

The Diamond Spy

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S.S. Montrose,

June 18.

I am having enough bother with one or two of the passengers this trip, to make me wish I was running a cargo boat again.

When I went up on the upper bridge this morning, Mr. Wilmet, my First Officer, had allowed one of the passengers, a Mr. Brown, to come up on to the bridge and loose off some prize pigeons. Not only that; but the Third Officer was taking the time for him, by one of the chronometers.

I'm afraid what I said looked a bit as if I had lost my temper.

"Mr. Wilmet," I said, "will you explain to Mr. Brown that this bridge is quite off his beat; and I should like him to remove himself, and ask him please to remember the fact for future reference. If Mr. Brown wants to indulge his taste in pigeon flying, I've no objections to offer at all; but he'll kindly keep off my bridge!"

I certainly made no effort to spare Mr. Brown; and this is not the first time I have had to pull him up; for he took several of his pigeons down into the dining-saloon yesterday, and was showing them off to a lot of his friends—actually letting them fly all about the place; and you know what dirty brutes the birds are! I gave him a smart word or two before all the saloonfull; and I fancy they agreed with me. The man's mad on his pigeon-flying.

Then there's a bore of a travelling Colonel, who's always trying to invade my bridge, to smoke and yam with me. I've had to tell him plainly to keep off the bridge, same as Mr. Brown, only, perhaps, not quite in the same manner. And there are two ladies, an old and a young one, who are always on the bridge steps, as you might say. I took the opportunity to talk to the oldest about my eighth boy, to-day. I thought it might cool her off; but it didn't; she's started talking to me now about the dear children; and as I'm not even married, I've lied myself nearly stupid, confound her! And the old lady has let the young one know, *of course!* And the young one has left me now entirely to the old one's mercies! Goodness me!

But the passenger who really bothers me, is a Mr. Aglae, a sallow, fat, darkish man, short, and most infernally inquisitive. He seems always to be hanging about; and I've more than a notion he's cultivating a confidential friendship with my servant-lad.

Of course, I've guessed all along he's a Diamond Spy; and I don't doubt but there's need for the breed in these boats; for there's a pile to be made in running stones and pearls through the Customs.

I nearly broke loose on him to-day and told him, slam out, I knew he was a spy, and that he had better keep his nose out of my cabin and my affairs; and pay a bit more attention to people who had the necessary thousands to deal successfully in his line of goods.

The man was actually peeking into my cabin, when I came up behind him; but he was plausible enough. He said he had knocked, and thought I said, "Come in." He had come to ask me to take care of a very valuable diamond, which he brought out of his vest pocket, in a wash-leather bag. He told me he had begun to feel it might be safer if properly locked up. Of course, I explained that his diamond would be taken care of in the usual way; and when he asked my opinion of it, I became astonishingly affable; for it was plainly his desire to get me to talk on the subject.

"A magnificent stone!" I said. "Why, I should think it must be worth thousands. It must be twenty or thirty carats."

I knew perfectly well that the thing was merely a well cut piece of glass; for I tried it slyly on the tester I carry on the inner edge of my ring; and as for the size, I was purposely "out"; for I knew that if it had been a diamond, it would have been well over sixty carats.

The little fat spy frowned slightly and I wondered whether I'd shown him that he was getting up the wrong tree; and then, in a moment, I saw by the look in his eyes that he suspected me as much as ever; and was putting me down as being simply ostentatiously ignorant of diamonds. After he had gone, I thought him over for a bit, and I got wishing I could give the little toad a lesson.

June 19.

I got a splendid idea during the night.

We should dock this evening, and I've just time to work it. The diamond-running talk came up at dinner last night, as is but natural in these boats; and different passengers told some good yarns, some of them old and some new, and a lot of them very clever dodges that have been worked on the Customs.

