

The Secret of Lonesome Cove

By Samuel Hopkins Adams

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CHAPTER XV. The Turn of the Game.

STRICKEN with amazement at the hatred in the tone, Sedgwick stood staring. But Kent stepped before the advancing man. "This won't do," he said firmly. "We can't any of us afford killing." "I can," contradicted Mr. Blair. "You would gain nothing by it. If one of us is killed the other will finish the task. You know what I am here for, Mr. Blair. I purpose to open the coffin and then go."

"No," said the master of Hedgerow house. And it was twenty years ago since his "no" had been overborne. "Yes," returned Chester Kent quietly. Mr. Blair's arm rose, steady and slow, with the inevitable motion of machinery. "If you shoot," pointed out Kent, "you will rouse the house. Is there no one there from whom you wish to conceal that coffin?"

The arm rose higher until the muzzle of the pistol glared like a baleful, interestless eye into Kent's face. Instead of making any counter motion with the sheriff's revolver the scientist turned on his heel, walked to Sedgwick and handed him the weapon. "I'm going to open the coffin, Frank," he announced. "That pistol of Mr. Blair's is a target arm. It has only one shot."

"True," put in its owner, "but I can score 120 with it at a hundred yards." "If he had fired, Frank, wing him. And then, whatever happens, get that casket open. That is the one thing you must do for me and yourself."

Sedgwick stepped to within two paces of Blair. "Blair," he said, with a snarl, "you so much as think with that trigger finger and you're dead!"

"No; no killing, Frank," countermanded Kent. "In his place you'd perhaps do as he is doing."

He worked the blade of a spade craftily under the lid and began to pry. The cover gave slightly. Mr. Blair's pistol sank to his side. "I should have shot before warning you," he said bitterly. "Violating graves is, I suppose, your idea of a lawful and orderly proceeding."

The rending crackle of the hard, heavy wood was his answer. Kent stooped and struggled up, bearing a shapeless heavy object in his arms. The object seemed to be swathed in sacking. Kent let it fall to the ground, where it lopped and lay. "All right," said he, with a strong exhalation of relief. "I knew it must be. And yet—well, one never is absolute in certainty. And if I'd been wrong I think, Frank, we could profitably have used that gun on ourselves. You can drop it now. Come over here."

Courageous though Sedgwick was, his nerves were of a highly sensitive order. He shuddered back. "I don't believe I can do it, Chester."

"You must. As a witness. Come, brace up!" Setting the bullseye lantern down, Kent produced a pocketknife. Sedgwick drew a long breath, and, walking over, crouched, steeling his nerves against the revelation that should come when the cords should be cut and the swappings reveal their contents. "If I feel over, don't let me tumble into the grave," he said simply and choked the last word off from becoming a cry of horror as he beheld his friend drive the knife blade to the hilt in the body and then whip it across and downward with a long ripping draw under which the harsh cloth sang hideously.

"Open your eyes! Look, look!" cried Kent heartily. A strong trickle of sand flowed out of the rent in the sack and spread upon the ground.

"That is all," said Kent. Relief clamored within Sedgwick for expression. He began to laugh in short choking spasms.

"Quiet!" warned Mr. Blair, in a broken tone of appeal. "You've found out the secret. God knows what you'll do with it. But there are innocent people in the house. What is this matter? Blackmail?"

Kent's face withdrew, as it were, behind his inscrutable half smile. "Peace, if you will," said he. "A truce at least."

"I should like to know just how much you know."

"An offer. I will tell you whenever you are ready to tell me all that you know. I think we are mutually in need of each other."

"I wish you were at the bottom of that pit," retorted the other grimly. "You and your accomplice of a friend with you."

"Thank you for myself," said Sedgwick. "If you were twenty years younger I would break every bone in your body for that."

"Steady, Frank," put in Kent. "Judge no man by his speech who has been through what Alexander Blair has been through tonight. Mr. Blair," he added, "you've refused my offer. I will undertake for Mr. Sedgwick and myself that this night's affair shall be kept secret. And, now, the next thing is to cover the evidence. Spades, Frank."

The two men took up their tools. "I'll spell you," said Alexander Blair, and they hurriedly reentered the sack of clean sand which bore the name of Wilfrid Blair.

"And now," said Chester Kent, petting his blistered palms as the last shovelful of dirt was tamped down. "I'll take you back with me, Mr. Sheriff, to Sedgwick's place and do the best I can for you till the morning. About 6 o'clock we'll find you unconscious below the cliffs where you fell in the darkness. EN?"

