

Diamond Cut Diamond

By JANE BUNKER

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CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

I was obliged to spin some sort of a plausible yarn to save appearances, and when I handed him my letter with the dime and begged him to mail it for me I knew I was saved. But I have never yet attempted to count up the lies those diamonds cost me!

It was now a little after ten and there was nothing for me to do but wait and shiver. I began to think coherently—to appreciate what monsieur himself would be getting into by calling the police or the customs authorities to help him steal Mrs. Delario's diamonds.

And yet I saw perfectly he could do it! Where he had her was that she'd smuggled the stones. He knew it—I knew it—Claire knew it. And if he were bold enough to steal them from her in just that way I wasn't sure but she was timid enough to let him do it.

I suddenly remembered what George had told me about his renting the flat. "Why, the man was here before we were!" I exclaimed. "He took a faster steamer—he was ready to carry through the job when we landed!"

And with that I suddenly remembered another thing that had entirely slipped my mind: while our baggage was being examined—or rather not examined—and Claire was weeping—and everybody was flying round and asking everybody if he'd seen her mother—an elderly man in a big fur automobile coat, the collar up about his face and his cap down over his brow—a man with a flowing white beard and flashing, black, beady eyes—a man on crutches—had stood opposite us, watching. As I looked at him I had the quick impression that there was something wrong about him—that he was there, perhaps, to steal from the incoming baggage in the confusion.

The next moment my eye fell on a turquoise-headed slipper—hers or mine, I didn't know which—that had fallen down between our suitcases. The old gentleman had his eye on it also. I saw his hand come out of his big pocket and reach, cautiously, slowly. My own hand shot out and grabbed the slipper from under his nose, and I gave him a double-barreled glare. I hadn't finished the glare when my cousin came hurrying to tell me to be quick, our baggage was through.

I had, as I say, forgotten the whole incident, but—THE MAN IN DISGUISE WAS MONSIEUR DE RAVENOL.

I knew it then—he confessed it later; he had expected to get those diamonds into his clutches while they were actually going through the customs inspection! I bounced out of my chair with one glad whoop—"Eureka!—I have found it!" and pranced to my bedroom. I had the key to the whole puzzle—"one of those slippers!"

When I asked Mrs. Delario that afternoon over the telephone how she got the diamonds through the customs house she replied, "One of those slippers we got in Paris is lost." Those were the words she said; and those words she really committed was "one of those slippers we got in Paris . . . is lost." The tones of her voice—the significant pauses—had been ignored by me then. But add "in" and drop "is lost" and she answered my question—she told me as plain as plain could be that she had smuggled the diamonds through the customs house "in one of the slippers."

Easy enough! I snatched them from beside my bed. Easy enough—with those high insteps. So that was how she did it!

Claire had been snooping till she found out where the diamonds were—that was what her father sent her over for. But she was not to steal the diamonds herself—the risk of her being caught with the goods was too great—that was her father's job; she was to give the signal—he was to get the stones. And why hadn't her mother met her, unless to create the confusion for Mrs. Delario and me that would make it possible for him to turn the trick? Why had he come over by a faster steamer except to be ready for it?

It's precisely what he did. I learned it all later. He came over ahead of us, passed himself off in disguise, and forged credentials as an Italian government secret service agent tracing an old master that had been recently stolen from one of the Italian museums and that was known to be coming to America—smuggled, of course—in charge of a certain woman whom he knew by sight.

To carry out this pose he had arranged to meet several incoming steamers and he was prepared to step up to Mrs. Delario, demand to search her baggage and then—upon turn of his head and he could have walked off with her diamonds in his pocket, shed his disguise and let her whistle for them. Instead of that he got a glare from me—one twist of my hand and I had "one of those slippers"—he didn't know which and he didn't dare speak for fear I'd recognize him!

And thus his whole plot fell to the ground—also all my interesting occult mystery about three rotating slippers that told the wall of their own accord after they'd been set heel to the wall

and then walked out of a locked flat and then came home and hid in my wardrobe.

Monsieur had turned the slippers when he set them down hurriedly—the suggestion of all the other slippers, too to the wall, had been too strong for his memory of three slippers heel to the wall after he had picked them up. That was his one inexcusable blunder in the whole affair—it had set me watching.

But Claire a thief!—or the accomplice of a thief! That high-bred girl—that rare, accomplished child!