One man at my table told an I.D.B. yarn of how a duck had been induced to gobble up

diamonds by bedding them in pellets of bread, and in this way the diamonds had been cunningly hidden, at a very critical moment for the well-being of their “illicit” owner. This gave me an idea; for that diamond spy has got on to my nerves a bit, and if I don’t do something to make him look and feel a fool, I shall just get rude; and rudeness to passengers is not a thing that commends itself to owners.

I have a coop of S. African black ringneck hens, down on the well-deck, which I am taking across to my brother, who makes a hobby of hen-keeping and has bred some wonderful strains.

I sent my servant for a plateful of new crumb-bread, and then I fished out from the bottom of my sea-chest, a box of what we used to call among the islands “native blazers” — that is, cut-glass imitation diamonds, which certainly cleaned up to a very pretty glitter. I’d had the things with me for years, some left-overs, from a sporting trip I made once that way.

I sat down at my table, and made bread pellets; and then I began to bed each of the “stones” into a pellet. As I did so, I became aware that some one was peeping in the window that looks into the saloon. I glanced into the mirror, across on the opposite bulkhead of my cabin, and saw for an instant the face of my servant.

This is what I had expected.

“So ho! my lad!” I said to myself. “I guess this is the last trip you’ll take with me; for, though I’ll see you aren’t dangerous now, you may be some other time.”

When I had done coating my “diamonds” with bread, I went forrard to my hen-coop, and began to feed the pellets to the birds.

As I turned away from giving the last of the big bread pills, I literally bumped into Mr. Aglae, who had just come round the end of the coop. Obviously, he had received word from my servant, and had been watching me feed diamonds to my hens, so as to hide my illegal jewelry, while the search officers were aboard!

It was rather funny to see the way in which the diamond spy put on a vacant expression, and apologized for his clumsiness, blaming the rolling of the vessel. As a matter of fact, he had no business in that part of the ship at all; and I made a courteous reference to this fact; for I wished him to think that I was disturbed and annoyed by his being there at so (apparently) critical a moment for me.

Later on, when I went into the wireless room, I found Mr. Aglae sending a wireless; and I sat down on the lounge to write my own message, while Melson (the Operator) was sending.

Instead, however, of writing out my own message, I jotted down the dot and dash iddle-de-umpty of the iggle-de-piggle that the Operator was sending; for it was a private code message, and ran : 17 a y b o z w r e y a a j g o o a v o o i o w t p q 2 2 3 2 i m v n 6 7 a m n t 8 t s .17. aglae. g.v.n.

I smiled; for it was the latest official cypher, and I had the “key” in my pocketbook. It is desirable to have what is popularly called “a friend in high quarters.” Only my friend is not very high, at least, not highly paid; though his secretarial position gives him access in a certain government office to papers that help him considerably to make both ends meet.

After Mr. Aglae had departed, I took out my “key,” and translated the message, while Melson was sending mine. Translated, it was this : “Hens fed on hundreds of diamonds concealed in bread pellets. Better come out in the pilot tug. Shall mark coop.

I must not appear in the case at all. Most important capture of years. 17. Aglae. g. v. n.”

This was sent to a private address, merely as a blind; for Mr. Aglae would be of little further use as a diamond spy if he began sending cypher messages to the Head Office! The 17, just before his name, I knew must be his official number; and I was interested, and perhaps a little impressed; for I have heard of the unknown “Number 17

before. He has effected some wonderful captures among the diamond smugglers. I wondered what he might look like, minus what I began now to suspect was both false stomachic appendage, and dyed hair, plus his little, vaguely foreign mannerisms, to suit. The letters “g.v.n.,” which followed the signature, were the inner “keys” to the message; for the cypher is really clever, in that a long message can be sent with a limited number of symbols, by a triplicate reading, according to the use of the various combinations—the working of which the main “key” explains, and which are indicated by the combination letters, which are always written, in this cypher, after the signature.

