

Futrelle Jacques

The Chase of the Golden Plate



Jacques Futrelle

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PART I

THE BURGLAR AND THE GIRL

CHAPTER I

Cardinal Richelieu and the Mikado stepped out on a narrow balcony overlooking the entrance to Seven Oaks, lighted their cigarettes and stood idly watching the throng as it poured up the wide marble steps. Here was an over-corpulent Dowager Empress of China, there an Indian warrior in full paint and toggery, and mincing along behind him two giggling Geisha girls. Next, in splendid robes of rank, came the Czar of Russia. The Mikado smiled.

"An old enemy of mine," he remarked to the Cardinal.

A Watteau Shepherdess was assisted out of an automobile by Christopher Columbus and they came up the walk arm-in-arm, while a Pierrette ran beside them laughing up into their faces. D'Artagnan, Athos, Aramis, and Porthos swaggered along with insolent, clanking swords.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Cardinal. "There are four gentlemen whom I know well."

Mary Queen of Scots, Pocahontas, the Sultan of Turkey, and Mr. Micawber chatted amicably together in one language. Behind them came a figure which immediately arrested attention. It was a Burglar, with dark lantern in one hand and revolver in the other. A black mask was drawn down to his lips, a slouch hat shaded his eyes, and a kit of the tools of his profession swung from one shoulder.

"By George!" commented the Cardinal. "Now, that's clever."

"Looks like the real thing," the Mikado added.

The Burglar stood aside a moment, allowing a diamond-burdened Queen Elizabeth to pass, then came on up the steps. The Cardinal and the Mikado passed through an open window into the reception-room to witness his arrival.

"Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth!" the graven-faced servant announced.

The Burglar handed a card to the liveried Voice and noted, with obvious amusement, a fleeting expression of astonishment on the stolid face. Perhaps it was there because the card had been offered in that hand which held the revolver. The Voice glanced at the name on the card and took a deep breath of relief.

"Bill, the Burglar!" he announced.

There was a murmur of astonishment and interest in the reception-hall and the ballroom beyond. Thus it was that the Burglar found himself the centre of attention for a moment, while a ripple of laughter ran around. The entrance of a Clown, bounding in behind him, drew all eyes away, however, and the Burglar was absorbed in the crowd.

It was only a few minutes later that Cardinal Richelieu and the Mikado, seeking diversion, isolated the Burglar and dragged him off to the smoking-room. There the Czar of Russia, who was on such terms of intimacy with the Mikado that he called him Mike, joined them, and they smoked together.

"How did you ever come to hit on a costume like that?" asked the Cardinal of the Burglar.

The Burglar laughed, disclosing two rows of strong, white teeth. A cleft in the square-cut, clean-shaven chin, visible below the mask, became more pronounced. A woman would have called it a dimple.

"I wanted something different," he explained. "I couldn't imagine anything more extraordinary than a real burglar here ready to do business, so I came."

"It's lucky the police didn't see you," remarked the Czar.

Again the Burglar laughed. He was evidently a good-natured craftsman, despite his sinister garb.

"That was my one fear – that I would be pinched before I arrived," he replied. "'Pinched,' I may explain, is a technical term in my profession meaning juggled, nabbed, collared, run in. It seemed that my fears had some foundation, too, for when I drove up in my auto and stepped out a couple of plain-clothes men stared at me pretty hard."

He laid aside the dark lantern and revolver to light a fresh cigarette. The Mikado picked up the lantern and flashed the light on and off several times, while the Czar sighted the revolver at the floor.

"Better not do that," suggested the Burglar casually. "It's loaded."

"Loaded?" repeated the Czar. He laid down the revolver gingerly.

"Surest thing, you know," and the Burglar laughed quizzically. "I'm the real thing, you see, so naturally my revolver is loaded. I think I ought to be able to make quite a good haul, as we say, before unmasking-time."

"If you're as clever as your appearance would indicate," said the Cardinal admiringly, "I see no reason why it shouldn't be worth while. You might, for instance, make a collection of Elizabethan jewels. I have noticed four Elizabeths so far, and it's early yet."

"Oh, I'll make it pay," the Burglar assured him lightly. "I'm pretty clever; practised a good deal, you know. Just to show you that I am an expert, here is a watch and pin I took from my friend, the Czar, five minutes ago."

He extended a well-gloved hand in which lay the watch and diamond pin. The Czar stared at them a moment in frank astonishment; patted himself all over in sudden trepidation; then laughed sheepishly. The Mikado tilted his cigar up to a level with the slant eyes of his mask, and laughed.

"In the language of diplomacy, Nick," he told the Czar, "you are what is known as 'easy.' I thought I had convinced you of that."

"Gad, you are clever," remarked the Cardinal. "I might have used you along with D'Artagnan and the others."

The Burglar laughed again and stood up lazily.

"Come on, this is stupid," he suggested. "Let's go out and see what's doing."

"Say, just between ourselves tell us who you are," urged the Czar. "Your voice seems familiar, but I can't place you."