I couldn't believe it—I wouldn't believe it. She was acting in good faith whatever she did. Perhaps he had convinced her that the diamonds were his—that Mrs. Delario was robbing him! I felt it then the boldest, cleverest plot I had ever heard of—I actually admired him for the daring and the intellectuality of it—as a feat it stimulated me.

Yes, once having the key to it in the slipper, I saw the whole plot as plain as day; the one point puzzling me was: how did monsieur know I had the diamonds now? I couldn't make that out at all—not if I believed Mrs. Delario hadn't told him, and I thought she was the only other living person who knew it. Well, I had them, and I'd keep them for all of monsieur until I returned them to her.

At a quarter after six or thereabouts I heard the front bell ring three two's I'd told Billy Rivers to use as his signal, and I skimmed along the hall in my Eureka frame of mind—never once thought of precautions or of calling through first and making sure it was Billy—and flung the door open wide.

As the door flew back I realized the fool thing I'd done; and then without even looking to see who it was I caught the door and tried to shut it again. But he pushed. I looked, then cried "Billy!" and grabbed him by the arm. I knew I didn't deserve it—it ought by the rights of romance to have been the villain.

"Oh, Billy—my deliverer—you dear!" I gasped the minute the door was shut. "I declare you're good enough to kiss!" and with that—I up and did it!

Billy was embarrassed. He appraised my salutation at "Aw—say—!" and a sheepish grin; so I felt obliged to add, as I dragged him along the hall, "But I used to kiss you years and years ago."

"Why, so you did—in my Stone age," acknowledged Billy, his tone implying that he'd passed through some of civilization since; and with that he thrust a big package in my hands, saying laconically, "Some eats."

"Some eats!" I gurgled, remembering suddenly that I was starving. "Billy—I could kiss you again—!"

"Aw—say—!" he parried, and grabbed the package and began tearing off the wrapper. "It's so sudden—but thank you ever so much, and for heaven's sake tell me what's happened! I'll bust if you don't."

"I've run off with a million dollars' worth of diamonds, that's all."

For a minute Billy looked as if he thought I'd run off with my senses; and then he observed in that sooty, condensed tone a very sane young person uses to a respected elder whose mind is wandering:

"I think you'd better eat something—immediately." (Full period here—it says, "We'll talk about what ails you when you're feeling more yourself.") "Where's your can opener?"

I was so hungry at the sight of food that little paucity pains ran round my insides and up my throat, and I pranced into the kitchen for the opener and plates, leaving Billy to think what he pleased about my mental state. I had the wit, though, to tell him "Shh!" Just at that moment Mrs. Thing-downstairs began her supper-time per-

formances. Little had I ever dreamed that her daily torture of an otherwise inoffensive piano would sometime prove a blessing to me. Billy whispered hoarsely, "What's that? The villain-trying to get in?"

I said, "Mrs. Thing-downstairs believes it's music, lucky for us—we can now breathe out loud without fear of the villain. He may be listening at the front door—but he'll hear nothing while she operates."

Billy forked a lot of chicken onto my plate and commanded me to go to it, and I grabbed a roll out of his box and said:

"Billy, he tried to murder me."

"That man—he was waiting for me with a dagger that night—look here!" I jumped up and got the dagger from my penholder tray—he dropped it on the floor.

"Gee whiz!" he cried, taking the dagger from me; and then he demanded, "Who?"

"That man—De Ravenol."

"De Ravenol?—you mean that man in Paris who wanted you to bring the pretty daughter over with you and you wouldn't?"

"Yes—that's the one. He was a diamond thief—that's what he was!" I blew off. "He was in the act of stealing a million dollars' worth of diamonds. And I foiled him!"

"Wow! You did?"

"I should say I did! And what's more, I've got the diamonds here—there—behind you in those hincynths."

"Wow!" he whooped, and before I knew what he was doing he was out of his chair, his hand on the glass. "Don't touch them!" I shrieked.

"Wow!" he cried, dropping his hand and jumping back. "Do they bite?"

"No—they sting. They pizen you very slow. But, Billy—stop wowing—I'm watched."

He sat down with the command, "Divulge the dread secret," and between bites I told him the whole story up to Eureka, and brought in the slipper to prove it.

He was still staring when I got through and asked him, "And now how am I going to get those beastly things out of the house and where am I going to get them to? She doesn't dare to have them at her house—"

"Oh, I can take them away and hide 'em, if that's all you want," he answered carelessly.

