THE SECRET OF LONESOME COVE

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THE SECRET OF LONESOME COVE

BY

SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

AUTHOR OF
THE CLARION, AVERAGE JONES, ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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TO ONE UNKNOWN

The only living being who possesses the secret of the strangely clad and manacled body found beneath the cliffs of Cornwall on April 30, 1909, this story, changed

in the setting as he will understand, is blindly inscribed.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I—THE BODY ON THE BEACH

Lonesome Cove is one of the least frequented stretches on the New England seaboard. From the land side, the sheer hundred-foot drop of Hawkill Cliffs shuts it off. Access by water is denied; denied with a show of menacing teeth, when the sea curls its lips back, amid a swirl of angry currents, from its rocks and reefs, warning boats away. There is no settlement near the cove. The somber repute suggested by its name has served to keep cottagers from building on the wildly beautiful uplands that overbrood the beach. Sheep browse between the thickets of ash and wild cherry extending almost to the brink of the height, and the straggling pathways along the edge, worn by the feet of their herders, afford the only suggestion of human traffic within half a mile of the spot. A sharp-cut ravine leads down to the sea by a rather treacherous descent.

Near the mouth of this opening, a considerable gathering of folk speckled the usually deserted beach, at noon of July sixth. They centered on a dark object, a few yards within the flood-tide limit. Some scouted about, peering at the sand. Others pointed first to the sea, then to the cliffs with the open gestures of those who argue vehemently. But always their eyes returned, drawn back by an unfailing magnetism, to the central object.

From some distance away a lone man of a markedly different type from the others observed them with an expression of displeasure. He had reached the cove by an arduous scramble, possible only to a good climber, around the jutting elbow of the cliff to the northward. It was easily to be read in his face that he was both surprised and annoyed to find people there before him. One of the group presently detached himself and ambled over to the newcomer, with an

accelerated speed as he drew nearer.

“Swanny!” he ejaculated, “if it ain’t Perfessor Kent! Didn’t know you at first under them whiskers. You remember me, don’t you? I used to drive you around when you was here before.”

“How are you, Jarvis?” returned the other. “Still in the livery business, I suppose?”

“Yes. What brings you here, Perfessor?”

“Holidays. I’ve just come out of the woods. And as you have some very interesting sea currents just here, I thought I’d have a look at them. Nobody really knows anything about coast currents, you know. Now my opportunity is spoiled.” He indicated the crowd by a movement of his head.

“Spoilt? I guess not. You couldn’t have come at a better time,” said the local man eagerly.

“Ah, but you see, I had planned to swim out to the eddy, and make some personal observations.”

“You was going to swim into Dead Man’s Eddy?” asked the other, aghast. “Why, Perfessor, you must have turned foolish. They ain’t a man on this coast would take a chance like that.”

“Superstition,” retorted the other curtly. “On a still day such as this there would be no danger to an experienced swimmer. The conditions are ideal except for this crowd. What is it? Has the village gone picnicking?”

“Not sca’cely! Ain’t you heard? Another one’s come in through the eddy. Lies over yonder.”

Professor Kent’s eyebrows went up, as he glanced toward the indicated spot; then gathered in a frown.

“Not washed up there, surely?” he said.

“Thet’s what,” answered Jarvis.

“When?”

“Sometime early this morning.”

“Pshaw!” said the other, turning to look at the curving bulwark of rocks

over which the soft slow swell was barely breaking. “If it were the other end of the cove, now, I could understand it.”

“Yes,” agreed Jarvis, “they mostly come in at the other end, on this tide.”

“Mostly? Always.” The professor’s tone was positive. “Unless my charts are wrong. But this—well, it spoils at least one phase of my theory.”

“Theery!” exclaimed the liveryman, his pale eyes alight. “You got a theery? But I thought you didn’t know anything about the body, till I told you, just now.”

“Oh, my ruined theory has reference to the currents,” sighed the other. “It has nothing to do with dead men, as such.”

“Neither has this,” was the prompt response, delivered with a jerk of the thumb toward the dark object.

“No? What is it then, if not a dead man?”

“A dead woman.”

“Oh! All the same, it shouldn’t have come in on this section of the beach at all.”

“Thet ain’t half the strangeness of it, the way it washed in. Lonesome Cove has had some queer folks drift home to it, but nothing as queer as this. Come and see for yourself.”

Still frowning, Professor Kent suffered himself to be led to the spot. Two or three of the group, as it parted before him, greeted him. He found himself looking down on a corpse clad in a dark silk dress and stretched on a wooden grating, to which it was lashed with a small rope. Everything about the body indicated wealth. The dress was expensively made. The shoes were of the best type, and the stockings were silk. The head was marred by a frightful bruise which had crushed in the right side and extended around behind the ear. Blood had clotted thickly in the short close-curled hair. The left side was unmarked. The eyes were closed and the mouth was slightly open, showing a glint of gold amid very white and regular teeth. An expression of deadly terror distorted the face. Professor Kent bent closely over it.

“That’s strange; very strange,” he murmured. “It should be peaceful.”

“But look at the hand!” cried Jarvis.

Here, indeed, was the astounding feature of the tragedy; the aspect that brought Kent to his knees, the more closely to observe. The body lay twisted slightly to the right, with the left arm extended. The left wrist was enclosed in a light rusted handcuff to which a chain was fastened. At the end of the chain was the companion cuff, shattered, evidently by a powerful blow, and half buried in the sand. As Kent leaned over the corpse, a fat, powerful, grizzled man with a metal badge on his shirt-front pushed forward.

“Them’s cast-iron cuffs,” he announced. “That kind ain’t been used these forty years.”

“What kind of a ship ’ud be carryin’ ’em nowadays?” asked some one in the crowd.

“An’ what kind of a seaman’d be putting of ’em on a lady’s wrists?” growled a formidable voice, which Kent, looking up, perceived to have come from amid a growth of heavy white whiskers, sprouting from a weather-furrowed face.

“Seafaring man, aren’t you?” inquired Kent.

“No more. Fifty year of it, man an’ boy, has put me in harbor.”

“That’s Sailor Smith,” explained Jarvis, who had assumed the duties of a self-appointed cicerone. “Not much about the sea and its ways, good or bad, that he don’t know.”

“True for you,” confirmed several voices.

“Then, Mr. Smith, will you take a look at those lashings and tell me whether in your opinion they are the work of a sailor?” asked Kent.

The old hands fumbled expertly. The old face puckered. Judgment came forth presently.

“The knots is well enough. The lashin’s a passable job. What gits me is the rope.”

“Well, what’s wrong with the rope?”

“Nothin’ in pertic’ler. Only, I don’t know what just that style of rope would

be doin’ on shipboard, unless it was to hang the old man’s wash on.”

“Suppose we lift this grating,” Kent suggested.

At this the man with the badge interposed. “Say, who’s runnin’ this thing, anyhow? I’m sheriff here, an’ this body ain’t to be moved till a doctor has viewed it.”

“Of course,” said Kent mildly; “but I thought you might be interested to see, Mr. Sheriff, whether a ship’s name was stamped somewhere on this grating.”

“Well, I don’t want any amachure learning me my business,” declared the official importantly.

Nevertheless, he heaved the woodwork up on edge and held it so, while eager eyes scanned the under part. Murmurs of disappointment followed. In these Kent did not join. He had inserted a finger in a crevice of the splintered wood and had extracted some small object which he held in the palm of his hand, examining it thoughtfully.

“Wot ye got there?” demanded the sheriff.

Professor Kent stretched out his hand, disclosing a small grayish object.

“I should take it to be the cocoon of *Ephestia kuchniella*,” he announced.

“An’ wot does he do for a livin’?” inquired the official, waxing humorous.

“Destroys crops. It’s a species of grain-moth.”

“Oh!” grunted Schlager. “You’re a bug collector, eh?”

“Exactly,” answered the other, transferring his trove to his pocket.

Thereafter he seemed to lose interest in the center of mystery. Withdrawing to some distance, he paced up and down the shore, whistling lively tunes, not always in perfect accord, from which a deductive mind might have inferred that his soul was not in the music.

[image]

Suppose we lift this grating.

Nearer and nearer to high-water mark his pacing took him. Presently, though all the time continuing his whistling, he was scanning the tangled débris that the highest tide of the year had heaped up, almost against the cliff's foot. His whistling became slow, lugubrious, minor. It sagged. It died away. When it rose again, it was in march time, whereto the virtuoso stepped briskly toward the crowd. By this time the group had received several additions, but had suffered the loss of one of its component parts, the sheriff. Conjecture was buzzing from mouth to mouth as to the official's sudden defection.

"Whatever it was he got from the pocket," Kent heard one of the men say, "it started him quick."

"Looked to me like an envelope," hazarded some one.

"No," contradicted Sailor Smith; "paper would have been all pulped up by the water."

"Marked handkerchief, maybe," suggested another.

"Like as not," said Jarvis. "You bet that Len Schlager figured it out there was somethin' in it for him, anyways. I could see the money-gleam in his eye."

"That's right, too," confirmed the old sailor. "He looked just like that when he brought in that half-wit pedler, thinkin' he was the thousan'-dollar-reward thief last year."

"Trust Len Schlager to look out for number one first, an' be sheriff afterward," observed some one else.

Amidst this interchange of opinion, none of which was lost upon him, Professor Kent advanced and bent over the manacled corpse.

"Have to ask you to stand back, Perfessor," said Jarvis. "Len's appointed me special dep'ty till he comes back, and he says nobody is to lay finger on hide ner hair of the corpse; not even the doc, if he comes."

"Quite right," assented the other. "Sheriff Schlager exhibits commendable

zeal and discretion."

"Wonder if he knowed the corpse?" suggested somebody in the crowd.

"Tell you who did, if he didn't," said another man.

"Who, then?"

"Elder Iry Dennett. Didn't none of you hear about his meetin' up with a strange woman yestiddy evenin'?"

"Shucks! This couldn't be that woman," said Jarvis. "How'd she come to be washed ashore from a wreck between last night and this morning?"

"How'd she come to be washed ashore from a wreck, anyway?" countered Sailor Smith. "The' ain't been no storm for a week, an' this body ain't been dead twenty-four hour."

"It plumb beats me," admitted Jarvis.

"Who is this Dennett?" asked Professor Kent.

"Iry? He's the town gab of Martindale Center. Does a little plumbin' an' tinkerin' on the side. Just now he's up to Cadystown. Took the ten-o'clock train last night."

"Then it was early when he met this woman?"

"Little after sundown. He was risin' the hill beyond the Nook—that's Sedgwick's place, the painter feller—when she come out of the shrubbery—pop! He quizzed her. Trust the Elder for that. But he didn't get much out of her, until he mentioned the Nook. Then she allowed she guessed she'd go there. An' he watched her go."

"You say a man named Sedgwick lives at the Nook. Is that Francis Sedgwick, the artist?" asked Kent.

"That's him," said Sailor Smith. "Paints right purty pictures. Lives there all alone with a Chinese cook."

"Well, the lady went down the hill," continued Jarvis, "just as Sedgwick come out to smoke a pipe on his stone wall. Iry thought he seemed su'prised when she bespoke him. They passed a few remarks, an' then they had some words, an' the lady laughed loud an' kinder scornful. He seemed to be pointin' at

a necklace of queer, fiery pink stones thet she wore, and tryin' to get somethin' out of her. She turned away, an' he started to follow, when all of a sudden she grabbed up a rock an' let him have it—blip! Keeled him clean over. Then she ran away up the road toward Hawkill Cliffs. That's the way Iry Dennett tells it. But I ain't never heard of a story losin' anythin' in the tellin' when it come through Iry's lips."

"Well, this corpse ain't got no pink necklace," suggested somebody.

"Bodies sometimes gets robbed," said Sailor Smith.

Chester Kent stooped over the writhen face, again peering close. Then he straightened up and began pulling thoughtfully at the lobe of his ear.

He pulled and pulled, until, as if by that process, he had turned his face toward the cliff. His lips pursed. He began whistling softly, and tunelessly. His gaze was abstracted.

"Ain't seen nothin' to make you feel bad, have you, Perfessor?" inquired Temporary-Deputy-Sheriff Jarvis with some acerbity.

"Eh? What?" said Kent absently. "Seen anything? Nothing but what's there for any one to see."

Following his fixed gaze, the others studied the face of the cliff; all but Sailor Smith. He blinked near-sightedly at the corpse.

"Say," said he presently, "what's them queer little marks on the neck, under the ear?"

Back came Kent's eyes. "Those?" he said smiling. "Why, those are, one might suppose, such indentations as would be made in flesh by forcing a jewel setting violently against it, by a blow or strong impact."

"Then you think it was the wom—" began the old seaman when several voices broke in:

"There goes Len now!"

The sheriff's heavy figure appeared on the brow of the cliff, moving toward the village.

"Who is it with him?" inquired Kent.

“Gansett Jim,” answered Jarvis.

“An Indian?”

“Gosh! You got good eyes!” said Jarvis. “He’s more Indian than anything else. Comes from down Amagansett way, and gets his name from it.”

“H-m! When did he arrive?”

“While you was trapesin’ around up yonder.”

“Did he see the body?”

“Yep. Just after the sheriff got whatever it was from the pocket, Gansett Jim hove in sight. Len went over to him quick, an’ said somethin’ to him. He come and give a look at the body. But he didn’t say nothing. Only grunted.”

“Never does say nothin’, only grunt,” put in Sailor Smith.

“That’s right,” agreed Jarvis. “Well, the sheriff tells me to watch the body. Then he says, ‘An’ I’ll need somebody to help me. I’ll take you, Jim.’ So he an’ the Indian goes away together.”

Professor Kent nodded. He looked seaward where the reefs were now baring their teeth more plainly through the racing currents, and he sighed. That sigh meant, in effect, “I wanted to play with my tides and eddies, and here is work thrown at my very feet!” Then he bade the group farewell, and set off up the beach.

“Seems kinder int’rested, don’t he?” remarked one of the natives.

“Who is he, anyway?” inquired another.

“Oh, he’s a sort of a harmless scientific crank,” explained Jarvis, with patronizing kindliness. “Comes from Washington. Something to do with the government work.”

“Kinder loony, *I* think,” conjectured a little, thin, piping man. “Musses and moves around like it.”

“Is that so!” said Sailor Smith, who still had his eyes fixed on the scarified neck. “Well, I ain’t any too dum sure thet he’s as big a fool as some folks I know thet thinks likelier of theirselves.”

Others, however, supported the little man’s diagnosis, and there was some

feeling against Sailor Smith who refused to make the vote unanimous.

"No, sir," he persisted sturdily. "That dude way of talkin' of his has got somethin' back of it, *I'll* bet. He seen there was somethin' queer about thet rope, an' he ast me about the knots, right off. *He* knows enough not to spit to wind'ard, an' don't you forgit it! Wouldn't surprise me none if he was p'intin' pretty nigh as clus up into the wind as Len Schlager."

Possibly the one supporter of the absent would have wavered in his loyalty had he seen the trove that Professor Chester Kent had carried unostentatiously from the beach, in his pocket, after picking it from the grating. It was the fuzzy cocoon of a small and quite unimportant insect. Perhaps the admiring Mr. Smith might even have come around to the majority opinion regarding Professor Kent's intellectual futility, could he have observed the absorbed interest with which the Washington scientist, seated on a boulder, opened up the cocoon, pricked it until the impotent inmate wriggled in protest, and then, casting it aside to perish, threw himself on his back and whistled the whole of Chopin's *Funeral March*, mostly off the key.

CHAPTER II—PROFESSOR KENT MAKES A CALL

Between the roadway and the broad front lawn of the Nook a four-foot, rough stone wall interposes. Looking up from his painting, Francis Sedgwick beheld, in the glare of the afternoon sun, a spare figure rise alertly upon the wall, descend to the road, and rise again. He stepped to the open window and watched a curious progress. A scrubby-bearded man, clad in serviceable khaki, was performing a stunt, with the wall as a basis. He was walking from east to west quite fast, and every third pace stepping upon the wall; stepping, Sedgwick duly noted, not jumping, the change of level being made without visible effort.

Now, Sedgwick himself was distinctly long of leg and limber, but he realized that he would be wholly incapable of duplicating the stranger's gracefully accomplished feat without violent and clumsy exertion. Consequently, he was interested. Leaning out of the window, he called:

"Hello, there!"

"Good afternoon," said the stranger, in a quiet cultivated voice.

"Would you mind telling me what you are doing on my wall."

"Not in the least," replied the bearded man, rising buoyantly into full view, and subsiding again with the rhythm of a wave.

"Well, what *are* you doing?"

"Taking a little exercise."

By this time, having reached the end of the wall, he turned and came back, making the step with his right leg instead of his left. Sedgwick hurried down-stairs and out into the roadway. The stranger continued his performance silently.

At closer inspection it appealed to the artist as even more mysterious both in purport and execution than it had looked at a distance.

“Do you do that often?” he asked presently.

The gymnast paused, poised like a Mercury on the high coping. “Yes,” said he. “Otherwise I shouldn’t be able to do it at all.”

“I should think not, indeed! Has it any particular utility, that form of exercise?”

“Certainly. It is in pursuance of a theory of self-defense.”

“What in the world has wall-hopping to do with self-defense?”

“I shall expound,” said the stranger in professional tones, taking a seat by the unusual method of letting himself down on one leg while holding the other at right angles to his body. “Do you know anything of jiu-jutsu?”

“Very little.”

“In common with most Americans. For that reason alone the Japanese system is highly effective here, not so effective in Japan. You perceive there the basis of my theory.”

“No, I don’t perceive it at all.”

“A system of defense is effective in proportion to its unfamiliarity. That is all.”

“Then your system consists in stepping up on a wall and diving into obscurity on the farther side, perhaps,” suggested Sedgwick ironically.

“Defense, I said; not escape. Escape is perhaps preferable to defense, but not always so practicable. No; the wall merely served as a temporary gymnasium while I was waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For you.”

“You have distinctly the advantage of me,” said Sedgwick, with a frown; for he was in no mood to welcome strange visitors.

“To return to my theory of self-defense,” said the other imperturbably. “My wall exercise serves to keep limber and active certain muscles that in the average

man are half atrophied. You are familiar with the ostrich?"

"With his proverbial methods of obfuscation," replied Sedgwick.

The other smiled. "That, again, is escape or attempted escape. My reference was to other characteristics. However, I shall demonstrate." He rose on one foot with an ease that made the artist stare, descended, selected from the roadway a stone of ordinary cobble size, and handed it to Sedgwick.

"Let that lie on the palm of your hand," said he, "and hold it out, waist high."

As he spoke he was standing two feet from the other, to his right. Sedgwick did as he was requested. As his hand took position, there was a twist of the bearded man's lithe body, a sharp click, and the stone, flying in a rising curve, swished through the leafage of a lilac fifty feet away.

"How did you do that?" cried the artist.

The other showed a slight indentation on the inside of his right boot heel, and then swung his right foot slowly and steadily up behind his left knee, and let it lapse into position again. "At shoulder height," he explained, "I could have done the same; but it would have broken your hand."

"I see," said the other, adding with distaste, "but to kick an opponent! Why, even as a boy I was taught—"

"We were not speaking of child's play," said the visitor coolly; "nor am I concerned with the rules of the prize-ring, as applied to my theory. When one is in danger, one uses knife or gun, if at hand. I prefer a less deadly and more effective weapon. Kicking sidewise, either to the front or to the rear, I can disarm a man, break his leg, or lay him senseless. It is the special development of such muscles as the sartorius and plantaris," he ran his long fingers down from the outside of his thigh round to the inside of his ankle, "that enables a human being, with practise, to kick like an ostrich. Since you found me exercising on your property, I owe you this explanation. I hope you won't prosecute for trespass, Mr. Long-Lean-Leggy Sedgwick."

"Leggy!" The artist had whirled at the name. "Nobody's called me that for

ten years."

"Just ten years ago that you graduated, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Then I knew you in college. You must have been before my class."

The bearded one nodded. "Senior to your freshman," said he.

The younger man scrutinized him. "Chester Kent!" said he softly. "What on earth are you doing behind that bush?"

Kent caressed the maligned whiskers. "Utility," he explained. "Patent, impenetrable mosquito screen. I've been off in the wilds, and am—or was—going back presently."

"Not until you've stopped long enough to get reacquainted," declared Sedgwick. "Just at present you're going to stay to dinner."

"Very good. Just now you happen to be in my immediate line of interest. It is a fortunate circumstance for me, to find you here; possibly for you, too."

"Most assuredly," returned the other with heartiness. "Come in on the porch and have a hammock and pipe."

———

Old interests sprang to life and speech between them. And from the old interests blossomed the old easy familiarity that is never wholly lost to those who have been close friends in college days. Presently Francis Sedgwick was telling his friend the story of his feverish and thwarted ten years in the world. Within a year of his graduation his only surviving relative had died, willing to him a considerable fortune, the income of which he used in furtherance of a hitherto suppressed ambition to study art. Paris, his Mecca, was first a task-mistress, then a temptress, finally a vampire. Before succumbing he had gone far, in a few years, toward the development of a curious technique of his own. Followed then two years of dissipation, a year of travel to recuperate, and the return to Paris, which was to be once more the task-mistress. But, to his terror and self-loathing, he found the power of application gone. The muscles of his

mind had become flabby. He quoted to Kent, with bitterness, the terrible final lines of Rossetti's *Known in Vain*:

> "When Work and Will awake too late, to gaze
> After their life sailed by, and hold their breath,
> Ah! who shall dare to search through what sad maze
> Thenceforth their incommunicable ways
> Follow the desultory feet of Death?"

"'When Work and Will awake too late,'" repeated Kent. "But is it too late in your case? Surely not, since you're here, and at your task."

"But think of the waste, man! Yet, here I am, as you say, and still able to fight. All by virtue of a woman's laugh; the laugh of a woman without virtue. It was at the Moulin de la Galette—perhaps you know the dance hall on the slope of Montmartre—and she was one of the dancers, the wreck of what had once been beauty and, one must suppose, innocence. Probably she thought me too much absinthe-soaked to hear or understand, as I sat half asleep at my table. At all events she answered, full-voiced, her companion's question, 'Who is the drunken foreigner?' by saying, 'He *was* an artist. The studios talked of him five years ago. Look at him now! That is what life does to us, *mon ami*. I'm the woman of it: that's the man of it.' I staggered up, made her a bow and a promise, and left her laughing. Last month I redeemed the promise; sent her the first thousand dollars I made by my own work, and declared my debt discharged."

A heavy cloud of smoke issued from Kent's mouth, followed by this observation: "That formula about the inability to lift one's self by one's own boot-straps fails to apply in the spiritual world."

"Right! You can pull yourself out of the ditch that way; but afterward comes the long hillside. Life has seemed all tilted on edge, at times, and pretty slippery, with little enough to cling to."

"Work," suggested Kent briefly.

“Wisdom lurks behind your screen. Work is the answer.”

“Good or bad, it’s the only thing. Which kind is yours?”

“Presently you shall sit in judgment. Meantime, suppose you account for yourself.”

Chester Kent stretched himself luxuriously. “A distinguished secretary of state has remarked that all the news worth telling on any subject can be transmitted by wire for twenty-five cents. The short and simple annals of the poor in my case can be recorded within that limit. ‘Postgraduate science. Agricultural Department job. Lectures. Invention. Judiciary Department expert. Signed, Chester Kent.’ Ten words—count them—ten.”

