

The Detective's Story

by Amy Randolph

It was a dull, rainy day, towards the end of August—one of those days when earth and sky alike are gray and dreary, and the rain drops pattering against the window sound like human sobs. The clock that hung against the wall pointed to the hour of three in the afternoon, and I was sitting by myself in our little inner office, looking out at the expanse of dull, gray wall that formed my only prospect from the not over-clean windows, and thinking. I had read every square inch of type in the newspapers; I had made out all the necessary papers and documents, and now with, literally, “nothing to do,” I was musing about Kitty Elton, and wondering how long it would be before I should be able to marry her.

Dear little Kitty! she was as sweet and patient as it was in the nature of woman to be, but I knew it was a hard life for her in that over-crowded milliner's work-room, day after day and month after month, and I longed to set her free from the monotonous captivity. She was a pretty, blue-eyed girl of twenty, with a dimple in her chin and the sweetest roses on her cheeks that ever inspired the pen of poet. I was no poet, yet I think I understood and appreciated all her womanly grace and delicate beauty as fully as if my heart's thoughts could shape themselves into verse. And it was of them I was thinking when the door opened, and Mr. Clenner came in.

Mr. Clenner was our “chief”—a dark, silent, little man, with a square, stern mouth and clouded gray eyes, which appeared almost expressionless when they were turned full upon you, and yet which seemed to see everything at one comprehensive glance. He sat down beside me.

“Meredith,” he said, in the quiet, subdued tone that was natural to him, “didn't you say you were getting tired of doing nothing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I have something for you to do.”

“What is it, sir?”

“Something that will bring you both credit and friends, if you manage it skillfully. I had intended to go myself, but circumstances happened untowardly, and I shall send you instead.”

Bending his head towards me and speaking scarcely above a whisper, he told me the special business on which I was to be sent. There had been, it seems, a series of very heavy forgeries lately committed, with a boldness and audacity that fairly seemed to set the authorities at defiance. For some time he had been in doubt as to the exact perpetrator of the crime, but after much quiet investigation and casting hither and thither, he had detected the hidden spring—one Perley Matteson—who had skillfully eluded all pursuit and was now somewhere hiding in the north-eastern portion of the State. His whereabouts had been ascertained as nearly as possible, and it was for me now to go quietly up and apprehend him, before he should become aware of our knowledge of all his movements.

I sat listening to various details of our plan as they were sketched out by Mr. Clenner. The reward that had been privately offered was high—my heart leaped as I reflected how much nearer it would bring me to Kitty Elton,—nor did the enterprise seem particularly difficult to accomplish.

“Do you think you can do it?” Mr. Clenner asked, after the whole thing had been laid before me.

“Yes, sir. When shall I start?”

“Now—within half an hour!”

“Within half an hour, sir?”

“Yes; why not?”

I could think of no sufficient reason except one, which I did not care to communicate with my superior,—the longing wish to see Kitty once more before I started.

“Just as you decide, Mr. Clenner, of course,” I said, rising. “If I take the four o’clock express, I shall be there by daylight tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, and that is altogether the best plan. He will not remain long in any one place just at present, depend upon it, and what you have to do must be done at once.”

All through that long night journey, I mused upon the task that lay before me. The house to which I was directed was in the midst of woods, about half a mile beyond the village of Drownville—the residence of Mrs. Matteson, the mother of the audacious forger. If help was needed I was fully authorized to call for it upon the constabulary authorities of Drownville; but I expected to need none.

The rosy dawn was just flushing the eastern sky when I alighted, stiff, weary and jaded from the train, at the little way station of Drownville.

“Can you direct me to Mrs. Matteson’s place?” I asked of the sleepy station-master, who was yawning behind the little aperture of the ticket office.

“Matteson—Mrs. Matteson; I don’t know her, but I guess likely I can tell you where she lives. Just you follow the main street of the village out, about a half a mile, and ye’ll come to a patch o’ woods, with bars at the fence. Go through them bars a little way further on, and you’ll see a little yaller house, just the last place in the world where you’d expect to see a house. That’s where Mrs. Matteson lives.”

I thanked my informant, and set out on a brisk walk, carrying my traveling bag. It was quite a distance ere I emerged from the suburbs of the “main street” into a quiet and secluded country road, or rather lane. The “patch o’ woods” with the bars, and the “little yaller house”—a cream-

colored cottage, literally overgrown with honeysuckles—duly rewarded my search, and as I knocked at the door, a clock somewhere inside struck seven.

A decent-looking, elderly woman in widow's weeds came to the door.

“Is Mr. Matteson in? Mr. Perley?”

“No,” she answered quickly, with, as I imagined, rather a confused look. I did not believe her and asked, quietly:

“When do you expect him home?”

“Not at present.”

Apparently she expected that I would go away, but, instead, I stepped in.

“Mother,” asked a soft voice at the head of the stairs, “who is it?”

And then for the first time I became aware that someone had been watching our colloquy from the head of the stairs—a young girl dressed like the mother in deep black, with very brilliant eyes, and a profusion of jet-black ringlets.

“Someone to see your brother.”

She came halfway down the stairs, pushing back her curls with one hand, and looking at me with wondering eyes. Even then her beauty struck me as I stood gazing at her.

“Perly is not at home,” she said, hurriedly. “He has gone away. We do not know when he will return.”

Evidently this mother and daughter were in the secret of Matteson's villainy, and doing their best to screen him from its consequences. My heart bled for both of them; but it was no time to indulge in sentimental pity. Speaking as briefly as I could, I told them that it was my duty to compel them to remain where they were, while I searched the house.

Mrs. Matteson sat down pale and trembling; her daughter colored high.

“Mother,” she said, “why do you stand by and listen to such slanders? It is false! Let this man search the house if he will; my brother Perley is as innocent as I am!”

