

this being an indication rather of his mental condition than of physical weariness. He did not throw away his cigar as he rang the bell because he wasn't smoking—but he did ring the bell. The maid whom he had seen on his previous visit opened the door.

"Is Mrs. Greyton in?" he asked with a nod of recognition.

"No, sir."

"Mr. Greyton?"

"No, sir."

"Did Mr. Meredith arrive from Baltimore?"

"Yes, sir. Last midnight."

"Ah! Is he in?"

"No, sir."

The reporter's disappointment showed clearly in his face.

"I don't suppose you've heard anything further from Miss Meredith?" he ventured hopefully.

"She's upstairs, sir."

Anyone who has ever stepped on a tack knows just how Hatch felt. He didn't stand on the order of being invited in—he went in. Being in, he extracted a plain calling card from his pocketbook with twitching fingers, and handed it to the waiting maid.

"When did she return?" he asked.

"Last night, about nine, sir."

"Where has she been?"

"I don't know, sir."

Kindly hand her my card, and explain to her that it is imperative that I see her for a few minutes," the reporter went on. "Impress upon her the absolute necessity of this. By the way, I suppose you know where I came from, eh?"

"Police headquarters, yes, sir."

Hatch tried to look like a detective, but a gleam of intelligence in his face almost betrayed him.

"You might intimate as much to Miss Meredith," he instructed the maid calmly.

The maid disappeared. Hatch went in and sat down in the reception-room, and said "Whew!" several times.

"The gold plate returned to Randolph last night by express," he mused, "and she returned also, last night. Now, what does that mean?"

After a minute or so the maid reappeared to state that Miss Meredith would see him. Hatch received the message gravely, and beckoned mysteriously as he sought for a bill in his pocketbook.

"Do you have any idea where Miss Meredith was?"

"No, sir. She didn't even tell Mrs. Greyton or her father."

"What was her appearance?"

"She seemed very tired, sir, and hungry. She still wore the masked ball costume."

The bill changed hands, and Hatch was left alone again. There was a long wait, then a rustle of skirts, a light step, and Miss Dollie Meredith entered.

She was nervous, it is true, and pallid, but there was a suggestion of defiance as well as determination on her pretty mouth. Hatch stared at her in frank admiration for a moment, then, with an effort, proceeded to business.

"I presume, Miss Meredith," he said solemnly, "that the maid informed you of my identity?"

"Yes," replied Dollie weakly. "You are a detective."

"Ah!" exclaimed the reporter meaningfully, "then we understand each other. Now, Miss Meredith, will you tell me, please, just where you have been?"

"No."

The answer was so prompt and so emphatic that Hatch was a little disconcerted. He cleared his throat and started over again.

"Will you inform me, then, in the interests of justice, where you were on the evening of the ball?" An ominous threat lay behind the words, Hatch hoped she believed.

"I will not."

"Why did you disappear?"

"I will not tell you."

Hatch paused to readjust himself. He was going at things backward. When next he spoke his tone had lost the official lang—he talked like a human being.

"May I ask if you happen to know Richard Herbert?"

The pallor of the girl's face was relieved by a delicious sweep of colour.

"I will not tell you," she answered.

"And if I say that Mr. Herbert happens to be a friend of mine?"

"Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

of a man who boasted such a friendship; two cheeks flamed with indignation that he should have mentioned the name. Hatch floundered for a moment, then cleared his throat, and took a fresh start.

"Will you deny that you saw Richard Herbert on the evening of the masked ball?"

"I will not."

"Will you admit that you saw him?"

"I will not."

"Do you know that he was wounded?"

"Certainly."

Now, Hatch had always held a vague theory that the easiest way to make a secret known was to intrust it to a woman. At this point he revised his draw; threw his hand in the pack and asked for a new deal.

"Miss Meredith," he said soothingly, "will you admit or deny that you ever heard of the Randolph robbery?"

"I will not," she began, then: "Certainly I know of it."

"You know that a man and a woman are accused of and sought for the theft?"

"Yes, I know that."

"You will admit that you know the man was in Burglar's garb, and that the woman was dressed in a Western costume?"

"The newspapers say that, yes," she replied sweetly.

"You know, too, that Richard Herbert went to that ball in Burglar's garb, and that you went there dressed as a Western Girl?" The reporter's tone was strictly professional now.

Dollie stared into the stern face of her interrogator, and her courage oozed away. The colour left her face, and she wept violently.