“Interesting, but unsatisfying,” retorted his friend. “Can’t you expand a bit? I suppose you haven’t any dark secret in your life?”

“No secret, dark or light,” sighed the other. “The newspapers won’t let me have.”

“Eh? Won’t let you? Am I to infer that you’ve become a famous person? Pardon the ignorance of expatriation. Have you discovered a new disease, or formulated a new theory of life, or become a golf champion, or a senator, or a freak aviator, or invented perpetual motion? Do you possess titles, honors, and ribboned decorations? Ought I to bat my brow against the floor in addressing you? What are you, anyway?”

“What I told you, an expert in the service of the Department of Justice.”

“On the scientific side?”

“Why—yes, generally speaking. I like to flatter myself that my pursuit is scientific.”

“Pursuit? What do you pursue?”

“Men and motives.”

Sedgwick’s intelligent eyes widened. “Wait,” he said, “something occurs to me, an article in a French journal about a wonderful new American expert in criminology, who knows all there is to know, and takes only the most abstruse cases. I recall now that the article called him ‘le Professeur Chêtre Kennat.’ That

would be about as near as they would come to your name."

"It's a good deal nearer than that infernal French journalist whom Wiley brought to my table at the Idlers' Club got to the facts," stated Kent.

"Then you are *the* Professor Kent! But look here! The Frenchman made you out a most superior species of highfalutin detective, working along lines peculiarly your own—"

"Rot!" interjected Kent. "The only lines a detective can work along successfully are the lines laid down for him by the man he is after."

"Sounds more reasonable than romantic," admitted the artist. "Come now, Kent, open up and tell me something about yourself."

"Only last month a magazine put that request in writing, and accompanied it with an offer of twenty-five hundred dollars—which I didn't accept. However, as I may wish to ask you a number of leading questions later, I'll answer yours now. You remember I got into trouble my senior year with the college authorities, by proving the typhoid epidemic direct against a forgotten defect in the sewer system. It nearly cost me my diploma; but it helped me too, later, for a scientist in the Department of Agriculture at Washington learned of it, and sent for me after graduation. He talked to me about the work that a man with the true investigation instinct—which he thought I had—could do, by employing his abilities along strictly scientific lines; and he mapped out for me a three-year's postgraduate course, which I had just about enough money to take. While I specialized on botany, entomology, and bacteriology, I picked up a working knowledge of other branches; chemistry, toxicology, geology, mineralogy, physiology, and most of the natural sciences, having been blessed with an eager and catholic curiosity about the world we live in.

"Once in the Department, I found myself with a sort of roving commission. I worked under such men as Wiley, Howard, and Merriam, and learned from them something of the infinite and scrupulous patience that truly original scientific achievement demands. At first my duties were largely those of minor research. Then, by accident largely, I chanced upon the plot to bull the cotton

market by introducing the boll weevil into the uninfested cotton area, and checked that. Soon afterward I was put on the ‘deodorized meat’ enterprise, and succeeded in discovering the scheme whereby it was hoped to sell spoiled meat for good. You might have heard of those cases; but you would hardly have learned of the success in which I really take a pride, the cultivation of a running wild grape to destroy *Rhus Toxicodendron*, the common poison ivy. What spare time I had I devoted to experimenting along mechanical lines, and patented an invention that has been profitable. Some time ago the Department of Justice borrowed me on a few cases with a scientific bearing, and more recently offered me incidental work with them on such favorable terms that I resigned my other position. The terms include liberal vacations, one of which I am now taking. And here I am! Is that sufficient?”

“Hardly. All this suggests the arts of peace. What about your forty-horse-power kick? You don’t practise that for drawing-room exhibitions, I take it?”

“Sometimes,” confessed the scientist, “I have found myself at close quarters with persons of dubious character. The fact is, that an ingenious plot to get rid of a very old friend, Doctor Lucius Carter the botanist, drew me into the criminal line, and since then, that phase of investigation has seemed fairly to obtrude itself on me, officially and unofficially. Even up here, where I hoped to enjoy a month’s rest—Do you know,” he said, breaking off, “that you have a most interesting inset of ocean currents hereabouts?”

“Of course. Lonesome Cove. But kindly finish that ‘even up here’. I recollect your saying that you were waiting for me. Haven’t traced any scientific crime to my door, have you?”

“Let me forget my work for a little while,” pleaded his visitor, “and look at yours.”

Sedgwick rose. “Come up-stairs,” he said, and led the way to the big, bare, bright studio.

From the threshold Chester Kent delivered an opinion, after one approving survey. “You really work, I see.”

“I really do. Where do you see it, though?”

“All over the place. No draperies or fripperies or fopperies of art here. The barer the room, the more work done in it.”

He walked over to a curious contrivance resembling a small hand-press, examined it, surveyed the empty easel, against which were leaning, face in, a number of pictures, all of a size, and turned half a dozen of them over, ranging them and stepping back for examination. Standing before them, he whistled a long passage from *La Bohème*, and had started to rewhistle it in another key, when the artist broke in with some impatience.

“Well?”

“Good work,” pronounced Kent quietly, and in some subtle way the commonplace words conveyed to their hearer the fact that the man who spoke them knew.

“It’s the best there is in me, at least,” said Sedgwick.

Kent went slowly around the walls, keenly examining, silently appraising. There were landscapes, genre bits, studies of the ocean in its various moods, flashes of pagan imaginings, nature studies; a wonderful picture of wild geese settling from a flight; a no less striking sketch of a mink, startled as he crept to drink among the sedges; a group of country children at hop-scotch on the sands; all the varied subjects handled with a deftness of truth and drawing, and colored with a clear softness quite individual.

“Have you found or founded a new system of coloring?” asked Kent as he moved among the little masterpieces. “No; don’t tell me.” He touched one of the surfaces delicately. “It’s not paint, and it’s not pastel. Oh, I see! They’re all of one size—of course.” He glanced at the heavy mechanism near the easel. “They’re color prints.”

Sedgwick nodded. “Monotypes,” said he. “I paint on copper, make one impress, and then—phut!—a sponge across the copper makes each one an original.”

“You certainly obtain your effects.”

“The printing seems to refine the color. For instance, moonlight on white water, a thing I’ve never been able to approach, either in straight oils or water. See here.”

From behind a cloth he drew a square, and set it on the easel. Kent whistled again, casual fragments of light and heavy opera intermingled with considerative twitches of his ear.

“It’s the first one I’ve given a name to,” said Sedgwick. “I call it *The Rough Rider*.”

A full moon, brilliant amid blown cloud-rack, lighted up the vast procession of billows charging in upon a near coast. In the foreground a corpse, the face bent far up and back from the spar to which it was lashed, rode with wild abandon headlong at the onlooker, on the crest of a roaring surge. The rest was infinite clarity of distance and desolation.

“*The Rough Rider!*” murmured Kent; then, with a change of tone, “For sale?”

“I don’t know,” hesitated the artist. “Fact is, I like that about well enough to keep.”

“I’ll give you five hundred dollars for it.”

“Five hundred! Man alive! A hundred is the most I’ve ever got for any of my prints!”

“The offer stands.”

“But, see here, Kent, can you afford it? Government salaries don’t make men rich, do they?”

“Oh, I’m rich enough,” said the other impatiently. “I told you I’d made inventions. And I can certainly afford to buy it better than you can afford to keep it here.”

“What’s that?” asked the painter, surprised.

Kent repeated his final sentence, with slow emphasis. “Do you understand what I mean?” he asked, looking flatly into Sedgwick’s eyes.

“No, not in the least. Another suggestion of mystery. Do you always deal in

this sort of thing?”

“Very seldom. However, if you don’t understand so much the better. When did you finish this picture?”

“Yesterday.”

“H-m! Has any one else seen it?”

“That old fraud of a plumber, Elder Dennett, saw me working on it yesterday, when he was doing some repairing here, and remarked that it gave him the creeps.”

“Dennett? Well, then that’s all up,” said Kent, as if speaking to himself. “There’s a streak of superstition in all these New Englanders. He’d be sure to interpret it as a confession before the fact. However, Elder Dennett left this morning for a trip to Cadystown. That’s so much to the good.”

“He may have left for a trip to Hadestown for all I care,” stated Sedgwick with conviction. “What’s it all about, anyway?”

“I’ll tell you, as soon as I’ve mulled it over a little. Just let me cool my mind down with some more of your pictures.” He turned to the wall border again, and faced another picture out. “What’s this? You seem to be something of a dab in black and white, too.”

“Oh, that’s an imaginary face,” said Sedgwick carelessly.

“Imaginary face studied from various angles,” commented Kent. “It’s a very lovely face, and the most wistful I’ve ever seen. A fairy, prisoned on earth by cockcrow, might wear some such expression of startled wondering purity, I fancy.”

“Poetry as well as mystery! Kent, you grow and expand on acquaintance.”

“There is poetry in your study of that imaginary fay. Imaginary! Um-hum!” continued Kent dryly, as he stooped to the floor. “I suppose this is an imaginary hairpin, too.”

“My Chinaman—” began Sedgwick quickly, when the other caught him up.

“Don’t be uneasy. I’m not going to commit the *bêtise* of asking who she is.”

“If you did, I give you my word of honor I couldn’t tell you. I only wish I

knew!”

There was silence between them for a moment; then the painter broke out with the air of one who takes a resolution:

“See here, Kent! You’re a sort of detective, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been called so.”

“And you like my picture of *The Rough Rider*?”

“Five hundred dollars’ worth.”

“You can have that and any other picture in my studio, except this one,” he indicated the canvas with the faces, “if you’ll find out for me who she is.”

“That might be done. We shall see. But frankly, Sedgwick, there’s a matter of more importance—”

“Importance? Good heavens, man! There’s nothing so important in this world!”

“Oh, is it as bad as that?”

A heavy knock sounded from below, followed by the Chinaman’s voice, intermingled with boyish accents demanding Sedgwick in the name of the Western Union Telegraph Company.

“Send him up,” ordered Sedgwick, and the boy arrived; but not before Kent had quietly removed *The Rough Rider* from its place of exhibit.

“Special from the village,” announced young Mercury. “Sign here.”

After the signature had been duly set down, and the signer had read his message with knit brows, the urchin lingered, big with news.

“Say, heard about the body on the beach?”

Kent turned quickly, to see Sedgwick’s face. It was interested, but unmoved as he replied:

“No. Where was it found?”

“Lonesome Cove. Woman. Dressed swell. Washed up on a grating last night or this morning.”

“It’s curious how they all come in here, isn’t it?” said the artist to Kent. “This is the third this summer.”

“And it’s a corkerino!” said the boy. “Sheriff’s on the case. Body was all chained up, they say.”

“I’m sure they need you at the office to help circulate the news, my son,” said Kent. “And I’ll bet you this quarter, payable in advance, that you can’t get back in half an hour on your wheel.”

With a grin the boy took the coin. “I got yer,” he said, and was off.

“And now, Sedgwick,” said Kent decisively, “if I’m to help you, suppose you tell me all that you know about the woman who called on you last evening?”

“Last evening? Ah, that wasn’t the girl of the picture. It’s an interminable six days since I’ve seen her.”

“No; I know it wasn’t she, having seen your picture, and since then your visitor of last night. The question is, who was it?”

“Wait! How did you know that a woman came here last night?”

“From common gossip.”

“And where have you seen her since?”

“On the beach, at Lonesome Cove.”

“Lonesome Cove,” repeated Sedgwick mechanically. Then with a startled glance: “Not the dead woman!”

Kent nodded, watching him closely. For a space of four heart-beats—one very slow, and three very quick—there was silence between them. Kent broke it.

“Do you see now the wisdom of frankness?”

“You mean that I shall be accused of having a hand in her death?”

“Strongly suspected, at least.”

“On what basis?”

“You are the last person known to have seen her alive.”

“Surely that isn’t enough?”

“Not of itself. There’s a bruise back of your right ear.”

Involuntarily Sedgwick’s hand went to the spot.

“Who gave it to you?” pursued Kent.

“You know it all without my telling you,” cried Sedgwick. “But I never saw

the woman before in my life, Kent—I give you my word of honor! She came and went, but who she is or why she came or where she went I have no more idea than you have. Perhaps not nearly so much."

"There you are wrong. I'm depending on you to tell me about her."

"Not if my life hung on it. And how could her being found drowned on the beach be connected with me?"

"I didn't say that she was found drowned on the beach."

"You did! No; pardon me. It was the messenger boy. But you said that her body was found in Lonesome Cove."

"That is quite a different matter."

"She wasn't drowned?"

"I should be very much surprised if the autopsy showed any water in the lungs."

"But the boy said that the body was lashed to a grating, and that there were chains on it. Is that true?"

"It was lashed to a grating, and manacled."

"Manacled? What a ghastly mystery!" Sedgwick dropped his chin in meditation. "If she wasn't drowned, then she was murdered and thrown overboard from a boat. Is that it?"

Chester Kent smiled inscrutably. "Suppose you let me do the questioning a while. You can give no clue whatsoever to the identity of your yesterday's visitor?"

There was the slightest possible hesitation before the artist replied, "None at all."

"If I find it difficult to believe that, what will the villagers think of it when Elder Dennett returns from Cadystown and tells his story, as he is sure to do?"

"Does Dennett know the woman?"

"No; but it isn't his fault that he doesn't. He did his best in the interviewing line when he met her on her way to your place."

"She wasn't on her way to my place," objected Sedgwick.

“Dennett got the notion that she was. Accordingly, with the true home-bred delicacy of our fine old New England stock, he hid behind a bush and watched.”

“Did he overhear our conversation?”

“He was too far away. He saw the attack on you. Now, just fit together these significant bits of fact. The body of a woman, dead by violence, is found on the beach not far from here. The last person, as far as is known, to have seen her alive is yourself. She called on you, and there was a colloquy, apparently vehement, between you, culminating in the assault upon you. She hurried away. One might well guess that later you followed her to her death.”

“I did follow her,” said Sedgwick in a low tone.

“For what purpose?”

“To find out who she was.”

“Which you didn’t succeed in doing?”

“She was too quick for me. The blow of the rock had made me giddy, and she got away among the thickets.”

“That’s a pity. One more point of suspicion. Dennett, you say, saw your picture, *The Rough Rider*. He will tell every one about it, you may be sure.”

“What of it?”

“The strange coincidence of the subject, and the apparent manner of the unknown’s death.”

“People will hardly suspect that I killed her and set her adrift for a model, I suppose,” said the artist bitterly; “particularly as Dennett can tell them that the picture was finished before her death.”

“Not that; but there will be plenty of witch-hangers among the Yankee populace, ready to believe that a fiend inspired both picture and murder in your mind. Why, the very fact of your being an artist would be *prima facie* evidence of a compact with the devil, to some people. And you must admit a certain diabolical ghastliness in that painting.”

“Evidently some devil of ill fate is mixing up in my affairs. What’s your advice in the matter?”

“Tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” suggested Chester Kent.

“Easily done. The question is whether you’ll believe it.”

“If I hadn’t felt pretty sure of your innocence, I shouldn’t have opened the case to you as I’ve done. I’ll believe the truth if you tell it, and tell it all.”

“Very well. I was sitting on my wall when the woman came down the road. I noticed her first when she stopped to look back, and her absurd elegance of dress, expensive and ill fitting, attracted my closer attention. She was carrying a bundle, wrapped in strong paper. It seemed to be heavy, for she shifted it from hand to hand. When she came near, I spoke to her—”

“You spoke to her first?”

“Well, we spoke simultaneously.”

“Why should you speak to her, if she was a stranger to you?”

“See here, Kent! You’ll have to let me tell this in my own way, if I’m to tell it at all.”

“So long as you do tell it. What did she say to you?”

“She asked me the time.”

“Casually?”

“Not as if she were making it a pretext to open a conversation, if that is what you mean.”

“It is.”

“Certainly it wasn’t that. She seemed anxious to know. In fact, I think she used the word ‘exact’; ‘the exact time,’ she said.”

“Presumably she was on her way to an appointment, then.”

“Very likely. When I told her, she seemed relieved; I might even say relaxed. As if from the strain of nervous haste, you know.”

“Good. And then?”

“She thanked me, and asked if I were Mr. Sedgwick. I answered that I was, and suggested that she make good by completing the introduction.”

“She wasn’t a woman of your own class, then?”

Sedgwick looked puzzled. “Well, no. I thought not, then, or I shouldn’t have been so free and easy with her. For one thing, she was painted badly, and the perspiration, running down her forehead, had made her a sight. Yet, I don’t know: her voice was that of a cultivated person. Her manner was awkward and her dress weird for that time of day, and, for all that, she carried herself like a person accustomed to some degree of consideration. That I felt quite plainly. I felt, too, something uncanny about her. Her eyes alone would have produced that impression. They were peculiarly restless and brilliant.”

“Insane?” questioned Kent.

“Not wholly sane, certainly; but it might have been drugs. That suggested itself to me.”

“A possibility. Proceed.”

“She asked what point of the headland gave the best view. ‘Anywhere from the first rise on is good,’ I said. ‘It depends on what you wish to see.’—‘My ship coming in.’ said she.—‘It will be a far view, then,’ I told her. ‘This is a coast of guardian reefs.’—‘What difference?’ she said, and then gave me another surprise; for she quoted:

> “‘And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond—
> Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.’”

“That’s interesting,” remarked Kent. “Casual female wayfarers aren’t given to quoting *The House of Life*.”

“Nor casual ships to visiting this part of the coast. However, there was no ship. I looked for myself, when I was trying to find the woman later. What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry I interrupted.”

“She walked away from me a few paces, but turned and came back at once.

“‘I follow my star,’ she said, pointing to a planet that shone low over the sea. ‘Therein lies the only true happiness; to dare and to follow.’

“‘It’s a practise which has got many people into trouble and some into jail,’ I remarked.

“‘Do not be flippant,’ she replied in her deep tones. ‘Perhaps under that star you move on dim paths to an unknown glory.’

“‘See here,’ I broke out, ‘you’re making me uncomfortable. If you’ve got something to tell, please tell it, kindly omitting the melodrama.’

“‘Remember this meeting,’ she said in a tone of solemn command; ‘for it may mark an epoch in your life. Some day in the future I may send for you and recall to-day to your mind by what I have just said. In that day you will know the hidden things that are clear only to the chosen minds. Perhaps you will be the last person but one to see me as I now am.’”

Kent pulled nervously at the lobe of his ear. “Is it possible that she foresaw her death?” he murmured.

“It would look so, in the light of what has happened, wouldn’t it? Yet there was an uncanny air of joyousness about her, too.”

“I don’t like it,” announced Kent. “I *do* not like it!”

By which he meant that he did not understand it. What Chester Kent does not understand, Chester Kent resents.

“Love-affair, perhaps,” suggested the artist. “A woman in love will take any risk of death. However,” he added, rubbing his bruised head reminiscently, “she had a very practical bent, for a romantic person. After her mysterious prophecy she started on. I called to her to come back or I would follow and make her explain herself.”

“As to what?”

“Everything: her being there, her actions, her—her apparel, the jewelry, you know, and all that.”

“You’ve said nothing about jewelry.”

“Haven’t I? Well, when she turned—”

“Just a moment. Was it the jewelry that you were going to speak of when you first accosted her?”

“Yes, it was. Some of it was very valuable, I judge. Wasn’t it found on the body?”

“No.”

“Not? Robbery, then, probably. Well, she came back at a stride. Her eyes were alive with anger. There came a torrent of words from her; strong words, too. Nothing of the well-bred woman left there. I insisted on knowing who she was, and she burst out on me with laughter that was, somehow, more insulting than her speech. But when I told her that I’d find out about her if I had to follow her into the sea, she stopped laughing fast enough. Before I could guard myself she had caught up a rock from the road and let me have it. I went over like a tenpin. When I got up, she was well along toward the cliffs, and I never did find her trail in that maze of copses and thickets.”

“Show me your relative positions when she attacked you.”

The artist placed Kent, and moved off five paces. “About like that,” he said.

“Did she throw overhand or underhand?”

“It was so quick I hardly know. But I should say a short overhand snap. It came hard enough!”

“I do not like it at all,” said Kent again.

He wandered disconsolately and with half-closed eyes about the room, until he blundered into collision with a cot-lounge in the corner, spread with cushions. These he heaped up, threw his coat over them, stretched himself out with his feet propped high on the mound just erected, and closed his eyes.

“Sleepy?” inquired Sedgwick.

“Busy,” retorted his guest.

“Like some more pillows?”

“No; I’d like ten minutes of silence.” The speaker opened one eye. “At the end of that time perhaps you’ll think better of it.”

“Of what?”

“Of concealing an essentially important part of your experience, which has to do, I think, with the jewelry.”

At the end of the ten minutes, when Kent opened both eyes, his friend forestalled him with another query.

“You say that no jewels were found on the body. Was there any other mark of identification?”

“If there was, the sheriff got away with it before I saw it.”

“How can you be sure, then, that the dead woman was my visitor?”

“Dennett mentioned a necklace. On the crushed flesh of the dead woman’s neck there is the plain impress of a jewel setting. Now, come, Sedgwick! If I’m to help you in this, you must help me. Had you ever seen that necklace before?”

“Yes,” was the reply, given with obvious reluctance.

“Where?”

“On the neck of the girl of my picture.”

Kent’s fingers went to his ear, pulling at the lobe until that unoffending pendant stretched like rubber. “You’re sure?” he asked.

“There couldn’t be any mistake. The stones were matched rose-topazes; you mightn’t find another like it in the whole country.”

Kent whistled, soft and long. “I’m afraid, my boy,” he said at length, “I’m very much afraid that you’ll have to tell me the whole story of the romance of the pictured face; and this time without reservation.”

“That’s what I’ve been guarding against,” retorted the other. “It isn’t a thing that I can tell, man to man. Don’t you understand? Or,” he added savagely, “do you misunderstand?”

“No, I don’t misunderstand,” answered Kent very gently. “I know there are things that can’t be spoken, not because they are shameful, but because they are sacred. Yet I’ve got to know about her. Here! I have it. When I’m gone, sit down and write it out for me, simply and fully, and send it to my hotel as soon as it is done. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can do that,” decided Sedgwick, after some consideration.

“Good! Then give me some dinner. And let’s forget this grisly thing for a time, and talk of the old days. Whatever became of Harkness, of our class, do

you know?”

Between them that evening was no further mention of the strange body in Lonesome Cove.

CHAPTER III—MY LADY OF MYSTERY

Being a single autobiographical chapter from the life of Francis Sedgwick, with editorial comment by Professor Chester Kent.

Dear Kent: Here goes! I met her first on June 22, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Some wonderful cloud effects after a hard rain had brought me out into the open. I had pitched my easel in the hollow, on the Martindale Road, so as to get that clump of pine against the sky. There I sat working away with a will, when I heard the drumming of hoofs, and a horse with a girl in the saddle came whizzing round the turn almost upon me. Just there the rain had made a puddle of thick sticky mud, the mud-pie variety. As the horse went by at full gallop, a fine, fat, mud pie rose, soared through the air, and landed in the middle of my painting. I fairly yelped.

To get it all off was hopeless. However, I went at it, and was cursing over the job when I heard the hoofs coming back, and the rider pulled up close to me.

"I heard you cry out," said a voice, very full and low. "Did I hurt you? I hope not."