As I went out of the wireless room, I had a second splendid idea. I got some breadcrumbs as an excuse, and had another walkdown to the well-deck to look at my coop of prize chickens, and I came slam on Number 17 (as I now called him to myself) just strolling off.

Now, I had made it plain to him that he had no business down there, and I called to him, to ask him what he was doing again in that part of the ship, after what I had told him in the morning.

I must say that Number 17 has got quite a remarkably sound “nerve” on him.

“I’m sorry. Captain,” he said; “but I’d lost my cigarette holder. I knew I’d had it in my fingers when I tumbled against you this morning, and I thought I might have dropped it

then.” He held it out to me, between his finger and thumb.

“I found it lying on the deck here,” he explained. “A mercy it was not trodden on. I’m thankful much; for I prize it”

“That’s all right, Mr. Aglae,” I said, and hid the smile his tricky little foreign flarour of speech rose in me. As a matter of fact, if what I’ve heard is correct, the man is Scotch, bred and born and reared. It shows what even a Scotchman can come down to! After he had gone, with one of his dinky little bows, I overhauled the hen-coop; but in a casual sort of way, so that no one, looking on, could suspect I was doing more than making one of my usual bi-daily visits to my chuck-chucks, and feeding them with bread-crumbs.

If I had not read the cyphet message, I should certainly not have discovered the marks that Mr. Aglae had made on the coop; they were merely three small dots, in a triangle, like this .
• ., with a tiny 17 in the centre. The thing had just been jotted down on one of the legs of the coops with a piece of sharp-pointed chalk, and it could have been covered with a ha’penny.

I grinned to myself and went to the carpenter’s shop for a piece of chalk. I made Chips sharpen it to a fine point with a chisel; then I put it in my pocket and continued my afternoon stroll round the decks.

I wanted first to place Mr. Aglae; for it would spoil part of the amusingness of my plot, if he were on the spy, and saw what I was going to do. I found him, away aft in the upper-deck smoke-room, reading *LePetit Journal*, and looking most subtly foreign and most convincingly innocent “You little devil!” I thought; and went right away to the well-deck. Here, in an unobtrusive way, I copied Mr. Aglae’s private signature, faithfully, on to the hencoop above the one in which I was carrying my brother’s black ring-necks. The coop was occupied for the voyage by the bulk of Mr. Brown’s confounded pigeons, which, I had insisted, must not be brought again Into the saloon.

After I had re-duplicated the mark, I lifted out four of my ring-necks from the bottom coop, and put them into the top one, among Mr. Brown’s pigeons. My argument was that, when the searchers boarded us with the pilot, they would find both these coops marked, and both with hens im them, and would act accordingly. They would have to open the upper coop to remove the four hens, and there would be a general exodus of Mr. Brown’s pigeons, which would re-double the confusion and general glad devilment of my little plot.

Mr. Brown would be enormously angry and enormously vociferous. I could picture him thundering: “I never heard of such a thing! Confound you. Sir! I shall write to *The Times* about this.”

And then, it seemed to me. Number 17 would have to come and make some kind of semi-

public explanation, of what he could never properly explain; and ever after, his value as a diamond spy would be decreased something like twenty-five per cent; for quite a lot of people aboard (maybe some of them in the Diamond-Running business) would be able to get a good square look at the famous Number 17, and for all time afterwards, in whatever way he might try to veil his charming personality, he would run chances of being recognised at some awkward and premature moment; at least, from his point of view! But, of course, at first, Mr. Aglae (Number 17) would be only partly involved in my cheerful little net of difficulties. He would know, all the time, that these curious complications were only trifling; for had he not made the greatest capture of years. Let Mr. Brown be apologized to; even compensated, if such compensation were legally his right.

The great thing would be to reduce the black ring-necks to poultry, as speedily as possible, and then to pick his Triumph from their gizzards. I wriggled quietly with pleasure, as I saw it all. And then, the Official Appraiser's brief explanation to the Chief; and the salty flavour of the Chief's explanation to Number 17, that there was no law against a sea Captain feeding his pet hens with bits of glass, cut or otherwise, for the improvement, or otherwise, of their digestions.

