

The Secret of Lonesome Cove

By Samuel Hopkins Adams

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"There, gentlemen and ladies," Simon P. Groot was saying, "there in that place of vast silences and infolding shadows I met and addressed one who was soon to be no more. Madam, I said, 'You are worn. You are vain. You are weary. Trust the chivalry of one who might be your father. Rest and be comforted as with balm. Standing by the roadside, she dropped like a power. There is no rest for me,' she said in mournful tones. I must away upon my mission."

"She vanished, that fair creature, into the forest. I looked at my watch—the unerring, unwarranted, sixteen jeweled chronometer which I shall presently have the honor of showing to you at the unexampled price of three seventy—and saw that the hour was exactly for these timepieces very not one fraction of a second a day—8:45. When next I looked at the face of Father Time's trustiest accountant, it was to mark the hour of the horrid shriek that shook my soul—precisely 9:31. And later, when I heard the dread news, I realized that my ears had thrilled to a death cry."

Kent moved away. His chin pressed down upon his chest. He went to the office of Lawyer Adam Bain and spent an hour waiting, with his feet propped up on the desk. When the lawyer entered Kent remarked:

"You rather put our two official friends in a hole this morning."

"Just a mite maybe. But they've crawled out. I guess I spoke too quick."

"How so?"

"Well, if they'd gone ahead and buried the body as it was we could have had it exhumed. And then we'd have seen what we'd have seen."

"True enough. And you didn't see it as it was?"

"See what? Did you?"

"Suppose," Kent said, "you give me the fullest possible character sketch of our impulsive friend, the sheriff."

Half an hour was consumed in this process. At the end of the time Kent strolled back to the square, where Simon P. Groot had been discoursing. There he found the ornate wagon closed, and its ornate proprietor, whistling over some minor repairs that he had been making. An invitation to take a ride in Kent's car was promptly accepted.

"Business first," said Kent. "You're a seller. I'm a buyer. You've got some information that I may want. If so I'm ready to pay. Was any of your talk true?"

"Yes," replied Simon P. Groot austere. "It was all true but the frills."

"When you trim off the frills for \$10?"

"Fair dealing for a fair price is my motto. You'll find it in gilt lettering on the back of the wagon. I will."

"What were you doing on Hawkhill cliffs?"

"Sleeping in the wagon."

"And you really met this mysterious wanderer?"

"Sure as you're standing there."

"What passed between you?"

"I gave her good evening, and she spoke to me fair enough, but queer, and said that my children's children might remember the day. Now, I ain't got any children to have children, so I wouldn't have thought of it again but for the man that came inquiring after her."

"When was that?"

"Not fifteen minutes after."

"Did you tell the crowd here that?"

"Yes. I sold two dozen wedding rings on the strength and romance of that point. From my description they allowed it was a painter man named Sedgwick. I thought maybe I'd call in and have him touch up the wagon a bit where she's rusty."

"And you heard the woman cry out less than an hour later?"

"That's a curious thing. I'd have almost sworn it was a man's voice that yelled. It went through me like a sharpened icicle."

"All this was right before last. What have you been doing meantime?"

"Drove over to Marcus Corners to trade yesterday. There I heard about the murder and came back here to make a little business out of it. Would it be worth \$5 to you, likely, a relic of the murderer?" suggested the old man.

"Quite likely."

"That's the word, then, for my part in it. The next morning I followed her trail a ways. You see, the fall in the night had got me interested. She'd met somebody in a thicket. I found the string and the paper of the bundle she was carrying there. Then there was a light of some sort, for the twine were

broken right to the edge of the thicket and the ground stamped down. One of both of 'em must have broken out into the open, and I lost the trail. But this is what I found on a hazel bush. Do I win the eye on it?"

The car came to a stop. Digging into his pocket, Kent produced a bill, which he handed over and took possession of Simon P. Groot's "relic." It was an embroidered silver star, with a few torn wisps of cloth clinging to it.

CHAPTER VIII. Beckonings.

"FACTS that contradict each other are not facts," pronounced Chester Kent.

Fumes of tobacco were rising from three pipes hovered about the porch of the Nook where Kent, Sedgwick and Lawyer Bain were holding late council. A discouraged observation from the artist had elicited Kent's epigram.

"Not all of them, anyhow," said Bain. "The chore in this case is to find facts enough to work on."

"On the contrary," declared Kent, "facts in this case are as plentiful as blackberries. The trouble is that we have no pall to put them in."

"Maybe we could borrow Len Schlager's," suggested the lawyer dryly.

"We don't seem to be getting much of anywhere," complained Sedgwick. "Complicated cases don't clear their selves up in a day," remarked Kent. "In this case we've got opponents who know more than we do."

"Schlager," asked the lawyer.

"And Dr. Breed. Also, I think, Gansett Jim. What do you think, Mr. Bain, is the mainspring of the sheriff's action?"