"No," I said without looking up. "Small thanks to you that you didn't!"

My tone silenced her for a moment. Somehow, though, I got the feeling that she was amused more than abashed at my resentment. And her voice was suspiciously meek when she presently spoke again.

"You're an artist, aren't you?"

"No," I said, busily scraping away at my copperplate. "I'm an archeologist, engaged in exhuming an ancient ruin from a square mile of mud."

She laughed; but in a moment became grave again. “I’m so sorry!” she said. “I know I shouldn’t come plunging around turns in that reckless way. May I—I should like to—buy your picture?”

“You may not,” I replied.

“That isn’t quite fair, is it?” she asked. “If I have done damage, I should be allowed to repair it.”

“Repair?” said I. “How do you propose to do it? I suppose that you think a picture that can be bought for a hundred-dollar bill can be painted with a hundred-dollar bill.”

“No; I’m not altogether a Philistine,” she said, and I looked up at her for the first time. Her face—(*Elision and Comment by Kent*: *I know her face from the sketches. Why could he not have described the horse? However, there’s one point clear: she is a woman of means.*)

She said, “I don’t wonder you’re cross. And I’m truly sorry. Is it quite ruined?”

At that I recovered some decency of manner. “Forgive a hermit,” I said, “who doesn’t see enough people to keep him civilized. The daub doesn’t matter.”

She leaned over from the saddle to examine the picture. “Oh, but it isn’t a daub!” she protested. “I—I know a little about pictures. It’s very interesting and curious. But why do you paint it on copper?”

I explained.

“Oh!” she said. “I should so like to see your prints!”

“Nothing easier,” said I. “My shack is just over the hill.”

“And there is a Mrs.—” her eyes suggested that I fill the blank.

“Sedgwick?” I finished. “No. There is no one but my aged and highly respectable Chinaman to play propriety. But in the case of a studio, *les convenances* are not so rigid but that one may look at pictures unchaperoned.”

“I’m afraid it wouldn’t do,” she answered, smiling. “No, I’ll have to wait until—” A shadow passed over her face. “I’m afraid I’ll have to give it up.”

Chance settled that point then and there. As she finished, she was in my

arms. The girth had loosened, and the saddle had turned with her. I had barely time to twist her foot from the stirrup when the brute of a horse bolted. As it was, her ankle got a bit of a wrench. She turned quite white, and cried out a little. In a moment she was herself again.

"King Cole has been acting badly all day," she said. "I shall have a time catching him." She limped forward a few steps.

"Here, that won't do!" said I. "Let me."

"You couldn't get near him—though, perhaps, if you had some salt—"

"I can get some at my place," said I, gathering up my things. "Your horse is headed that way. You'd better come along and rest there while Ching Lung and I round up your mount."

(*Comment by C. K.*: *Here follows more talk, showing how young people imperceptibly and unconsciously cement an acquaintance; but not one word upon the vital point of how far the horse seemed to have come, whether he was ridden out, or fresh, etc.*)

At the bungalow I called Ching, and we set out with a supply of salt. King Cole (*Comment by C. K.*: *Probably a dead-black horse*) was coy for a time, before he succumbed to temptation. On my return I found my visitor in the studio. She had said that she knew a little about pictures. She knew more than a little, a good deal, in fact, and talked most intelligently about them. I don't say this simply because she tried, before she went, to buy some of mine. When I declined to sell she seemed put out.

"But surely these prints of yours aren't the work of an amateur," she said. "You sell?"

"Oh, yes, I sell—when I can. But I don't sell without a good bit of bargaining; particularly when I suspect my purchaser of wishing to make amends by a purchase."

"It isn't that at all," she said earnestly. "I want the pictures for themselves."

"Call this a preliminary then, and come back when you have more time."

She shook her head, and there was a shadow over the brightness of her face.

“I’m afraid not,” she said. “But I have enjoyed talking again with some one who knows and loves the best in art. After all,” she added with a note of determination, almost of defiance, “there is no reason why I shouldn’t sometime.”

“Then I may look for you again?” I asked.

She nodded as she moved out across the porch. “If you’ll promise to sell me any print I may choose. Good-by. And thank you so much, Mr. Sedgwick!”

She held out her hand. It was a hand for a sculptor to model, as beautiful and full of character as her face. (*Comment by C. K.*: *Bosh!*) Afterward I remembered that never again in our friendship did I see it ungloved. (*Comment by C. K.*: *“Bosh” retracted. Some observation in that!*)

“Au revoir, then,” I said; “but you have the advantage of me, you see. I don’t know what to call you at all.”

She hesitated; then, with a little soft quiver of her eyelids, which I afterward learned to identify as an evidence of amusement, said, “Daw is a nice name, don’t you think?” (*Comment by C. K.*: *False name, of course; but highly probable first name is Marjorie.*) “By the way, what time is it?”

“Quarter to five, Miss Daw.”

She smiled at the name. “King Cole will have to do his best, if I am to be back for dinner. Good-by.” (*Comment by C. K.*: *Good! The place where she is staying is a good way off, assuming a seven-thirty dinner-hour; say twelve to fifteen miles.*)

That was the first of many visits, of days that grew in radiance for me. It isn’t necessary for me to tell you, Kent, how in our talks I came to divine in her a spirit as wistful and pure as her face. You do not want a love story from me; yet that is what it was for me almost from the first. Not openly, though. There was that about her which held me at arms’ length: the mystery of her, her quickly-given trust in me, a certain strained look that came into her face, like the startled attention of a wild thing poised for flight, whenever I touched upon the personal note. Not that I ever questioned her. That was the understanding between us: that

I should leave to her her *incognita* without effort to penetrate it.

While I talked, I sketched her and studied her. Young as she seemed, she had been much about the world, knew her Europe, had met and talked with men of many pursuits, and had taken from all sources tribute for her mind and color for her imagination. She had read widely, too, and had an individual habit of thought. Combined with all her cosmopolitanism was a quaint and profound purity of standards. I remember her saying once—it was one of her rare flashes of self-revelation—"I am an anomaly and an anachronism, a Puritan in modern society." After her first visit she did not ride on her horse; but came across lots and through the side hedge, swinging down the hillside yonder with her light dipping stride that always recalled to me the swoop of a swallow, her gloved hands usually holding a slender stick.

All those sketches that you saw were but studies for a more serious attempt to catch and fix her personality. (*Comment by C. K.*: *Couldn't he have given me in two words her height and approximate weight?*) I did it in pastel, and, if I missed something of her tender and changeful coloring, I at least caught the ineffable wistfulness of her expression, the look of one hoping against hope for an unconfessed happiness. Probably I had put more of myself into it than I had meant. A man is likely to when he paints with his heart as well as his brain and hand. When it was done I made a little frame for it, and lettered on the frame this line:

> "And her eyes dreamed against a distant goal."

It was the next day that she read the line. I saw the color die from her face and flood back again.

"Why did you set that line there?" she breathed, her eyes fixed on me with a strange expression. (*Comment by C. K.*: *Rossetti again. The dead woman of the beach quoted "The House of Life," also.*)

"Why not?" I asked. "It seems to express something in you which I have

tried to embody in the picture. Don’t you like it?”

She repeated the line softly, making pure music of it. “I love it,” she said.

At that, I spoke as it is given to a man to speak to one woman in the world when he has found her. She listened, with her eyes on the pictured face. But when I said to her, “You, who have all my heart, and whose name, even, I have not—is there no word for me,” she rose, and threw out her hands in a gesture that sent a chill through me.

“Oh, no! No!” she cried vehemently. “Nothing—except good-by. Oh, why did you speak?”

I stood and watched her go. At the end of the garden walk she stooped and picked a rose with her gloved fingers, and as she disappeared in the thicket at the top of the hill I thought she half turned to look. That was five interminable days ago. I have not seen her since. I feel it is her will that I shall never see her again. And I must! You understand, Kent, you must find her!

I forgot to tell you that when I was sketching her I asked if she could bring something pink to wear, preferably coral. She came the next time with a string of the most beautiful rose-topazes I have ever seen, set in a most curious old gold design. It was that necklace and none other that the woman with the bundle wore, half concealed, when she came here.

To-day—it is yesterday really, since I am finishing this at three *A. M.*—the messenger boy brought me a telegram. It was from my love. It had been sent from Boston, and it read:

> “Destroy the picture, for my sake. It tells too much of both of us.”

The message was unsigned. I have destroyed the picture. Help me! ——F. S.

CHAPTER IV—AN INQUIRY

“Am I running a Strangers’ Rest here?” Francis Sedgwick asked of himself when he emerged upon his porch the morning after Kent’s visit.

The occasion of this query was a man stretched flat on the lawn, with his feet propped up comfortably against the stone wall. In this recumbent posture he was achieving the somewhat delicate feat of smoking a long, thin clay pipe. Except for this plebeian touch he was of the most unimpeachable elegance. His white serge suit was freshly pressed. His lavender silk hose, descending without a wrinkle under his buckskin shoes, accorded with a lavender silk tie and lavender striped shirt. A soft white hat covered his eyes against the sun glare. To put a point to this foppishness, a narrow silken ribbon, also pure white, depending from his lapel buttonhole, suggested an eye-glass in his pocket.

Sedgwick, who had risen late, having returned to his house at daybreak after delivering his manuscript at Kent’s hotel, regarded this sartorial marvel with a doubt as to whether it might not be a figment of latent dreams. Making a détour across the grass, he attained to a side view of the interloper’s face. It repaid the trouble. It was a remarkable face, both in contour and in coloring. From chin to cheek, the skin was white, with a tint of blue showing beneath; but the central parts of the face were bronzed. The jaw was long, lean and bony. The cheek-bones were high; the mouth was large, fine-cut, and firm; the nose, solid, set like a rock.

At the sound of a footstep, the man pushed his hat downward, revealing a knobby forehead and half-closed eyes in which there was a touch of somberness, of brooding. The artist remembered having seen that type of physiognomy on the

Venetian coins of the sixteenth century, the likenesses in bronze, of men who were of iron and gold,—scholars, rulers, and poets. The eyes of the still face opened wide, and fixed themselves on Sedgwick, and the expression of melancholy vanished.

“Good morning,” said the artist, and then all but recoiled from the voice that replied, so harsh and raucous it was.

“You rise late,” it said.

“I hear your opinion on it,” retorted Sedgwick, a bit nettled. “Am I to infer that you have been waiting for me?”

“You wouldn’t go far wrong.”

“And what can I do for you—before you leave?” said Sedgwick significantly.

“Take a little walk with me presently,” said the man in another voice, brushing the hat clear of his face.

“Kent!” exclaimed the artist.

“Well, you appear surprised. What kind of artist are you, not to recognize a man simply because he shaves his beard and affects a false voice?”

“But you’re so completely changed. And why this disguise?”

“Disguise?” returned the other, astonished in his turn. “I’m not in disguise.”

“Your clothes. They’re—well, except for being offensive, I’d call them foppish.”

“Not at all!” protested the other warmly. “Just because I’m a scientific man, is it to be assumed that I ought to be a frump? I’m fond of good clothes; I can afford good clothes; I wear good clothes. It’s a hobby of mine; but I deny that it is a weakness.”

“Of course not,” assented the other, somewhat amused. “By the way, though, your socks and tie don’t match.”

“They do, absolutely,” replied the other with asperity.

“Perhaps in fact; but not in effect. In matching smooth silk with ribbed silk, you should get the latter one shade lighter.”

“Is that so?” said Kent with interest. “You’ve told me something I never knew. I’ll remember that. Now I’ll trouble you to tell me some more things.”

“While taking that walk you spoke of?”

“That comes later. I’ve read your story.”

“Already?”

“Already! Do you know it’s ten o’clock? However, it’s a good story.”

“Thank you.”

“As a story. As information, it leaves out most of the important points.”

“Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. Color, size, and trappings of the horse?”

“I didn’t notice particularly. Black, I think; yes, certainly, black. Rather a large horse. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Humph! Color, size, and trappings of the rider?”

“Reddish brown hair with a gloss like a butterfly’s wing,” said the artist with enthusiasm; “deep hazel eyes; clear sun-browned skin; tall—I should say quite tall—but so—so feminine that you wouldn’t realize her tallness. She was dressed in a light brown riding costume, with a toque hat, very simple, tan gauntlets, and tan boots; that is, the first time I saw her. The next time—”

“Hold on! A dressmaker’s catalogue is no good to me. I couldn’t remember it all. Was she in riding clothes on any of her later visits?”

“No.”

“Any scars or marks?”

“Certainly not!”

“That’s a pity; although you seem to think otherwise. Age?”

“We—ell, twenty, perhaps.”

“Add five. Say twenty-five.”

“What for?” demanded Sedgwick indignantly.

“I’m allowing for the discount of romance. Did you notice her boots?”

“Not particularly; except that she was always spick and span from head to foot.”

“Humph! Was it pretty warm the last week she called on you?”

“Piping!”

“Did she show it?”

“Never a bit. Always looked fresh as a flower.”

“Then, although she came far, she didn’t walk far to get here. There’s a road back of the hill yonder, and a little copse in an open field where a motor-car has stood. I should say that she had driven herself there and come across the hill to you.”

“Could we track the car?” asked Sedgwick eagerly.

“No farther than the main road. What is the latest she ever left here, when she arrived afoot?”

“Once she stayed till half past six. I begged her to stay and dine; but she drew into herself at the mere suggestion.”

“Half past six. Allowing for a half past seven dinner, and time to dress for it, she would have perhaps twelve to fifteen miles to go in the car. That figures out with the saddle ride, too. Now, we have, as your visitor, a woman of rather inadequate description eked out by some excellent sketches—young, passably good-looking (don’t lose your temper, Sedgwick); passably good-looking, *at least*; with command of some wealth; athletic, a traveler, well informed. The name she gave is obviously not her own; not even, I judge, her maiden name.”

Sedgwick turned very white. “Do you mean that she is a married woman?” he demanded.

“How could you have failed to see it?” returned the other gently.

“But what is there to prove it?”

“Proof? None. Indication, plenty. Her visits, in the first place. A young girl of breeding and social experience would hardly have come to your studio. A married woman might, who respected herself with full confidence, and knew, with the same confidence, that you would respect her. And, my dear boy,” added Kent, with his quiet winning smile, “you are a man to inspire confidence. Otherwise, I myself might have suspected you of having a hand in the death of

the woman on the beach."

"Never mind the woman on the beach. This other matter is more than life or death. Is that flimsy supposition all you have to go on?"

"No. Her travel. Her wide acquaintance with men and events. Her obvious poise."

"All might be found in a very exceptional girl, such as she is. Why shouldn't she tell me, if she were married?"

"Oh, don't expect me to dissect feminine psychology. There I'm quite beyond my depth. But you'll note she doesn't seem to have told you any slightest thing about herself. She's let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, prey on *your* damask cheek."

"Confound your misquotations! It's true, though. But there might be many reasons."

"Doubtless. Only, my imagination doesn't seem to run to them. And reverting to tangible fact, as clenching evidence, there are her gloves, which she always wore."

"What about her gloves?"

"You never saw her left hand, did you?"

"Oh, I see. You mean the wedding-ring. Well, I suppose," continued Sedgwick, with a tinge of contempt in his voice, "she could have taken off her ring as easily as her gloves."

There was no answering contempt in Chester Kent's voice as he replied, "But a ring, constantly worn and then removed, leaves an unmistakable mark. Perhaps she gave you greater credit for powers of observation than you deserve. I'm afraid, Frank, that she is a married woman; and I'm sure, from reading between your lines, that she is a good woman. What the connection between her and the corpse on the beach may be, is the problem. My immediate business is to discover who the dead woman is."

"And mine," said Sedgwick hoarsely, "to discover the living."

"We'll at least start together," replied Kent. "Come!"

Capacity for silence, that gift of the restful gods, was possessed by both men. Intent, each upon his own thoughts, they strode up the hillside and descended into a byway where stood a light runabout, empty. Throwing on the switch, Kent motioned his companion to get in. Twenty minutes of curving and dodging along the rocky roads brought them to the turnpike, in sight of the town of Annalaka. Not until then did Kent offer a word.

"The inquest is set for eleven o'clock," he said.

"All right," said Sedgwick with equal taciturnity.

They turned a corner, and ran into the fringe of a crowd hovering about the town hall. Halting his machine in a bit of shade, Kent surveyed the gathering. At one point it thickened about a man who was talking eagerly, the vocal center of a small circle of silence.

"Elder Dennett," said Kent, "back from Cadystown. You'll have to face the music now."

"I'm ready."

"You're ready for attack. Are you ready for surprises?"

"No one is ever ready for surprise, or it wouldn't be surprise, would it?"

"True enough. One word of warning: don't lose your head or your temper if the suspicion raised against you by Dennett is strengthened by me."

"By you!"

"Unfortunately. My concern is to get to the bottom of this matter. There is something the sheriff knows that I don't know. Probably it is the identity of the body. To force him into the open, it may be necessary for me to augment the case against you."

"Ought I to be ready for arrest?"

"Hardly probable at present. No; go on the stand when you're called, and tell the truth, and nothing but the truth."

"But not the whole truth?"

"Nothing of the necklace. You won't be questioned about that. By the way, you have never kept among your artistic properties anything in the way of

handcuffs, have you?”

“No.”

“I didn’t suppose you had. Those manacles are a sticker. I don’t—I absolutely do *not* like those manacles. And on one wrist only! Perhaps that is the very fact, though—Well, we shall know more when we’re older; two hours older, say. Whether we shall know all that Mr. Sheriff Len Schlager knows, is another question. I don’t like Mr. Schlager, either, for that matter.”

“Dennett has seen me,” said Sedgwick in a low voice.

Indeed, the narrator’s voice had abruptly ceased, and he stood with the dropped jaw of stupefaction. One after another of his auditors turned and stared at the two men in the motor-car.

“Stay where you are,” said Kent, and stepped out to mingle with the crowd.

No one recognized, at first, the immaculate flannel-clad *élégante* as the bearded scientist whose strange actions had amused the crowd on the beach. A heavy solemn man addressed him:

“Friend of his?” he asked, nodding toward the artist.

“Yes.”

“He’ll need ’em. Going to give evidence?”

“To hear it, rather,” replied Kent pleasantly. “Where’s the body?”

“Inside. Just brought it over from Doctor Breed’s. He’s the medical officer, and he and the sheriff are running the show. Your friend want a lawyer, maybe?”

The thought struck Kent that, while a lawyer might be premature, a friend in the town might be very useful.

“Yes,” he said; “from to-morrow on.”

“Meanin’ that you’re in charge to-day,” surmised the big man shrewdly.

Kent smiled. “I dare say we shall get on very well together, Mr.—” his voice went up interrogatively.

“Bain, Adam Bain, attorney and counselor at law for thirty years in the town of Annalaka.”

“Thank you. My name is Kent. You already know my friend’s name. What

kind of man is this medical officer?”

“Breed? Not much. More of a politician than a doctor, and more of a horse trader than either. Fidgety as a sandpaper undershirt.”

“Did he perform the autopsy at his own house?”

“Him and the sheriff last evening. Didn’t even have an undertaker to help lay out.”

The lobe of Kent’s ear began to suffer from repeated handling. “The body hasn’t been identified, I suppose?”

“Nobody’s had so much as a wink at it but those two and Ira Dennett. He viewed the corpse last night. That’s why I guess your friend needs *his* friends and maybe a lawyer.”

“Exactly. Mr. Dennett doesn’t seem to be precisely a deaf mute.”

Lawyer Bain emitted the bubbling chuckle of the fat-throated. “It’s quite some time since Iry won any prizes for silent thought,” he stated. “You are known, hereabouts?” he added, after a pause.

“Very little.”

“Gansett Jim, yonder, looks as if he kinder cherished the honor of your acquaintance.”

Over his shoulder Kent caught the half-breed’s glance fixed upon him with stolid intensity. A touch on his arm made him turn to the other side, where Sailor Smith faced him.

“Didn’t hardly know you, with your beard off,” piped the old man. “Howdy, Professor! You’re finickied up like your own weddin’.”

“Good morning,” said the scientist. “Are you going inside?”

“No hurry,” said the other. “Hotter’n Tophet in there.”

“I want a good seat; so I think I’ll go in at once,” said Kent. “Sit with us, won’t you? Mr. Sedgwick is with me.”

The ex-sailor started. “Him?” he exclaimed. “Here?”

Kent nodded. “Why not?”

“No reason. No reason at all,” said the old seaman hastily. “It’s a public

proceedin’.”

“But you’re surprised to see him here?”

“There’s been quite a lot o’ talk—”

“Suspicion, you mean.”

“We—ell, yes.”

“People are inclined to connect Mr. Sedgwick with the death of the woman?”

“What else can you expect?” returned the old man deprecatingly. “Iry Dennett’s been tellin’ his story. He’s certain the woman he seen talkin’ to Mr. Sedgwick is the dead woman. Willin’ to swear to it anywheres.”

“What about Gansett Jim? Has he contributed anything to the discussion?”

“No. Jim’s as close-tongued as Iry is clatter-mouthed.”

“And probably with reason,” muttered Kent. “Well, I’ll look for you inside.”

He returned to join Sedgwick. Together they entered the building, while behind them a rising hum testified to the interest felt in them by the villagers.

Within, a tall wizened man, with dead fishy eyes, stalked nervously to and fro on a platform, beside which a hastily constructed coffin with a hasped cover stood on three sawhorses. On a chair near by slouched the sheriff, his face red and streaming. A few perspiring men and women were scattered on the benches. Outside a clock struck eleven. There was a quick inflow of the populace, and the man on the platform lifted up a chittering voice.

“Feller citizens,” he said, “as medical officer I declare these proceedings opened. Meaning no disrespect to the deceased, we want to get through as spry as possible. First we will hear witnesses. Anybody who thinks he can throw any light on this business can have a hearing. Then those as wants may view the remains. The burial will take place right afterwards, in the town buryin’-ground, our feller citizen and sheriff, Mr. Len Schlager, having volunteered the expenses.”

“That man,” said Sedgwick in Kent’s ear, “is a great deal more nervous this

minute than I am."

"Perhaps he has more cause to be," whispered the scientist. "Here comes the first witness."

A sheep-herder had risen in his place, and without the formality of an oath told of sighting the body at the edge of the surf at seven o'clock in the morning. Others, following, testified to the position on the beach, the lashing of the body to the grating, the wounds, and the manacles. Doctor Breed announced briefly that the deceased had come to her death by drowning, and that the skull had been crushed in, presumably, when the waves hammered the body upon the reefs.

"Then the corpse must have come from a good ways out," said Sailor Smith; "for the reefs wouldn't catch it at that tide."

"Nobody knows how the dead come to Lonesome Cove," said the sheriff in his deep voice.

There was a murmur of assent. The people felt a certain pride in the ill-omened locality.

Elder Ira Dennett was the next and last witness called. Somewhere beneath the Elder's dry exterior lurked the instinct of the drama. Stalking to the platform, he told his story with skill and fervor. He made a telling point of the newly finished picture he had seen in Sedgwick's studio, depicting the moonlit charge of the wave-mounted corpse. He sketched out the encounter between the artist and the dead woman vividly. As he proceeded, the glances turned upon Sedgwick darkened from suspicion to enmity. Kent was almost ready to wish that he had come armed, when Dennett, with a final fling of his arm toward the artist, stepped from the platform and resumed his seat, amid a surcharged silence.