Then there would be the replacing of my five dozen ring-necks, or their equivalent in good honest dollars, treasury dollars, I presume. I calculated rapidly that even as the prestige of Number 17 must come down, so the price of my hens should as infallibly go up.

I snicked the lesser door of the upper coop shut, and watched my four hens and Mr. Brown's pigeons. The hens clucked, and walked odd paces in the dignified and uncertain fashion affected by all hens of a laying age. The pigeons fluttered a bit, and then resumed their wonted cooing; and after that, all was comfortable in that ark; for the hens discovered pigeon-food to be very good hen-food also, and set to work earnestly to fill the unfillable.

The searchers came aboard with the Pilot, and after the usual preliminaries, my presence was requested at the opening of the hen-coop. I noticed that Mr. Aglae was still in the upper smoke-room, as I passed, and there he appeared intent to stay. I admired his judgment.

The officials gathered on the well-deck, and the Chief explained that they had received certain information which they were acting upon; and asked me formally whether I had any diamonds to declare.

"I'm sorry to say that I've left my diamond investments at home this trip, Mister," I said. "I've nothing I'm setting out to declare, except you've been put on to somemare's nest!"

"We happen to think otherwise, Cap'n," he said. "I've given you your chance, and you've

chucked it. Now you've got to take what's coming to you!"

He turned to one of his men.

"Open the lower coop, Ellis," he told him. "Rake out those chickens. Hand 'em over to the poulterer." As each chicken was taken out, it was handed to the poulterer, and the man killed it then and there. My little plan was making things unfortunate, of course, for my brother's ring-necks; but, after all, they were fulfilling their name, and I felt that, eventually, I should have nothing personally to grumble about.

But, in spite of this pleasant inward feeling, I protested formally and vigorously against the whole business, and pointed out that someone would have to pay, and keep on paying for an "outrage" (as I called it) of this kind.

The Chief merely shrugged his shoulders, and told the men to rake out the four hens from the upper coop. The man reached in his hand through the trap; but, of course, the hens side-stepped him in a dignified fashion. Then the man grew a little wrathful, and whipped down the whole front of the coop, and plunged in, head and shoulders, to get them.

Instantly, what I had planned, happened.

There was a multitudinous, harsh, dry whisper of a hundred pairs of wings; and then, hey! the air was white with pigeons. The man backed out of the coop, with a couple of my ring-neck hens in each hairy fist; and met the blast of his superior's wrath.

"You clumsy goat!" snarled the Chief— "What——" And then the second thing that I had foreseen, occurred.

"Confound you. Sir!" yelled Mr. Brown, dashing in among us, breathless. "Confound you ! Confound you ! You've loosed all my pigeons! What the blazes does this mean! What the blazes. . . ."

"You may well ask, Sir, what it means," I answered. "I think these officials have gone mad!" But Mr. Brown was already, to all appearances, quite oblivious of anyone or anything, except his beloved pigeons.

He had lugged out a big gold watch and a notebook and was making frantic efforts to achieve a lightning-like series of time-notes, staring up with a crick in his neck, trying crazily to identify the directions taken by various of his more particular birds.

He had, of course, to give it up almost at once; for already the bulk of the birds had made their preliminary circles, and were now shooting away for the coast, at various angles.

Then Mr. Brown proved himself more of a man than I had hitherto supposed possible in one who flew pigeons. He attained a height of denunciatory eloquence, which not only brought most of the first-class passengers to the spot; but caused a number, even of the married women, to withdraw hastily.

The Chief made several attempts to pacify him; but it was useless, and he made dumb-show then to the poulterer to set about opening up my brother's five dozen ringnecks, which that man did with admirable skill, until the well-deck looked like a slaughter house. And still Mr. Brown continued to express himself.