"Money," said the lawyer with conviction. "He's as crooked as a snake with the collar."

"Would it require much money to influence him?"

"As much as he could get. If the case was in the line of blackmail, he'd hold out strong. He's shrewd."

"Dr. Breed must be getting some of it."

"Oh, Tim Breed is Len's little dog. He takes orders. Of course he'll take money, too, if it comes his way. Like mister, like man."

"Those two," said Kent slowly, "know the identity of the body. For good and sufficient reasons, they are keeping that information to themselves. Those reasons we aren't likely to find out from them."

"Murderer has bribed 'em," opined Bain.

"Possibly. But that presupposes that the sheriff found something on the body which led him to the murderer, which isn't likely. How improbable it is that a murderer—allowing for argument, that there has been murder—who would go as far as to cover his trail and the nature of the crime by binding the body on a grating, would overlook anything like a letter incriminating himself!"

"What did the sheriff find, then, in the dead woman's pocket?"

"Perhaps a handkerchief with a distinctive mark."

"And that would lead him to the identity of the body?"

"Presumably. Also to some one, we may assume, who was willing to pay roundly to have that identity concealed."

"That would naturally be the murderer, wouldn't it?" asked Sedgwick.

"No. I don't think so."

"It looks to me so," said the lawyer.

"He's the one naturally interested in concealment."

"I'm almost ready to dismiss the notion of a murderer at all."

"Why so?" demanded both the others.

"Because there was no murder probably."

"How do you make that out?" queried Bain.

"From the nature of the wounds, that caused death."

"They look to me to be just such wounds as would be made by a blow with a heavy club."

"Several blows with a heavy club might have caused such wounds. But the blows would have had to be delivered peculiarly. A circle on the skull six inches in diameter, impinging on the right ear, is crushed in. If you can imagine a man swinging a baseball bat at the height of his shoulder repeatedly and with great force at the victim's head you can infer such a crushing in of the bone. My imagination hardly carries me so far."

"Beating down from above would be the natural way," said Bain.

"Certainly. No such blow ever made that wound."

"Then how was it made?" asked Sedgwick.

"Probably by a fall from the cliff to the rocks below."

"And the fall broke the manacle from the right wrist?"

"The broken manacle was never on the right wrist."

"That's merely conjecture," said the lawyer.

"No. It's certainty. A blow heavy enough to break that iron, old as it is, must have left a mark on the flesh. There was no mark."

"Why should any one put one hand-cuff on a woman and leave the other dangling?"

"Suppose the other was not left dangling?"

"Where was it, then?"

"On the wrist of some other person, possibly."

"A man had chained the woman to himself," said Sedgwick incredulously.

"More probably the other way round."

"That's even more unbelievable."

"Not if you consider the evidence. You will remember that your mysterious visitor, while talking with you, car-

ried a heavy bundle. The manacles were, I infer, in that."

"But what conceivable motive could the dead woman have in dressing herself up like a party, going to meet a man and chaining him to herself?"

"When you have a bizarre crime you must look for bizarre motives. Just at present I'm dealing with facts. The iron was on the left wrist of the body; therefore it was on the right wrist of the unknown companion. It is natural to perform a quick, deft act like snapping on a handcuff with the right hand. Hence, presumably, your visitor was the one who clamped the cuffs."

"And the man broke off his?"

"Yes. But only after a struggle, undoubtedly. If I could find a man with a badly bruised right wrist I should consider the trail's end in sight. You'll make inquiries, will you, Mr. Bain?"

"I will; and I will keep an eye on Len Schlager and the doc. Anything more now? If not I'll say good night."

After the lawyer had made his way into the darkness Kent turned to his host. "This affair is really becoming a very pretty problem. Why didn't you tell me of your meeting with Simon P. Groot?"

"Who?"

"The patriarch in the circus wagon."

"Oh, I forgot. Why, when I was trying to trail the woman I chanced upon him and asked if he had seen her. He hadn't."

"He had. Also he heard a terrified cry shortly after. The cry, he thought, was in a man's voice. Simon P. Groot isn't wholly lacking in sense of observation."

"A man's voice in a cry? What could that mean?"

"Oh, any one of several hundred unthinkable things," said Kent patiently.

"Wait! She must have attacked some other man as she did me. She was going to a rendezvous, wasn't she? Then she and the man she went to meet quarreled, and he killed her by throwing her over the cliff."

"And the handcuffs?"

Sedgwick's hands went to his head. "That, of course, is the inexplicable thing. But don't you think that was the way she met her death?"

"No."

"Then what do you think?"

"Never mind that at present. The point is that Simon P. Groot naturally supposed you to have been mixed up in whatever tragedy there was going on. You're an unfortunate knacker of manufacturing evidence against yourself, Sedgwick. The redeeming feature is that the sheriff can't very well use it to arrest you."