Then Sedgwick rose. He was white; but his voice was under perfect control as he said, "I presume I have the right to be heard in my own defense?"

"Nobody's accused you yet," growled Schlager.

"Public opinion accuses me. That is not to be wondered at, in view of what Elder Dennett has just told you. It is all true. But I do not know the woman who

accosted me. I never saw her before that evening. She spoke strangely to me, and indicated that she was to meet some one and go aboard ship, though I saw no sign of a ship."

"You couldn't see much of the ocean from your house," said the medical officer.

"I walked on the cliffs later," said Sedgwick, and a murmur went through the court room; "but I never found the woman. And as for throwing her out of a ship, or any such fantastic nonsense, I can prove that I was back in my house by a little after nine o'clock that night."

He sat down, coolly enough; but his eyes dilated when Kent whispered to him:

"Keep your nerve. The probability will be shown that she was killed before ten o'clock."

Now, however, Doctor Breed was on his feet again. "Form in line, ladies and gentlemen," said he, "and pass the coffin as spry as possible."

At this, Sheriff Schlager stepped forward and loosened the hasps, preparatory to removing the cover. "The body has been left," said he, slipping the lid aside, "just as—" Of a sudden, his eyes stiffened. A convulsive shudder ran through his big body. He jammed the cover back, and, with fingers that actually drummed on the wood, forced the hasps into place.

"She's come to life!" cried a voice from the rear.

"No, no!" rumbled the sheriff. Whirling upon the medical officer, he whispered in his ear; not more than a single word, it seemed to the watchful Kent.

The doctor turned ghastly. "Gents," he said in a quavering voice to the amazed crowd, "the program will not be carried out as arranged. The—the—well, the condition of the deceased is not fitten—" He stopped, mopping his brow.

But Yankee curiosity was not so easily to be balked of its food. It found expression in Lawyer Adam Bain.

“That ain’t the law, Doc,” he said.

“I’m the law here,” declared Sheriff Schlager, planting himself solidly between the crowd and the coffin. One hand crept slowly back toward his hip.

“Don’t pull any gun on me,” retorted the lawyer quietly. “It ain’t necessary.”

“You heard Doc Breed say the body wasn’t fitten to be viewed,” pursued the sheriff.

“That’s all right, too. But the doc hasn’t got the final word. The law has.”

A quick murmur of assent passed through the room.

“And the law says,” continued Bain, “that the body shall be duly viewed. Otherwise, and the deceased being buried without view, an order of the court to exhume may be obtained.”

“Look at Breed,” whispered Kent to Sedgwick.

The medical officer’s lips were gray, as he leaned forward to pluck at the sheriff’s arm. There was a whispered colloquy between them. Then Breed spoke, with a pitiful effort at self-control:

“Lawyer Bain’s point is correct; undoubtedly correct. But the body must be prepared. It ought to ‘a’ been looked to last night. But somehow I—we—Will six citizens kindly volunteer to fetch the coffin back to my house?”

Ten times six offered their services. The box was carried out swiftly, followed by the variable hum of excited conjecture. Quickly the room emptied itself, except for a few stragglers.

CHAPTER V—ONE USE FOR A MONOCLE

Sedgwick, who had followed the impromptu cortège with his vision, was brought up sharply by the glare of a pair of eyes outside the nearest window. The eyes were fixed on his own. Their expression was distinctly malevolent. Without looking round, Sedgwick said in a low voice:

"Kent!"

No answer came.

"Kent!" said the artist a little louder.

"Huh?" responded a muffled and abstracted voice behind him.

"See here for a moment."

There was neither sound nor movement from the scientist.

"An Indian-looking chap outside the window is trying to hypnotize me, or something of the sort."

This information, deemed by its giver to be of no small interest, elicited not the faintest response. Somewhat piqued, the artist turned, to behold his friend stretched on a bench, with face to the ceiling, eyes closed, and heels on the raised end. His lips moved faintly. Alarmed lest the heat had been too much for him, Sedgwick bent over the upturned face. From the moving lips issued a musical breath which began its career softly as Raff's *Cavatina* and came to an inglorious end in the strains of *Honey Boy*. Sedgwick shook the whistler insistently.

"Eh? What?" cried Kent, wrenching his shoulder free. "Go away! Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I'll give you something to think about. Look at this face of a cigar-store

Indian at the window. No! It's gone!"

"Gansett Jim, probably," opined Kent. "Just where his interest in this case comes in, I haven't yet found out. He favored me with his regard outside. And he had some dealings with the sheriff on the beach. But I don't want to talk about him now, nor about anything else."

Acting on this hint, Sedgwick let his companion severely alone, until a bustle from without warned him that the crowd was returning. Being aroused, Kent accosted one of the villagers who had just entered.

"Body coming back?" he asked.

"Yep. On its way now."

"What occurred in the house where they took it?"

"Search me! Everybody was shut out by the sheriff and the doc. They had that body to theirselves nigh twenty minutes."

At this moment the sheriff entered the hall, followed by Doctor Breed, who escorted the coffin to its supporting sawhorses. The meager physician was visibly at the fag end of his self-control. Even the burly sheriff looked like a sick man, as he lifted aside the coffin lid and spoke.

"There was reasons, neighbors," said he, "why the corpse wasn't suitable to be looked at. Nobody had seen it since last night. We've fixed it up as good as we could, and you'll now please pass by as quick as possible."

In the line that formed Kent got a place behind Elder Dennett, who had decided to take another look for good measure, as he said. The look was a productive one. No sooner had it fallen on the face of the dead than Dennett jabbed an indicatory finger in that direction and addressed the sheriff:

"Hey, Len! What's this?"

"What's what?" growled Schlager.

"Why, there's a cut on the lady's right cheek. It wasn't there when I seen the corpse last night."

"Ah, what's the matter with your eyes?" demanded the sheriff savagely. "You want to hog the lime-light, that's your trouble!"

This was evidently a shrewd lash at a recognized weakness, and the Elder moved on amid jeering comments. But Sedgwick, whose eyes had been fixed upon Kent, saw a curious expression flicker and fade across the long-jawed face. It was exactly the expression of a dog that pricks up its ears. The next moment a titter ran through the crowd as a bumpkin in a rear seat called out:

"The dude's eyes ain't mates!"

Chester Kent, already conspicuous in his spotless white flannels, had made himself doubly so by drawing out a monocle and deftly fixing it in his right eye. He leaned over the body to look into the face, and his head jerked back the merest trifle. Bending lower, he scrutinized the unmanacled right wrist. When he passed on his lips were pursed in the manner of one who whistles noiselessly.

He resumed his seat beside Sedgwick. His eyes grew dull and melancholy. One would have thought him sunk in a daze, or a doze, while the procession filed past the unknown dead. His monocle, which had dropped from his eye as he turned from the coffin, dangled against his hand. Chancing to look down at it, Sedgwick started and stared. Kent's knuckle, as seen through the glass, stood forth, monstrous and distorted, every line of the bronzed skin showing like a furrow.

The monocle was a powerful magnifying lens.

The sheriff's heavy voice rose. "Any one here present recognize or identify the deceased?" he droned, and, without waiting for a reply, set the lid in place and signaled to the medical officer.

"Feller citizens," began the still shaking physician, "we don't need any jury to find that this unknown drowned woman—"

"The deceased was not drowned." Emerging from his reverie, Chester Kent had leisurely risen in his place and made his statement.

"N-n-not drowned!" gasped the medical man.

"Certainly not! As you must know, if you made an autopsy."

"No autopsy was necessary," replied the other quickly. "There's plenty of testimony without that. We've heard the witnesses that saw the drowned body on

the grating it washed ashore on."

"The body never washed ashore on that grating."

A murmur ran through the crowd. "How do you figure that?" called a voice.

"On the under side of the grating I found a cocoon of a common moth. Half an hour in the water would have soaked the cocoon through and killed the insect inhabitant. The insect was alive."

"How'd the grating get there, then?"

"Dragged down from the high-water mark on the beach. It was an old half-rotted affair such as no ship would carry. Ask Sailor Smith."

"That's true," said the old seaman with conviction.

"You're an expert, Mr. Smith. Now, was that grating large enough to float a full grown human body?"

"Why, as to that, a body ain't but a mite heavier than the water. I should say it'd just barely float it, maybe."

"Exactly; but plus several pounds of clothing, and some dead metal extra?"

"No."

"The clothes would have been soaked, and handcuffs weigh something," said Kent calmly.

"There might have been extra spars under the grating, that got pounded loose on the beach and washed away," propounded the medical officer desperately.

"Look at the face," said Kent with finality. "This is a bad coast. Most of you have seen drowned bodies. Did any one ever see an expression of such terror and agony on the face of one who came to death by drowning?"

[image]

Murder! echoed a voice from the doorway.

“No, by thunder!” shouted somebody. “He’s right.”

Others took up the cry. Clamor rose and spread in the room. The sheriff silenced it with a stentorian voice. “What are you trying to get at?” he demanded, facing Kent.

“The truth. What are you?”

Schlager’s eyelids flickered; but he ignored the counter-stroke. “Look out it don’t lead you where you won’t want to follow,” he returned, with a significant look at Sedgwick.

“This is as far as it has led me,” said Kent, in his clear even voice. “The body, already dead, was dragged down and soaked in the sea, and then lashed to the grating by a man who probably is or has been a sailor.”

“Then the deceased met death on shore, and presumably by violence,” said Lawyer Bain.

“It’s murder!” cried a woman shrilly. “Bloody murder! That’s what it is!”

“Murder!” echoed a voice from the doorway. Gansett Jim, his half-Indian, half-negro face alight with fury, stood there pointing with stiffened hand at Sedgwick. “Dah de murderer!”

CHAPTER VI—THE RETREAT IN ORDER

No one moved in the court room for appreciable seconds after that pronouncement. As a flash-light photograph fixes an assemblage poised, with eyes staring in one direction, thus the half-breed's words had cast a spell of immobility over all. It was a stillness fraught with danger. No man could say in what violent form it might break.

First to recover from the surprise was the sheriff. "You, Jim, set down!" he shouted. "If there's to be any accusin' done here, I'll do it."

"I do it," persisted the half-breed. "Blood is on his han'. I see it."

Involuntarily Sedgwick looked at his right hand. There was a low growl from the crowd.

"Steady!" came Kent's voice at his elbow. "Mistakes like that are Judge Lynch's evidence."

"Whah was he the night of the killin'?" cried Gansett Jim. "Ast him. Whah was he?"

"Where was you, if it comes to that?" retorted the sheriff, and bit his lip with a scowl.

At that betrayal Chester Kent's eyelids flashed up, and instantly drooped again into somberness.

"This hearing is adjourned," twittered the medical officer. "Burial of the unknown, will take place at once. All are invited."

"Invitation respectfully declined," murmured Sedgwick to Kent. "I don't know that I'm exactly frightened; but I think I'd breathe easier in the open country."

“Well, I’m exactly frightened,” replied Kent in the same tone. “I want to run—which would probably be the end of us. Curious things about those handcuffs, isn’t it?” he went on in a louder and easily conversational voice.

During their slow progress to the door he kept up a running comment, which Sedgwick supported with equal coolness. The crowd, darkling and undecided, pressed around them. As they went through the doorway, they were jostled by a sudden pressure, following which Kent felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned to face the sheriff.

“Better get out of town quick,” advised Schlager in a half whisper.

“Thank you,” said Kent in a clear and cheerful voice. “Where can I get some tobacco?”

“Sterrett’s grocery keeps the best,” said some informant back of him. “End of the Square to the right.”

“Much obliged,” said Kent, and strolled leisurely to his car, followed by Sedgwick. As they took their seats and started slowly through the crowd, Sedgwick inquired earnestly:

“Do you crave tobacco at this particular moment worse than you do the peace and loneliness of the green fields?”

“Policy, my young friend,” retorted Kent. “I wish I could think up a dozen more errands to do. The more casually we get out of town, the less likely we are to be followed by a flight of rocks. I don’t want a perfectly good runabout spoiled by a mob.”

Both of them went into Sterrett’s store, where Kent earned the reputation from Sterrett of being “awful dang choosy about what he gets,” and came out into a considerable part of the populace, which had followed. As they reëmbarked, the sheriff put his foot on the running-board.

“Better take my tip,” he said significantly.

“Very well,” returned Kent. “There will be no arrest, then?”

“Not just now.”

A peculiar smile slid sidewise off a corner of the scientist’s long jaw. “Nor

at any other time," he concluded.

He threw in the clutch, leaving Schlager with his hand in his hair, and the crowd, which might so easily have become a mob, to disperse, slowly and hesitantly, having lacked the incentive of suggested flight on the part of the suspects to be spark to its powder. When the car had won the open road beyond the village Sedgwick remarked:

"Queer line the sheriff is taking."

"Poor Schlager!" said Kent, chuckling. "No other line is open to him. He's in a tight place. But it isn't the sheriff that's worrying me."

"Who, then?"

"Gansett Jim."

"What did the sheriff mean by asking Gansett Jim where he was the night of the murder?"

"Murder?" said Kent quizzically. "What murder?"

"The murder of the unknown woman, of course."

"I don't know that there was any murder."

"Oh, well, the death of the unknown woman, then."

"I don't know that there was any unknown woman."

"Quit it! From what you do know, what do you think the sheriff meant?"

"What do *you* think?"

"I think that Gansett Jim killed her and is trying to turn suspicion on me."

"Humph!"

"But if the sheriff knows where Gansett Jim was at the time of the killing, he can't suppose me guilty. I wonder if he really does believe me guilty?"

"If he does, he doesn't care. His concern is quite apart from your guilt."

"It's too much for me," confessed the artist.

"And for me. That is why I am going back to the village."

"But I thought you were frightened."

"If I stayed away from everything that alarms me," said Kent, "I'd never have a tooth filled or speak to a woman under seventy. I'm a timid soul,

Sedgwick; but I don’t think I shall be in any danger in Annalaka so long as I’m alone. Here we are. Out with you! I’ll be back by evening.”

CHAPTER VII—SIMON P. GROOT DOES BUSINESS

To his surprise, Kent, turning into the village Square, found the crowd still lingering. A new focus of interest had drawn it to a spot opposite Sterrett's store, where a wagon, decorated in the most advanced style of circus art, shone brilliant in yellow and green. Bright red letters across the front presented to public admiration the legend:

SIMON P. GROOT
SIMON PURE GOODS

A stout projection rested on one of the rear wheels. Here stood the proprietor of the vehicle, while behind him in a window were displayed his wares. It was evident that Simon P. Groot followed the romantic career of an itinerant hawker, dealing in that wide range of commodities roughly comprised in the quaint term, "Yankee notions." Before the merchandizing voice came to the new arrival's ears as anything more than a confused jumble, Kent was struck with the expansive splendor of the man's gestures, the dignity of his robust figure, and the beauty of a broad whitening beard that spread sidewise like the ripples from a boat's stem. Two blemishes unhappily marred the majesty of Simon P. Groot's presence; a pair of pin-head eyes, mutually attracted to each other, and a mean and stringent little voice. Freed of these drawbacks, his oratory might well, one could not but feel, have rolled in any of our legislative chambers more superbly and just as ineffectually as much of the other oratory therein practised. That the Annalakans

were truly spellbound by it was obvious. Indeed, Kent was at a loss to understand the depth of their absorption until he had come within the scope of the high-piping words.

“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 wan. 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 drooped like a flower. ‘There is no rest for me,’ said she in mournful tones. ‘I must away upon my mission.’ ‘Stay!’ I bade her. ‘Ere you go, but touch your lips to this revivifying flagon. De Lorimer’s Life Giving Tonic, free from intoxicants, poisons, and deception, a boon to the blood, a balm to the nerves, a prop to the flagging spirit.’ She looked, she tasted, she drank. New color sprang to her cheeks. Her form pulsated with joyous vigor. ‘Aged sir,’ said she, ‘I know not your name; but if the blessings of a harried spirit are of avail, your sleep will be sweet this night.’ Of this wonderful balm, ladies and gentlemen of Annalaka, I have still a few bottles left at the low price of half a dollar each. Sickness flies before it. Amalgamating at once with the blood, it clears the precious life fluid of all impurities, and rehabilitates man, woman, and child, body, soul and mind.”

The shrill voice rose and fell, the wide beard quivered with the passion of salesmanship, the gaudy bottles on the shelf were replaced by half-dollars, until the market flagged. Whereupon again the orator took up his tale.

“Ever shall I give thanks for that inestimable privilege, the privilege of having given cheer to one on the brink of a dreadful doom. She vanished, that fair creature, into the forest. I looked at my watch—the unerring, warranted, 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 vary not one fraction of a second in a day—eight-forty-five. 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 nine-

thirty-one. And later, when I heard the dread news, I realized that my ears had thrilled to a death cry."

He looked about him with a face of controlled emotion. His voice dropped to a throaty and mesmeric gurgle.

"How frail," he continued: "How frail and uncertain is the life of mankind! Who of these happy faces before me may not to-morrow be bathed in tears for the loss of some loved one? Best be prepared against the time of sorrow. I show you here a unique collection of framed mottoes, suitable alike for the walls of the humblest home or the grandest palace. Within these tasty frames are enshrined comforting mortuary verses, delicately ornamented by the hands of our leading artists, such poetry as distils assuagement upon the wounded heart; and these priceless objects of art and agents of mercy I am distributing at the nominal charge of one dollar each."

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?"

Kent's quiet smile sidled down from the corner of his mouth.

"Suppose," he 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?”

“Yep,” replied Simon P. Groot austerely. “It was all true but the frills.”

“Will you trim off the frills for ten dollars?”

“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 Hawkill 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?”

“Yep. 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 night 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. I’ve done fine.”

“You made no attempt to trace the woman?”

“Look here!” said Simon P. Groot after a spell of thoughtfulness. “Your ten dollars is good, and you’re a gent, all right; but I think I’ve talked a little too much with my mouth around here, and I’m afraid they might dig up this lady and start something new and want me for a witness. Witnessing is bad for business.”

“I’m safe,” said Kent.

“So far so good. Now, would it be worth five dollars to you, likely, a relic of the murderer?” suggested the old man.

“Quite likely.”

“Mum’s the word, then, for my part in it. That next morning I followed her trail a ways. You see, the yell in the night had got me interested. It was an easy trail to follow for a man that’s acquainted in the woods, and I used to be a yarb-grubber. Do a little of it now, sometimes. 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 fight of some sort; for the twigs were broken right to the edge of the thicket, and the ground stamped down. One or 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 five on it?”

Kent’s eyes drooped, fixing themselves on a small object which the other had laid on his knee. His lips pursed. Nothing that could be interpreted as an answer came from them. Simon P. Groot waited with patience. Finally he said:

“That’s an awful pretty tune you’re whistlin’, mister, but sad, and terrible long. What about the five? Do we trade?”

The car came to a stop. Digging into his pocket, Kent produced a bill which he handed over, and still whistling the long-meter *China*, 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—RECKONINGS

“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 pail to put them in.”

“Maybe we could borrow Len Schlager’s,” suggested the lawyer dryly.

Kent received this with a subdued snort. “It is remarkable that the newspapers haven’t sent men down on such a sensational case,” he said.

“On the contrary to you, sir,” retorted Bain, “so much fake stuff has come out of Lonesome Cove that the papers discount any news from here.”

“All the better. The only thing that worries me more than the stupidity of professional detectives is the shrewdness of trained reporters. At least we can work this out in our own way.”

“We don’t seem to be getting much of anywhere,” complained Sedgwick.

“Complicated cases don’t clear themselves up in a day,” remarked Kent. “In this one we’ve got opponents who know more than we do.”

“Schlager?” asked the lawyer.

“And Doctor 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 colic."

"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."

"Doctor 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 master, 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 handcuff 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, carried 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’ll 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’d forgotten. 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. You’ve an unfortunate knack 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 of 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.”

“And so you stick to a public hotel! Queer notions you have of privacy.”

“Not at all. A hotel is absolutely mine to do with as I please, as long as I pay my bills. I’m among strangers; I’m not interfered with. 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 merest 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—“try”—puff—“to forget if you can”—puff—puff—“that stuff about the crazy woman”—puff—puff—puff.

“Forget it? How should I? Why should I?”

“Because”—puff—“you’re absolutely on the”—puff—puff—“wrong track. Good night.”

Slowly Kent climbed the road to the crest of the hill; then stopped and looked back into the studio, which had sprung into light as soon as he left. Sedgwick’s figure loomed, tall and spare, in the radiance. The artist was standing before his easel, looking down at it fixedly. Kent knew what it was that he gazed on, and as the lovely wistful girl-face rose in his memory he sighed, a little.

“I mustn’t forget that quest,” he said. “Poor old Sedgwick!”

But, once in his room, the picture faded, and there came before his groping mental vision instead the spectacle of two dark figures, chained together and battling, the one for life, the other for some mysterious elusive motive that fluttered at the portals of his comprehension like a half-remembered melody. And the second struggling figure, whose face was hidden, flashed in the moonlight with the sheen of silver stars against black.

CHAPTER IX—CHESTER KENT DECLINES A JOB

Sundayman's Creek Road, turning aside just before it gains the turnpike to the Eyrie Hotel to evade a stretch of marsh, travels on wooden stilts across a deep clear pool fed by a spring. Signs at each end of the crossing threaten financial penalties against any vehicle traversing the bridge faster than a walk. Now, the measure of a walk for an automobile is dubious; but the most rigorous constable could have found no basis for protest in the pace maintained 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.

"Yes," was the reply. "Very much lost."

"When did you lose it, if it's not an impertinent question?"

"Not in the least," answered the other cordially. "I didn't lose it at all."

"Ah!" The motorist smiled. "When was it lost, then?"

Across the monocled face passed a shadow of thoughtful consideration. "About four million years ago, I should judge."

"And you are still looking? I perceive that you are an optimist," said the elderly man.

"Just at present I'm a limnologist."

"Pardon me?"

“A limnologist. Limnology is the science of the life found on the banks of small bodies of water. It is a fascinating study, I assure you. There is only one chair of limnology in the world.”

“And you, I presume, are the incumbent?” asked the other politely.

“No, indeed! The merest amateur, on the contrary. I’m humbly hoping to discover the eggs of certain neuropterous insects. We know the insects, and we know they lay eggs; but how they conceal them has been a secret since the first dragon-fly rose from the first pool.”

“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 *antiopas* last month? Rather unusual, I think.”

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

“The suddenness of the appearance. You know, Helmund says that—”

“Pardon me, who?”

“Helmund, the Belgian.”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Go on!”

The stranger went on at some length. He appeared to be an interested rather than 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 chiseled outlines, from which the eyes looked forth, thoughtful, alert, yet with the gaze of a man in pain. Presently he said 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.

"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 that 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 woolens by the clothes moth. You may perhaps know that I am president of the Kinsella Mills. We've 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 to-night for Connecticut."

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

"Yes, at Hedgerow 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 a curious death that occurred here three days ago."

"Yes, I've heard something of it," said the other indifferently. "I took it to be mostly gossip."

"Before the death there was a struggle. This star was found at the scene of the struggle."