"Wait till unmasking-time," retorted the Burglar good-naturedly. "Then you'll know. Or if you think you could bribe that stone image who took my card at the door you might try. He'll remember me. I never saw a man so startled in all my life as he was when I appeared."

The quartet sauntered out into the ballroom just as the signal for the grand march was given. A few minutes later the kaleidoscopic picture began to move. Stuyvesant Randolph, the host, as Sir Walter Raleigh, and his superb wife, as Cleopatra, looked upon the mass of colour, and gleaming shoulders, and jewels, and brilliant uniforms, and found it good – extremely good.

Mr. Randolph smiled behind his mask at the striking incongruities on every hand: Queen Elizabeth and Mr. Micawber; Cardinal Richelieu and a Pierrette; a Clown dancing attendance on Marie Antoinette. The Czar of Russia paid deep and devoted attention to a light-footed Geisha girl, while the Mikado and Folly, a jingling thing in bells and abbreviated skirts, romped together.

The grotesque figure of the march was the Burglar. His revolver was thrust carelessly into a pocket and the dark lantern hung at his belt. He was pouring a stream of pleasing nonsense into the august ear of Lady Macbeth, nimbly seeking at the same time to evade the pompous train of the Dowager Empress. The grand march came to an end and the chattering throng broke up into little groups.

Cardinal Richelieu strolled along with a Pierrette on his arm.

"Business good?" he inquired of the Burglar.

"Expect it to be," was the reply.

The Pierrette came and, standing on her tip-toes – silly, impractical sort of toes they were – made a *moue* at the Burglar.

"Oooh!" she exclaimed. "You are perfectly horrid."

"Thank you," retorted the Burglar.

He bowed gravely, and the Cardinal, with his companion, passed on. The Burglar stood gazing after them a moment, then glanced around the room, curiously, two or three times. He might have been looking for someone. Finally he wandered away aimlessly through the crowd.

CHAPTER II

Half an hour later the Burglar stood alone, thoughtfully watching the dancers as they whirled by. A light hand fell on his arm – he started a little – and in his ear sounded a voice soft with the tone of a caress.

"Excellent, Dick, excellent!"

The Burglar turned quickly to face a girl – a Girl of the Golden West, with deliciously rounded chin, slightly parted rose-red lips, and sparkling, eager eyes as blue as – as blue as – well, they were blue eyes. An envious mask hid cheeks and brow, but above a sombrero was perched arrogantly on crisp, ruddy-gold hair, flaunting a tricoloured ribbon. A revolver swung at her hip – the wrong hip – and a Bowie knife, singularly inoffensive in appearance, was thrust through her girdle. The Burglar looked curiously a moment, then smiled.

"How did you know me?" he asked.

"By your chin," she replied. "You can never hide yourself behind a mask that doesn't cover that."

The Burglar touched his chin with one gloved hand.

"I forgot that," he remarked ruefully.

"Hadn't you seen me?"

"No."

The Girl drew nearer and laid one hand lightly on his arm; her voice dropped mysteriously.

"Is everything ready?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he assured her quickly. His voice, too, was lowered cautiously.

"Did you come in the auto?"

"Yes."

"And the casket?"

For an instant the Burglar hesitated.

"The casket?" he repeated.

"Certainly, the casket. Did you get it all right?"

The Burglar looked at her with a new, businesslike expression on his lips. The Girl returned his steady gaze for an instant, then her eyes dropped. A faint colour glowed in her white chin. The Burglar suddenly laughed admiringly.

"Yes, I got it," he said.

She took a deep breath quickly, and her white hands fluttered a little.

"We will have to go in a few minutes, won't we?" she asked uneasily.

"I suppose so," he replied.

"Certainly before unmasking-time," she said, "because – because I think there is someone here who knows, or suspects, that –"

"Suspects what?" demanded the Burglar.

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned the Girl, and she laid a finger on her lips. "Not so loud. Someone might hear. Here are some people coming now that I'm afraid of. They know me. Meet me in the conservatory in five minutes. I don't want them to see me talking to you."

She moved away quickly and the Burglar looked after her with admiration and some impalpable quality other than that in his eyes. He was turning away toward the conservatory when he ran into the arms of an oversized man lumpily clad in the dress of a courtier. The lumpy individual stood back and sized him up.

"Say, young fellow, that's a swell rig you got there," he remarked.

The Burglar glanced at him in polite astonishment – perhaps it was the tone of the remark.

"Glad you like it," he said coldly, and passed on.

As he waited in the conservatory the amusement died out of his eyes and his lips were drawn into a straight, sharp line. He had seen the lumpy individual speak to another man, indicating generally the direction of the conservatory as he did so. After a moment the Girl returned in deep agitation.

"We must go now – at once," she whispered hurriedly. "They suspect us. I know it, I know it!"

"I'm afraid so," said the Burglar grimly. "That's why that detective spoke to me."

"Detective?" gasped the Girl.

"Yes, a detective disguised as a gentleman."

"Oh, if they are watching us what shall we do?"

