

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

TWELVE DETECTIVE STORIES By ARTHUR STRINGER

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VIII.—A STRANGER IN THE HOUSE

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Balmy Rymal, special agent and operative for the Jewelers' Protective Alliance, in New York, writes these stories for the information of Winkie, Mr. Winkie's friend, to prove to him that although appearances were often against her, she always loved him. Balmy was dismissed from a hospital, where she was training, because she let Angelo Parento, a young Italian who had killed his sweetheart and wounded himself, escape. She later learns that he became a gem thief. As an object lesson for a group of gem thieves, Inspector Sloan, of the Alliance, gave Balmy the job of stealing the third biggest diamond in America. She was then to be arrested, tried and sent to jail—and immediately released. In the attempt at this sham robbery she chloroformed the owner of the diamond, who is later found dead, and the stone is gone from the safe which she goes to take it. The stone is later recovered from Curate Sam, a well-known gem thief. Then begins a battle of wits between the gem thieves and the representatives of law and order, and each one of these stories tells in a forceful manner the outcome of one of these interesting encounters. Toosey Attrill is a stool-pigeon for the Alliance.

I sat on a lilac-colored chair, in a lilac-colored room, waiting for the fifth wealthiest woman in America. And I had set their waiting Mrs. Obden-Belmont for exactly thirty-five minutes. I was still waiting with my watch in my hand, like a timekeeper at a track side, when a quick rustle of silk made me look up.

I saw myself being inspected by a thin and nervous woman with narrow cheekbones and an iron Duke nose. She was at least fifty. And I knew at once that I was face to face with Mrs. Obden-Belmont.

"You're the young lady from the Police Department?" she demanded. She spoke briskly, pausing only a moment, apparently to digest her shock at finding a hireling of the law in a Duff-Gordon frock and a Teppe hat.

"Sincerely," I amended, "creating my real feelings behind a rather languid smile.

"Then who?" she began slightly elevating her thinly penciled eyebrows.

"I'm Miss Rymal," I said. "And I was sent here from the Protective Alliance office.

"But you were to come on the twenty-five train and Hoskins was sent to meet you," she announced with a note of latent reproach.

"Yes," I smilingly retorted. "But, you see, it was with the servants' cart. And I rather fancied that you'd overlooked that I might be crowding the new second cook and the car wiper."

I had the satisfaction of seeing her start, as I had intended to make her start, at the none too muffled rebuke of mine.

But in a moment's time she was completely mistress of herself. "Miss Blanchan attends to those things," she explained. "Miss Blanchan is my secretary."

"Then she ought to be dismissed," I promptly announced.

"I can give you precisely fifteen minutes," was the unflinching statement of Mrs. Obden-Belmont.

"That will be sufficient, I think," I told her, still smiling. Having scored a point I could afford to be magnanimous.

"To a thief merely a few hundred dollars at the most. But its historic value is quite another matter. It was an antique Florentine ring, once in the possession of Lorenzo de Medici."

"Who discovered the theft?"

"I did."

"Whom do you suspect?" The question seemed to startle her.

"I have fixed my suspicion on no particular person as yet," she announced with quite unnecessary dignity.

"And you are willing to let me go about this in my own way?"

"I'd prefer having some slight inkling of what that way is to be," she finally averred.

"It would make my work much easier if no one in the house knew why I am here."

"Then you already have a suspicion as to—as to who the guilty person is?"

"I have concluded that it is what we call an inside job," I said. "How many servants have you here?"

"She did a quick sum in mental arithmetic.

"Seventeen of my own. Then there's Gwendolyn de Haven's maid and Hallie Babish's and Ferris's man. That makes twenty, not counting the chauffeurs and the seven men Mr. Obden-Belmont keeps on the yacht. But I have already told you that all of my servants are above suspicion," asserted the mistress of that manorial retinue.

I was tempted to remark, with a sigh, that they always were above suspicion in a case like this.

"The deer-hounds which trotted confidently up beside me.

"Fine animals, eh?" off-handedly remarked a man who promptly arose from one of the club-chairs in front of me. I at once saw that it was my old friend, Admiral Trevor Ferris.

It seemed natural enough that he should give me his chair and then explain that a deer-hound was ornamental but not overly intelligent. Then a younger man on my right began enlarging on the intelligence of the Zeigler pointers, and a fat man further around the circle spoke of the cleverness of the Elmview scott-dogs, and that reminded me of what I'd seen the dogs in the New York Police Department do, and before I knew it I had that entire circle listening to my description of how a police dog could be trained to make an arrest by overtaking a prisoner and holding him.