No opposition was offered to my search. It was entirely fruitless, however—there was nowhere any trace of the flown bird. Nevertheless I concluded to remain there quietly for a day or two, to see what a little waiting might bring forth.

The same afternoon Clara Matteson came in, as I sat by the piazza window, keeping a quiet watch on all the surroundings.

“Mr. Meredith,” she said, softly, “mother thinks I have been very rude to you. She says it is not your fault, personally, that you are sent here on—on such a mistake, and perhaps she is right. I am very sorry if I have hurt your feelings.”

The pretty, penitent way in which she spoke quite won my heart, and a few questions on my part seemed to unlock the hidden recesses of her confidence. She talked at first shyly, but afterwards with more assurance, of herself, the absent brother, and her mother, giving me a thousand artless little family details which I almost dreaded to hear. That twilight talk was one of the pleasantest episodes of my no means universally pleasant life, and I was considerably annoyed when it was broken in upon by the arrival of the Drownville constables who were to watch through the night. At the sound of their footsteps on the piazza floor Clara rose up and sat down again, confused and frightened.

“O, Mr. Meredith—those men—”

“Be easy, Miss Matteson,” I said; “you shall in no way be annoyed by them. Your privacy shall not be broken in upon, believe me.”

“I know I am silly,” faltered Clara, “but oh! it seems so dreadful!”

My orders to the men were brief and succinct. I stationed them as seemed best to me, and then returned to spend the evening with Miss Matteson. And when I was at length left alone I could not help thinking—God forgive me—how much more winning and graceful she was than poor Kitty Elton.

At length an answer came to my report to Mr. Clenner—it was short and to the purpose:

“Come back. You are only losing time. If the bird has flown we must look elsewhere for him.”

I read the brief missive with a pang. Clara Matteson’s cheek deepened in color as I announced my departure to her.

“You have been far kinder than we dared to hope, Mr. Meredith,” she said, as I held her hand in mine.

The reader will easily perceive how our intimacy had progressed. She smiled, hung her head, and taking a pair of scissors from the table, severed one bright black curl from the abundant tresses that hung over her forehead.

“Keep this, Mr. Meredith, in memory of me.”

Was I foolish to press the jetty ringlet to my lips ere I laid it closely against my heart. Clara evidently thought I was—for she laughed, but did not seem displeased.

Mr. Clenner seemed annoyed when I got back to the Bureau—rather an unreasonable proceeding on his part, for I had certainly done all that man could do, under the circumstances.

“We have been mistaken all the way through, it seems,” he said, biting his lip. “Strange—very strange—I never was mistaken before in my calculations. Well, we must try again!”

I went to Kitty Elton’s that night. She received me with a sweet, shy gladness of welcome that should have made me the happiest man in all the world; but it did not. Clara Matteson’s dark beauty seemed to stand between me and her like a visible barrier. When I took leave, there were tears in her blue eyes.

“Kitty, you are crying!”

“Because you are changed, Edward. You do not love me as well as you did!”

“Kitty, what nonsense!”

I was vexed with her, simply because I knew her accusation was true. But I kissed her once more, and took my leave, moody and dissatisfied.

When I reached the office next morning Mr. Clenner was not there.

“He has gone to Drownville,” said my fellow detective; “he went last night.”

“To Drownville!”

I was seriously annoyed. Did Mr. Clenner distrust the accuracy of my reports? Or did he imagine that I was unable to institute a thorough and complete investigation of the premises?

“It’s very strange,” I mused aloud.

Jones laughed.

“Well,” he said, “you know Clenner has a way of doing strange things. Depend upon it, he has good reasons for his conduct.”

I was sitting at my desk, two days subsequently, when the door glided noiselessly open and Clenner himself entered.

“You are back again, sir? and what luck?”

“The best.”

“You don’t mean to say you’ve got him?”

“I *do* mean to say it. Edward Meredith, I knew I could not be so entirely mistaken. Perley Matteson is in the next room—half an hour from now he will be in prison.”

I felt myself alternately flush and grow pale.

“Where did you apprehend him?”

“At home in his mother’s house.”

“But—”

“He was there all the time you remained there. Ned, my boy, you’ve made a blunder for once; don’t let it happen again!”

“What do you mean, sir?”

For a reply he opened the door of the private inner apartment, his own special sanctum. A slight boyish figure leaned against the window smoking a cigarette, with black curls tossed back from a marble white brow, and brilliant eyes. He mockingly inclined his head as I stared at him, with a motion not entirely unfamiliar to me.

“Clara Matteson!”

“Yes,” he said, in a soft, sarcastic voice. “Clara Matteson, or Perley Matteson, or whatever you choose to call me! Many thanks for your politeness, Detective Meredith; and if you would like another lock of hair—”

I turned away, burning scarlet, while Mr. Clenner closed the door.

“Never mind, my boy, it will be a lesson to you,” he said, laughing. “He makes a very pretty girl, but I am not at all susceptible!”

What a double-dyed fool I had been! I had lost the reward—fallen in the estimation of my fellow officers—and behaved like a brute to poor Kitty—and all for what?

I went to Kitty and told her the whole story, and to my surprise the dear, faithful little creature loved me just as well as ever.

“I won’t be jealous of Perley Matteson, Edward,” she said, smiling, “whatever I might be of his sister! And, dearest, don’t be discouraged. I’ll wait as long as you please, and you will be a second Mr. Clenner yet!”

She was determined to look on the bright side of things, this little Kitty of mine! But I felt the mortification none the less keenly, although, as Mr. Clenner said, it would undoubtedly prove a good lesson to me.

Perley Matteson's girlish beauty is eclipsed in State's Prison now,—nor do I pity him! The stake for which he played was high—and he lost!

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