The Burglar glanced out, and seeing the man to whom the lumpy individual had spoken coming toward the conservatory, turned suddenly to the Girl.

"Do you really want to go with me?" he asked.

"Certainly," she replied eagerly.

"You are making no mistake?"

"No, Dick, no!" she said again. "But if we are caught – "

"Do as I say and we won't be caught," declared the Burglar. His tone now was sharp, commanding. "You go on alone toward the front door. Pass out as if to get a breath of fresh air. I'll follow in a minute. Watch for me. This detective is getting too curious for comfort. Outside we'll take the first auto and run for it."

He thoughtfully whirled the barrel of his revolver in his fingers as he stared out into the ballroom. The Girl clung to him helplessly a moment; her hand trembled on his arm.

"I'm frightened," she confessed. "Oh, Dick, if – "

"Don't lose your nerve," he commanded. "If you do we'll both be caught. Go on now, and do as I say. I'll come – but I may come in a hurry. Watch for me."

For just a moment more the Girl clung to his arm.

"Oh, Dick, you darling!" she whispered. Then, turning, she left him there.

From the door of the conservatory the Burglar watched her splendid, lithe figure as she threaded her way through the crowd. Finally she passed beyond his view and he sauntered carelessly toward the door. Once he glanced back. The lumpy individual was following slowly. Then he saw a liveried servant approach the host and whisper to him excitedly.

"This is my cue to move," the Burglar told himself grimly.

Still watching, he saw the servant point directly at him. The host, with a sudden gesture, tore off his mask and the Burglar accelerated his pace.

"Stop that man!" called the host.

For one brief instant there was the dead silence which follows general astonishment – and the Burglar ran for the door. Several pairs of hands reached out from the crowd toward him.

"There he goes, there!" exclaimed the Burglar excitedly. "That man ahead! I'll catch him!"

The ruse opened the way and he went through. The Girl was waiting at the foot of the steps.

"They're coming!" he panted as he dragged her along. "Climb in that last car on the end there!"

Without a word the Girl ran to the auto and clambered into the front seat. Several men dashed out of the house. Wonderingly her eyes followed the vague figure of the Burglar as he sped along in the shadow of a wall. He paused beneath a window, picked up something and raced for the car.

"Stop him!" came a cry.

The Burglar flung his burden, which fell at the Girl's feet with a clatter, and leaped. The auto swayed as he landed beside her. With a quick twist of the wheel he headed out.

"Hurry, Dick, they're coming!" gasped the Girl.

The motor beneath them whirled and panted and the car began to move.

"Halt, or I'll fire," came another cry.

"Down!" commanded the Burglar.

His hand fell on the Girl's shoulder heavily and he dragged her below the level of the seat. Then, bending low over the wheel, he gave the car half power. It leaped out into the road in the path of its own light, just as there came a pistol-shot from behind, followed instantly by another.

The car sped on.

CHAPTER III

Stuyvesant Randolph, millionaire, owner of Seven Oaks and host of the masked ball, was able to tell the police only what happened, and not the manner of its happening. Briefly, this was that a thief, cunningly disguised as a Burglar with dark lantern and revolver in hand, had surreptitiously attended the masked ball by entering at the front door and presenting an invitation card. And when Mr. Randolph got this far in his story even *he* couldn't keep his face straight.

The sum total of everyone's knowledge, therefore, was this:

Soon after the grand march a servant entered the smoking room and found the Burglar there alone, standing beside an open window, looking out. This smoking room connected, by a corridor, with a small dining room where the Randolph gold plate was kept in ostentatious seclusion. As the servant entered the smoking-room the Burglar turned away from the window and went out into the ballroom. He did not carry a bundle; he did not appear to be excited.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later the servant discovered that eleven plates of the gold service, valued roughly at \$15,000, were missing. He informed Mr. Randolph. The information, naturally enough, did not elevate the host's enjoyment of the ball, and he did things hastily.

Meanwhile – that is, between the time when the Burglar left the smoking-room and the time when he passed out the front door – the Burglar had talked earnestly with a masked Girl of the West. It was established that, when she left him in the conservatory, she went out the front door. There she was joined by the Burglar, and then came their sensational flight in the automobile – a 40 horse-power car that moved like the wind. The automobile in which the Burglar had gone to Seven Oaks was left behind; thus far it had not been claimed.

The identity of the Burglar and the Girl made the mystery. It was easy to conjecture – that's what the police said – how the Burglar got away with the gold plate. He went into the smoking-room, then into the dining-room, dropped the gold plate into a sack and threw the sack out of a window. It was beautifully simple. Just what the Girl had to do with it wasn't very clear; perhaps a score or more articles of jewelry, which had been reported missing by guests, engaged her attention.

It was also easy to see how the Burglar and the Girl had been able to shake off pursuit by the police in two other automobiles. The car they had chosen was admittedly the fastest of the scores there, the night was pitch-dark, and, besides, a Burglar like that was liable to do anything. Two shots had been fired at him by the lumpy courtier, who was really Detective Cunningham, but they had only spurred him on.