Despite his pain the sheriff grinned. "I guess that's as good as the next life," he acquiesced. "You fight fair, professor."

"Then answer me a fair question. What were you doing at Hedgerow house tonight?"

"Why, you see," drawled the official, "I saw you flash that stream, and it came to my mind that you was castin' around for more than trout that wasn't there. But I didn't hardly think you'd come so soon, and I was asleep when the noise of the spade on the coffin woke me."

"Bad work and clumsy," commented Kent, with a scowl. "Come along. My car will carry three. Sedgwick can sit on the floor. Good night, Mr. Blair. All aboard, Frank."

There was no answer. "What became of Sedgwick?" demanded Kent.

"He was here half a minute ago. I'll swear to that," muttered the sheriff.

Kent stared anxiously about him. "Frank, Frank," he called half under his breath.

"Not too loud," besought Alexander Blair.

The clouds closed over the moon. Somewhere in the open a twig crackled. Sedgwick had disappeared.

Hope had surged up sudden and fierce in Sedgwick's heart at the gleam of a candle in Hedgerow house. Silent, he laid his revolver beside his spade and slipped into the shadows.

He heard Kent's impatient query. He saw him as he picked up the relinquished weapon and examined it, and, estimating the temper of his friend, was sure that the scientist would not stop to search for him. In this he was right. Taking the sheriff by the arm, Kent guided him through the creek and into the darkness beyond. Mr. Blair, walking with heavy steps and fallen head, made his way back to the house. Sedgwick heard the door close behind him. A light shone for a time in the second story. It disappeared. With infinite caution, Sedgwick made the detour, gained the rear of the house, and skirting the north wing, stepped forth in the bright moonlight, the presence of passion throbbing wildly in his breast.

She sat at the window, head high to him, bowed in roses. Her face was turned slightly away. Her long, fine hands lay, inert, on the sill. Her face, purely itself in the pure, moonlight, seemed dimmed with weariness and strain, a flower glowing through a mist.

With a shock of remembrance that was almost grotesque, Sedgwick realized that he had no name by which to call her. So he called her by the name that is Love's own.

She did not change her posture. But her lips parted. Her lids drooped and quivered. She was as one in a lovely dream.

He stepped toward her and spoke again.

"You!" she cried, and her voice breaking from a whisper into a thrill of pure music, "you!"

Bending, he pressed his lips on her hands and felt them tremble beneath his kiss. They were withdrawn and fluttered for the briefest moment at his temples. Then she spoke, hurriedly and softly.

"You must go—at once! At once!"

"When I have just found you?"

"If you have any care for me—for my happiness, for my good name—go away from this house of dread."

"What?" said Sedgwick sharply. "Of dread? What do you do here, then?"

"Suffer," said she. Then bit her lips. "No, no! I didn't mean it. It is only that the mystery of it—I am unstrung and weak. Tomorrow all will be right. Only go."

"I will go," said Sedgwick firmly. "And you shall go with me."

"Where?"

He caught her hand again and held it to his heart. "To—"

"See the gold air and the silver fade And the last bird fly into the last night," he whispered.

"Don't!" she begged. "Not that! It brings back that week too poignantly. Oh, my dear, please, please go."

"Listen," he said. "Heart of my heart, I don't know what curse hangs over this house, but this I do know that I cannot leave you here. Come with me now. I will find some place for you tonight, and tomorrow we will be married."

With a sharp movement she shrank back from him.

"Married! Tomorrow! The words seemed to choke her. 'Don't you know who I am?'"

Fear chilled his mounting blood as

Kent's analysis of the probabilities came back to him.

"If you are married already," he said unsteadily, "it—it would be better for me that Kent had let him shoot."

"Who?" she cried. "What has been passing here? You have been in danger?"

"What does it matter?" he returned. "What does anything matter but—"

"Hark," she broke in, a spasm of terror contracting her face.

Footsteps sounded within. There was the noise of a door opening and closing. Around the turn of the wing Alexander Blair stepped into view. His pistol was still in his hand.

"Still here, sir?" he inquired with an effect of murderous courtesy. "You add spying to your other practices, then." He took a step forward and saw the girl. "My God, Marjorie!" he cried.

Sedgwick turned white at the cry, but faced the older man steadily.

"I fear, sir," he said, "that I have made a terrible mistake. The blame

is wholly mine. I beg you to believe that I came here wholly without the knowledge of—of your wife."