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

"Positiveness is the greatest temptation and snare that I have to fight against," remarked Chester Kent. "Otherwise I should say positively that no officer, going to a dubious rendezvous, would wear a uniform which would be certain to make him conspicuous. 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 elemental chemical test I made. Something in the nature of a worsted batiste, I should judge, from what I could make out under the inferior magnifying-glass that they loaned me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Blair. You’ve eliminated one troublesome hypothesis for me. I’ll telephone you before three 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, Helmund on *The Swarm 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 thoughtful walk, “that was a fatal break on your part, that mention of Helmund. Amateurs who have wholly dropped a subject since years back don’t usually know 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 Hedgerow 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 Annalaka burying-ground?”

Eliciting no reply from the fence post, Kent returned to the Eyrie, called up Hedgerow House, and declined Blair’s proposition.

Early that evening Francis Sedgwick came to the hotel. The clerk, at first negligent, pricked up his ears and exhibited unmistakable signs of human interest when he heard the name; for the suspicion attaching to the artist had spread swiftly. Moreover, the caller was in a state of hardly repressed excitement.

“Mr. Kent? I’m afraid you can’t see him, sir. He isn’t in his room.”

“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. Somewhat less timidity characterized his next effort. A growl of surpassing savagery from within was his reward.

“You see, Mr. Sedgwick,” said the clerk. Raising his voice he called, “Mr. 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 bell-boy 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. Beside the mattress lay a small pad and a pencil. Only on the visitor’s subconscious self did these peculiarities impress themselves, such was his absorption in his own interests.

“It’s happened!” he announced.

“Has it?” said Kent. “Lean up against the wall and make yourself at home. Man, you’re shaking!”

“You’d shake, too,” retorted the artist, his voice trembling.

“No; anger doesn’t affect me that way. Wait! Now, don’t tell me yet. If I’m to have a report, it must be from a sane man, not from one in a blind fury. Take time and cool down. What do you think of my room?”

“It looks like the abode of white silence. Have you turned Trappist monk?”

“Not such a bad guess. This is the retreat of my mind. I think against the blank walls.”

“What’s the game?” asked Sedgwick, interested in spite of himself.

“It dates back to our college days. Do you remember that queer freshman, Berwind?”

“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. But his notion of keeping the mind blank for impressions has its points. If you throw off the clutch of the brain, as it were, and let it work along its own lines, it sometimes arranges and formulates ideas that you wouldn’t get from it under control.”

“Sort of self-hypnosis?”

“In a sense. For years I’ve kept a bare white room in my Washington house to do my hard 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. “The stars in their courses may have fought against Sisera,” he remarked; “but they aren’t going out of their way to fight—to fight—to—to—” Kent’s jaw was sagging down. His lean fingers pulled savagely at the lobe of his long-suffering ear. “The stars in their courses—in their courses—That’s it!” he half whispered. “Sedgwick; *what* was it your visitor said to you about Jupiter?”

“She didn’t mention Jupiter.”

“No, of course not. Not by name. But what was it she said about the planet that she pointed out, over the sea?”

“Oh; was that Jupiter? How did you know?”

“Looked last night, of course,” said Kent impatiently. “There’s no other planet conspicuous over the sea at that hour, from where you stood. That’s not important; at least, not now. What did she say?”

“Oh, some rot about daring to follow her star and find happiness, and that perhaps it might lead me to glory or something.”

A kind of snort came from Kent. “Where have my brains been!” he cried. He thrust the bit of embroidery back into his pocket. Then, with an abrupt change of tone:

“Well, is your temper in hand?”

“For the present.”

“Tell me about it, then.”

“You remember the—the picture of the face?” said Sedgwick with an effort.

“Nobody would easily forget it.”

“I’ve been doing another portrait from the sketches. It was on opaque glass, an experimental medium that I’ve worked on some. Late this afternoon I went out, leaving the glass sheet, backed against a light board, on my easel. The door was locked with a heavy spring. There’s no possible access by the window. Yet somebody came in and smashed my picture to fragments. If I can find that man, Kent, I’ll kill him!”

Kent glanced at the artist’s long strong hands. They were clenched on his knees. The fingers were bloodless.

“I believe you would,” said the scientist with conviction. “You mustn’t, you know. No luxuries, at present.”

“Don’t joke with me about this, Kent.”

“Very good. But just consider, please, that I’m having enough trouble clearing you of a supposed murder of your doing, to want a real one, however provoked, on my hands.”

“Keep the man out of my way, then.”

“That depends. Anything else in your place damaged?”

“Not that I noticed. But I didn’t pay much attention to anything else. I came here direct to find you.”

“That’s right. Well, I’m with you, for the Nook.”

Locking his curious room after him, Kent led the way to the hotel lobby, where he stopped only long enough to send some telegrams. The sun was still a few minutes short of its setting when he and his companion emerged from the hotel. Kent at once broke into a trot.

CHAPTER X—THE INVASION

Such ruin as had been wrought in Sedgwick's studio was strictly localized. The easel lay on the floor, with its rear leg crumpled. Around it were scattered the fragments of the glass upon which the painter had set his labor of love. A high old-fashioned chair faced the wreckage. On its peak was hung a traveling cap. Lopping across the back sprawled a Norfolk jacket belonging to Sedgwick. Chester Kent lifted the coat, and after a swift survey let it drop.

"Did you leave that there?" he asked.

"I hung it across the back of the chair," answered Sedgwick.

"North window closed?"

"Yes, as you see it now."

"And west one open?"

"Nothing has been changed, I tell you, except this." Sedgwick's hand, outstretched toward the destroyed portrait, condensed itself involuntarily into a knotty fist.

"The lock of the door hasn't been tampered with," said Kent. "As for this open window," he leaned out, looking around, "any man gaining access here must have used a ladder, which is unlikely in broad daylight."

"How about a pass-key for the door?"

"There's a simpler solution nearer at hand, I fancy. You didn't chance to notice that things have happened to the coat, as well as to the easel."

"Then the invader went through the coat and, not finding what he was looking for, smashed my picture," cried Sedgwick.

"Through the coat, certainly," agreed Kent, with his quiet smile. "Now hang

it across the chair back just as it was, please."

Sedgwick took the Norfolk jacket from him. "Why, there's a hole through it!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly: the path of the invader."

"A bullet!"

"Right again. Instead of murdering, as you pine to do, you've been murdered. That the picture was destroyed is merely a bit of ill fortune. That you weren't inside the coat when the bullet went through it and cut the prop from your easel, is a bit of the other kind. Hang up the coat, please."

Sedgwick obeyed.

"There," said Kent viewing the result from the window. "At a distance of, say, a quarter of a mile, that arrangement of coat and cap would look uncommonly like a man sitting in a chair before his work. At least, I should think so. And yonder thicket on the hillside," he added, looking out of the window again, "is just about that distance, and seems to be the only spot in sight giving a straight range. Suppose we run up there."

Sound as was his condition, Sedgwick was panting when he brought up at the spot, some yards behind his long-limbed leader. As the scientist had surmised, the arrangement of coat and cap in the studio presented, at that distance, an excellent simulacrum of the rear view of a man lounging in a chair. Bidding the artist stay outside the copse, Kent entered on hands and knees and made extended exploration. After a few moments the sound of low lugubrious whistling was heard from the trees, and presently the musician emerged leading himself by the lobe of his ear.

"Evidently you've found something," commented Sedgwick, who had begun to comprehend his friend's peculiar methods of expression.

"Nothing."

"Then why are you so pleased with yourself?"

"That is why."

"Because you've found nothing?"

“Exactly.”

“It seems an easy system,” observed the artist sarcastically.

“So it is, to a reasoning being. I’m satisfied that some one fired a shot from here. The marksman—a good one—saw you, as he supposed, jerk to the shot as if with a bullet through you, and went away satisfied.”

“Leaving no trace behind him,” added Sedgwick.

“No trace that is tangible. Therein lies the evidence.”

“Of course you don’t expect me to follow that.”

“Why not? Look at the ground in the thicket.”

“What is there to be seen there, since you’ve said there are no marks?”

“The soil is very soft.”

“Yes; there’s a spring just back of us.”

“Yet there’s not a footprint discernible on it.”

“I’ve got that part of the lesson by heart, I think.”

“Use your brain on it, then. Some one designing to make you his target, has been in this thicket; been and gone, and left the place trackless. That some one was a keen soft-footed woodsman. Putting it in words of one syllable, I should say he probably had the racial instinct of the hunt. Does that flush any idea from the deep and devious coverts of your brain?”

“Racial instinct? Gansett Jim!” said Sedgwick.

“Exactly. If I had found tracks all over the place, I should have known it wasn’t he. Finding nothing, I was naturally pleased.”

“That’s more than I am,” retorted the other. “I suppose he’s likely to resume his gunnery at any time.”

“Unless we can discourage him—as I expect we can.”

“By having him arrested?”

“Difficulties might be put in our way. Sheriff Len Schlager and the half-breed are in some sort of loose partnership in this affair, as you know. Gansett Jim honestly thinks that you had a hand in the Lonesome Cove murder, as he believes it to be. It isn’t impossible that the sheriff has subtly egged him on to

kill you in revenge."

"Why does the sheriff want me killed?"

"Nothing personal, I assure you," answered Kent with mock courtesy. "I've already explained that he will not arrest you. But you're the suspect, and if you were put out of the way every one would believe you the murderer. There would be a perfunctory investigation, the whole thing would be hushed up, and the body in Annalaka churchyard would rest in peace—presumably a profitable peace for the sheriff."

"Flat out, Kent, do you know who the dead woman is?"

"Flat out, I don't. But I've a shrewd guess that I'll find out before long."

"From Gansett Jim?"

"No hope there. He's an Indian. What I'm going to see him about now is your safety."

"Now? Where do you expect to find him?"

"In the village, I hope. It wouldn't do for you to come there. But I want you to go to the spot where you met the circus-wagon man, and wait, until I bring Jim."

It was a long wait for the worried artist, in the deep forest that bounded the lonely road along Hawkill Heights. Ten o'clock had chimed across the hill from the distant village, when he heard footsteps, and at a call from Kent, stepped out into the clear, holding the lantern above him. The light showed a strange spectacle. Kent, watchful, keen, ready as a cat to spring, stood with his eyes fixed upon the distorted face of the half-breed. Terror, rage, overmastering amazement, and the soul-panic of the supernatural glared from the blue-white eyeballs of the negro; but the jaw and chin were set firm in the stoicism of the Indian. In that strange racial conflict of emotions the fiercer finer strain won. Gansett Jim's frame relaxed. He grunted.

"Good boy, Jim!" Chester Kent's voice, at the half-breed's ear, was the voice of one who soothes an affrighted horse. "I didn't know whether you could stand it or not. You see, you didn't shoot Mr. Sedgwick, after all."

“Dun’no what you mean,” grunted Gansett Jim.

“And you mustn’t shoot at him any more,” continued the scientist. The tone was soft as a woman’s; but Sedgwick felt in it the tensity of a man ready for any extreme. Perhaps the half-breed, too, felt the peril of that determination; for he hung his head. “I’ve brought you here to show you why. Pay good heed, now. A man traveling in a wagon was met here, as he says, by a woman—you understand—who questioned him and then went on. He followed the trail through the brush and found the signs of a fight. The fight took place before the death. Here’s the lantern. Take his trail from here.”

Without a word the half-breed snatched the light and plunged into a by-path. After a few minutes of swift going he pulled up short, in an open copse of ash, and set the lantern on the ground. Hound-like, he nosed about the trodden earth. Suddenly he darted across and, seizing Sedgwick’s ankle, lifted his foot, almost throwing him from his balance. Sedgwick wrenched himself free and, with a swinging blow, into which he put all the energy of his repressed wrath, knocked the half-breed flat.

“Hands off, damn you!” he growled.

Gansett Jim got to his feet a little unsteadily. Expectant of a rush, his assailant stood, with weight thrown forward; but the other made no slightest attempt at reprisal. Catching up the lantern, which had rolled from his hand, he threw its light upon Sedgwick’s forward foot. Then he turned away. Kent whistled softly. The whistle had a purring quality of content.

“Not the same as the footprint, eh?” he remarked.

“Footprint too small,” grunted Gansett Jim.

“How many people; two?”

“Three.”

[image]

You see, you didn't shoot Mr. Sedgwick, after all.

"Three, of course. I had forgotten the circus-wagon man. He came later. But, Jim, you see it wasn't Mr. Sedgwick."

"What he follow for?" demanded the other savagely.

"No evil purpose. You can take his trail from the circus wagon and follow that, if you want to satisfy yourself further that he wasn't here. I'll let you have the lantern. Only, remember, now! No more shooting at the wrong man!"

The half-breed made no reply.

"And you, Sedgwick. Here's the destroyer. Do you still want to kill him?"

"I suppose not," replied the artist lifelessly.

"Since his design was only against your life and not against your picture," commented Kent with a smile. "Well, our night's work is done." Lifting the lantern, he held it in the face of the half-breed. "Jim!"

"Huh?"

"When you really want to know who made those footprints, come and tell me who the body in Annalaka burying-ground is. A trade for a trade. You understand?"

The eyes stared, immovable. The chin did not quiver. Reaching for the lantern, Gansett Jim, now nine of Indian to one of negro, turned away from them to the pathway. "No," he said stolidly.

As the flicker of radiance danced and disappeared in the forest Sedgwick spoke. "Well, do you consider that we've made a friend?"

"No," answered Chester Kent; "but we've done what's as good. We've quashed an enmity."

CHAPTER XI—HEDGEROW HOUSE

Answers to the telegrams Chester Kent had despatched arrived in the form of night letters, bringing information regarding the Blairs of Hedgerow House: not sufficient information to satisfy the seeker, however. Therefore, having digested their contents at breakfast, the scientist cast about him to supply the deficiency. The feet of hope led him to the shop of Elder Ira Dennett.

Besides being an able plumber and tinker, Elder Dennett performed, by vocation, the pleasurable duties of unprinted journalism. That is to say, he was the semiofficial town gossip. As Professor Kent was a conspicuous figure in the choicest titbit the Elder had acquired in stock for many years, and as the Elder had been unable to come to speech with him since the inquest (Kent had achieved some skilful dodging), there was joy in the plumber-tinker's heart over the visit. Unhappily, it appeared that Kent was there strictly on business. He did not wish to talk of the mystery of Lonesome Cove. He wished his acetylene lamp fixed. At once, if Elder Dennett pleased.

Glum was the face of the Elder as he examined the lamp, which needed very little attention. It lightened when his visitor observed:

"I've been thinking a little of getting an electric car, to run about here in. There was a neat little one in town yesterday."

"Old Blair's," replied Dennett. "I seen you in it. Known Mr. Blair long?"

"He offered me a lift into town, very kindly. He was a stranger to me," said Kent truthfully, and with intent to deceive. "Who did you say he was?"

"Gosh sakes! Don't you know who Aleck Blair is?"

"Blair? Blair?" said Kent innocently. "Is he the author of Blair's *Studies of*

Neuropterae?”

Elder Dennett snorted. “He’s a millionaire, that’s what he is! Ain’t you read about him in the Fabric Trust investigations?”

“Oh, that Blair! Yes, I believe I have.”

Kent yawned. It was a well-conceived bit of strategy, and met with deserved success. Regarding that yawn as a challenge to his vocational powers, the Elder set about eliminating the inhuman indifference of which it was the expression. Floods of information poured from his eager mouth. He traced the history of the Blairs in and out of concentric circles of scandal; financial, political, social—and mostly untrue. Those in which the greatest proportion of truth inhered dealt with the escapades of Wilfrid Blair, the only son and heir of the household, who had burned up all the paternal money he could lay hands on, writing his name in red fire across the night life of London, Paris, and New York. Tiring of this, he had come home and married a girl of nineteen, beautiful and innocent, whose parents, the Elder piously opined, had sold her to the devil, per Mr. Blair, agent. The girl, whose maiden name was Marjorie Dorrance—Kent’s fingers went to his ear at this—had left Blair after a year of marriage, though there was no legal process, and he had returned to his haunts of the gutter, until retribution overtook him, in the form of tuberculosis. His father had brought him to their place on Sundayman’s Creek, and there he was kept in semi-seclusion, visited from time to time by his young wife, who helped to care for him.

“That’s the story they tell,” commented the Elder; “but some folks has got suspicions.”

“It’s a prevalent complaint,” murmured Kent, “and highly contagious.”

Dennett stared. “My own suspicions,” he proceeded firmly, “is that the young feller hasn’t got no more consumption than you have. I think old Blair has got him here to keep him out of the papers.”

“Publicity is not to Mr. Blair’s taste, then?”

“‘Not’s’ no word for it,” declared the human Bureau of Information, delighted at this evidence of dawning interest on the part of his hearer. “He’s

crazy against it. They says he pays *Town Titbits* a thousand dollars a year to let young Blair's name alone. I don't believe the old man would hardly stop short of murder to keep his name out of print. He's kind o' loony on the subject."

"You've been to his country place?"

"Only wunst. Mostly they have one o' them scientific plumber fellers from Boston." The Elder's tone was as essence of gall and wormwood. "Wunst I had a job there, though, an' I seen young Blair moonin' around the grounds with a man nurse."

"Quite a place, I hear," suggested Kent.

"Sailor Milt Smith is the feller that can tell you about the place as it used to be. Here he comes, up the street."

He thrust his head out of the door and called. Sailor Smith, sturdy and white, entered and greeted Kent courteously.

"Mr. Dennett was saying," remarked Kent, "that you know something of the history of Hedgerow House, as I believe they call it."

"They call it!" repeated the old sailor. "Who calls it? If you mean the Blair place, that's Hogg's Haven, that is! You can't wipe out that name while there's a man living as knew the place at its worst. Old Captain Hogg built it and lived in it and died in it. And if there's a fryin'-pan in hell, the devil is fryin' bacon out of old Hogg to-day for the things he done in that house."

"How long since did he die?"

"Oh, twenty year back."

"And the house was sold soon after?"

"Stood vacant for ten years. Then this rich feller, Blair, bought it. I don't know him; but he bought a weevilly biscuit, there. A bad house, it is—rotten bad!"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Men's bones in the brick and women's blood in the mortar."

"Was the old boy a cannibal?" asked Kent, amused by the sea veteran's heroics.

“Just as bad: slave-trader.”

“Have you ever been in the house?”

“Many’s the time, when it was Hogg’s Haven. Only once, since. They do tell that the curse has come down with the house and is heavy on the new owner’s son.”

“So I’ve heard.”

The old white head wagged bodingly. “The curse of the blood,” he said. “It’s on all that race.”

“But that wouldn’t affect the Blairs.”

“Not Aleck Blair. But the boy.”

“How so?”

“Didn’t you know there was the same strain in young Wilfrid Blair, as there was in old Captain Hogg?”

“Hogg’s oldest sister was the grandmother of this young feller’s mother, wasn’t she?” put in Elder Dennett.

“That’s right. Wilfrid Blair’s great grandmother.”

“And a bad ’un, too, I guess,” continued the Elder relishingly.

“Don’t you say it!” cried the old seaman. “The curse of the blood was on her. Strange she was, and beautiful, so my mother used to tell me; but not bad. She came in at Lonesome Cove, too.”

“Drowned at sea?” asked Kent.

“They never knew. One day she was gone; the next night her body came in. They said in the countryside that she had the gift of second sight, and foretold her own death.”

“Hum-m,” mused Kent. “And now the Blairs have changed the name of the place. No wonder.”

“There’s one thing they haven’t changed, the private buryin’-plot.”

“Family?”

“Hogg’s there, all right, an’ never a parson in the countryside dared to speak to God about his soul, when they laid him there. His nephew, too, that was as

black-hearted as himself. But the rest of the graves has got no headstones."

"Slaves?"

"Them as he kept for his own service an' killed in his tantrums. Nobody knows how many. You can see the bend of the creek where they lie, from the road, and the old willows that lean over 'em."

"Cheerful sort of person the late Mr. Hogg seems to have been. Any relics of his trade in the house?"

"Relics? You may say so! His old pistols, and compasses, guns, nautical instruments, and the leaded whalebone whip that they used to say he slept with. They've got 'em hung on the walls now for ornyments. Ornyments! If they'd seen 'em as I've seen 'em, they'd sink the dummed things in a hundred fathom o' clean sea."

"Sailor Smith was cabin-boy on one of the old Hogg fleet one voyage," explained Elder Dennett.

"God forgive me for it!" said the old man. "There they hang; and with 'em the chains and—"

"Isn't that lamp finished yet?" demanded Kent, turning sharply upon Elder Dennett.

Having paid for it—with something extra for his curtness—he led the seaman out of the place.

"You were going to say 'and handcuffs', weren't you?" he inquired.

"Why, yes. What of that?" asked the veteran, puzzled. Suddenly he brought his hand down with a slap on his thigh. "Where was my wits?" he cried. "Them irons on the dead woman's wrist—I knew I'd seen their like before! Slave manacles! They must 'a' come from Hogg's Haven!"

"Very likely. But that suspicion had better be kept quiet, at present."

"Aye, aye, sir," agreed the other. "More devilment from the old Haven? A bad house—a rotten bad house!"

"Yet I've a pressing desire to take a look at it," said Chester Kent musingly. "Going back to Annalaka, Mr. Smith? I'll walk with you as far as the road to Mr.

Sedgwick's."

Freed of the veteran's company at the turn of the road, Kent sat down and took his ear in hand, to think.

"Miss Dorrance," he mused, "Marjorie Dorrance. What simpler twist for a nickname than to transform that into Marjorie Daw? Poor Sedgwick!"

At the Nook he found the object of his commiseration mournfully striving to piece together, as in a mosaic, the shattered remnants of his work. Sedgwick brightened at his friend's approach.

"For heaven's sake, come out and do me a couple of sets of tennis!" he besought. "I'm no sport for you, I know, particularly as my nerves are jumpy; but I need the work."

"Sorry, my boy," said Kent, "but I've got to make a more or less polite call."

"Didn't know you had friends in this part of the world," said Sedgwick in surprise.

"Oh, friends!" said Kent rather disparagingly. "Say acquaintances. People named Blair. Ever know 'em?"

"Used to know a Wilfrid Blair in Paris," said the artist indifferently.

"What kind of a person was he?"

"An agreeable enough little beast; but a rounder of the worst sort. I won't go so far as to say that he shocked my moral sense in those days; but he certainly offended my sense of decency. He came back to America, and I lost track of him. Is he the man you're going to see?"

"No such luck," said Chester Kent. "I never expect to see Mr. Wilfrid Blair. Probably I shan't even be invited to his funeral."

"Oh! Is he dead?"

"His death is officially expected any day."

Sedgwick examined his friend's expression with suspicion. "Officially? Then he's very ill."

"No, he isn't ill at all."

“Don’t you think you overdo this business of mystification sometimes, Kent?”

“Merely a well-meant effort,” smiled the other, “to divert your mind from your own troubles—before they get any worse.”

With which cheering farewell Kent stepped out and into his waiting car.

CHAPTER XII—THE UNBIDDEN VISITOR

One of Kent's Washington friends once criticized the scientist's mode of motoring, as follows: "Kent's a good driver, and a fast one, and careful; but he can never rid himself of the theory that there's a strain of hunter in every well-bred motor-car."

Cross-country travel was, in fact, rather a fad of Kent's, and he had trained his light car to do everything but take a five-barred gate. After departing from the Nook, it rolled along beside Sundayman's Creek sedately enough until it approached the wide bend, where it indulged in a bit of path-finding across the country, and eventually crept into the shade of a clump of bushes and hid. Its occupant emerged, and went forward afoot until he came in view of Hedgerow House. At the turn of the stream he leaped a fence, and made his way to a group of willows beneath which the earth was ridged with little mounds. Professor Chester Kent was trespassing. He was invading the territory of the dead.