These things were easy to understand. But the identity of the pair was a different and more difficult proposition, and there remained the task of yanking them out of obscurity. This fell to the lot of Detective Mallory, who represented the Supreme Police Intelligence of the Metropolitan District, happily combining a No. 11 shoe and a No. 6 hat. He was a cautious, suspicious, far-seeing man – as police detectives go. For instance, it was he who explained the method of the theft with a lucidity that was astounding.

Detective Mallory and two or three of his satellites heard Mr. Randolph's story, then the statements of his two men who had attended the ball in costume, and the statements of the servants. After all this Mr. Mallory chewed his cigar and thought violently for several minutes. Mr. Randolph looked on expectantly; he didn't want to miss anything.

"As I understand it, Mr. Randolph," said the Supreme Police Intelligence at last, "each invitation-card presented at the door by your guests bore the name of the person to whom it was issued?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Randolph.

"Ah!" exclaimed the detective shrewdly. "Then we have a clue."

"Where are those cards, Curtis?" asked Mr. Randolph of the servant who had received them at the door.

"I didn't know they were of further value, sir, and they were thrown away – into the furnace." Mr. Mallory was crestfallen.

"Did you notice if the card presented at the door by the Burglar on the evening of the masked ball at Seven Oaks bore a name?" he asked. He liked to be explicit like that.

"Yes, sir. I noticed it particularly because the gentleman was dressed so queerly."

"Do you remember the name?"

"No, sir."

"Would you remember it if you saw it or heard it again?"

The servant looked at Mr. Randolph helplessly.

"I don't think I would, sir," he answered.

"And the Girl? Did you notice the card she gave you?"

"I don't remember her at all, sir. Many of the ladies wore wraps when they came in, and her costume would not have been noticeable if she had on a wrap."

The Supreme Intelligence was thoughtful for another few minutes. At last he turned to Mr. Randolph again.

"You are certain there was only *one* man at that ball dressed as a Burglar?" he asked.

"Yes, thank Heaven," replied Mr. Randolph fervently. "If there'd been another one they might have taken the piano."

The Supreme Intelligence frowned.

"And this girl was dressed like a Western girl?" he asked.

"Yes. A sort of Spirit-of-the-West costume."

"And no other woman there wore such a dress?"

"No," responded Mr. Randolph.

"No," echoed the two detectives.

"Now, Mr. Randolph, how many invitations were issued for the ball?"

"Three or four hundred. It's a big house," Mr. Randolph apologised, "and we tried to do the thing properly."

"How many persons do you suppose actually attended the ball?"

"Oh, I don't know. Three hundred, perhaps."

Detective Mallory thought again.

"It's unquestionably the work of two bold and clever professional crooks," he said at last judiciously, and his satellites hung on his words eagerly. "It has every ear-mark of it. They perhaps planned the thing weeks before, and forged invitation-cards, or perhaps stole them – perhaps stole them."

He turned suddenly and pointed an accusing finger at the servant, Curtis.

"Did you notice the handwriting on the card the Burglar gave you?" he demanded.

"No, sir. Not particularly."

"I mean, do you recall if it was different in any way from the handwriting on the other cards?" insisted the Supreme Intelligence.

"I don't think it was, sir."

"If it had been would you have noticed it?"

"I might have, sir."

"Were the names written on all the invitation-cards by the same hand, Mr. Randolph?"

"Yes: my wife's secretary."

Detective Mallory arose and paced back and forth across the room with wrinkles in his brow.

"Ah!" he said at last, "then we know the cards were not forged, but stolen from someone to whom they had been sent. We know this much, therefore – " he paused a moment.

"Therefore all that must be done," Mr. Randolph finished the sentence, "is to find from whom the card or cards were stolen, who presented them at my door, and who got away with the plate."

The Supreme Intelligence glared at him aggressively. Mr. Randolph's face was perfectly serious. It was his gold plate, you know.

"Yes, that's it," Detective Mallory assented. "Now we'll get after this thing right. Downey, you get that automobile the Burglar left at Seven Oaks and find its owner; also find the car the Burglar and the Girl escaped in. Cunningham, you go to Seven Oaks and look over the premises. See particularly if the Girl left a wrap – she didn't wear one away from there – and follow that up. Blanton, you take a list of invited guests that Mr. Randolph will give you, check off those persons who are known to have been at the ball, and find out all about those who were not, and – follow that up."

"That'll take weeks!" complained Blanton.

The Supreme Intelligence turned on him fiercely.

"Well?" he demanded. He continued to stare for a moment, and Blanton wrinkled up in the baleful glow of his superior's scorn. "And," Detective Mallory added magnanimously, "I will do the rest."

Thus the campaign was planned against the Burglar and the Girl.