"Of whom?" exclaimed Blair, and in the same moment, the girl cried out, "Oh, no; not that!"

"Not?" exclaimed Sedgwick. "Then—"

"Marjorie," interrupted Mr. Blair, "I think you had best go to your room."

The girl's soft lips straightened into a line of inflexibility. "I wish to speak to Mr. Sedgwick," she said.

"Speak, then, and quickly."

"No; I wish to speak to him alone. There is an explanation which I owe him."

"And there is one which he owes you," retorted Blair. "As he seems to have been too cowardly to give it, I will supply his deficiencies. In order that there may be no misunderstanding let me present Mr. Francis Sedgwick, the murderer."

A low cry, the most desolate, the most stricken sound that Sedgwick had ever heard from human lips, trembled on the air. Before he could gather his senses to retort and deny she had drawn herself to her feet, and the rose bowed window framed only emptiness.

"Is it possible that you really believe it?" Sedgwick exclaimed.

"So possible that but for the scandal I would do what I cannot invoke the law to do and exact life for life. And, to crown all, I find you with my son's wife."

"Your son's wife?" The cry burst from Sedgwick's lips.

"—In the dead of night at a rendezvous," concluded Blair.

"That is a lie," said Sedgwick very low, "for which I shall kill you if you dare repeat it even to your own thoughts. It was no rendezvous. Is your mind so vicious that you can't believe in innocence? Stop and think: How could it have been a rendezvous when I came here, as you know, for another purpose?"

"That is true," said the other thoughtfully. "That still remains to be explained."

"By you," returned the artist. "You speak of your son's wife. To carry out the face of the sham burial shouldn't you have said his 'widow'?"

"The widow of a day, as you well know," answered Mr. Blair bitterly.

"As I do not know at all. But I think I begin to see light. The rose topazes on the dead woman's neck. Her topazes. That helps to clear it up. The dead woman was some past light o' love of Wilfrid Blair's. She came here either to reassess her away over him or to blackmail him. He gave her his wife's jewels. Then he followed her to the cliffs and killed her, perhaps in a drunken frenzy. And you, Mr. Alexander Blair, to save your son have concealed him somewhere, bribed the sheriff and the medical officer, contrived this false death and burial and are now turning suspicion on a man you know to be innocent further to fortify your position. But what damnable lie have you told her?"

During this exposition Alexander Blair's face was a study in changing emotions. At the close his thin lips curled in the suggestion of a sardonic grin.

"I leave you to the company of your theory, sir," said he, and the door closed sharply after him.

Three hours later, wet and bedrag-

gled, but with a fire at his heart, the nightfearer came to his home and roused Kent from slumber on the studio couch.

In brief outline Sedgwick told of the moonlight interview.

"Do you know," Kent said, "I would not wonder if Blair really thought you the murderer. Yours is a very interesting and ingenious theory. But the fact is that Wilfrid Blair was dead before his father ever learned of the tragedy of Lonesome Cove."

CHAPTER XVI.
Chance Sits In.

SUIT case at his side, Chester Kent stood on the platform of the Martineau Center station waiting for the morning train to Boston. Before him paced Sedgwick, with a face of storm.

"This is something I must do for myself," the artist declared. "Chester, I must see her again," pleaded Sedgwick. "I must!"

"Exhibit that tact and delicacy which you displayed at your last meeting," broke in Kent curtly. "Asking a woman to marry you on the day of her husband's burial!"

"It wasn't her husband's burial," Sedgwick checked his nervous pacing. "Do you think so? You believe she wasn't a party to that ghastly fraud?"

"Certainly not. She attended the funeral ceremony in good faith. In my belief the real circumstances of Blair's death are as unknown to her as they are to you."

"Assuming always that he is dead. Your confidence being so sound, it must be based on something. How did he come to his death?"

"If I knew that I shouldn't be going to Boston to consult an astrologer. And you?"

"I am going back to Hedgerow house," concluded the artist obstinately.

"Do you know Room 571 at the Byrie?" asked Kent abruptly.

"No. Yes; I do too."

"Walk up to the hotel. Give this card to the clerk. Get the key. Go to that room at once. Lie down on your back with your eyes open and think for one hour by the watch. If at the end of that time you still believe you're right go ahead. Will you do it?"

"Agreed. It's a bargain. But it won't change my mind."