"I beg your pardon," Hatch expostulated, "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean it just that way, but —"

He stopped helplessly and stared at this wonderful woman with the red hair. Of all things in the world, tears were quite the most disconcerting.

"I beg your pardon," he repeated awkwardly.

Dollie looked up with tear-stained, pleading eyes, then arose and placed both her hands on Hatch's arm. It was a pitiful, helpless sort of a gesture; Hatch shuddered with sheer delight.

"I don't know how you found out about it," she said tremulously, "but if you've come to arrest me, I'm ready to go with you."

"Arrest you?" gasped the reporter.

"Certainly. I'll go and be locked up. That's what they do, isn't it?" she questioned innocently.

The reporter staired.

"I wouldn't arrest you for a million dollars!" he stammered in dire confusion. "It wasn't quite that. It was —"

And five minutes later Hutchinson Hatch found himself wandering aimlessly up and down the sidewalk.

V.

Dick Herbert lay stretched lazily on a couch in his room with hands pressed to his eyes. He had just read the Sunday newspapers, announcing the mysterious return of the Randolph plate, and naturally he had a headache. Somewhere in a remote recess of his brain mental pyrotechnics were at play; a sort of intellectual pin-wheel spouted senseless ideas and suggestions of senseless ideas. The late afternoon shaded off into twilight, twilight into dusk, dusk into darkness, and still he lay motionless.

After a while, from below, he heard the tinkle of a bell, and Blair entered with light tread:

"Beg pardon, sir, are you asleep?"

"Who is it, Blair?"

"Mr. Hatch, sir."

"Let him come up."

Dick arose, snapped on the electric lights, and stood blinking in the sudden glare. When Hatch entered they faced each other silently for a moment. There was that in the reporter's eyes that interested Dick immeasurably; there was that in Dick's eyes that Hatch was trying vainly to fathom. Dick relieved a certain vague tension by extending his left hand. Hatch shook it cordially.

"Well?" Dick inquired.

Hatch dropped into a chair and twirled his hat.

"Heard the news?" he asked.

"The return of the gold plate, yes," and Dick passed a hand across his forehead. "It makes me dizzy."

"Heard anything from Miss Meredith?"

"No. Why?"

She returned to the Greytons last night."

"Returned to the —" and Dick started up suddenly. "Well, there's no reason why she shouldn't have," he added. "Do you happen to know where she was?"

The reporter shook his head.

"I don't know anything," he said wearily, "except —" He paused.

Dick paced back and forth across the room several times with one hand pressed to his forehead. Suddenly he turned on his visitor.

"Except what?" he demanded.

"Except that Miss Meredith, by action and word, has convinced me that she either had a hand in the disappearance of the Randolph plate, or else knows who was the cause of its disappearance."

Dick glared at him savagely.

"You know she didn't take the plate?" he demanded.

"Certainly," replied the reporter; "and that's what makes it all the more astonishing. I talked to her this afternoon, and when I finished she seemed to think I had come to arrest her, and she wanted to go to goal. I nearly fainted."

Dick glared incredulously, then resumed his nervous pacing. Suddenly he stopped.

"Did she mention my name?"

"I mentioned it. She wouldn't admit even that she knew you."

There was a pause.

"I don't blame her," Dick remarked enigmatically. "She must think me a cad."

Another pause.

"Well, what about it all, anyhow?" Dick went on finally. "The plate has been returned, therefore the matter is at an end."

"Now, look here, Dick," said Hatch. "I want to say something, and don't go crazy, please, until I finish. I know an awful lot about this affair—things the police never will know. I haven't printed anything much, for obvious reasons."

Dick looked at him apprehensively.

"Go on," he urged.

"I could print things I know," the reporter resumed; swear out a warrant for you in connection with the gold plate affair and have you arrested and convicted on your own statements, supplemented by those of Miss Meredith. Yet, remember, please, neither your name nor hers has been mentioned as yet."

Dick took it calmly; he only stared.

"Do you believe that I stole the plate?" he asked.

"Certainly I do not," replied Hatch, "but I can prove that you did; prove it to the satisfaction of any jury in the world, and no denial of yours would have any effect."

"Well?" asked Dick, after a moment.

"Further, I can, on information in my possession, swear out a warrant for Miss Meredith, prove she was in the automobile, and convict her as your accomplice. Now, that's a silly state of affairs, isn't it?"

"But, man, you can't believe that she had anything to do with it! She's—she's not that kind."