CHAPTER IV

Hutchinson Hatch was a newspaper reporter, a long, lean, hungry looking young man with an insatiable appetite for facts. This last was, perhaps, an astonishing trait in a reporter; and Hatch was positively finicky on the point. That's why his City Editor believed in him. If Hatch had come in and told his City Editor that he had seen a blue elephant with pink side-whiskers his City Editor would have *known* that that elephant was blue – mentally, morally, physically, spiritually and everlastingly – not any washed-out green or purple, but blue.

Hatch was remarkable in other ways, too. For instance, he believed in the use of a little human intelligence in his profession. As a matter of fact, on several occasions he had demonstrated that it was really an excellent thing – human intelligence. His mind was well poised, his methods thorough, his style direct.

Along with dozens of others Hatch was at work on the Randolph robbery, and knew what the others knew – no more. He had studied the case so closely that he was beginning to believe, strangely enough, that perhaps the police were right in their theory as to the identity of the Burglar and the Girl – that is, that they were professional crooks. He could do a thing like that sometimes – bring his mind around to admit the possibility of somebody else being right.

It was on Saturday afternoon – two days after the Randolph affair – that Hatch was sitting in Detective Mallory's private office at Police Headquarters laboriously extracting from the Supreme Intelligence the precise things he had not found out about the robbery. The telephone-bell rang. Hatch got one end of the conversation – he couldn't help it. It was something like this:

"Hello!.. Yes, Detective Mallory... Missing?.. What's her name?.. What?.. Oh, Dorothy!.. Yes?.. Merritt?.. Oh, Merryman!.. Well, what the deuce is it then?.. *SPELL IT!*... M-e-r-e-d-i-t-h. Why didn't you say that at first?.. How long has she been gone?.. Huh?.. Thursday evening?.. What does she look like?.. Auburn hair. Red, you mean?.. Oh, ruddy! I'd like to know what's the difference."

The detective had drawn up a pad of paper and was jotting down what Hatch imagined to be the description of a missing girl. Then:

"Who is this talking?" asked the detective.

There was a little pause as he got the answer, and, having the answer, he whistled his astonishment, after which he glanced around quickly at the reporter, who was staring dreamily out a window.

"No," said the Supreme Intelligence over the 'phone. "It wouldn't be wise to make it public. It isn't necessary at all. I understand. I'll order a search immediately. No. The newspapers will get nothing of it. Good-by."

"A story?" inquired Hatch carelessly as the detective hung up the receiver.

"Doesn't amount to anything," was the reply.

"Yes, that's obvious," remarked the reporter drily.

"Well, whatever it is, it is not going to be made public," retorted the Supreme Intelligence sharply. He never did like Hatch, anyway. "It's one of those things that don't do any good in the newspapers, so I'll not let this one get there."

Hatch yawned to show that he had no further interest in the matter, and went out. But there was the germ of an idea in his head which would have startled Detective Mallory, and he paced up and down outside to develop it. A girl missing! A red-headed girl missing! A red-headed girl missing since Thursday! Thursday was the night of the Randolph masked ball. The missing Girl of the West was red-headed! Mallory had seemed astonished when he learned the name of the person who reported this last case! Therefore the person who reported it was high up – perhaps! Certainly high enough up to ask and receive the courtesy of police suppression – and the missing girl's name was Dorothy Meredith!

Hatch stood still for a long time on the curb and figured it out. Suddenly he rushed off to a telephone and called up Stuyvesant Randolph at Seven Oaks. He asked the first question with trepidation:

"Mr. Randolph, can you give me the address of Miss Dorothy Meredith?"

"Miss Meredith?" came the answer. "Let's see. I think she is stopping with the Morgan Greytons, at their suburban place."

The reporter gulped down a shout. "Worked, by thunder!" he exclaimed to himself. Then, in a deadly, forced calm:

"She attended the masked ball Thursday evening, didn't she?"

"Well, she was invited."

"You didn't see her there?"

"No. Who *is* this?"

Then Hatch hung up the receiver. He was nearly choking with excitement, for, in addition to all those virtues which have been enumerated, he possessed, too, the quality of enthusiasm. It was no part of his purpose to tell anybody anything. Mallory didn't know, he was confident, anything of the girl having been a possible guest at the ball. And what Mallory didn't know now wouldn't be found out, all of which was a sad reflection upon the detective.

In this frame of mind Hatch started for the suburban place of the Greytons. He found the house without difficulty. Morgan Greyton was an aged gentleman of wealth and exclusive ideas – and wasn't in. Hatch handed a card bearing only his name, to a maid, and after a few minutes Mrs. Greyton appeared. She was a motherly, sweet-faced old lady of seventy, with that grave, exquisite courtesy which makes mere man feel ashamed of himself. Hatch had that feeling when he looked at her and thought of what he was going to ask.

"I came up direct from Police Headquarters," he explained diplomatically, "to learn any details you may be able to give us as to the disappearance of Miss Meredith."

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Greyton. "My husband said he was going to ask the police to look into the matter. It is most mysterious – most mysterious! We can't imagine where Dollie is, unless she has eloped. Do you know that idea keeps coming to me and won't go away?"

She spoke as if it were a naughty child.