From the seclusion of the graveyard amid the willows a fair view was afforded of Hedgerow House. Grim as was the repute given it, it presented to the intruder an aspect of homely hospitable sweetness and quaintness. Tall hollyhocks lifted their flowers to smile in at the old-fashioned windows. Here and there, on the well-kept lawn, peonies glowed, crimson and white. A great, clambering rose tree had thrown its arms around the square porch, softening the uncompromising angles into curves of leafage and bloom. Along the paths pansies laughed at the sun, and mignonette scattered its scented summons to bee and butterfly. The place was a loved place; so much Kent felt with sureness of instinct. No home blooms except by love.

But the house was dead. Its eyes were closed. Silence held it. The garden buzzed and flickered with vivid multicolored life; but there was no stir from the habitation of man. Had its occupants deserted it? Chester Kent, leaning against the headstone of Captain Hogg of damnable memory, pondered and wondered.

From the far side of the mansion came the sound of a door opening and closing again. Moving quickly along the sumac-fringed course of the creek, Kent made a détour which gave him view of a side entrance, and had barely time to efface himself in the shrubbery when a light wagon, with a spirited horse between the shafts, turned briskly out into the road. Kent, well sheltered, caught one brief sufficient glimpse of the occupant. It was Doctor Breed. The medical officer looked, as always, nerve-beset; but there was a greedy smile on his lips.

Kent's mouth puckered. He took a deep breath of musical inspiration—and exhaled it in painful noiselessness, flattening himself amid the greenery, as he saw a man emerge from the rear of Hedgerow House. The man was Gansett Jim. He carried a pick and a spade and walked slowly. Presently he disappeared in the willow-shaded place of mounds. The sound of his toil came, muffled, to the ears of the hidden man.

Cautiously Kent worked his way, now in the stream, now through the heavy growth on the banks, until he gained the roadway. Once there he went forward to the front gate of Hedgerow House. The bricked sidewalk runs, thence, straight and true to the rose-bowered square porch which is the mansion's main entry. Kent paused for the merest moment. His gaze rested on the heavy black door. Heavier and blacker against the woodwork a pendant waved languidly in the faint breeze.

To the normal human being, the grisly insignium of death over a portal is provocative of anything rather than mirth. But Chester Kent, viewing the crape on Hedgerow House, laughed as he turned to the open road.

CHAPTER XIII—LOOSE ENDS

Meditation furrowed the brow of Lawyer Adam Bain. Customarily an easy-minded participant in the placid affairs of his community, he had been shaken out of his rut by the case in which Kent had enlisted him, and in which he had, thus far, found opportunity for little more than thought.

“Nobody vs. Sedgwick,” grumbled he. “Public opinion vs. Sedgwick,” he amended. “How’s a self-respecting lawyer going to earn a fee out of that? And Len Schlager standing over the grave of the *corpus delicti* with a warrant against searching, so to speak, in his hand. For that matter, this Professor Kent worries me more than the sheriff.”

A sharp humming rose in the air, and brought the idle counselor to his window, whence he beheld the prime author of his bewilderment descending from a car. A minute later the two men were sitting with their feet on one desk, a fairly good sign of mutual respect and confidence.

“Blair?” said Lawyer Bain. “No, I don’t know him, not even to see. Took Hogg’s Haven, didn’t he?”

“Then he doesn’t use this post-office?”

“No. Might use any one of half a dozen. See here.” He drew a county map from a shelf. “Here’s the place. Seven railroad stations on three different roads, within ten miles of it. Annalaka would be way out of his reach.”

“Yet Gansett Jim seems to be known here.”

“Oh; is it Blair that the Indian works for? I never knew. Closer’n a deaf mute with lockjaw, he is. Well, I expect the reason he comes here occasionally is that it’s the nearest license town.

“‘Lo! the poor Injun when he wants a drink
Will walk ten miles as easy as you’d wink.’”

“Do you know most of the post-offices around here?”

“There isn’t but one postmaster within twenty miles that I don’t call by his first name, and she’s a postmistress.”

“Then you could probably find out by telephone where the Blair family get their mail.”

“Easy!”

“And perhaps what newspapers they take.”

“H’m! Yes, I guess so.”

“Try it, as soon as you get back.”

“Back from where?”

“Back from the medical officer’s place. I think he must have returned by this time.”

“You want to see Tim Breed?”

“No; just his records. Burial permits, I suppose, are a matter of public record.”

“Yes. All you’ve got to do is to go and ask for ’em. You won’t need me.”

“Regrettable as his bad taste is,” said Kent with a solemn face, “I fear that Doctor Breed doesn’t regard me with that confidence and esteem which one reads of in illuminated resolutions.”

“And you want me as an accelerator, eh?” smiled the lawyer. “All right. It’s the Jane Doe permit you’re after, I suppose.”

“Which?”

“Jane Doe. They buried the corpse from Lonesome Cove under that name. Unidentified dead, you know.”

“Of course! Of course!” assented Kent.

“If you’re looking for anything queer in the official paper you won’t find it.”

“You’ve examined it yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Good! Nevertheless, I’d like to see the record.”

Together they went to the medical officer’s quarters. Doctor Breed had come in fifteen minutes before. Without preliminary, Lawyer Bain said:

“I want to see that Jane Doe certificate again.”

“Aren’t you afraid of wearin’ out the ink on it, Adam?” retorted the other with a furtive grin.

“And I,” said Chester Kent in his suavest manner, “venture to trouble you to show me the certificate in the case of Wilfrid Blair.”

Something like a spasm shook the lineaments of Doctor Breed’s meager face. “Blair!” he repeated. “How did you know—” He stopped short.

“How did I know that Wilfrid Blair is dead?” Kent finished for him. “Why, there has been time enough, hasn’t there?”

The physician’s hands clawed nervously at his straggling hair.

“Time enough?” he murmured. “Time enough? I’m only just back from the Blair place myself.”

“News travels faster than a horse,” observed Kent.

“It don’t travel as fast as all that,” retorted the medical officer, and shut his teeth on the sentence as if he could have bitten the tongue that spoke it.

“Ah,” commented Kent negligently. “Then he died within two hours or so?”

“This morning,” retorted the other. “It’s all in the certificate.”

“All?” inquired Kent, so significantly that Lawyer Bain gave him a quick look.

“All that’s your business or anybody else’s,” said Breed, recovering himself a bit.

“Doubtless. And I’m to be permitted to see this document?”

Breed pushed a paper across the table. “There it is. I just finished making it out.”

“I see,” said Kent, giving the paper a scant survey, “that the cause of death

is set down as ‘cardiac failure’.”

“Well. What’s the matter with that?”

“Just a trifle non-committal, isn’t it? You see, we all die of cardiac failure, except those of us who fall from air-ships.”

“That record’s good enough for the law,” declared the medical officer doggedly.

“Who was the attending physician?”

“I was.”

“Indeed! And to what undertaker was the permit issued?”

“It was issued to the family. They can turn it over to what undertaker they please.”

“Where is the interment to be?”

“Say, looky here, Mr. Man!” cried the physician, breaking into the sudden whining fury of hard-pressed timidity. “Are you trying to learn me my business? You can go to hell! That’s what you can do!”

“With your signature on my certificate?” inquired the scientist, unmoved. “I won’t trouble you so far, Doctor Breed. I thank you.”

Outside in the street, Lawyer Bain turned to his client. “You didn’t look at the Jane Doe paper at all.”

“No. I’m not so interested in that as in the other.”

“Something queer about this Blair death?”

“Why, the fact that the attending physician and the certificating officer are one and the same, that there doesn’t appear to be any real cause of death given, or any undertaker, and that the interment is too private for Breed even to speak of with equanimity, might seem so, to a man looking for trouble.”

“Not another murder?” said the lawyer.

One side of Chester Kent’s face smiled. “No,” said he positively, “certainly not that.”

“There has been a lot of scandal about young Blair, I’m told. Perhaps they’re burying him as quietly as possible just to keep out of the papers.”

“I shouldn’t consider his method of burial likely to prove particularly quiet,” returned Kent. “Of course I may be wrong; but I think not. The most private way to get buried is in public.”

“Well, if a death was crooked I’d want no better man than Breed to help cover it. By the way, the sheriff has been away since yesterday afternoon on some business that he kept to himself.”

“That also may mean something,” remarked Kent thoughtfully. “Now, if you’ll find out about that newspaper matter, I’ll go on over to Sedgwick’s. You can get me there by telephone.”

In the studio Kent found Sedgwick walking up and down with his hands behind his back and his head forward.

“Why the caged lion effect?” inquired the scientist.

“Some one has been having a little fun with me,” growled Sedgwick.

“Apparently it was one-sided. What’s this on the easel?”

“What would you take it to be?”

“Let’s have a closer look.”

Walking across the room Kent planted himself in front of the drawing-board, upon which had been fixed, by means of thumb-tacks, a square of rather soft white paper, exhibiting evidence of having been crumpled up and subsequently smoothed out. On the paper was a three-quarter drawing of a woman’s head, the delicate face beneath waves of short curly hair, turned a little from the left shoulder, which was barely indicated. Setting his useful monocle in his eye, Kent examined the work carefully.

“I should take it,” he pronounced at length, “to be a sort of a second-hand attempt at a portrait.”

“You recognize it, though?”

“It bears a resemblance to the face of the corpse at Lonesome Cove.”

“Pretty good likeness, for a thing done from memory, I think.”

“Memory? Whose memory?”

“Well—mine, for instance.”

“Oh, no. That won’t do, you know. It isn’t your style of drawing at all.”

“Setting up for an art critic, are we?”

“Aside from which you certainly wouldn’t be using this sort of paper, when you’ve cardboard to your hand.”

“So you’re not to be caught, I see,” said Sedgwick, with a nervous laugh.

“Not in so plain a trap, at any rate. Where did that precious work of art come from?”

“Heaven knows! Ching Lung found it lying on the door-step, with a cobblestone holding it down. I’d like to lay my hands on the artist.”

“You’d crumple him up as you did his little message, eh?” smiled Kent.

“At least I’d have an explanation out of him. It’s a fact though, that I lost my temper and threw that thing into a corner, when Ching first handed it to me. Then it occurred to me that it might be well worth saving. Interesting little sketch, don’t you think?”

“No.”

“What? You don’t find it interesting?”

“Profoundly. But it isn’t a sketch.”

“What would you call it, then?”

“A copy.”

“How can you tell that? You haven’t seen the original from which it was made, have you?”

“No.”

“Then, what’s the basis?”

“Quite simple. If you had used your eyes on it instead of your temper, you might have seen at once that it is a tracing. Look for yourself, now.”

Taking the magnifying monocle that Kent held out, the artist scrutinized the lines of the picture.

“By Jove! You’re right,” said he. “It’s been transferred through tracing-paper, and touched up afterward. Rather roughly, too. You can see where the copyist has borne down too hard on the lead.”

“What’s your opinion of the likeness—if it is the likeness which you suppose?” inquired Kent.

“Why, as I remember the woman, this picture is a good deal idealized. The hair and the eyes are much the same. But the lines of the face in the picture are finer. The chin and mouth are more delicate, and the whole effect softer and of a higher type.”

“Do you see anything strange about the neck, on the left side?”

“Badly drawn; that’s all.”

“Just below the ear there is a sort of blankness, isn’t there?”

“Why, yes. It seems curiously unfinished, just there.”

“If you were touching it up how would you correct that?”

“With a slight shading, just there, where the neck muscle should be thrown up a bit by the turn of the head.”

“Or by introducing a large pendant earring which the copier has left out?”

“Kent, you’re a wonder! That would do it, exactly. But why in the name of all that’s marvelous, should the tracer of this drawing leave out the earring?”

“Obviously to keep the picture as near like as possible to the body on the beach.”

“Then you don’t think it is the woman of the beach?”

“No; I don’t.”

“Who else could it possibly be?”

“Perhaps we can best find that out by discovering who left the drawing here.”

“That looks like something of a job.”

“Not very formidable, I think. Suppose we run up to the village and ask the local stationer who has bought any tracing-paper there within a day or two.”

As the demand for tracing-paper in Martindale Center was small, the stationer upon being called on, had no difficulty in recalling that Elder Dennett had been in that afternoon and made such a purchase.

“Then he must have discovered something after I left him,” said Kent to

Sedgwick, “for he never could have kept his secret if he’d had it then.”

“But what motive could he have?” cried the artist.

“Just mischief, probably. That’s enough motive for his sort.” Turning to the store-keeper Kent asked: “Do you happen to know how Mr. Dennett spent the early part of this afternoon?”

“I surely do. He was up to Dimmock’s rummage auction, an’ he got something there that tickled him like a feather. But he wouldn’t let on what it was.”

“The original!” said Sedgwick.

“What does Dimmock deal in?”

“All kinds of odds and ends. He scrapes the country for bankrupt sales, an’ has a big auction once a year. Everybody goes. You can find anything from a plough-handle to a second-hand marriage certificate at his place.”

“We now call on Elder Dennett,” said Kent.

That worthy was about closing up shop when they entered.

“Don’t your lamp work right, yet, Professor Kent?” he inquired.

“Perfectly,” responded the scientist. “We have come to see you on another matter, Mr. Sedgwick and I.”

“First, let me thank you,” said Sedgwick, “for the curious work of art which you left at my place.”

“Hay-ee?” inquired the Elder, with a rising inflection.

“Don’t take the trouble to lie about it,” put in Kent. “Just show us the original of the drawing which you traced so handily.”

The town gossip shifted uneasily from foot to foot. “How’d you know I got the picture?” he giggled. “I didn’t find it, myself, till I got back from the auction.”

“Never mind the process. Have you the original here?”

“Yes,” said Elder Dennett; and, going to his desk he brought back a square of heavy bluish paper, slightly discolored at the edges.

“That’s a very good bit of drawing,” said Sedgwick, as he and Kent bent

over the paper.

“But unsigned,” said his companion. “Now, Mr. Dennett, whom do you suppose this to be?”

“Why, the lady that stopped to talk with Mr. Sedgwick, and was killed in Lonesome Cove.”

“Then why did you leave out this earring in copying the picture?”

“Aw—well,” explained the other in some confusion, “she didn’t have no earrings on when I seen her. And it looks a lot more like, without it.”

“Your bent for gratuitous mischief amounts to a passion,” retorted the scientist. “Some day it will get you into deserved trouble, I trust.”

“I guess there ain’t no law to prevent my givin’ away a picture, if I like,” sulked the Elder.

“Perhaps you’d like to give away another one.”

Yankee shrewdness sparkled in the eye of Mr. Dennett. “Mr. Sedgwick said that was a good drawin’, and I guess he knows. I guess it’s worth money.”

“How much money, would you guess?”

“Five dollars,” replied the other, in a bold expulsion of breath.

At this moment, Sedgwick, who had been studying the picture in the light, made a slight signal with his hand, which did not escape Kent.

“Five dollars is a big price for a rough pencil sketch,” said the scientist. “I’d have to know more of the picture to pay that for it. Where did you find it?”

“In this book. I bought the book at Dimmock’s rummage auction.” He produced a decrepit, loosely-bound edition of the *Massachusetts Agricultural Reports*. “The picture was stuck in between the leaves.”

“No name in the book,” said Kent. “The flyleaf is gone. But here’s the date of publication: 1830.”

“That would be just about right,” said Sedgwick with lively interest.

“Right for what?” demanded Dennett.

Before there was time for reply, Kent had pressed a five-dollar bill into his hand, with the words:

“You’ve made a trade.”

“Wait,” protested the Elder. But the sketch was already in Sedgwick’s possession.

“It’s an Elliott,” said that gentleman. “I’m sure of it. I’ve seen his sketches before—though they’re very rare—and there’s an unmistakable touch about his pencil work.”

“In that case,” said Kent suavely, “Mr. Dennett will be gratified to know that he has sold for five dollars an article worth fifty times that.”

They left him, groaning at his door, and went to look up Dimmock, the rummage man. But he was wholly unable to throw any light on the former owner of the reports, in which the drawing had been tucked away. There the investigation seemed to be up against a blank wall.

“Isn’t it astounding!” said Sedgwick. “Here’s a portrait antedating 1830, of a woman who has just died, young. What was the woman I saw; a revenant in the flesh?”

“If you ask me,” said Kent slowly, “I should say, rather, an imitation.”

Further he would not say, but insisted on returning to the Nook. As they arrived, the telephone bell was ringing with the weary persistence of the long-unanswered. To Kent’s query, Lawyer Bain’s voice announced:

“I’ve been trying to get you for an hour.”

“Sorry,” said Kent. “Is it about the newspapers?”

“Yes,” said the lawyer. “I’ve got the information.” And he stated that four newspapers went regularly to Hedgerow House,—*The New York Star* and *Messenger* and *The Boston Eagle* to Alexander Blair, and *The Boston Free Press* to Wilfrid Blair.

Over this information Kent whistled in such melancholy tones that his host was moved to protest.

“You’re on the track of something, and you’re keeping it dark from me!”

“I’m not traveling the most brilliantly illuminated paths myself, my young friend,” replied Kent, and lapsed into silence.

The artist set the Elliott sketch beside the copy, and compared them for a time. Then he fell to wandering desolately about the studio. Suddenly he turned, walked over to his friend, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Kent, for the love of heaven, can’t you do something for me?”

“You mean about the girl?”

Sedgwick nodded. “I can’t get my mind to stay on anything else. Even this infernal puzzle of the pictures doesn’t interest me for more than the minute. The longing for her is eating the heart out of me.”

“My dear Frank,” said the other quietly, “if there were anything I could do, don’t you think I’d be doing it? It’s a very dark tangle. And first of all I have to clear you—”

“Never mind me! What do I care what people think?”

“Or what she may think?”

Sedgwick’s head drooped. “I didn’t consider that.”

“It may be the very center-point for consideration.”

“If there were only something to do!” fretted the artist. “It’s this cursed inaction that is getting my nerve!”

“If that’s all,” returned Kent slowly, “I’ll give you something to do. And I fancy,” he added grimly, “it will be sufficiently absorbing to take your mind from your troubles for a time at least.”

“Bring it on. I’m ready!”

“All in good time. Meantime, here’s a little test for your intelligence. Problem,” continued Kent, with a smile: “when the bewildered medieval mind encountered a puzzle too abstruse for ordinary human solution, what was its refuge?”

“Magic, I suppose,” said Sedgwick after some consideration.

“Good! You get a high mark. The medieval mind, I may observe, was at times worthy of emulation.”

“Explain.”

“I am seriously thinking, my dear young friend,” said Kent solemnly, “of

consulting an astrologer."

"You're crazy!" retorted Sedgwick.

"I wish I were for a few hours," said Kent with entire seriousness. "It might help."

"Well, that's where I'll be if you don't find something for me to do soon. So, come on, and materialize this promised activity."

"If you regard a trip to the Martindale Public Library as activity, I can furnish that much excitement."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Consult the files of the newspapers, and pick out a likely high-class astrologer from the advertisements."

"That has a mild nutty flavor; but it doesn't excite any profound emotion in me except concern for your sanity."

"You've said that before," retorted Kent. "However, I'm not sure I shall take you with me, anyway."

"Then that isn't the coming adventure?"

"No; nothing so mild and innocuous."

"Are you asking me to run some danger? Is it to see *her*?" said Sedgwick eagerly.

"Leave her out of it for the present. There is no question of seeing her now."

The artist sighed and turned away.

"But the danger is real enough, and pretty ugly."

"Life isn't so wholly delightful to me just at present that I wouldn't risk it in a good cause."

"But this is a bigger risk than life. There's an enterprise forward which, if it fails, means the utter damning of reputation. What do you say?"

"Kent," said Sedgwick after a moment's thought, "I'm thirty-two years old. Ten years ago I'd have said 'yes' at the drop of the question. Perhaps I value my life less and my good name more, than I did then. What's the inducement?"

"The probable clearing up of the case we're on."

“Is that all the information I get?”

“I’d rather not tell you any more at present. It would only get on your nerves and unfit you for the job.”

Again Sedgwick fell into thought.

“When I come to tackle it,” continued Kent, “I may find that one man could do it alone. But—”

“Wait. You’re going into it, are you?”

“Oh, certainly.”

“With, or without me?”

“Yes.”

“Why couldn’t you have said so at first and saved this discussion?” cried his host. “Of course, if you’re in for it, so am I. But what about *your* reputation?”

“It’s worth a good deal to me,” confessed the scientist. “And I can’t deny I’m staking it all on my theory of this case. If I’m wrong—well, it’s about the finis of my career.”

“See here, Chet!” broke out his friend. “Do you think I’m going to let you take that kind of a chance for me?”

“It isn’t for you,” declared the other with irritation. “It’s for myself. Can’t you understand that this is *my* case? You’re only an incident in it. I’m betting my career against—well, against the devil of mischance, that I’m right. As I told you, I’m naturally timid. I don’t plunge, except on a practically sure thing. So don’t get any foolish notions of obligation to me. Think it over. Meantime, do you care to run over to the library? No? Well, for the rest of the evening I can be found—no; I can not be found, though I’ll be there—in room 571.”

“All right,” said Sedgwick. “You needn’t fear any further intrusion. But when is our venture?”

“To-morrow night,” replied Kent, “Wilfrid Blair having officially died, as per specifications, to-day.”

CHAPTER XIV—THE LONE FISHERMAN

Trout are a tradition rather than a prospect in Sundayman's Creek. Some, indeed, consider them a myth. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, however, and a fisherman, duly equipped, might have been observed testing the upper reaches of the stream on the morning of July tenth. Although his rod and tackle were of the best, his apparel was rough, not to say scrubby. An old slouch hat was drawn down over his forehead, and staring blue glasses sheltered his eyes against the sun, which was sufficiently obscured—for most tastes—by a blanket of gray cloud, promising rain. Under arching willow, and by promising rock, his brown hackle flickered temptingly, placed by an expert hand. But, except for one sunfish who had exhibited suicidal curiosity, there was none to admire his proficiency. One individual, indeed, had witnessed it, but without admiration—an urchin angling under a bridge for bullheads.

"W'at yer gittin' with that rig?" he had inquired with the cynicism of the professional.

"Oh, some snags, and an occasional branch, and now and then a milkweed," returned the angler amiably.

"Well, you can't fish below the nex' bend," the urchin informed him. "Them folks that bought Hogg's Haven has wire-fenced off the creek."

"I had just as lief get tangled in a wire fence as any other kind," replied the angler with cheery pessimism, whipping his fly into a shaded spot where a trout would surely have been lurking if the entire *salmo* family hadn't departed for the Happy Fishing Grounds, several generations back, in consequence of the pernicious activities displayed by an acquisitive sportsman with an outfit of

dynamite in sticks.

“Suit yerself,” retorted the boy. “You won’t get nothin’, anyhow.”

The rumble of a vehicle distracted his attention, and he looked up to observe with curiosity a carriage full of strangers pass across the bridge. The strangers were all in black. The angler had looked up, too; but immediately looked away again, and turned to continue his hopeful progress toward the bend. Not until he had rounded the curve did he pause for rest. Beyond sight of the youthful Izaak Walton, he waded out upon the bank, produced a glass, and applied it to his eyes, turning it upon the willow grove on the borders of the Blair estate. The briefest of surveys satisfied him, and he resumed his fishing and his waiting. He was waiting for the funeral service of Wilfrid Blair.

