The Secret of Lonesome Cove

By Samuel Hopkins Adams

"First, the jewels."

Kent turned to Preston Jax, who handed him a package. Opening it, Kent displayed the wonderful Grosvenor rose topazes, with a miscellaneous lot of rings sparkling amid their coils. With a cry, Marjorie caught up the necklace.

"Are all the remainder of the lost valuables there, Mrs. Blair?" asked Kent.

She glanced carelessly at the rings. "I think so. Yes. But this is what matters to me."

"These are all that Preston Jax found on the body."

"It was you who found the body?" demanded Blair of Jax.

"Yes," said the astrologer uneasily.

"Were you alone when you found it?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. There was a man somewheres near. I heard him, but I never saw him."

"Was Mr. Francis Sedgwick with you that night?" pursued Mr. Blair in measured tones.

"I never saw Mr. Sedgwick until today."

There was a little soft sigh of relief from where Marjorie Blair sat.

"That may or may not be true," said Alexander Blair sternly. "It is the word of a man who has robbed a dead body if, indeed, he did not also kill"—

"I didn't kill or rob any one," said Jax.

"How came you by my daughter's jewels, then, if you did not take them from the body?"

"Who ever said I didn't take 'em from the body?" retorted the other "I did take 'em, but it wasn't robbery

And what I want to know is how did they come to be on the body anyhow? What was that Astraea woman doing with your daughter's rings and necklace? Tell me that!"

"Wait a moment," put in Kent. "Explain to Mr. Blair, Jax, what your purpose was in taking the jewels."

"To hide 'em. I thought the less there was on the body to identify it the better chance I'd have of getting away. I was so scared that I guess I was half crazy anyway. And now I hear she never has been ideintified. Is that right?"

Sheriff Schlager half rose from his chair. "Ain't you told 'em, Professor Kent?"

Kent shook his head.

"Nor you, Mr. Blair?"

"No."

"Then I don't see why we can't keep it among ourselves," said the sheriff.

"There is no reason why it should ever be known outside of this room," said Kent, and as the words Alexander Blair exhaled a pent up breath of relief. "But it is due to one person here that she should know everything. Follow me through a page of unwritten local history. The beginning of this story goes back some seventy-five years, when there lived not far from Hogg's Haven in a house which has since been destroyed an older sister of Captain Hogg, who married into the Grosvenor family. She was, from the evidence of the Grosvenor family historian, who, by the way, has withheld all this from his pages, a woman of the most extraordinary charm and magnetism. Not beautiful in the strict sense of the word, she had a gift beyond beauty, and she led men in chains. Her husband appears to have been a weakling who counted for nothing in her life after the birth of her children. Seeking distraction, she flung herself into mysticism and became the priestess of a cult of star worshipers, which included many of the more cultivated people of this region. Among them was a young German mystic and philosopher who had fled to this country to escape punishment for political offenses. Hermann von Miltz was his name."

"That's why she called me Hermann," broke in Preston in an awed half whisper.

"Don't jump to wild conclusions," said Kent smilingly. "Some of their correspondence is still extant. She signed herself Astraea in handwriting similar to the signature of that note of yours, Jax. There seems to have been no guilt between them as the law judges guilt. The bond was a mystic one. But it was none the less fatal. It culminated in a tragedy of which the details are lost. Perhaps it was an elopement that they planned; perhaps a double suicide, with the idea that their souls would be united in death. There are hints of that in the old letters in the historian's possession and in the library at Hedgerow house. This much is known: The couple embarked together in a small boat. Von Miltz was never again heard of. Camilla Grosvenor's body came ashore in Lonesome Cove. She was the Cove's earliest recorded victim. The sketch which that mischief monger, Elder Dennett, left at your door, Sedgwick, supposing it to be a likeness of the unfortunate creature he had seen on the road to your house, is a Charles Elliott sketch for the portrait of Camilla Grosvenor."

"My God!" Jax burst out. "Was it a ghost I met up with that night on Hawkill heights?"

"As near as you are ever likely to encounter, probably," answered Kent. "Now, I'm going to make a long jump down to the present. First, then, I want you to follow with me the course of a figure that leaves Hedgerow house on the late afternoon of July 5. By chance, the figure is not seen, except at a distance by Gansett Jim, who suspected nothing then. Otherwise it would have been stopped, as it wears Mrs. Blair's necklace and rings."