I sat there quite at my ease rather flattered because a brick-colored Apollo seemed to stare at me.

"I didn't see Winkie again until that night when I rushed down in a feverishly altered Paquin dinner-gown. Then I saw Winkie at a slightly closer range than I had expected, for it so happened that I was seated that night at dinner between him and Rear-Admiral Trevor Ferris. I thought for a foolish moment that Winkie might like me in my unsuspected Queen-of-Sheba get-up. But in that I made the mistake of my life. Instead of melting with admiration, he looked me over with a cool and scottish eye, relapsing into a morose and troubled silence from which the sassy debutante made repeated but ineffectual attempts to rouse him.

That dinner was far from being all play to me, for I kept going up and down that double line of prattling grandees, pondering which one of them could be a gem-thief and what reason that particular person could have for purloining a poor little Dresden-china heirloom's wedding gift. Again and

thoroughly looked over the wall-safes, which proved a pretty enough vault, for which a Tudor fireplace had been sacrificed. The entrance to this, protected by a four-tumbler combination lock, was rather cleverly concealed. But after I'd persuaded Mrs. Obden-Belmont to slow the jewelry away in that safe I secretly wired a mat in front of the safe door and had it connected with a buzzer beside my own bed.

Besides all this, while I was busy at my end of the line, Toosey was correspondingly occupied in a surreptitious inspection and appraisal of the forces below stairs. We had worked thoroughly, but we had worked fruitlessly. Not a thing out of the ordinary had occurred. And not a clue had been unearthed.

There at "Miramar" it had astonished me to find out how complex life could become, how rused by procedure and system, and conventional. The thing was too big for me. I tended to subjugate me to leave me as an obliterated as Miss Blanchan herself had become. And as the time for the much-talked about and much-written-about Serwin-Obden-Belmont wedding drew nearer I more and more realized

to me through a veil of ether: "Are you staying close, you girl with the gray eyes?" And when he was conversing in the St. Andrew's sun-room, before his married sister had whisked him off to Pasadena, he'd even lifted my hand (just a little blanching with bioloride) up to his lips and said: "I don't see, Gray Eyes, how I can ever live without you!"

But that seemed a long time ago. And many things had happened since then. From time to time, now, I noticed that he looked at me with troubled eyes. I could see the unspoken question on his face. My Winkie, I could see, was suspicious of me. He no longer believed in me. And I remembered that I wasn't in a position to explain things to him. If it hurt me a little to feel that he couldn't at least give me the benefit of a doubt, I still worried a sort of joy out of his bewilderment.

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Winkie and I looked at each other long and thoughtfully.

how barbaric the mating-rites of a he-and-she-thing of the human tribe could become once you looked at it through the cool light of reason.

The making ready for these rites was still converting certain parts of "Miramar" into a cross between a greenhouse and an oriental bazaar, and below stairs was a humming beehive of activity. But the house itself seemed rather empty of guests that day, and luncheon proved an extremely dreary affair. Ferris, I found, had flitted off to Newport the night before. So it was with considerable surprise that I ran across him under a clump of maples late that afternoon. He was dressed in knickerbockers, and had a field-glass in his hand, and seemed intent on a study of the azure heavens above him when I interrupted his seance. He stood for quite a long time staring off through the heavy foliage.

"That's most remarkable," he said as he slowly put down his glasses. "I'm sure that was a Canada Jay I saw there—perisorous canadensis, you know."

"A bird?" I asked as I sat down on a rustic bench past which a tiny brook gurgled and danced.

"Yes, a bird," he said as he sat down in front of me on a collapsible campstool of steel and canvas. "Sometimes called the Whisky-Jack, or the Vespaux Heron, or the Moose Bird, or several other names. I love to study God's innocent little feathered creatures, and a place like 'Miramar' gives them such splendid harborage. Somewhere through the thicker cover here you may run across a Hungarian pheasant or two I brought over myself for Mrs. Obden-Belmont."

The sound of that name seemed to cause him to lapse into silence. After a minute or two he turned to me.

"Who did it?" he abruptly demanded.

"Did what?" I asked. "Carried off that De Medici ring?"

The handsome old face grew suddenly furrowed. "There have been two thefts?" he said.