Notices in the Boston and New York papers had formally designated the burial as “Private”. That invaluable aid, Lawyer Adam Bain, who seemed to have his fingers on the pulse of all the county’s activities, had informed Kent that telegraphic summons had gone out to a few near relatives, and that the relatives, together with a clergyman, were expected that morning. That is why Chester Kent, a famous master of the art of fly fishing, was whipping a “dead” stream.

For a patient hour longer his questing flies explored unresponsive nooks and corners. At the end of that time he sighted a figure coming from Hedgerow House, and dodged into a covert of sumac. The glass brought out clearly the features of Alexander Blair, set, stern, and pale. Blair walked swiftly to the willow thicket where lay Captain Hogg and his unnamed victims, looked down into the raw fresh excavation, and turned away. Another man, issuing from the house, joined him. From his gestures Alexander Blair seemed to be explaining and directing. Finally both returned to the house.

“Handling the whole business himself,” commented Kent. “I like his courage, anyway.”

Half an hour afterward the little funeral procession moved from the house. There was no hearse. Six men carried the coffin. They were all strangers to Kent,

and their clothes gave obvious testimony of city origin. Half a dozen other men, and three women, heavily veiled, followed. Kent thrust his glass into his pocket and lifted his rod again. By the time the clergyman had begun the service Kent was close to the obstructing fence. He could hear the faint solemn murmur of the words. Then came the lowering of the casket. The onlooker marked the black and silver sumptuousness of it, and thought of the rough hemlock box that enclosed the anonymous body in Annalaka churchyard. And, as his fly met the water, he smiled a little, grim, wry smile.

It was over soon. The black-clad group drifted away. One member paused to glance with curiosity at the roughly clad angler making his way up stream. For Kent judged it wise to absent himself now, foreseeing the advent of one keener-eyed than the mourners, whose scrutiny he did not desire to tempt. Shortly Gansett Jim came to the grave. Hastily and carelessly he pitched in the earth, tramped it down, and returned. Carriages rolled to the door of Hedgerow House, and rolled away again, carrying the mourners to their train. Not until then did Kent snug up his tackle and take the road.

No sooner had he reached the hotel and changed into dry clothes, than he made haste to the Nook, and thus addressed Sedgwick. “Now I’m your man for that tennis match.”

“Kent, I don’t like your looks,” observed his friend, remarking the scientist’s troubled eyes.

“Don’t you? Where are the implements of warfare?”

“Here they are,” said the other, producing rackets and balls. “You look to me done up.”

“Well, the great game is always something of a gamble, and being usually played for higher stakes than money, is likely to get on one’s nerves.”

“The great game?” repeated Sedgwick inquiringly, giving the words Kent’s own emphasis.

“Yes. The greatest of all games. You know the Kipling verse, don’t you?”

“‘Go stalk the red deer o’er the heather.
Ride! Follow the fox if you can!
But for pleasure and profit together
Afford me the hunting of Man.’”

“So, we’re man-hunting, then, to-night,” said the artist quickly.

“Far from it,” replied Kent, with fervency. “Let’s drop the subject for the time being, won’t you? I’ve had a morning none too pleasant to look back on, and I’ve got an evening coming none too pleasant to look forward to. Therefore, I shall probably give you the licking of your life on the tennis-court.”

“As to the evening,” began Sedgwick, “while I’m—”

“Frank,” cried Kent, “there’s a query trying to dislodge itself from your mind and get put into words. Don’t let it!”

“Why?”

“Because at one single question from you I’ll either bat you over the head with this racket or burst into sobs. It’s a toss-up which.” He threw the implement in the air. “Rough or smooth?” he called.

Kent played as he worked, with concentration and tenacity, backing up technical skill. Against his dogged attack, Sedgwick’s characteristically more brilliant game was unavailing, though the contest was not so uneven but that both were sweating hard as, at the conclusion of the third set, they sought a breathing space on the terraced bank back of the court.

“That’s certainly a good nerve sedative,” said the artist breathing hard; “and not such rotten tennis for two aged relics of better days, like ourselves.”

“Not so bad by any means,” agreed his opponent cheerfully. “If you had stuck to lobbing, I think you’d have had me, in the second set. Wonder how our spectator enjoyed it,” he added, lowering his voice.

“What spectator? There’s no one here, but ourselves.”

“Oh, I think there is. Don’t be abrupt about it; but just take a look at that lilac copse on the crest of the hill.”

“Can’t see any one there,” said Sedgwick.

“No more can I.”

“Then what makes you think there’s any one?”

“The traditional little bird told me.”

“Meaning, specifically?”

“Literally what I say. There’s the bird on that young willow. You can see for yourself it’s trying to impart some information.”

“I see a grasshopper-sparrow in a state of some nervousness. But grasshopper-sparrows are always fidgety.”

“This particular one has reason to be. She has a nest in that lilac patch. A few minutes ago she went toward it with a worm in her beak; hastily dropped the worm, and came out in a great state of mind. Hence I judge there is some intruder near her home.”

“Any guess who it is?”

“Why it might be Gansett Jim,” replied Kent in a louder voice. “Though it’s rather stupid of him to pick out a bird-inhabited bush as a hiding-place.”

The lilac bush shook a little, and Gansett Jim came forth.

“He went to Carr’s Junction,” said the half-breed curtly.

“You found his trail?” asked Kent.

The other nodded. “This morning,” he said.

“Find anything else?”

“No. I kill him if I get him!” He turned and vanished over the rise of ground back of the court.

“Now what does that mean?” demanded Sedgwick in amazement.

“That is Gansett Jim’s apology for suspecting you,” explained Kent. “He is our ally now, and this is his first information. What a marvelous thing the bulldog strain in a race is! Nobody but an Indian would have kept to an almost hopeless trail as he has done.”

“The trail of the real murderer?” cried Sedgwick.

Kent shook his head. “You’re still obsessed with dubious evidence,” he

remarked. “Let me see your time-table.”

Having studied the schedules that the artist produced for him, he nodded consideringly. “Boston it is, then,” he said. “As I thought. Sedgwick, I’m off for two or three days of travel—if we get through this night without disaster.”

CHAPTER XV—THE TURN OF THE GAME

Night came on in murk and mist. As the clouds gathered thicker, Chester Kent's face took on a more and more satisfied expression. Sedgwick, on the contrary, gloomed sorely at the suspense. Nothing could be elicited from the director of operations, who was, for him, in rather wild spirits. The tennis match seemed to have sweated the megrims out of him. He regaled his chafing friend with anecdotes from his varied career; the comedy of the dynamiter's hair; the tragedy of the thrice fatal telephone message at the Standard Club; the drama of the orchid hunt on Weehawken Heights. From time to time he thrust a hand out of the window. Shortly after midnight there was a splatter of rain on the roof.

"Good!" said Kent, stretching elaborately. "Couldn't be better. Life's a fine sport!"

"Couldn't be worse, I should think," contradicted Sedgwick.

"Depends on the point of view, my boy. No longer can my buoyant spirit support your determined melancholy—without extraneous aid. The time has come for action. Be thankful. Get on your coat."

Sedgwick brightened at once. "Right-o!" he said. "Get your lamps lighted and I'll be with you."

"No lights. Ours is a deep, dark, desperate, devilish, dime-novel design."

"Ending, most likely, in the clutch of some night-hawk constable for violation of the highway laws."

"Possibly. We've got to chance it. 'Come into the garden, Maud,'" chanted the scientist.

Sedgwick started. "I thought we were going to motor somewhere. What

about the garden?”

“About the garden? Why, somewhere about the garden there must be, I should guess, certain implements which we need in our enterprise.” He executed a solemn dance-step upon the floor and warbled,

> “‘Oh, a pickax and a spade, a spade,
> For and a shrouding sheet!’”

A sudden thought struck cold into the heart of Sedgwick. “Be sensible, can’t you?” he exclaimed. “What do you want with a pickax and spade!”

“My wants are few and small. If you haven’t a pick, two spades will do. In fact, they’ll be better. I was merely sticking to the text of my *Hamlet*.”

His shoulders slumped, his jaw slackened, and, as his figure warped into the pose of the gravedigger he wheezed out the couplet again. The cold thought froze around Sedgwick’s heart. He visioned the wet soil of Annalaka burying-ground, heaped above a loose-hasped pine box, within which went forward the unthinkable processes of earth reclaiming its own.

“Good God! Is it *that*?” he muttered.

The mummer straightened up. “In plain prose, do you possess two spades?” he inquired.

Speechless, Sedgwick went out into the dark, presently returning with the tools. Kent took them out and disposed them in the car.

“Get in,” he directed.

“If we had to do this, Kent,” said Sedgwick, shuddering in his seat, “why haven’t we done it before?”

The other turned on the power. “You’re on the wrong track as usual,” he remarked. “It couldn’t be done before.”

“Well, it can’t be done now,” cried the artist in sudden sharp excitement. “It won’t do. Stop the car, Kent!”

Kent’s voice took an ominously deliberate measure. “Listen,” said he; “I am

going through with this—now—to-night. If you wish to withdraw—”

“That’s enough,” growled the artist. “No man alive can say that to me.”

The car slowed up. “I beg your pardon, Frank,” said Kent. “We’re both of us a little on edge to-night. This is no time for misunderstandings. What is on your mind?”

“Just this. Annalaka burying-ground is watched. Lawyer Bain said as much. Don’t you remember? He told us that the house next door is occupied by an old sleepless asthmatic who spends half her nights in her window overlooking the graves.”

The car shot forward again. “Is that all?” asked Kent.

“Isn’t it enough?”

“Hardly. We’re not going within miles of Annalaka.”

“Then our night’s work is not—” Kent could feel his companion’s revolt at the unuttered word, and supplied it for him.

“Grave robbery? It is.”

“Where?”

“In a private burying-ground on the Blairs’ estate.”

“Wilfrid Blair’s grave? When was the funeral?”

“This morning. I was among those present, though I don’t think my name will be mentioned in the papers.”

“Why should you have been there?”

“Oh, set it down to vulgar curiosity,” said Kent.

“Probably you’d say the same if I asked you the motive for this present expedition. I suppose you fully appreciate the chance we are taking?”

“Didn’t I tell you that it was rather more than a life-and-death risk?”

Something cold touched Sedgwick’s hand in the darkness. His fingers closed around a flask. “No, no Dutch courage for me. Where is this place?”

“On Sundayman’s Creek, some fourteen miles from the Nook as the motor-car flies.”

“Fourteen miles,” repeated Sedgwick musingly, following a train of thought

that suddenly glowed, a beacon-light of hope. “And these Blairs have some connection with the dead woman of the cove, the woman who wore *her* jewels.” His fingers gripped and sank into Kent’s hard-fibered arm. “Chet, for the love of heaven, tell me! Is she one of these Blairs?”

“No nonsense, Sedgwick,” returned the other sternly. “You’re to act,—yes, and *think*—under orders till the night’s job is done.”

There was silence for nearly half an hour, while the car slipped, ghostlike, along the wet roadway. Presently it turned aside and stopped.

“Foot work now,” said Kent. “Take the spades and follow.”

He himself, leading the way, carried a coil of rope on his shoulders. For what Sedgwick reckoned to be half a mile they wallowed across soaked meadows, until the whisper of rain upon water came to his ears.

“Keep close,” directed his guide, and preceded him down a steep bank.

The stream was soon forded. Emerging on the farther side they scrambled up the other bank into a thicker darkness, where Sedgwick, colliding with a gnarled tree trunk, stood lost and waiting. A tiny bar of light appeared. It swept across huddled and half-obliterated mounds, marked only by the carpet of myrtle —that faithful plant whose mission it is to garland the graves of the forsaken and the forgotten—shone whitely back from the headstone of the old slave-trader, came to a rest upon a fresh garish ridge of earth, all pasty and yellow in the rain, and abruptly died.

“Too dangerous to use the lantern,” murmured Kent. “Take the near end and dig.”

Delving, even in the most favorable circumstances, is a fairly stern test of wind and muscle. In the pitch blackness, under such nerve-thrilling conditions, it was an ordeal. Both men, fortunately, were in hard training. The heavy soil flew steadily and fast. Soon they were waist deep. Kent, in a low voice, bade his fellow toiler stop.

“Mustn’t wear ourselves out at the start,” he said. “Take five minutes’ rest.”

At the end of three minutes, Sedgwick was groping for his spade. “I’ve got

to go on, Chet," he gasped. "The silence and idleness are too much for me."

"It's just as well," assented his commander. "The clouds are breaking, worse luck. And some one might possibly be up and about, in the house. Go to it!"

This time there was no respite until, with a thud which ran up his arm to his heart, Kent's iron struck upon wood. Both men stood, frozen into attitudes of attention. No sound came from the house.

"Easy now," warned Kent, after he judged it safe to continue. "I thought that Jim dug deeper than that. Spade it out gently. And feel for the handles."

"I've got one," whispered Sedgwick.

"Climb out, then, and pass me down the rope."

As Sedgwick gained the earth's level, the moon, sailing from behind a cloud, poured a flood of radiance between the tree trunks. Kent's face, as he raised it from the grave, stretching out his hand for the cord, was ghastly, but his lips smiled encouragement.

"All right! One minute, now, and we're safe."

"Safe!" repeated the other. "With that opened grave! I shall never feel safe again."

From between the earthen walls Kent's voice came, muffled. "Safe as a church," he averred, "from the minute that we have the coffin. Take this end of the rope. Got it? Now this one. It's fast, fore and aft. Here I come."

With a leap he clambered out of the excavation. He took one end of the rope from Sedgwick's hand. "All ready to haul?" he inquired in matter-of-fact tones.

"Wait. What are we going to do with this—this *thing*?" demanded his co-laborer. "We can never get it to the car."

A low chuckle sounded from the shrubbery back of them. The resurrectionists stood, stricken.

"An owl," whispered Sedgwick at length.

"No," replied Kent in the same tone. Then, in full voice, and with vivid urgency, "*Haul*!"

Up came the heavy casket, bumping and grating. Even through the rope Sedgwick felt, with horror, the tumbling of the helpless sodden body within. With a powerful effort Kent swung his end up on the mound. The lantern flashed. By its gleam Sedgwick saw Kent striving to force his spade-edge under the coffin lid, to pry it loose. The chuckle sounded again.

“That’s enough,” said a heavy voice, with a suggestion of mirthful appreciation.

Sheriff Len Schlager stepped from behind a tree. He held a revolver on Kent. Sedgwick made a swift motion and the muzzle swung accurately on him.

“Steady, Frank,” warned Kent anxiously.

“I’m steady enough,” returned the other. “What a fool I was not to bring a gun.”

“Oh, no,” contradicted the scientist. “Of what use is my gun? We’re in the light, and he is in the shadow.”

“So you’ve got a gun on you, eh?” remarked the sheriff, his chuckle deepening.

“I didn’t say so.”

“No; but you gave yourself away. Hands up, please. Both of you.”

Four hands went up in the air. Kent’s face, in the light, was very downcast, but from the far corner of his mouth came the faintest ghost of a whistled melody—all in a minor key. It died away on the night air and the musician spoke in rapid French.

“*Attention! La ruse gagne. Quand lui donnerai le coup de pied, battez-le á terre.*”

“What’s that gibberish?” demanded Schlager.

“Very well,” said Sedgwick quickly, in the tone of one who accepts instructions. “I’ll be still enough. Go ahead and do the talking.”

“Better both keep still,” advised the deceived sheriff. “Anything you say can be used against you at the trial. And the penalty for body-snatching is twenty years in this state.”

“Yes; but what constitutes body-snatching?” murmured Kent.

“You do, I guess,” retorted the humorous sheriff. “Steady with those hands. Which pocket, please, Professor?”

“Right-hand coat, if you want my money,” answered the scientist sullenly.

“Nothing like that,” laughed the officer. “Your gun will do, at present.”

“I haven’t got any gun.”

“I heard you say it! Remember, mine is pointed at your stomach.”

“Correct place,” approved Kent, quietly shifting his weight to his left foot. “It’s the seat of human courage. Well!” as Schlager tapped pocket after pocket, without result, “you can’t say I didn’t warn you. *Now*, Frank!”

With the word there was a sharp spat as the heel of Kent’s heavy boot, flying up in the *coup de pied* of his own devising, caught the sheriff full on the wrist breaking the bones, and sending the revolver a-spin into the darkness. As instantly Sedgwick struck, swinging full-armed, and Schlager went down, half-stunned.

“Pin him, Frank,” ordered Kent.

But Sedgwick needed no directions, now that resolute action was the order of the moment. His elbow was already pressed into the sheriff’s bull neck. Schlager lay still, moaning a little.

“Good work, my boy,” approved Kent, who had retrieved the revolver.

“Who clubbed me?” groaned the fallen man. “I didn’t see no third feller. And what good’s it going to do you, anyway? There you are, and there’s the robbed grave. Exaggerated by assault on an officer of the law,” he added technically.

“That is right, too, Kent,” added Sedgwick with shaking voice. “Whatever we do, I don’t see but what we are disgraced and ruined.”

“Unless,” suggested Kent with mild-toned malice, “we rid ourselves of the only witness to the affair.”

A little gasp issued from the thick lips of Len Schlager. But he spoke with courage, and not without a certain dignity. “You got me,” he admitted quietly. “If

it’s killin’—why, I guess it’s as good a way to go as any. An officer in the discharge of his duty.”

“Not so sure about the duty, Schlager,” said Kent with a change of tone. “But your life is safe enough, in any event. Pity you’re such a grafter, for you’ve got your decent points. Let him up, Sedgwick.”

Relieved of his assailant’s weight, Schlager undertook to rise, set his hand on the ground, and collapsed with a groan.

“Too bad about that wrist,” said Kent. “I’ll take you back in my car to have it looked after as soon as we’ve finished here.”

“I s’pose you know I’ll have to arrest you, just the same.”

“Don’t bluff,” retorted the other carelessly. “It wastes time. Steady! Here comes the rest of the party.”

Across the moonlit lawn moved briskly the spare alert figure of the owner of Hedgerow House. His hand grasped a long-barreled pistol. He made straight for the grove of graves. Within five yards of the willows he stopped, because a voice from behind one of them had suggested to him that he do so.

“I also am armed,” the voice added.

Hesitancy flickered in Mr. Blair’s face for a brief moment. Then, with set jaw, he came on.

“Two men of courage to deal with in a single night. That’s all out of proportion,” commented the voice with a slight laugh. “Mr. Blair; I really should dislike shooting you.”

“Who are you?” demanded Mr. Blair.

“Chester Kent.”

“What are you doing on my property at this hour?”

“Digging.”

“Ah!” It was hardly an exclamation; rather it was a contained commentary. Mr. Blair had noted the exhumed casket. “You might better have taken my offer,” he continued after a pause of some seconds. “I think, sir, you have dug the grave of your own career.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“Schlager! Are you there?”

“Yes, Mr. Blair. They’ve broken my wrist and got my gun.”

Mr. Blair took that under consideration. “It doesn’t strike me that you are much of a man-hunter,” he observed judicially. “Who are *they*?”

“Francis Sedgwick is the other, at your service,” answered the owner of that name.

An extraordinary convulsion of rage distorted the set features of the elderly man.

“You!” he cried. “Haven’t you done enough—without this! I would come on now if hell yawned for me.”

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 that coffin and then go.”

“No,” said the master of Hedgerow House; and it was twenty years 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 lusterless 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 one hundred and twenty with it at a hundred yards’ range.”

“If he should fire, Frank, wing him. And then, whatever happens, get that casket open. That is the one thing you *must* do—for me and yourself.”

“But he may kill you,” cried Sedgwick in an agony of apprehension.

“He may; but I think he won’t.”

“Won’t he!” muttered the older man on an indrawn breath. “I’d rather it was the other scoundrel. But either—or both.”

Sedgwick stepped to within two paces of him. “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.”

“Don’t take any chances, Mr. Blair,” besought the sheriff. “They’re desperate characters. Look what they done to me!”

“There’s a testimonial,” murmured Kent, as he picked up his spade, “for one who has always worked on the side of law and order.”

He worked the blade 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, Chet.”

“You must. As a witness. Come! Brace up!”

Setting the bull's-eye lantern down, Kent produced a pocket-knife. 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 swathings reveal their contents. "If I keel 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. I see a light stirring there now. We—I must do what I may to shelter them."

A glimmer shone from the ground floor of one of the wings. Thither Mr. Blair ran, calling out as he went. When he returned, his face was like a mask.

"Now," said he, "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 scoundrel 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 to-night. Mr. Blair,” he added, “you’ve refused my offer. It is still open. And as an extra, 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.

While the sheriff, mourning softly over his fractured wrist, sat watching the house in case of alarm, the scientist, the painter, and the trust magnate, sweating amid the nameless graves, hurriedly reinterred 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 six o’clock we’ll find you unconscious below the cliffs where you fell in the darkness. Eh?”

Despite his pain the sheriff grinned. “I guess that’s as good as the next lie,” he acquiesced. “You fight fair, Professor.”

“Then answer me a fair question. What were you doing at Hedgerow House to-night?”

“Why, you see,” drawled the official, “I saw you fishin’ that stream, and it come 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.

CHAPTER XVI—THE MEETING

Hope had surged up, sudden and fierce, in Sedgwick's heart, at the gleam of the candle in Hedgerow House. He was ready for any venture after the swift climax of the night, and his hope hardened into determination. Faithfully he had taken Kent's orders. But now the enterprise was concluded, to what final purpose he could not guess. He was his own man again, and, perhaps, behind that gleam from the somber house, waited the woman—his own woman. Silently 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 détour, gained the rear of the house, and skirting the north wing, stepped forth in the bright moonlight, the prescience of passion throbbing wildly in his breast.

She sat at the window, head high to him, bowered in roses. Her face was turned slightly away. Her long fine hands lay, inert, on the sill. Her face, purity 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!*”

There was, in the one syllable, so much of terror that his heart shivered; so much of welcome that his heart leaped; so much of joy that his heart sang.

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. To-morrow all will be right. Only go.”

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

“I! 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 light’,”

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 can not leave you here. Come with me now. I will find some place for you to-night, and to-morrow we will be married."

With a sharp movement she shrank back from him.

"Married! To-morrow!" 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."

[image]

She sat at the window, bowered in roses.

"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 practises, 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, no. Not that!”

“Not?” exclaimed Sedgwick. “Then—”

“Marjorie,” interrupted Mr. Blair, “do you know this man?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“Since when?”

“Since two weeks.”

“And he has come here before?”

“No.”

“Then why do I find him here with you to-night: this night of all nights?”

“He is not here with me,” said she, flushing.

“I came from—from where you saw me,” began Sedgwick, “on a reckless impulse. Believe me, sir—”

“One moment! Marjorie, 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-bowered window framed only emptiness. Sedgwick whirled upon the other man. “Of course,” he said with deceptive calmness; “you know that you lie.”

“I know that I speak truth,” retorted Mr. Blair with so profound a conviction that the other was shaken.

“Is it possible that you really believe it?” he exclaimed.

“So possible that, but for the scandal, I would do what I can not 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 farce 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 reassert her sway 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 bedraggled, but with a fire at his heart, the night-farer came to his home and roused Kent from slumber on the studio couch.