"Dressing the part of Astraea," guessed Lawyer Bain.

"Precisely. Our jeweled figure, in a dress that is an old one of Mrs. Blair's and with a package in hand, makes its way across country to the coast."

"To join me," said Preston Jax.

"To join you. Chance brings the wayfarer face to face with that gentleman of the peekaboo mind, Elder Dennett. They talk. The stranger asks—quite by chance, though the elder assumed it was otherwise—about he home of Francis Sedgwick. At the entrance to Sedgwick's place the pair met. There was a curious encounter, ending in Sedgwick's demanding an explanation of the rose topazes, which he knew to be Mrs. Blair's."

"How did he know that?" demanded Alexander Blair.

"Because I had worn them when I sat to him for my picture," said Marjorie Blair quietly.

"The stranger," continued Kent, "refused to give Sedgwick any explanation, and when he threatened to follow stunned him with a rock and escaped. Some distance down the road the wayfarer encountered Simon P. Groot, the itinerant merchant. Sedgwick afterward met him and made inquiries, but obtained no satisfaction.

"Sedgwick was back in his house by 9 o'clock, and we have a witness here who was talking with the wearer of the necklace at that hour. Jax, let us have your statement."

Holding the copy of the confession in his hand in case of confusion of memory, the starmaster told of his rendezvous, of the swift savage attack, of the appalling incident of the manacles, of the wild race across the heights and of the final tragedy.

"I've thought and wondered and figured day and night," he said in conclusion, "and I can't get at what that rope and the handcuffs meant."

"The handcuffs must have come from that dreadful collection of Captain Hogg's things in the big hallway at Hedgerow house," said Marjorie Blair.

"Yes," assented Kent, "and the dim clew to their purpose goes back again, I fancy, to the strange mysticism of the original Astraea. The disordered mind, with which we have to deal, seems to have been guarding against any such separation as divided in death Astraea from her Hermann."

"It was the other man that killed her," said Preston Jax, "the man I heard yell when she went over. But what became of him?"

"Simon P. Groot spoke of hearing that man's scream, too," confirmed Bain. "Have you got any clew to him, Professor Kent?"

"The other man was Francis Sedgwick," declared Alexander Blair doggedly.

Chester Kent shook his head.

"I've got a witness against that theory from your own side, Mr. Blair," said he. "Gansett Jim at first thought as you do. In that belief he tried to kill Mr. Sedgwick. Now he knows his mistake. Isn't that so, Jim?"

"Yeh," grunted the half breed.

"There was no other man," said Chester Kent. "Don't you understand, Mr. Blair," he added, with significant emphasis, "the source of that cry in the night heard by Jax and Simon P. Groot?"

A flash of enlightenment swept Blair's face. "Ah-h-h!" he said in a long drawn breath. Then: "I was wrong. I beg Mr. Sedgwick's pardon."

Sedgwick bowed. Marjorie Blair's hand went out, and her fingers closed softly on the tense hand of her father-in-law.

"No third person had any part whatsoever in the drama which Jax has recounted to us," pursued Kent. "In the morning the body was discovered. Sheriff Schlager was sent for. He found in the pocket something that betrayed the connection of the body with Hedgerow house."

"A bit of writing paper with the heading still legible," said the sheriff.

"With this he accosted Gansett Jim, who after a night long search had come out on the cliff. Jim, assuming that the sheriff knew all, told him of the identity of the body. The sheriff saw a chance for money in it. If I do you an injustice, Schlager, you'll correct me."

"Go right ahead. Don't mind me. I'll take my medicine."

"Very well. Schlager adopted the ready made theory which Mr. Jax had prepared for him, so to speak, that the body was washed ashore, and arranged, with the connivance of Dr. Breed, the medical officer, to bury it as an unknown. For this perversion of their duty Mr. Blair rewarded them handsomely. As I understand it, he dreaded any publicity attaching itself to Hedgerow house and his family.