"A bargain's a bargain. It won't change my mind," said Kent coolly. "By that time, if I have any understanding of Mr. Alexander Blair, he will have put your lady of mystery on the morning train which leaves for Boston by one of the other roads. If not, why, you may take your chance."

"Ticked!" said Sedgwick. "Well, I owe you too much to go back on my agreement. But—see here, Kent, she's going to Boston. You're going to Boston. You can easily find out where the Blairs live. Go to her for me and find—"

"Heaven forbid!" cried Kent piously. "Why?"

"Haven't I told you that I am a timid creature and especially about females? Over seventy I like 'em, and under seven I love 'em. Between I shun 'em. I'll do anything for you but that, my boy. I've concluded as the train came rumbling in."

"Then I shall have to follow and look her up myself," returned his friend. "I'll wire you before I come. Goodby."

"By the way," said Kent, leaning out from the car step upon which he had swung himself, "don't be disturbed if you miss that drawing which we bought from Elder Dennett at a bargain."

"Miss it? Why, where is it?"

"In my suit case."

"What's it doing there?"

"Why, you see, it's a sketch for a finished portrait by Elliott, as I suspect, some of the art people in Boston might recognize it. Good luck! I hope not to see you soon—too soon, that is!"

Chance and a deranged railway schedule conspired against the peace of mind of the shy and shrinking Kent. Outside of Boston a few miles is a junction and a crossing. Here Kent's train was held up by some minor accident. Here, too, the train from the north on the other road stopped for orders. Thus it was that Kent, stepping out to take the air, found himself looking into an open Pullman window at a woman's face framed in deepest black.

"Mrs. Blair?"

For once in his life Chester Kent's controlled tongue had broken the leash. Immediately he would have given a considerable sum of money to recall his impulsive exclamation. He was in an agony of shyness. But it was too late. The girl's face turned.

"I beg p-pardon," stammered the man. "Are you Mr. Blair? I'm Mrs. Kent."

At this astonishing announcement, amusement gleamed in the woman's eyes and gave a delicate up twist to the corners of the soft mouth.

"I don't recognize you in your present attire, Mrs. Kent," she murmured. "No. Of course not. I—I meant to say—that is, you know—"

Kent gathered his forces, resolved desperately to see it through now. "There are things I want to speak to you about. I wish to get on your ear."

"Certainly not," replied she decisively. "I do not know you."

"I am a friend of Francis Sedgwick. Try to believe me when I tell you that I wish only to save both of you misunderstanding and suffering—needless misunderstanding and suffering," he added.

"It is too late," she said hopelessly. "Now, what cock and bull story has Alexander Blair told her?" Kent demanded of his mind. "How much does she know or how little?"

The jar and forward lurch of the car before him brought him out of his reverie. "Can I see you in Boston?" he asked hurriedly.

She shook her head. "Not now. I can see no one. And, remember, I do not even know you."

Kent cast about rapidly in his mind as he walked along with the car for some one who might be a common acquaintance. He mentioned the name of a very great psychologist at Harvard. "Do you know him?" he asked.

"Yes. He is my mother's half brother."

"And my valued friend," he cried. "May I get him to bring me?" He was almost running now beside the window.

"Yes," she assented, "if you insist. But I will hear no word of—of your friend."

"I understand. Agreed," called Kent. "Tomorrow morning then."

Kent went direct to Cambridge. He found his friend, one of the finest and profoundest philosophers of his time, sitting in a closed house over a game of that form of solitaire appropriately denominated "Idiot's Delight."

"It is long since you have done me the honor to consult me," said the old scholar, smiling.

Kent outlined the case to him.

"You see," he said, "there is an obvious connection between the unknown body on the beach and the Blair tragedy."

"Poor Marjorie!" exclaimed the old man. "For her marriage I blame myself largely. When Marjorie Dorrance was left an orphan I was her nearest relative of an age and position such as to constitute a moral claim of guardianship. She visited here when she was eighteen—came like a flood of sunlight into this house. A beautiful vivid girl, half child, half woman; with a beautiful vivid mind. When I returned from one of my journeys into the past I found that Marjorie was engaged to that wretched creature. Now, he is dead. Let be. I have seen little of her in late years. God grant the life with him has not crushed out of her all her sweetness and happiness."

"While I am no judge of women," said Kent judiciously, "I should venture to aver that it hasn't. But about calling on her—my being a stranger, you see—and in the first days of her widowhood—social conventions, and that sort of thing."

"Mist and moonshine, my dear sir! Moonshine and mist! Marjorie feels no grief. She will pretend to none—not even to herself. I will take you to her tomorrow."