At last, the Chief sent a messenger, and (evidently much against his will) Mr. Aglae had to come and explain.

Mr. Brown ceased to denunciate for a moment, while Mr. Aglae explained, and the passengers crowded nearer, until the Chief asked me to tell them to retire. But I shrugged my shoulders. It fell in well with my plans for the spy's flattening, to have as many witnesses as possible.

"I never marked your coop. Sir," said Number 17, warmly. "It was the Captain's coop of hens that I marked. . . ." "Rubbish!" interpolated the Chief; "here's your mark on both coops I"

It struck me, in that moment, that possibly the Chief would not be sorry to weaken Number 17's position; for that man may have been climbing the promotion-ladder a little too rapidly for the Chief's peace of mind; though I knew the Chief would not dare say much, in case the capture proved as important as Number 17 had described.

I never saw a man look so bewildered as the spy, when he saw that both coops were marked. Then he turned and looked straight at me; but I gave him a good healthy back-stare.

"So," I said aloud, for every one to hear, "you've a beastly spy? I don't wonder I've felt crawly every time you've passed near me this trip!" The little man glared at me, and I thought he was going to lose control, and come for me; but at that moment, Mr. Brown, having rested, began again.

During the fluent period that followed, the poulterer worked stolidly and quickly and I saw that he was resurrecting quite a number of my cut-glass ornaments.

They had brought out the official appraiser with them; so important had they considered the case, from Number 17's message; and that man, breaking himself from the charmed circle of Mr. Brown's listeners, walked over to the poulterer, and began to examine the "diamonds." I watched him, quietly, and saw him test the first one, carefully; then frown,

and pick up another. At the end of five minutes, both he and the poulterer finished their work almost simultaneously; and I saw the appraiser throw down the last of the “diamonds” contemptuously on to the hatch.

“Mr. Franks!” he called out aloud, to the Chief, “I have to report that there is not a single diamond in the crops of these—er poultry. There are a large number of pieces of cut-glass, such as can be bought for ten cents a dozen; but no diamonds. I imagine our Mr. Aglae has made a thumper for once.” I grinned, as I realized that Number 17 was not loved, even by the appraiser. But I laughed outright, when I looked from the Chief’s face to Number 17’s, and then back again.

Mr. Brown had halted spasmodically, in his fiftieth explanation of the remarkable and unprintable letter that he meant to write to *The Times*, on the subject of his outrage.

And now he commenced again, but, by mutual consent, everyone moved away sufficiently far to hear themselves speak; and there and then, the Chief said quite some of the things he was thinking and feeling about Number 17’s “capture.” Number 17 said not a word. He looked stunned. Abruptly, a light came into his eyes, and he threw up his hand, to silence the Chief.

“Good Lord, Sir!” he said, in a high, cracking voice of complete comprehension. “The pigeons! The pigeons! We’ve been done brown. The hens were a blind worked off on me, to keep me from smelling the pigeon pie. Carrier pigeons, Sir! What a fool I’ve been!”

I explained that he had no right to make such a libellous and unfounded statement, and Mr. Brown’s proposed letter to *The Times* grew in length and vehemence. Eventually, Mr. Aglae had to apologise as publicly as he had slandered both Mr. Brown and me. But that did not prevent us from presenting our bills for compensation for damage done. And what is more, both of us got paid our own figure; for neither the Treasury, nor its officers, were eager for the further publicity which would have inevitably accompanied the fighting of our “bills of costs” at a court trial.

It was, maybe, a week later, that Mr. Brown and I had dinner together at a certain very famous restaurant.

“Pigeons” said Mr. Brown, meditatively—“I like ’em best with a neat little packet of diamonds fixed under their feathers.”

“Same here!” I said, smiling reminiscently.

I filled my glass.

“Pigeons!” I said.

“Pigeons!” said Mr. Brown, raising his glass.

And we drank.

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