"To avoid this, Mr. Blair was willing even to let the supposed murderer, whom he believed to be Sedgwick, go unscathed of justice. By chance I saw the body on the beach. Not until the inquest, however, did I realize the really startling and unique feature of the case. There is where you and Dr. Breed made your fatal error, Mr. Sheriff."

"That's right. You saw the face when we lifted the lid, I s'pose."

"No. You were too quick in replacing it."

"Then how did you get on to the thing?"

"From seeing the face after the body was returned to the courtroom."

CHAPTER XX.

The Face in the Coffin.

"HOLD on a bit," interrupted Lawyer Bain. "I remember there was a fuss about the corpse not being publicly shown for identification. Some of us insisted. The sheriff gave in. The coffin lid wasn't quarter off when Breed gave a yell and clapped it on again, and they took the body back to his house and shut themselves in with it for half an hour before they took it to the hall again. I rather opined that some one had changed bodies."

"That's what made you so cussed curious, was it, Adam?" barked the sheriff.

"There was no exchange of bodies," said Kent. "But there was a change in the body itself."

"What kind of a change?" asked Sedgwick.

"Has it ever occurred to you to think that after death the hair grows fast?"

"I've heard it said," said Lawyer Bain, "that it grows faster than in life."

"And that it grows not only on the head, but on the face as well?"

"The face! A woman's face?" exclaimed Sedgwick.

"No—a man's."

"What man?"

"The man in the coffin."

"Have you lost your mind, Chet? The body in the coffin was that of the woman who met me at the entrance to the Nook."

"No. It was the body of the man who, dressed in woman's clothing, met you at the Nook and knocked you down with a stone flung overhand as not one woman in a thousand could have thrown it. That, in itself, ought to have suggested the secret to me long before I discovered it."

"But how did you discover it?" inquired Sedgwick in bewilderment.

"By the cut on the cheek. You see, the sheriff had failed to foresee that telltale beard. They had the body taken to the house and did the best they could. That cut on the cheek was a razor cut. Having realized that much, I had to deal thenceforth with the mystery of a dead man masquerading as a woman and being abetted in the deception by the officers of the law"—

"Astraea a man!" broke in Preston Jax, his chin in a spasm. "No wonder she—he put up such a fight. Who was he?"

"My son, Wilfrid Blair," said Alexander Blair.

"You see, Mrs. Blair," said Kent very gently, "it isn't so bad as you feared. There was no other woman in the case, no disgrace, no shame. You feel nothing but pity for an unhappy, wrecked mind, for which death was the happiest refuge."

"But the man's voice!" exclaimed Jax. "The voice of the man on the cliff!"

"Wilfrid Blair's," said Kent. "In the final moment he came to himself. At last he resumed his voice. Up to then he had been in voice, manner, thought, purpose, unconsciously playing a part."

"Astraea!" said Sedgwick and Jax in a breath.

"Yes. It was one of those strange and complete assumptions of personality which puzzle the alienists. Wilfrid Blair's diseased mind had fastened upon the strange history of his ancestress and brooded on it until he became convinced that her spirit was reincarnated in himself. Undoubtedly his striking likeness to the portrait of Camilla Grosvenor powerfully aided the obsession."

"We thought it melancholia," said Alexander Blair. "As you say, he had been very secretive, very silent too. We kept Gansett Jim with him as a sort of bodyguard."

"I must understand this all," said Marjorie. "Wilfrid's body is where?"

"In Annalaka churchyard."

"Then who—what is buried in his grave at Hedgerow house?"

"Nothing," said Alexander Blair.

"A mock funeral!"

"My dear," said the man—he seemed to have grown suddenly old under the unspoken arraignment—"I could not tell you what I thought the truth. I thought then that Wilfrid had encountered Mr. Sedgwick and that—that there had been a fight, in which he was killed. Rather than face the scandal of a murder trial, a scandal in which the family name would have been dragged through the mire of the public prints again, I chose the part of deceit."

"But you made me believe that Mr. Sedgwick killed Wilfrid!" she accused.

"I believed it myself," he retorted.

"But what basis had you for suspecting me of the crime?" cried Sedgwick, turning to Marjorie Blair.