"If you'll tell me something about Miss Meredith – who she is and all that?" Hatch suggested.

"Oh, yes, to be sure," exclaimed Mrs. Greyton. "Dollie is a distant cousin of my husband's sister's husband," she explained precisely. "She lives in Baltimore, but is visiting us. She has been here for several weeks. She's a dear, sweet girl, but I'm afraid – afraid she has eloped."

The aged voice quivered a little, and Hatch was more ashamed of himself than ever.

"Some time ago she met a man named Herbert – Richard Herbert, I think, and –"

"Dick Herbert?" the reporter exclaimed suddenly.

"Do you know the young gentleman?" inquired the old lady eagerly.

"Yes, it just happens that we were classmates in Harvard," said the reporter.

"And is he a nice young man?"

"A good, clean-cut, straightforward, decent man," replied Hatch. He could speak with a certain enthusiasm about Dick Herbert. "Go on, please," he urged.

"Well, for some reason I don't know, Dollie's father objects to Mr. Herbert's attentions to her – as a matter of fact, Mr. Meredith has absolutely prohibited them – but she's a young, headstrong girl, and I fear that, although she had outwardly yielded to her father's wishes, she had clandestinely kept up a correspondence with Mr. Herbert. Last Thursday evening she went out unattended and since then we have not heard from her – not a word. We can only surmise – my husband and I – that they have eloped. I know her father and mother will be heart-broken, but I have always noticed that if a girl sets her heart on a man, she will get him. And perhaps it's just as well that she *has* eloped now since you assure me he is a nice young man."

Hatch was choking back a question that rose in his throat. He hated to ask it, because he felt this dear, garrulous old woman would have hated him for it, if she could have known its purpose. But at last it came.

"Do you happen to know," he asked, "if Miss Meredith attended the Randolph ball at Seven Oaks on Thursday evening?"

"I dare say she received an invitation," was the reply. "She receives many invitations, but I don't think she went there. It was a costume affair, I suppose?"

The reporter nodded.

"Well, I hardly believe she went there then," Mrs. Greyton replied. "She has had no costume of any sort made. No, I am positive she has eloped with Mr. Herbert, but I should like to hear from her to satisfy myself and explain to her parents. We did not permit Mr. Herbert to come here, and it will be very hard to explain."

Hatch heard the slight rustle of a skirt in the hall and glanced toward the door. No one appeared, and he turned back to Mrs. Greyton.

"I don't suppose it possible that Miss Meredith has returned to Baltimore?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" was the positive reply. "Her father there telegraphed to her to-day – I opened it – saying he would be here, probably to-night, and I – I haven't the heart to tell him the truth when he arrives. Somehow, I have been hoping that we would hear and – and – "

Then Hatch took his shame in his hand and excused himself. The maid attended him to the door.

"How much is it worth to you to know if Miss Meredith went to the masked ball?" asked the maid cautiously.

"Eavesdropping, eh?" asked Hatch in disgust.

The maid shrugged her shoulders.

"How much is it worth?" she repeated.

Hatch extended his hand. She took a ten-dollar bill which lay there and secreted it in some remote recess of her being.

"Miss Meredith did go to the ball," she said. "She went there to meet Mr. Herbert. They had arranged to elope from there and she had made all her plans. I was in her confidence and assisted her."

"What did she wear?" asked Hatch eagerly.

"Her costume was that of a Western Girl," the maid responded. "She wore a sombrero, and carried a Bowie knife and revolver."

Hatch nearly swallowed his palate.

CHAPTER V

Hatch started back to the city with his brain full of seven-column heads. He thoughtfully lighted a cigar just before he stepped on the car.

"No smoking," said the conductor.

The reporter stared at him with dull eyes and then went in and sat down with the cigar in his mouth.

"No smoking, I told you," bawled the conductor.

"Certainly not," exclaimed Hatch indignantly. He turned and glared at the only other occupant of the car, a little girl. She wasn't smoking. Then he looked at the conductor and awoke suddenly.

"Miss Meredith is the girl," Hatch was thinking. "Mallory doesn't even dream it and never will. He won't send a man out there to do what I did. The Greytons are anxious to keep it quiet, and they won't say anything to anybody else until they know what really happened. I've got it bottled up, and don't know how to pull the cork. Now, the question is: What possible connection can there be between Dorothy Meredith and the Burglar? Was Dick Herbert the Burglar? Why, of course *not*! Then – what?"

Pondering all these things deeply, Hatch left the car and ran up to see Dick Herbert. He was too self-absorbed to notice that the blinds of the house were drawn. He rang, and after a long time a man-servant answered the bell.

"Mr. Herbert here?" Hatch asked.

"Yes, sir, he's here," replied the servant, "but I don't know if he can see you. He is not very well, sir."

"Not very well?" Hatch repeated.

"No, it's not that he's sick, sir. He was hurt and –"

"Who is it, Blair?" came Herbert's voice from the top of the stair.

"Mr. Hatch, sir."