"I don't see why."

Kent chuckled. "Don't you see that the last thing the sheriff wants to do is arrest anybody?"

"No, I don't."

"Why he has the body safely buried now. You'll remember that he was in a great hurry to get it buried. Identification is what he dreaded. Danger or identification is now over. If any one should be arrested the body would be exhumed and the danger would return in aggravated form. No; he wants you suspected, not arrested."

"He is certainly getting his wish."

"For the present. Well, I'm off."

"Why don't you move your things from the hotel and stay here with me?" suggested Sedgwick.

"Getting nervous?" inquired Kent.

"It isn't that, but I think I could make you more comfortable."

"Kent shook his head. "Thank you, but I don't believe I'd better. When I'm at work on a case I need privacy. No house, not even a man's own, can possibly be so private as a strange hotel."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted the other with a laugh, then lapsing into pronounced gloom for the first time he said, "It seems pretty tough that I should be in all this coil and tangle because a crazy woman happened by mere chance to make a call on me."

Kent's pipe glowed in the darkness and silence before he replied. Then he delivered himself as follows: "Sedgwick—puff—puff—'to forget if you can'—puff—puff—'that snuff about the crazy woman'—puff—puff—puff. 'Forget it! How should I? Why should I?'"

"Because—puff—puff—'absolutely on the'—puff—puff—'wrong track. Sundayman's Creek road, turning aside just before it gains the turnpike to the Elyrie hotel to evade a stretch of marsh, travels on wooden stilts across a deep, clear pool fed by a spring. The most rigorous constable could have found no basis for protest in the peace maintained across the bridge by a light electric car, carrying a short, slender, elderly man, who peered out with weary eyes into the glory of the July sunshine. At the end of the bridge the car stopped to allow its occupant a better view of a figure prostrate on the brink of the pool. Presently the figure came to the posture of all fours. The face turned upward, and the motorist caught the glint of a monocle. Then the face turned again to its quest."

"Are you looking for something lost?" asked the man in the car.

"I'm hoping to discover the eggs of certain aerobopterops insects."

"Ah! You are an entomologist, then."

"To some extent."

"So was I, once—when I had more time. Business has drawn my attention, though never my interest, away from it. I've entirely dropped my reading in the last year. By the way, were you here in time to witness the swarm of—antropes—last month? Rather unusual, I think."

"No, I missed that. What was the feature, specially?"

"The suddenness of the appearance. You know, Helmond says that—"

"The stranger went on at some length. He appeared to be an interested subject, but a learned student of the subject. As he talked, sitting on

the step of his car, from which he had descended, the other studied him. His quiet but forceful voice, his severely handsome face, with its high brows, harsh nose, and bluish outlines, from which the eyes looked forth, thoughtful, alert, yet with the gaze of a man in pain. Presently he remarked very courteously:

"If you are going back to the hotel, may I take you along? I am Alexander Blair."

"Thank you. I'll be glad of a lift. My name is Chester Kent."

"Not the Professor Kent of the Ramsay case?"

"The same. You know, Mr. Blair, I've always believed that you had more of a hand in Ramsay's death than I. Now, if you wish to withdraw your offer of a lift?"

"Not at all. A man who has been so abused by the newspapers as I can stand a little plain speaking. For all that, on my word, Professor Kent, I had no hand in sending Ramsay on that dirty business of his."

"The scientist considered him thoughtfully. 'Well, I believe you,' said he shortly, and got into the machine."

CHAPTER IX. Chester Kent Declines a Job.

"THIS meeting is a fortunate chance for me," said Blair presently.

"Chance?" murmured Kent interrogatively.

The car swerved sharply, but immediately resumed the middle of the road. "Certainly, chance," said the motorist. "What else should it be?"

"Of course," agreed Kent. "As you say."

"I said fortunate," continued the other, "because you are, I believe, the very man I want. There is an affair which has been troubling me a good deal. I haven't been able to look into it personally because of the serious illness of my son, who is at my place on Sundayman's creek. But it is in your line, being entomological and perhaps criminal."

"What is it?" asked Kent.

"An inexplicable destruction of our stored woollens by the clothes moth. You may perhaps know that I am president of the Kinsella mills. We're been having a great deal of trouble this spring, and our superintendent believes that some enemy is introducing the pest into our warehouses. Will you take the case?"

"When?"

"Start tonight for Connecticut. Chester Kent's long fingers went to the lobe on his ear. 'Give me until 3 o'clock this afternoon to consider. Can I reach you by telephone?'"

"Yes, at Hodgeworth house, my place."

"That is how far from here?"

"Fourteen miles. But you need not come there. I could return to the hotel to conclude arrangements. And I think," he added significantly, "that you would find the project a profitable one."