She flushed to her temples. "I—I—thought," she murmured, "that he might have known of our acquaintance and have misconstrued; that he might have gone to find you and attacked you and that you killed him in self defense, I mean."

"Thank you for that last at least," said Sedgwick rather bitterly; then, as he saw her wince, "Forgive me!" he added in a low tone. "But to be suspected by you, even though you were misled"— He stopped, catching Kent's frowning glance.

"Who discovered that the burial was a false one?" she asked after a pause.

"Professor Kent," said Blair. "He and Mr. Sedgwick exhumed the coffin."

"That was the night"— Her eyes questioned Sedgwick.

"That I found you at Hedgerow house. Yes," he said gently.

"Whatever Wilfrid may have been," she continued after a moment's silence, "he was my husband. I bear his name, and to leave him in a nameless grave is to dishonor not him alone, but myself."

"You would claim the body?" cried Alexander Blair.

"What else is there for us to do?" she countered.

"And bring down upon us unavoidably the publicity which we have escaped at so bitter a price?" cried the elder Blair. "Have we not suffered enough from the scandal of his life that we should be further involved in the scandal of his death?"

"He's right, miss. It won't do," said the sheriff kindly.

The tension was broken by a tremendous sigh. All eyes turned to Preston Jax, who had risen and was leaning against the wall, his chin jerking galvanically.

"Well?" said Kent.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You? Oh, you go back to Irene," said Kent, with his half smile. "That's your sentence if Mrs. Blair approves."

The astrologer drew a quick breath. The light of a great relief softened his hard little eyes. A startled look widened them as Marjorie Blair, her own trouble forgotten for the moment, rose and went over to him, the reflection of another's happiness shining in her face and making it doubly lovely. A ring glinted in her outstretched hand.

"Take this," she said softly, "for your Irene. May you be very, very happy together!"

"Wh-wh-whut'll I say? Whut'll I do to thank you, ma'am? I—I—I'll jest tell you this: It's me for the straight and narrow from now on. And if ever you or Professor Kent or any of you want an A1, special charted, extra celestial star reading for self or friends, you—you—you c-c-c-come"— He made a rush for the hallway, and the door banged a period to his emotion.

"I think," said Chester Kent gravely, "that lesson will last."

As Marjorie Blair stood smiling, soft eyed, at the door whence the overcome starmaster had disappeared, Sedgwick started to pass. With quick and unexpected tact, Alexander Blair drew the sheriff and the lawyer aside, giving to the young people their moment. She looked up at Sedgwick with lifted eyebrows.

"Are you not going to speak to me?" she said sorrowfully.

"What is there to say, except one thing—and that I may not say now."

"No, no!" she whispered, in affright. "But say you forgive me."

"You! For what?"

"For having believed, even for an instant, what Father Blair said, that you were the murderer."

Sedgwick smiled bravely. "That is all past."

"And you'll think of me at least kindly?"

"I'll think of you with every beat of my heart," he said passionately.

Across her face passed the look of fairy wistfulness that was all her own. "No," she said, "it would be better—for both of us—that you should forget, for the time."

He leaned over her:

"What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
And teach the unforgetful to forget?"

he quoted very low.

"And yet," she persisted, "it would be easier, now that I am going away."

"Going away! For long?"

She nodded with compressed lips. Sedgwick turned very white.

"Oh, don't look like that!" she faltered. "I can't bear it! Can't you see that after what has happened I must go? I must have time to forget. There is so much to forget! Surely you can be patient—and trust."

He drew her gaze to his own, held it for the space of a heart beat and was gone.

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Summer had waned from the coast and with it had passed the keenness of local interest in the strangest victim of Lonesome Cove. Other subjects of absorbing interest supervened during the long winter, among them the rumor that Hedgerow house was to be sold before summer.

"And young Blair's body along with it, I expect," remarked Elder Dennett malevolently. "Seems to me, if I was a millionaire like Alexander Blair, I wouldn't sell my own flesh and blood, dead or alive."

Of Alexander Blair himself nothing had been seen in the neighborhood since mid-July nor of his daughter-in-law. Hedgerow house was in charge of Gansett Jim as caretaker. Professor Kent had left about the same time as the Blairs, but Francis Sedgwick had stuck to the Nook. Though his work prospered, the worker had paled.