"Come up, Hatch!" Dick called cordially. "Glad to see you. I'm so lonesome here I don't know what to do with myself."

The reporter ran up the steps and into Dick's room.

"Not that one," Dick smiled as Hatch reached for his right hand. "It's out of business. Try this one –" And he offered his left.

"What's the matter?" Hatch inquired.

"Little hurt, that's all," said Dick. "Sit down. I got it knocked out the other night and I've been here in this big house alone with Blair ever since. The doctor told me not to venture out yet. It has been lonesome, too. All the folks are away, up in Nova Scotia, and took the other servants along. How are you, anyhow?"

Hatch sat down and stared at Dick thoughtfully. Herbert was a good-looking, forceful person of twenty-eight or thirty, and a corking right-guard. Now he seemed a little washed out, and there was a sort of pallor beneath the natural tan. He was a young man of family, unburdened by superlative wealth, but possessing in his own person the primary elements of success. He looked what Hatch had said of him: a "good, clean-cut, straightforward, decent man."

"I came up here to say something to you in my professional capacity," the reporter began at last; "and frankly, I don't know how to say it."

Dick straightened up in his chair with a startled expression on his face. He didn't speak, but there was something in his eyes which interested Hatch immensely.

"Have you been reading the papers?" the reporter asked – "that is, during the last couple of days?"

"Yes."

"Of course, then, you've seen the stories about the Randolph robbery?"

Dick smiled a little.

"Yes," he said. "Clever, wasn't it?"

"It was," Hatch responded enthusiastically. "It was." He was silent for a moment as he accepted and lighted a cigarette. "It doesn't happen," he went on, "that, by any possible chance, you know anything about it, does it?"

"Not beyond what I saw in the papers. Why?"

"I'll be frank and ask you some questions, Dick," Hatch resumed in a tone which betrayed his discomfort. "Remember I am here in my official capacity – that is, not as a friend of yours, but as a reporter. You need not answer the questions if you don't want to."

Dick arose with a little agitation in his manner and went over and stood beside the window.

"What is it all about?" he demanded. "What are the questions?"

"Do you know where Miss Dorothy Meredith is?"

Dick turned suddenly and glared at him with a certain lowering of his eyebrows which Hatch knew from the football days.

"What about her?" he asked.

"Where is she?" Hatch insisted.

"At home, so far as I know. Why?"

"She is not there," the reporter informed him, "and the Greytons believe that you eloped with her."

"Eloped with her?" Dick repeated. "She is not at home?"

"No. She's been missing since Thursday evening – the evening of the Randolph affair. Mr. Greyton has asked the police to look for her, and they are doing so now, but quietly. It is not known to the newspapers – that is, to other newspapers. Your name has not been mentioned to the police. Now, isn't it a fact that you did intend to elope with her on Thursday evening?"

Dick strode feverishly across the room several times, then stopped in front of Hatch's chair.

"This isn't any silly joke?" he asked fiercely.

"Isn't it a fact that you did intend to elope with her on Thursday evening?" the reporter went on steadily.

"I won't answer that question."

"Did you get an invitation to the Randolph ball?"

"Yes."

"Did you go?"

Dick was staring straight down into his eyes.

"I won't answer that, either," he said after a pause.

"Where were you on the evening of the masked ball?"

"Nor will I answer that."

When the newspaper instinct is fully aroused a reporter has no friends. Hatch had forgotten that he ever knew Dick Herbert. To him the young man was now merely a thing from which he might wring certain information for the benefit of the palpitating public.

"Did the injury to your arm," he went on after the approved manner of attorney for the prosecution, "prevent you going to the ball?"

"I won't answer that."

"What is the nature of the injury?"

"Now, see here, Hatch," Dick burst out, and there was a dangerous undertone in his manner, "I shall not answer any more questions – particularly that last one – unless I know what this is all about. Several things happened on the evening of the masked ball that I can't go over with you or anyone else, but as for me having any personal knowledge of events at the masked ball – well, you and I are not talking of the same thing at all."

He paused, started to say something else, then changed his mind and was silent.

"Was it a pistol shot?" Hatch went on calmly.

Dick's lips were compressed to a thin line as he looked at the reporter, and he controlled himself only by an effort.

"Where did you get that idea?" he demanded.

Hatch would have hesitated a long time before he told him where he got that idea; but vaguely it had some connection with the fact that at least two shots were fired at the Burglar and the Girl when they raced away from Seven Oaks.

While the reporter was rummaging through his mind for an answer to the question there came a rap at the door and Blair appeared with a card. He handed it to Dick, who glanced at it, looked a little surprised, then nodded. Blair disappeared. After a moment there were footsteps on the stairs and Stuyvesant Randolph entered.

CHAPTER VI

Dick arose and offered his left hand to Mr. Randolph, who calmly ignored it, turning his gaze instead upon the reporter.

"I had hoped to find you alone," he said frostily.

Hatch made as if to rise.

"Sit still, Hatch," Dick commanded. "Mr. Hatch is a friend of mine, Mr. Randolph. I don't know what you want to say, but whatever it is, you may say it freely before him."

