in advance of her arraignment for the theft of the Mission necklace. Over the intervening Sunday papers went so far as to publish page stories, purporting to be psychological studies of the mental bent that made the trusted secretary of a multi-millionaire society woman, with a comfortable career in expectation, throw all chances to the wind and give up to a momentary feminine impulse to possess herself of glittering baubles. These psychological studies were interesting to the multitude, and might have been worth publishing had they been based on either psychology or truth. They had their effect on Griswold, though, and as the clubman's mind was at ease so far as the possibility that he would be connected with the disappearance of the gems was concerned.

So Griswold did not go to the Renaissance that night, nor did he disturb Mrs. Delaroché with a telephone message, although an instrument stood on a convenient table in her boudoir, and an extension wire connected it with a duplicate device that rested on a little Russian table beside her bed. It would have been the work of a moment for Griswold to get into conversational touch with Mrs. Delaroché, and he would have done so, replying to her urgent and somewhat petulant note—if he had received it; unfortunately for him, he never had seen that missive. Canada's guess in regard to the activity of his followers, Chunda and Gasim, was accurate, for those adroit Orientals had stolen the missing note from Griswold's apartment before it came under the observation of "Curtis dear," to whom it was addressed. "Altogether, once more, as he would have expressed it, things were not 'breaking' for the suave secretary of the Iroquois Trust Company.

## CHAPTER XXI

### Stop, Thiel!

Millicent Delaroché slept soundly. Hers was the type of beauty that retains its freshness through indulgence in creature comforts. Not all her fondness for amusement could lead her to rob herself for many nights of the repose she instinctively knew was essential to the preservation of her charms. She was the sort of woman, past thirty, who retains a false youth sometimes more effective than the immaturity which is measured by the calendar. Her complexion was as delicate as a debutante's. Her eyes were brighter than those of the average athletic young woman, and no silver thread shot the dusk of her luxuriant hair. All this was due largely, she was convinced, to her lifelong habit of sleeping early and often, and of resolutely refusing to let her slumber be disturbed by any such restless things as dreams, which, after all, are the mere ghosts of thought—and too much thinking was not one of her foibles. The beauty of Mrs. Delaroché was, in short, the kind that leads the lowly worshiper of Buddha to hang garlands about the necks of sleek, white zebus in the temples of the East, which causes the Alaskan aborigine to carve the smooth surface of his totem poles, and which prompts the beighted black of darkness to lay offerings at the feet of his Mumbo Jumbo. Most men who saw Mrs. Delaroché felt a strange impulse to place burnt offerings upon the shrine of her loveliness. Hers was the beauty of a Ninon, a Sappho. It was its own excuse for existence, and as well it was, since no other reason could be advanced for the admiration of the magnificent Millicent.

Though Mrs. Delaroché slept profoundly, her external senses were not wholly unvigilant. Long study of herself had made her sensitive to disagreeable impressions that were purely physical, and so, though no intrusive vision of mind could interrupt the fluid calm of her beauty sleep, a slightest uncomfortable feeling at the precise spot whence her tresses swept upward in an elaborate coiffure or parted in the braids of negligee had the effect of arousing her as no mere dream possibly could have done. It required a second's alertness for the habits of her mind, and the fact that she suddenly was recalled from deep repose, for Mrs. Delaroché to realize there was a hand beneath her pillow, and that hand was not one of her own. Right with fright, she walled to that it might be the hand of a thief, and she made a swift reach for the alien hand—too late. It had been withdrawn swiftly in the few moments requisite to complete comprehension of the situation, and if Mrs. Delaroché had not been so certain that she never dreamed, she might have thought she still was sleeping. Hasty exploration of the space beneath her pillow, however, told her the midnight hand had not

gone away empty. She was broad awake in an instant. She was erect so swiftly that she bruised her forehead slightly against the thing cold and hard and round and metallic that was immediately pressed menacingly to her head.

"Don't move, or you'll get this!" said a rough voice.

Mrs. Delaroché gasped, and despite the hand, sank back again to her pillow. She could not see, but she felt the metal that had touched her brow. This was a great feat of imagination for Mrs. Delaroché.