Wind borne on the blast of a mid-March gale, Chester Kent dropped down at the door of the Nook one wild afternoon without warning. As always, he was impeccably clad, though his stout boots showed the usage of recent hard wear. Throwing open the door, he called his friend's name.

Instantly the artist came loping down the stairs and had him by the shoulders.

"I've got a caller up above," he said after the usual greetings and questionings were over.

"Yes? Have you gone in for local society?"

"Not exactly local. It's Alexander Blair."

"Hel-lo!" said Kent in surprise. "What brings him?"

"Why, he came down to Hedgerow house to look after certain books and papers and ran over here to make his amende honorable in form. Chet, I hate being apologized to."

"Of course. Every one does. Nevertheless, it's good exercise for Mr. A. Blair, Esquire."

"He's the grim jawed, hard bitted Blair of old. Just the same, he made his apology as handsomely as need be I'll bring him down here."

The fabric magnate descended from the studio and greeted Kent briefly, then turned to his host. "You will excuse me if I ask Mr. Kent to step outside. I have some business with him."

"Stay here," said the artist. "I'll go back to my studio." Which he did.

"I need your assistance. Some one has been tampering with my son's grave," said Blair.

"You mean the grave at Hedgerow house?"

"Yes. Gansett Jim reports that there are signs of recent digging. It looks as if ghouls had been at work there with the idea of getting the body and holding it for ransom. They would have had a fine surprise if they had got the coffin out!"

"Because they'd have found no body in it, you mean?"

"Certainly. But suppose they discovered that there were no remains, nothing but a punctured sand bag? Do you see the potentialities of blackmail?"

"Do you know of an old lady named Orcutt in Annalaka?" asked Kent.

"No."

"She owns the house just next to Annalaka churchyard, where your son was buried as Jane Doe. She is a very worthy old lady. But she suffers severely from asthma. In fact, it keeps her awake most of the night. So some interested persons have subscribed money and sent her south to a sanatorium. I'd like to get you interested in her case."

"You wish me to subscribe?"

"Oh, more than that. I think it would be a good idea if you were to assume the entire expense of the proceedings."

"You mean reimburse the subscribers?"

"Exactly."

For a few seconds the millionaire studied Kent's candid face. "Very well," he agreed. "How much?"

"Sheriff Schlager can tell you. He is keeping the accounts. You see, it was necessary to get her out of the way. Her windows overlook the churchyard."

"So you took occasion to indicate before."

"Repetition of a really relevant point is excusable. She left two weeks ago, very much mystified but pathetically thankful, poor old girl!

"When she was safely out of the way and no longer overlooking Annalaka churchyard by night from her window Schlager, Adam Bain and I paid a visit to the place. What lay, nameless, in Annalaka churchyard now rests in its own place at Hedgerow house. I wish that you might have heard the little prayer made by that simple country lawyer over your son's grave."

Alexander Blair's clinched hands went to his temples in a singular gesture and dropped again. "What interest did Schlager and Bain have in the matter?" he added in a low tone.

"Why, Schlager had done some dirty work for you and wanted to even accounts with his own conscience. As for Bain, we needed a third man we could trust. I asked him and got him. It was no small risk for him. If you felt that his risk is worth some reward you might"—

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the other eagerly. "Do you think a thousand—or perhaps more"—

Kent smiled. "By thinking hard I could think a thousand," he said, "but not more in this case. It wouldn't be safe. Bain might not survive the shock. Thank you very much, Mr. Blair."

CHAPTER XXI.

Reward.

"AND now," said Blair, "I am still in the dark as to your interest in the matter."

"Mine? Why, for one thing, I dislike to leave any affair unfinished. Besides, there was a promise made to Mrs. Blair. Is she back from Europe?" asked Kent.

"She is at Hedgerow house." Blair communed with himself for a time then said abruptly. "By the way, do you think your friend, Mr. Sedgwick, would come over to a pickup dinner before we leave?"

Kent's face lighted up. "Ask him," said he heartily, "and see."

"I will as soon as I get home. Good day." Blair hesitated. "Kent," he blurted, "I realize now why you won't take my money. I can always buy brains, but I can't buy the bigger better thing. It isn't in the market. Thank you!" He caught the scientist's hand in a swift hard grip and strode off down the road.