Hatch knew that humour in Dick. It always preceded the psychological moment when he wanted to climb down someone's throat and open an umbrella. The tone was calm, the words clearly enunciated, and the face was white – whiter than it had been before.

"I shouldn't like to – " Mr. Randolph began.

"You may say what you want to before Mr. Hatch, or not at all, as you please," Dick went on evenly.

Mr. Randolph cleared his throat twice and waved his hands with an expression of resignation.

"Very well," he replied. "I have come to request the return of my gold plate."

Hatch leaned forward in his chair, gripping its arms fiercely. This was a question bearing broadly on a subject that he wanted to mention, but he didn't know how. Mr. Randolph apparently found it easy enough.

"What gold plate?" asked Dick steadily.

"The eleven pieces that you, in the garb of a Burglar, took from my house last Thursday evening," said Mr. Randolph. He was quite calm.

Dick took a sudden step forward, then straightened up with flushed face. His left hand closed with a snap and the nails bit into the flesh; the fingers of the helpless right hand worked nervously. In a minute now Hatch could see him climbing all over Mr. Randolph.

But again Dick gained control of himself. It was a sort of recognition of the fact that Mr. Randolph was fifty years old; Hatch knew it; Mr. Randolph's knowledge on the subject didn't appear. Suddenly Dick laughed.

"Sit down, Mr. Randolph, and tell me about it," he suggested.

"It isn't necessary to go into details," continued Mr. Randolph, still standing. "I had not wanted to go this far in the presence of a third person, but you forced me to do it. Now, will you or will you not return the plate?"

"Would you mind telling me just what makes you think I got it?" Dick insisted.

"It is as simple as it is conclusive," said Mr. Randolph. "You received an invitation to the masked ball. You went there in your Burglar garb and handed your invitation-card to my servant. He noticed you particularly and read your name on the card. He remembered that name perfectly. I was compelled to tell the story as I knew it to Detective Mallory. I did not mention your name; my servant remembered it, had given it to me in fact, but I forbade him to repeat it to the police. He told them something about having burned the invitation-cards."

"Oh, wouldn't that please Mallory?" Hatch thought.

"I have not even intimated to the police that I have the least idea of your identity," Mr. Randolph went on, still standing. "I had believed that it was some prank of yours and that the plate would be returned in due time. Certainly I could not account for you taking it in any other circumstances. My reticence, it is needless to say, was in consideration of your name and family. But now I want the plate. If it was a prank to carry out the rôle of the Burglar, it is time for it to end. If the fact that the matter is now in the hands of the police has frightened you into the seeming necessity of keeping the plate for the present to protect yourself, you may dismiss that. When the plate is returned to me I shall see that the police drop the matter."

Dick had listened with absorbed interest. Hatch looked at him from time to time and saw only attention – not anger.

"And the Girl?" asked Dick at last. "Does it happen that you have as cleverly traced her?"

"No," Mr. Randolph replied frankly. "I haven't the faintest idea who she is. I suppose no one knows that but you. I have no interest further than to recover the plate. I may say that I called here yesterday, Friday, and asked to see you, but was informed that you had been hurt, so I went away to give you opportunity to recover somewhat."

"Thanks," said Dick drily. "Awfully considerate."

There was a long silence. Hatch was listening with all the multitudinous ears of a good reporter.

"Now the plate," Mr. Randolph suggested again impatiently. "Do you deny that you got it?"

"I do," replied Dick firmly.

"I was afraid you would, and, believe me, Mr. Herbert, such a course is a mistaken one," said Mr. Randolph. "I will give you twenty-four hours to change your mind. If, at the end of that time, you see fit to return the plate, I shall drop the matter and use my influence to have the police do so. If the plate is not returned I shall be compelled to turn over all the facts to the police with your name."

"Is that all?" Dick demanded suddenly.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then get out of here before I – " Dick started forward, then dropped back into a chair.

Mr. Randolph drew on his gloves and went out, closing the door behind him.

For a long time Dick sat there, seemingly oblivious of Hatch's presence, supporting his head with his left hand, while the right hung down loosely beside him. Hatch was inclined to be sympathetic, for, strange as it may seem, some reporters have even the human quality of sympathy – although there are persons who will not believe it.

"Is there anything I can do?" Hatch asked at last. "Anything you want to say?"

"Nothing," Dick responded wearily. "Nothing. You may think what you like. There are, as I said, several things of which I cannot speak, even if it comes to a question – a question of having to face the charge of theft in open court. I simply *can't* say anything."

"But – but – " stammered the reporter.

"Absolutely not another word," said Dick firmly.

CHAPTER VII

Those satellites of the Supreme Police Intelligence of the Metropolitan District who had been taking the Randolph mystery to pieces to see what made it tick, lined up in front of Detective Mallory, in his private office, at police headquarters, early Saturday evening. They did not seem happy. The Supreme Intelligence placed his feet on the desk and glowered; that was a part of the job.

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