"Blair ill treated her?" asked Kent.

"Oh, ill treatment! That is a wide term. I believe that the poor weakling did his best to keep faith and honor. But ropes of mud are strong. Those with which he had bound himself drew him resistlessly back to the severs. Here was but a marriage of glamour at best."

"Does she know anything of the manner of Blair's death?"

"No one knows much of it, from what I understand, unless it be Alexander Blair. One of the family who went to Hedgerow house for the funeral called upon me as a courtesy due to Mrs. Blair's nearest relative. Alexander Blair, he said, was reticent. His dread of publicity is notorious. But from what he said, the relative, could ascertain the affair was substantially this: On the evening before the woman's body was found Wilfrid Blair, who had been exhibiting symptoms of melancholia, left the house secretly. No one saw him go, but about the time that he left the unknown woman was seen in the vicinity of Hedgerow house."

"By whom?"

"By a half breed, Indian, a devoted servant of the family, who was practically young Blair's body servant."

"Gansett Jim! That helps to explain."

"Whether or not Wilfrid Blair had arranged a meeting with this woman is not known. As you know, she was found with her skull crushed on the sea beach. Blair was afterward mortally injured and was brought home to die."

"That is Alexander Blair's version of the tragedy?"

"As I understand it."

"Wilfrid Blair never was brought home?"

"Ah? In any case Alexander Blair is striving to conceal some scandal, the nature of which I have no wish to guess. By the way, I should have added that he suspects a third person, an artist, resident not far from his place, of being his son's assailant."

"Francis Sedgwick?"

"You know the man?"

"It is on his behalf that I am acting," replied Kent.

"My informant, however, inclines to the belief that Alexander Blair is wrong; that Wilfrid Blair killed the woman and then inflicted mortal wounds upon himself. Perhaps you would better see my informant for yourself."

"Unnecessary, thank you. Mr. Blair is not telling quite all that he knows, believes. If I correctly follow his mental processes, that Francis Sedgwick met his son on the night of the tragedy, by chance or otherwise, and that in the encounter which he believes followed Wilfrid Blair was killed. Unfortunately some color of motive is lent to this by the fact that Sedgwick had fallen desperately in love with Mrs. Blair."

"Impossible! Marjorie is not the woman to permit such a thing."

"Without blame to her or, indeed, to either of them. She also believes now that Sedgwick killed her husband."

"And—and she was interested in your friend?" asked the old scholar slowly.

"I fear—that is, I trust so. Circum-

stantial evidence is against Sedgwick, but I give you my word, sir, it is wholly impossible that he should have killed your niece's husband."

"To doubt your certainty would be crassly stupid. And are you hopeful of clearing up the circumstances?"

"There I want your aid. The night of the tragedy a person wearing a dark garment embroidered with silver stars was on Hawkliff heights. I have reason to believe that this person came there to meet some one from the Blair place. It is to run him down that I have come to Boston."

"A man wearing a dark garment embroidered with silver stars," said the philosopher. "Surely a strange garb in this age of sartorial orthodoxy."

"Not for an astrologer."

"Ah, an astrologer! And you think he came from Boston?"

"I think," said Chester Kent, drawing some newspaper clippings from his pocket, "that somewhere among these advertisements taken from the newspapers which are subscribed for at Hedgerow house he is to be found."

"There I ought to be able to help. Through my association with the occult society I have investigated many of these gentry. Great rascals, most of them."

"Whom would you consider the most able of the lot?"

"The old man set a finger on one of the clippings. 'Preston Jax,' said he, 'is the shrewdest of them all. Sometimes I have thought that he had dim flashes of real clairvoyance.'

"Probably he is my man. Anyway, I shall visit him first, and if I find that his office was closed on July 5—"

"It was and for a day or two thereafter as I chance to know, because one of the occult society's secret agents was to have visited him and could not get an appointment."

"Good! I shall see you, then, tomorrow, sir."

Ten o'clock the following morning found the Harvard professor formally presenting his friend, Chester Kent, to Mrs. Wilfrid Blair at the house of the cousin with whom she was staying.

"My dear," said the old gentleman, "you may trust Professor Kent's judgment and insight as implicitly as his own. I can give no stronger recommendation and will now take my leave."

Kent resisted successfully a wild and fearful desire to set a restraining hold upon the disappearing coastlines, for embarrassment had again engulfed the scientist's soul.

"I don't know exactly how to begin," he said.