"Doubtless. Are you well acquainted with this part of the country, Mr. Blair?"

"Yes; I've been coming here for years."

"Is there an army post near by?"

"Not within a hundred miles."

"Nor any officers on special detail about?"

"None so far as I know."

Kent produced from his pocket the silver star with the shred of cloth hanging to it. "This may or may not be an important clue to the curious death that occurred here three days ago."

"It looks like the star from the collar of an officer. I should say positively that it was from an army or navy uniform."

"Are you yourself an expert in woolen fabrics, Mr. Blair?"

"I have been."

"Could you tell from that tiny fragment whether or not the whole cloth is all wool?"

Without replying Blair gave the steering handle a quick sweep, and the car drew up before a drug store. He took the star and was gone a few minutes.

"Not all wool," he announced on his return.

"Exit the army or navy officer," remarked Kent.

"Why so?"

"Because regulations require all wool garments—and get them. What is the fabric?"

"A fairly good mixture, from the very elementary chemical test I made."

"Thank you, Mr. Blair. You've eliminated one troublesome hypothesis for me. I'll telephone you before 3 o'clock. Good day."

From the woolen manufacturer Chester Kent went direct to the Martindale Center library, where he interviewed the librarian.

"Do you get the agriculture department publications?"

"Yes."

"Have you a pamphlet issued by the bureau of entomology, Helmond on 'The Swamp Phenomenon in Lepidoptera'?"

"Yes, sir. It was inquired for only yesterday by Mr. Blair."

"Ah, yes! He's quite interested in the subject, I believe."

"It must be quite recent, then," said the librarian. "We haven't seen him here for a long time until two days ago, when he came and put in a morning reading on insects."

"So, Mr. Alexander Blair," said Kent, addressing the last fence post on the outskirts of the town after a thoughtless walk, "that was a fatal break on your part, that mention of Helmond. Since years back don't usually subject publications issued only within three months. That casual meeting with me was well carried out, and you called it chance. A very palpably manufactured chance! But why am I worth so much trouble to know? And why does Alexander Blair leave a desperately ill son to arrange an errand for me at this particular time?"

And is Hodgeworth house, fourteen miles distant and possessing just such an electric car as a woman would use in driving round the country, perhaps the place whence came Sedgwick's sweet lady of mystery? Finally, what connection has all this with the body lying in Annala's burying ground?"

Blindly not reply from the fence post, Kent returned to the Elyrie, called up Hodgeworth house and declined Blair's proposition.

Early that evening Francis Sedgwick came to the hotel.

"Mr. Kent? I'm afraid you can't see him, sir. He isn't in his room," said the clerk.

"Isn't he about the hotel?"

The clerk hesitated. "I ought not to tell you, sir, for it's Mr. Kent's strict orders not to be disturbed, but he's in his special room. Is it anything very important? Any new evidence or something of that sort?"

"That is what I want Mr. Kent to decide."

"In that case I might take the responsibility. But I think I had better take you to him myself."

After the elevator had carried them to the top of its run, they mounted a flight of stairs and walked to a far corner of the building.

"Nobody's been in here since he took it," explained the clerk as they walked. "Turned all the furniture out. Special lock on the door. Some kind of scientific experiments. I suppose. He's very quiet about it."

Having reached the door, he discreetly tapped. No answer came. Somehow less timidity characterized his next effort. A growl of surprise, savagery from within was his reward.

"You see, Mr. Sedgwick," said the clerk, raising his voice he called. "Kent, I've brought—"

"Get away and go to the devil!" cried a voice from inside in fury.

"What do you mean by—"

"It's I, Kent, Sedgwick. I've got to see you."

There was a silence of some seconds.

"What do you want?" asked Kent at length.

"You told me to come at once if anything turned up."

"So I did," sighed Kent. "Well, chase that infernal bellboy to the stairs and I'll let you in."

With a wry face the clerk retired. Kent opened the door and his friend squeezed through into a bare room. The walls were hung and the floor was carpeted with white sheets. There was no furniture of any kind unless a narrow mattress in one corner could be so reckoned.

"It's happened!" announced Sedgwick, interested in spite of himself.

"It dates back to our college days. Do you remember that queer freshman, Serwynd?"

"The mind reader? Yes. The poor chap went insane afterward."

"Yes. It was a weak mind, but a singularly receptive one. You know we used to force numbers or playing cards upon his consciousness by merely thinking of them."

"I recollect. His method was to stand gazing at a blank wall. He said the object we were thinking of would rise before him visually against the blankness. Did you ever figure out how he managed to do it?"

"Not exactly."

"For years I've kept a bare white room in my Washington house to do my mind thinking in. When your affair promised to become difficult for me I rigged up this spot. And I'm trying to see things against the walls."

"Any particular kind of things?"

Kent produced the silver star from his pocket and told of its discovery.