Chester Kent went back into the house with a glow at his heart. He shouted upstairs to Sedgwick: "Go on with your work, Frank. I want to loaf and invite my soul for an hour. Where's your reading matter?"

Three minutes later Kent was stretched luxuriously on the divan, with the window shade pulled down and the big electric chandelier glowing, immersed in the joyous nonsense of "Rhyme and Reason." The wind alternately shouted profane protests at the window because it couldn't get in, and then fell silent, waiting for an answer. In one of these lulls Kent heard footsteps outside.

He dropped his book. The footsteps approached the window. Tiptoeing to the door he threw it open. Chester Kent and Marjorie Blair stood face to face.

"I—I—I beg your pardon!" gibbered Kent.

Feminine wise she built up her self possession on the ruins of his. "I wonder," she said, with a smile, "whether I'm the worse frightened one of us."

"You see," he said lamely, "it was so sudden, your—your coming that way. I didn't expect you."

"And for that reason you intend to bar me from the house? It's quite disgustingly wet out here."

With a muttered apology Kent stepped aside, and she entered. Even amid his ill ease he could not but note how the girlish loveliness had ripened and warmed. But there glinted now in her deep eyes an elfish spirit of mischief.

"What a surprise to find you here, Mrs. Kent!" she remarked sweetly. "Or are you calling yourself Mr. Blair nowadays?" His tormentor considered him with malicious eyes.

"Did any woman ever say 'Boo!' to you suddenly, I wonder?" she mused aloud. "May the kindly fates give me to be among those present when you fall in love!"

Kent favored her with an elaborate bow. "Your presence would be the one essential."

"Really," she approved, "you're progressing. I begin to feel repaid for my visit already."

This time Kent looked her in the eye. "You're not very demanding in

"Finished!" he said.

the matter of returns for your trouble," he remarked. "You haven't asked me about Sedgwick."

"Is he well?" she inquired formally, but with quickened breath.

"He is more than that. He is cured—and a man—a man," he added meaningly, "for any woman to be proud of."

There was a step on the floor above. Marjorie Blair's hand went to her heart.

"I didn't know he was here," she panted affrightedly. "I came just to—look at the place."

Chester Kent raised his voice. "Frank," he called, "come down here; quick!"

Not twice in his life had Sedgwick heard that tone in his friend's voice. He took the stairs at a leap and on the landing stopped dead.

"Marjorie!" he whispered.

She shrank back a little from the light in his eyes.

"What do you do here?" he said very low.

Still she did not speak, but stood, tremulous, her face half panic, half passion.

Unobtrusively Kent slid along the wall, like a shadow, and vanished into the night.

"Where have you been?" Sedgwick asked the woman of his love.

"Everywhere. Nowhere. What does it matter?" she faltered. "I've come back."

He went forward and took her hands in his; cold little hands that clung as they touched.

"Why did you never write me?" he asked gently.

"I don't know. I couldn't. Don't ask me to explain. It was just that I—I felt I must come back to you as I had come to you first, unexpected and without a word. Can you understand?"

"No," he said.

"No; I suppose not. A man couldn't."

"Good God!" he burst out. "Do you realize what it is to live in such uncertainty and longing as I've lived in since you left, to wait and hope and keep hope and hope and wait again for a word that never comes—to eat your heart out with waiting?"

A slow wonderful smile trembled on her lips. "My dear," she said, "I have waited for you all my life."

Suddenly her arms were around him. Her cheek was pressed to his own. The breath of her whisper was at his ear.

"Oh, forgive me! I will make it up to you, my dear, my dearest!"

Out in the wind and the rain Chester Kent drew in the deep breath of satisfied and rounded achievement. He had beheld against the wide window shade two shadows, which, standing motionless for a moment a few feet apart, had drawn slowly together as by some irresistible magnetism, and suddenly merged into one. The unintentional eavesdropper nodded in grave gratulation to the house and then turned away.

"Finished!" he said. "C'est comme. Finis. Telos. Das End. And any or all other words of whatever language meaning a sound conclusion!"

THE END.

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