"It isn't all," I retorted, a bit indignant. "It's only the beginning of a new chapter of misery for the whole of us—it's throwing the responsibility on you without getting me out of the net—it won't save me from being kidnapped and searched and maybe murdered to keep my mouth shut—"

Billy nodded at that and said, "You're right."

He took a cigarette out of his case and with a short, "May I?" lighted up and began to blow rings, gazing at them abstractedly. I nibbled crumbs. After I'd stood his silence for half a cigarette, I repeated my question and told him, "We've got to do something right off—now—tonight."

"Of course," he snatched another quarter and threw the cigarette with energy into the empty chicken tin, bouncing up as he spoke.

"What are we going to do?" he gave forth masterfully. "We're going to trap that bold man all by our little own selves—you and I. And we'll give him one nice lesson on stealing diamonds from defenseless women—and threatening you."

"But we've got to hurry," I urged. "I can't live this way much longer—it's simply killing me!"

"Sure," Billy agreed, suppressing a smile at me. "I'm hurrying all I can. I calculate to have your 'mossoo' in hand in the morning night." And he unfolded his plot and I entered into it with fervor. The truth is Billy and I were having the fun of our lives.

The scheme was to decoy monsieur to the flat by a letter from Mrs. Delario indicating where the diamonds were hidden: we banked it on his remembering the one place he hadn't searched—the hincynths; and if he got the tip we believed he'd return the moment I went out.

After some discussion Billy and I decided not to take Mrs. Delario into our confidence, not knowing how she'd act in the crisis, which necessitated our imitating her writing. The only sample of her writing we had was her address in my notebook and some titles of books on spiritualism she'd wished me to read. But the sample did us, and the joint literary efforts of myself and Billy produced the following—this purporting to be from me to her:

My Dear Mrs. Delario: Since we searched everything but the bunch of hincynths as I told you over the telephone Tuesday—(this struck me as an awfully neat, convincing touch, for his detective must have reported both that I telephoned and the number of the call)—I thought the same place would continue safe in case of a second invasion. I got a fresh bunch, so you will know where it happens to me. If so, come and get them at once; break in the flat if you have to.

I am going to try to see you Saturday night for final arrangements if I can slip out without being seen. Expect me between eight and ten. Be sure to be alone so we can talk. I still hold to my promise—on third to "a" if you will help me to dispose of 'em—J. B.

"Gum drops" was Billy's touch—he

declared that "mossoo" would read it "diamonds" sure as anything.

And this, purporting to be from her to him:

Monsieur! I have refused to have anything to do with this matter since I know the truth of the ownership. Under the circumstances, I feel she is foolish to try to hold on. Get the hincynths while she is at my house tonight, and the trouble will be over for everybody.

I typed my own letter with a carbon copy while Billy laboriously produced the one from Mrs. Delario.

The decoy letters we sent to the hotel where monsieur was staying. The rest of our plan was this: Billy was to "steak it" upstairs and get into the flat; I was then to put on my wraps,

go down in the elevator, telling George I was going out for the evening—so he'd report it to monsieur; wait in the lower hall for a mythical automobile till George went up with the car, and then creep up the stairs.

"This time tomorrow night I'll present you with a nice 'mossoo' in hand-cuffs," affirmed Billy confidently.

"Suppose he doesn't come? Or suppose he murders me tonight?"

"Oh, the guns!" He snatched up his overcoat and dived into the pocket. He laid two revolvers on the table, saying cheerfully: "He will come and he won't murder you—not if you keep your wits about you. They're loaded."

He slipped the coat on. He was going in high feather; but my heart sank at the prospect of another night and that man lurking in the house.

"Keep a stiff upper lip—heroine of the century!" he bantered. "I'll be here at six tomorrow." He picked up his hat.

"Oh, I'm all right," I returned nonchalantly, feeling suddenly knocked-kneed yet determined I'd not let Billy suspect it.

I rang for the elevator, and while the car was rumbling up Billy glided away in the darkness of the stairs back of it. He must have reached only the first turn when I heard him exclaim, "Oh! Excuse me! I never saw you!"

Followed the word, "Pardon!" and I recognized monsieur's voice!

I had the presence of mind to stifle my curiosity and slip back into my flat, noiselessly shutting the door. Was he merely coming to lock me in, or had he been listening? My forebodings every moment increased, for up to one o'clock—when I went to bed—he had failed to lock me in.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Flour a Dollar a Pound. Food prices at present seem high,