"I thought you knew that. Any

feature of the secret being withheld from me?" I asked him as I outlined to him what had already been told me of the case.

"No; that's all we know positively. And I wasn't told of the second theft. That makes things more serious."

"Tell me about Gwendolyn De Haven," I ventured.

"Impossible," he said with the utmost decision.

"Then Miss Blanchan?" I continued. "Again he shook his head."

"Then how about Bessie?"

"He smiled almost commiseratively. "It's quite clear you don't know the respectable Bessie; as—as we've come to know him. It would be a bit absurd to sacrifice a forty-four-year record for honesty, a life state of absolute integrity for a three or four hundred dollar trinket."

"That's what I've felt all along," I agreed. "And at the same time that's why it has impressed me as an inside job. It's really the sort of snatch-petty sneak-thieving that a weakling or a mental defective might be guilty of."

"Mrs. Obden-Belmont is as weak-willed as her husband," he proclaimed.

"That's what I've been at considerable pains to verify," I acknowledged.

"Then that takes us back to the guests, after all," he said with a chuckle.

"But what is there to work on there?"

"I've been wondering about young Belmont," he ventured, in a hesitating sort of way. "Hasn't it struck you that he's rather worried-looking and ill-at-ease?"

Then he looked at me out of the corner of his shrewd old eye. "How well do you know him?"

"I don't think I know him at all," I frankly acknowledged. Then I turned and asked him blankly: "Do you think he stole those jewels?"

"I am sorry to have to say it," he muttered without looking at me, "but I know of something he has stolen."

"What?" I demanded.

"Rear-Admiral Ferris didn't answer that question, because he caught up his field-glasses and leveled them through the sun-filtering leafage."

Not long afterward as I returned across the glowing green terrace I saw under the cool shadow of the carriage entrance a big plum-colored sedan ornamented by two human caryatids in plum-colored uniforms. One of these figures suddenly circled the car and swung open the plum-colored door. At the same moment Mrs. Obden-Belmont herself stepped out to the sedan. She stopped short as she caught sight of me.

"You haven't succeeded very well, have you?" she remarked. Her tone was very quiet. It made me think of a knife-blade buried in rose leaves.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because a diamond bar-pin, I find, has just been stolen from my daughter's room," quietly retorted that magisterial figure. And the plum-colored factorium swung shut the plum-colored door and left the staring rather empty after that glistering equipage as it grove its purring way out along the winding gravel drive.

About the third jewel robbery at "Miramar" I found, there was little that was novel and still less that was known. The night brought nothing new nor did the morning. "Miramar," in fact, was preoccupied with a bigger movement than the one which had ushered me in through its cobble-stone gate-pillars. And all day long the ever-shifting army of preparation came and went.

"Say, Balmy," Toosey remarked after an observation of certain of these activities. "I wouldn't be that bride for all the flash junk that ever came out of the Kimberley Mines."

"Toosey, what's the matter with you?"

"It isn't me, it's the house."

"What's going to happen to this house?"

"There's going to be a death in it," was her solemn-noted reply.

"What makes you say about things like that?" was my too-patient inquiry.

"Balmy, when a bird flies into a house, that means death! It never fails. And a bird flew into this house. And what's more, I saw it."

A BOGUS HALF-DOLLAR.

A man who looked seedy and bunged up boarded a trolley car and laid his hand on the arm of the conductor and said:

"Old chap, let me give you a tip. If a little old woman with an iron jaw tries to board your car today ring the bell to leave her behind."

"But why should I?" was queried in reply.

"Because she was riding on this route yesterday and some conductor passed a bogus half-dollar on her. She was so mad about it that she didn't sleep any last night, and an hour ago she put on her hat and walked out. She is going to board your car on the Mtn. She will take you by the necktie and give your head and neck a twist and demand a good half-dollar of you. Don't you look guilty and gasp for breath and try to stammer out some excuse. If you do she will think you are the man, and you will go to the hospital for two weeks before she gets through with you."

WHAT AN ARMISTICE IS.

Mr. Jones was reading his newspaper and Mrs. Jones was reading another, when she suddenly looked up and asked:

"My dear, what is an armistice?"

VALUE OF SALVAGE IN A. E. F.

The value of material salvaged by the A. E. F. Salvage Service for the thirteen months ending with January amounted to \$55,253,074, of which \$25,100,000 was material collected on battlefields. During January battlefields covered material having an original cost of \$11,000,000 and a salvage value of \$11,000,000.