"I could take oath that she didn't have anything to do with it, but all the same I can prove that she did," replied Hatch. "Now, what I am getting at is this: if the police should happen to find out what I know, they would send you up—both of you."

"Well, you are decent about it, old man, and I appreciate it," said Dick warmly. "But what can we do?"

"It behoves us—Miss Meredith and you and myself—to get the true facts in the case all together before you get pinched," said the reporter judicially.

"Suppose now, just suppose, that we three get together and tell each other the truth for a change, the whole truth, and see what will happen?"

"If I should tell you the truth," said Dick dispassionately, "it would bring everlasting disgrace on Miss Meredith, and I'd be a beast for doing it; if she told you the truth, she would unquestionably send me to prison for theft."

"But here —" Hatch expostulated.

"Just a minute!" Dick disappeared into another room, leaving the reporter to chew on what he had, then returned in a little while, dressed for the street.

"Now, Hatch," he said, "I'm going to try to get to Miss Meredith, but I don't believe she'll see me. I, she will, I may be able to explain several things that will clear up this affair in your mind, at any rate. If I don't see her — By the way, did her father arrive from Baltimore?"

"Yes."

"Good!" exclaimed Dick. "I'll see him, too—make a show-down of it, and when it's all over I'll let you know what happened."

Hatch went back to his shop, and threatened to kick the office boy into the waste basket.

At just about that moment Mr. Meredith, in the Greyton home, was reading a card on which appeared the name, "Mr. Richard Hamilton Herbert."

Having read it, he snorted his indignation, and went into the reception-room. Dick arose to greet him, and offered a hand which was promptly declined.

"I'd like to ask you, Mr. Meredith," Dick, began with a certain steely coldness in his manner, "just why you object to my attentions to your daughter Dorothy?"

"You know well enough!" raged the old man.

"It is because of the trouble I had in Harvard with your son Harry. Well and good, but is that all? Is that to stand for ever?"

"You proved then that you were not a gentleman," declared the old man savagely. "You're a puppy, sir!"

"If you didn't happen to be the father of the girl I'm in love with, I'd poke you in the nose." Dick replied, almost cheerfully. "Where is your son now? Is there no way I can place myself right in your eyes?"

"No!" Mr. Meredith thundered. "An apology would only be a confession of your dishonour!"

Dick was nearly choking, but managed to keep his voice down.

"Does your daughter know anything of that affair?"

"Certainly not."

"Where is your son?"

"None of your business, sir!"

"I don't suppose there's any doubt in your mind of my affection for your daughter?"

"I suppose you do admire her," snapped the old man. "You can't help that, I suppose. No one can," he added naively.

"And I suppose you know that she loves me, in spite of your objections?" went on the young man.

"Bah! Bah!"

"And that you are breaking her heart by your mutton-headed objection to me?"

"You—you —" sputtered Mr. Meredith.

Dick was still calm.

"May I see Miss Meredith for a few minutes?" he went on.

"She won't see you, sir," stormed the irate parent. "She told me last night that she would never consent to see you again."

"Will you give me your permission to see her here and now, if she will consent?" Dick insisted steadily.

"She won't see you, I say."

"May I send a card to her?"

"She won't see you, sir," repeated Mr. Meredith doggedly.

Dick stepped out into the hall and beckoned to the maid.

"Please take my card to Miss Meredith," he directed.

The maid accepted the white square with a little uplifting of her brows, and went up the stairs. Miss Meredith received it languidly, read it, then sat up indignantly.

"Dick Herbert!" she exclaimed incredulously. "How dare he come here! It's the most audacious thing I ever heard of! Certainly I will not see him again in any circumstances." She arose and glared defiantly at the demure maid. "Tell Mr. Herbert," she said emphatically, "tell him—that I'll be right down."

VII.

Mr. Meredith had stamped out of the room angrily, and Dick Herbert was alone when Dollie, in regal indignation, swept in. The general slant of her ruddy head radiated defiance, and a most depressing chilliness lay in her blue eyes. Her lips formed a scarlet line, and there was a how-dare-you-sir tilt to nose and chin. Dick started up quickly at her appearance.

"Dollie!" he exclaimed, eagerly.

"Mr. Herbert," she responded coldly. She sat down primly on the extreme edge of a chair which yawned to embrace her. "What is it, please?"

Dick was a singularly audacious sort of person, but her manner froze him to sudden austerity. He regarded her steadily for a moment.

"I have come to explain why —"