"That's right; lie still!" continued the voice. "If you know what's good for you."

The woman, after several agonized seconds, summoned courage to say in a choked whisper, "But I don't want to speak!"

"I told you to keep still, and you'd better do it!"

Rough though the voice was, it was carefully subdued. It could not have been heard in the corridor. Mrs. Delaroché drew a deep, fluttering breath, and was evidently on the point of making another attempt to speak when the metallic thing touched her forehead again, chilling her to silence and the voice went on:

"See here, lady, I've got no time to waste with you. Just you stay where you are, and don't make a sound, unless you want to get this!" and the metal was pressed a little harder to her forehead. "I am going to get out of this room quietly, and I'm going right now. If you make any noise for the next five minutes, I'll blow your head off!"

Joe water seemed to course through the woman's veins. She dared not speak, a muscle nor did she essay to speak again. As far as her benumbed senses could tell her, there was no irresolution in that raucous voice, no in the contact of the weapon against her shrinking flesh. She did as much thinking as it was possible for her to do, and concluded she at least must have a chance to give her a chance of escape. The door of her boudoir, with a strong thumb-bolt on its inner side offered protection could she but reach it. She knew its exact situation, and in spite of the darkness, could have pointed her way to it without error. But to do so she must cross half the width of the bedroom, and after the burglar's latest words she did not doubt he would put his throat into a scabbard before she could reach the floor. So she lay still, trembling in every inch of her unseemly loveliness, waiting for an opportunity to slip through the boudoir door and summon help ere the thief could escape from the hotel. She had a fair supply of animal courage, and if she had not been taken at so great a disadvantage might have made a fair fight for it, which the burglar had taken from her under her pillow. But life bitted her altogether comfortably at all points to risk any hopeless daring of danger. She lay still.

The cold pressure was removed from her forehead, and the burglar moved about the room. The thick carpet and doubtless the felt soles on the man's feet muffled his footsteps. He stepped soundly. He went from her dressing table to a writing desk, lighting each in turn with a vivid circle of rays from an electric pocket torch, but holding the little illuminating device always in such position that no faint gleam fell upon himself. Not for a moment, however, did he slacken his alertness sufficiently for Mrs. Delaroché to have a good chance to get to the inner room. He pretended to search thoroughly several places where money or jewels might be kept, but even to a woman of her slow wit, it was apparent he did so in a half-hearted way. Millicent felt assured the man knew just what he had taken from beneath her pillow, and that he was satisfied with it. He showed that to be true when he gave up the pretended search without so much as trying the handle of a small safe in a far corner of the room. Returning to the dressing table, he renewed his warning, throwing so much savage meaning into his words that Mrs. Delaroché was certain there was no pretense about that.

Then he walked to the door opening on the corridor, turned the handle cautiously, thrust his head through a second opening, and looked up and down the hall. He saw nothing, he opened the door, stepped outside, and closed it swiftly and silently. There was no sound to indicate whether he had gone along the corridor, or still stood just outside the door. Mrs. Delaroché waited, listening intently to the hope of hearing his footstep on the floor. He waited perhaps a minute, for she had no desire to hazard a shot from that terrible thing the burglar had pressed against her brow. Then her courage oozed back, and she bounded to the door, screaming with all her might, pausing only long enough to snatch a peignoir and throw it about her shoulders ere she pulled open the outer door and sent her shrieks rattling down the long hall. Her cries, for she was a magnificently constructed animal of most expansive lung power, not only echoed far along the corridor, but penetrated even the sound-proof doors of the other apartments. The disturbance she made was alarmingly novel to the exclusive calm of the Hotel Renaissance. Doors were flung open, heads popped out, and a dozen inquiries were flung at her from every part of the hall, but Mrs. Delaroché had exhausted her coherence in framing that one purpose of assuring herself she had not committed the innovation of dreaming, then she made a swift reach for the alien hand—too late. It had been withdrawn swiftly in the few moments requisite to complete comprehension of the situation, and if Mrs. Delaroché had not been so certain that she never dreamed, she might have thought she still was sleeping. Hasty exploration of the space beneath her pillow, however, told her the midnight hand had not

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