“And where have you been?” demanded the scientist.

“She was in the house. I’ve seen her.”

“Exactly what I wished to prevent. I don’t think you’ve done yourself any good.”

“Any good,” groaned his friend. “She left me believing that I am the murderer of the unknown woman.”

“Indeed! You’ve done worse, even, than I had feared. Tell me.”

In brief outline, Sedgwick told of the moonlight interview. Kent gripped at his ear lobe, and for a time sought silently to draw clarification of ideas from it.

“Do you know,” he said at length, “I wouldn’t wonder if Blair really thought you the murderer.”

“I would,” declared Sedgwick savagely. “He knows who murdered that woman. It was his own son, whom he pretended to bury, for a blind.” And the artist proceeded to outline eagerly his newly developed idea.

“That’s an interesting theory,” said Chester Kent slowly. “A very interesting and ingenious theory. I’ll admit to you now that something of the sort occurred to my mind early in the development of the mystery, but I forsook it because of one fact that rather militates against its probability.”

“What is that?”

“The fact,” replied Kent with a slow smile, “that Wilfrid Blair was dead before his father ever learned of the tragedy of Lonesome Cove.”

CHAPTER XVII—CHANCE SITS IN

Suit case at his side, Chester Kent stood on the platform of the Martindale 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, with that peculiar flatness of obstinacy which goes with an assertion repeatedly made. “Not you, nor any other man, can do it for me.”

“Not you, nor any other man, should attempt it at all, now,” retorted the scientist.

“That’s the view of the pedant,” cried Sedgwick. “What do you know of love?”

“Nothing, except as a force obstructive to reason.”

“But, Chet, 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.”

“She supposed it was.”

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 —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."

"Have you still got astrology on the brain?"

"Hopelessly," smiled Kent.

"Luck go with you. And I—"

"Yes: and you?" queried Kent, as the other hesitated.

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

"If I were employed to work on this case," observed Kent dispassionately; "if it were a mere commission, undertaken on money terms, I should throw it up right here and now." He took a long strong pull at the extension end of his ear, and whistled a bar or two of *Pagliacci*. "Do you know room 571 at the Eyrie?" he asked abruptly.

"No. Yes; I do, too. That's your temple of white silence, isn't it?"

"Correct. Humor me thus far. 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 need to," 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."

"Tricked!" 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," he 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. Good-by.”

“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, if 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: a young face, but saddened and weary, whose unforgettable appeal of wistfulness had looked out upon him from the canvas in Sedgwick’s studio.

“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 girlish face turned. The composed eyes scanned a serious-looking man of indeterminate age, clad in the cool elegance of light gray, and obviously harassed by some catastrophic embarrassment.

“I beg p-p-pardon,” stuttered 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. “I’m M-M-Mrs. Blair and I suppose you’re Mr. Kent.”

The soft music of her laughter made Kent savage. “Damn!” he muttered beneath his breath; and then went direct to the point. “There are things I want to speak to you about. I wish to get on your car.”

“Certainly not,” replied she decisively. “I do not know you.”

“I am a friend of Francis Sedgwick’s.”

The warm blood flushed her cheeks rose-color, and died away. Her lips quivered. So much of mute helpless misery did her face show, that Kent’s embarrassment vanished.

“Try to believe me,” he said earnestly, “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.

“Forgive me, but that is foolish. Your mind has been led astray. Sedgwick is absolutely blameless.”

“Please,” she begged in a half whisper, “I can’t listen. I mustn’t listen. I have tried to make myself believe that he acted in self-defense. But, even so, don’t you see, it must stand forever between us?”

“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. “To-morrow morning, then.”

And he walked, whistling a melancholious theme, to the platform. Another whistle answered his. It was that of his train, disappearing around the curve a mile down the track.

Belated, but elated, Kent, after some inquiries, reached his destination by an intricate exchange of trolley lines, and 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.”

“Very soothing to the mind,” murmured the professor, after welcoming his guest. “So many matters turn out wrong in this world that one finds relief in a problem which usually turns out right.”

“I’ve a little problem of my own which may or may not turn out right,” said Kent, “and I want your help.”

“It is long since you have done me the honor to consult me,” said the old scholar, smiling. “Not, indeed, since the instance of the cabinet member who was obsessed with a maniacal hatred of apples.”

“Without you, I should never have so much as approached the solution of Mr. Carolan’s recall,” returned Kent. “But this present affair calls for aid, not advice.”

“Either is equally at your service,” replied the philosopher courteously.

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. For her mother’s sake, if not for her own, I should have watched over her, and warded her against the danger of an ‘advantageous’ marriage, such as is always imminent in the set which she entered. Ah, well, I live among the dust and cobwebs of my own dim interests—and 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 judicially, “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.”

The old scholar made a sweeping gesture of surprising swiftness, suggesting incongruously the possession of great muscular power. The cards flew far and wide, from the stand.

“Mist and moonshine, my dear sir! Moonshine and mist! Marjorie is one of those rare human beings who deal honestly with themselves. Her husband’s death can be nothing but a welcome release. She feels no grief; she will pretend to none. Not even to herself. I will take you to her to-morrow.”

“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 sewers. Hers was but a marriage of glamour, at best. And, at the first scent of foulness in her nostrils, it became only a marriage of law. Society does her the justice to believe her faithful to him, and praises the devotion with which, since his breakdown and retirement, she has given up her world to devote herself to his care. Essentially

the girl is Puritan in her concepts of duty."

"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, 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 discovered by his half-breed servant, mortally injured, and was brought home to die."

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

"As I understand it."

"Well, it's ingenious."

"But untrue?"

"In one vital particular, at least."

"Are you at liberty to state what it is?"

"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. Nevertheless, the theory which he propounds as to his son’s assailant, is natural enough, from his point of view. Although,” added Kent thoughtfully, “it will be most unfortunate if it leads him to distrust Mrs. Blair.”

“Marjorie? Am I to infer that her good name is involved?” demanded the old man.

“Hardly her good name. Mr. Blair 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.”

“You trust so? With this horror standing between them!”

“It must be cleared away,” said Kent earnestly. “Circumstantial 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 Hawkill Heights. I have reason to

believe that this person came there to meet some one from the Blair place; also, that he can tell me, if I can find him, the facts which I lack to fill out my theory. 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. Be that as it may, he has a surprising clientele of which he makes the most, for he is a master-hand at cozening women out of their money. More than once he has been in the courts."

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

"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, to-morrow, sir."

"Clarity of vision go with you, amid your riddles," said his host with a smile, shuffling the cards which Kent had gathered up for him. "Here is my all-sufficient riddle. Watch me now, how I meet and vanquish the demon mischance." He turned up a card. "Ah," said he with profound satisfaction, "the seven of spades. My luck runs in sevens."

CHAPTER XVIII—THE MASTER OF STARS

Ten o’clock of 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 honor. 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 coat tails, for embarrassment had again engulfed the scientist’s soul. He seized himself by the lobe of the ear with that grip which drowning men reserve for straws. And—to continue the comparison—the ear sank with him beneath the waves of confusion. Mrs. Blair’s first words did not greatly help him.

“Have you an earache, Professor Kent?” she inquired maliciously.

“Yes. No. It’s a habit,” muttered the caller, releasing his hold and immediately resuming it.

“Isn’t it very painful?”

“Of course it is,” said he testily; “when I forget to let go in time—as I frequently do.”

“As you are doing now,” she suggested.

Kent bestowed a final yank upon the dried fount of inspiration, and gave it up as hopeless.

“I don’t know exactly how to begin,” he complained.

“Then I will help you,” said she, becoming suddenly grave. “You are here

to speak to me of some topic, wholly distinct from one forbidden phase."

"Exactly. You make it difficult for me by that restriction. And I rather like difficulties—in reason. Let me see. Have you lost any jewels lately, Mrs. Blair?"

The girl-widow started. "Yes. How did you know?"

"You have made no complaint, or published no advertisements for them?"

"I have kept it absolutely secret. Father Blair insisted that I should do so."

"They were valuable, these jewels?"

"The rings were, intrinsically, but what I most valued was the necklace of rose-topazes. They were the Grosvenor topazes."

"A family relic?"

"Not my own family. My husband's mother left them to me. They came down to her from her grandmother, Camilla Grosvenor."

"You speak that name as if it should be recognizable by me."

"Perhaps it would, if you were a New Englander. She was rather a famous person in her time. C. L. Elliott painted her—one of his finest portraits, I believe. And—and she was remarkable in other respects."

"Would you mind being more specific? It isn't mere curiosity on my part."

"Why, my uncle could have told you more. He knows all about the Grosvenors. My own knowledge of Camilla Grosvenor is merely family tradition. She was a woman of great force of character, and great personal attraction, I believe, though she was not exactly beautiful. When she was still under thirty she became the leader of a band of mystics and star-worshipers. I believe that she became infatuated with one of them, a young German, and that there was an elopement by water. This I remember, at least: her body washed ashore on the coast not very far from Hedgerow House."

"At Lonesome Cove?"

"Yes. The very name of it chills me. For my husband it had an uncanny fascination. He used to talk to me about the place. He even wanted to build there; but Mr. Alexander Blair wouldn't listen to it."

"Would you know the face of Camilla Grosvenor?"

“Of course. The Elliott portrait hangs in the library at Hedgerow House.”

Kent took from under his coat the drawing purchased from Elder Dennett.

“That is the same,” said Mrs. Blair unhesitatingly. “It isn’t quite the same pose as the finished portrait. And it lacks the earring which is in the portrait. But I should say it is surely Elliott’s work. Couldn’t it be a preliminary sketch for the portrait?”

“Probably that is what it is.”

“Can you tell me where it came from?”

“From between the pages of an old book. It must have been carelessly thrown aside. The book has just been sold at an auction in Martindale Center, and the drawing found by a man who didn’t appreciate what it was. I bought it from him.”

“That’s rather wonderful, isn’t it?”

“There are more wonders to come. Tell me how your necklace was lost, please.”

“I don’t know. On the afternoon of July fifth I left Hedgerow House rather hurriedly. My maid, whom I trust implicitly, was to follow with my trunks, including my jewel case. She arrived, a day later, with part of the jewels missing, and a note from Father Blair saying that there had been a robbery, but that I was to say nothing of it.”

“July fifth,” remarked Kent with his lids dropped over the keen gaze of his eyes. “It was the following morning that the unknown body was found on the beach near Mr.—near the Nook.”

Her face showed no comprehension. “I have heard nothing of any body,” she replied.

“Did none of the talk come to your ears of a strange woman found at Lonesome Cove?”

“No. Wait, though. After the funeral, one of the cousins began to speak of a mystery, and Mr. Blair shut him off.”

“Your necklace was taken from that body.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Was she the thief?” she asked eagerly.

“The person who took the necklace from the body is the one for whom I am searching. Now, Mrs. Blair, will you tell me, in a word, how your husband met his death?”

Her gaze did not falter from his, but a look of suffering came into her eyes, and the hands in her lap closed and opened, and closed again.

“Perhaps I can save you by putting it in another form. Your father-in-law gave you to understand, did he not, that Wilfrid Blair met and quarreled with—with a certain person, and was killed in the encounter which followed?”

“How shall I ever free myself from the consciousness of my own part in it?” she shuddered. “Don’t—don’t speak of it again. I can’t bear it.”

“You won’t have to, very long,” Kent assured her. “Let us get back to the jewels. You would be willing to make a considerable sacrifice to recover them?”

“Anything!”

“Perhaps you’ve heard something of this man?”

Drawing a newspaper page from his pocket, Kent indicated an advertisement outlined in blue pencil. It was elaborately “displayed,” as follows:

Your Fate is Written in the Heavens

Consult The
Star-Master

Past, Present and Future are Open Books to His Mystic Game—Be Guided Aright in
Business, Love & Health
Thousands to Whom he has pointed Out the Way of the Stars Bless Him for His Aid.

Consultation by Appointment
Preston Jax
Suite 77 Mystic Block, 10 Royal Street

Mrs. Blair glanced at the announcement.

“Some of my friends have been to him,” she said. “For a time he was rather a fad.”

“But you haven’t ever consulted him, yourself?”

“No, indeed.”

“That is well. I want you to go there with me to-day.”

“To that charlatan? Why, Professor Kent, I thought you were a scientific man.”

“Translate ‘science’ down to its simplest terms in Saxon English,” said Kent.

“It would be ‘knowing’, I suppose.”

“Exactly. When I think a man knows something which I wish to know but do not know, I try to possess myself of his knowledge, whether he is microscopist, astrologer, or tinsmith. To that extent I am a scientist.”

“And you expect the stars to tell us something about my lost topazes?”

“They seem to have had some influence on the career of the original owner,” said Kent, with his half smile. “And one star has already lighted up the beginning of the trail for me.”

“I can’t understand your motives,” she said. “But I know that I can trust you. When do you wish me to go?”

“I have an appointment for us at high noon.”

As the clock struck twelve, Kent and Mrs. Blair passed from the broad noonday glare of the street into the tempered darkness of a strange apartment. It was hung about with black cloths, and lighted by the effulgence of an artificial half-moon and several planets, contrived, Kent conjectured, of isinglass set into the fabric, with arc lights behind them. A soft-footed servitor, clad throughout in black, appeared from nowhere, provided chairs, set a pitcher of water beside them, and vanished silently. A faint, heavy, but not unpleasant odor as of incense, hovered in the air. The moon waxed slowly in brightness, illumining the two figures.

“Very well fixed up,” whispered Kent to his companion. “The astrologer is now looking us over.”

In fact, at that moment, a contemplating and estimating eye was fixed upon them from a “dead” star in the farther wall. The eye beheld a girl whose delicate but vivid loveliness was undimmed by the grisly trappings of mourning which a Christian civilization has borrowed from barbarism to belie its own Christianity withal, rested a moment, and passed, with more of scrutiny, to her companion.

Preston Jax did not, as a rule, receive more than one client at a time. Police witnesses travel in pairs, and the Star-master was of a suspicious nature. Only an extraordinary fee, and the cultured languor of the voice which requested the appointment over the telephone, had induced him to relax his rule. Now, however, his uneasiness was appeased. He beheld a gentleman clad in such apparel as never police spy nor investigating agent wore; a rather puzzling “swellness” (the term is culled from Mr. Jax’s envious thoughts), since it appeared to be individual, without being in any particular conspicuous. Mr. Jax, an adept in extracting information, wondered if he could persuade the visitor to disclose his tailor to the stars; for he was, himself, in light vacational moments at Atlantic City and in the Waldorf-Astoria something of a “dresser”. One point, however, the connoisseurship of the Star-master could hardly approve: the monocle displayed in his visitor’s left eye, though it was reassuring to his professional judgment. The visitor was obviously “light”.

Quitting his peep-hole, the Star-master pressed a button. Strains of music, soft and sourceless, filled the air (from a phonograph muffled in rugs). The moon glow paled a little. There was a soft rustle and fluctuation of wall draperies in the apartment. The light waxed. The Star-master stood before his visitors.

They beheld a man of undistinguished size and form, eked out by a splendid pomposity of manner. To this his garb contributed. All the signs of the zodiac had lent magnificence to the long, black, loose robe with gaping sleeves, which he wore. Mrs. Blair noted with vague interest that it was all hand embroidered.

Pale and hard the face rose from this somber and gorgeous appareling. It

was a remarkable face, small, calm, and compacted of muscles. Muscles plumped out the broad cheeks; muscles curved about the jaws; muscles worked delicately along the club of a nose. The chin was just one live, twitching muscle. Even the faint screwed lines at the eye-corners suggested muscle. And, withal, there lurked in the countenance a suggestion of ingenuousness. The man looked like a bland and formidable baby. He looked even more like a puma.

With a rhythmical motion of arms and hands he came forward, performed a spreading bow of welcome, and drew back, putting his hand to his brow, as if in concentration of thought. Marjorie Blair felt an unholy desire to laugh. She glanced at Professor Kent, and, to her surprise, found him exhibiting every evidence of discomposure. He fidgeted, fanned himself with his hat, mopped his brow and palpably flinched under the solemn regard of the mage.

“Stupid of me,” he muttered, in apology. “Gets on one’s nerves, you know. Awesome, and all that sort of thing, fussing with the stars.”

Preston Jax bestowed a patronizing smile upon his visitor. Protectiveness, benign and assured, radiated from him.

“Fear nothing,” said he. “The star forces respond to the master-will of him who comprehends them. Madam, the date, year, month and day of your birth, if you please?”

“March 15th, 1889,” replied Mrs. Blair.

Propelled by an unseen force, a celestial globe mounted on a nickeled standard, rolled forth. The Star-master spun it with a practised hand. Slowly and more slowly it turned, until, as it came to a stop, a ray of light, mysteriously appearing, focused on a constellation.

“Yonder is your star,” declared the astrologist. “See how the aural light seeks it.”

“Oh, I say!” murmured he of the monocle. “Weird, you know! Quite gets on one’s nerves. Quite!”

“Sh-h-h-h!” reproved Preston Jax. “Silence is the fitting medium of the higher stellar mysteries. Madam, your life is a pathway between happiness and

grief. Loss, like a speeding comet, has crossed it here. Happiness, like the soft moon glow, has beamed upon it, and will again beam, in fuller effulgence."

With beautifully modulated intonations he proceeded, while one of his visitors regarded him with awestruck reverence, and the other waited with patience—but unimpressed, so the orator felt, by his gifts. His voice sank, by deep-toned gradations into silence. The ray winked out. Then the woman spoke.

"Is it possible for your stars to guide me to an object which I have lost?"

"Nothing is hidden from the stars," declared their master. "Their radiance shines not alone upon the broad expanses of existence, but also into the smallest crevices of life. You seek jewels, madam?" (Kent had let this much out, as if by accident, in the morning's conversation.)

"Yes."

"Your birth stone is the bloodstone. Unhappy, indeed, would be the omen if you lost one of those gems." (He was fishing and came forward toward her, almost brushing Kent.)

"But I say," cried Kent in apparently uncontrollable agitation; "did your stars tell you that she had lost some jewelry? Tell me, is that how you knew?"

[image]

See how the aural light seeks it.

In his eagerness he caught at the astrologer's arm, the right one, and his long fingers, gathering in the ample folds of the gown, pressed nervously upon the wrist. Preston Jax winced away. All the excited vapidity passed from Kent's speech at once.

"The jewels which this lady has lost," he said very quietly, "are a set of unique rose-topazes. I thought—in fact, I felt that you could, with or without the

aid of your stars, help her to recover them."

Blackness, instant and impenetrable, was the answer to this. There was a subdued flowing sound of drapery, as if some one were brushing along the wall. Kent raised his voice the merest trifle.

"Unless you wish to be arrested, I advise you not to leave this place. Not by either exit."

"Arrested on what charge?" came half-chokingly out of the darkness.

"Theft."

"I didn't take them."

"Murder, then."

"My God!" So abject was the terror and misery in the cry that Kent felt sorry for the wretch. Then, with a certain dogged bitterness: "I don't care what you know; I didn't kill her."

"That is very likely true," replied Kent soothingly. "But it is what I must know in detail. Find your foot lever and turn on the light."

The two visitors could hear him grope heavily. As the light flashed on, they saw, with a shock, that he was on all fours. It was as if Kent's word had felled him. Instantly he was up, however, and faced around upon Marjorie Blair.

"Who was she?" he demanded. "Your sister?"

Mrs. Blair was very pale, but her eyes were steady and her voice under control as she answered:

"I do not know."

"You must know! Don't torture me! I'm a rat in a trap."

"I'm sorry," she said gently, "that I can't help you. But I do not know."

"You, then." The Star-master turned upon Kent. "What am I up against? How did you find me?"

Thrusting his hand in his pocket the scientist brought out a little patch of black cloth, with a single star skilfully embroidered on it.

"Wild blackberry has long thorns and sharp," he said. "You left this tatter on Hawkill Cliffs."

At the name, the man's chin muscle throbbed with his effort to hold his teeth steady against chattering.

"At first I suspected an army officer. When I found that the cloth was below grade, the only other starred profession I could think of was astrology. As the highest class astrologer now advertising, you seemed likely to be the man. When I found, first, that you were out of town on July fifth, and, just now, by a somewhat rough experiment, that you had suffered a wound of the right wrist, I was certain."

"What do you want?"

"A fair exchange. My name is Chester Kent."

The Star-master's chin worked convulsively. "The Kent that broke up the Coordinated Spiritism Circle?"

"Yes."

"It's ill bargaining with the devil," observed Preston Jax grimly. "What's the exchange?"

"I do not believe that you are guilty of murder. Tell me the whole story, plainly and straight, and I'll clear you in so far as I can believe you innocent."

For the first time the seer's chin was at peace.

"You want me to begin with this lady's necklace?"

"Why, yes. But after that, begin at the beginning."

"The topazes are cached under a rock near the cliff. I couldn't direct you, but I could show you."

"In time you shall. One moment. As you realize, you are under presumption of murder. Do you know the identity of the victim?"

"Of Astræa? That's all I know about her. I don't even know her last name."

"Why Astræa?"

"That's the way she signed herself. She seemed to think I knew all about her, without being told."

"And you played up to that belief?"

"Well—of course I did."

“Yes, you naturally would. But if you had no name to write to, how could you answer the letters?”

“Through personal advertisements. She had made out a code. She was a smart one in some ways, I can tell you.”

“Have you any of the letters here?”

“Only the last one.”

“Bring it to me.”

Obediently as an intimidated child, the astrologer left the room, presently returning with a plain sheet of paper with handwriting on one side. Kent, who almost never made a mistake, had forgotten in his absorption in the matter of the document, the presence, even the existence, of Marjorie Blair. He was recalled to himself, with a shock, as he felt her shoulder touch his. Involuntarily he whirled the sheet behind him.

“Let me see the rest of it, please,” she said calmly enough.

Kent nodded. With drooping head, and chin a-twitch, the Master of Stars stood studying them, while they read the letter together. It was in two handwritings, the date, address and body of the letter being in a clear running character, while the signature, “Astræa,” was in very fine, minute, detached lettering. The note read:

> “All is now ready. You have but to carry out our arrangements implicitly. The place is known to you. There can be no difficulty in your finding it. At two hours after sundown of July the fifth we shall be there. Our ship will be in waiting. All will be as before. Fail me not. Your reward shall be greater than you dream.
>
> *Astræa.*”

Kent looked askance at Mrs. Blair. She was very white, and her sensitive lips quivered a little, but she contrived, with an effort of courage which he marked

with a flashing access of admiration, to smile reassuringly.

"Don't fear for me," she said. "We Dorrances are of firm fiber."

"So I see," he said warmly. He folded and pocketed the letter.

"Had you ever been to this place before?" Kent asked of Jax.

"No."

"Then how did you expect to find it?"

"She sent me a map. I lost it—that night."

"What about the ship?"

"I wish you'd tell *me*. There wasn't any ship that I could see."

"And the reference to all being as it was before?"

"You've got me again, there. In most every letter there was something about things I didn't understand. She seemed to think we used to know each other. Maybe we did. Hundreds of 'em come to me. I can't remember 'em all. Sometimes she called me Hermann. My name ain't Hermann. Right up to the time I saw her on the Heights I was afraid she was taking me for somebody else and that the whole game would be queered as soon as we came face to face."

"It seems quite probable," said Kent with a faint smile, "that you were taken for some one else. Your personal appearance would hardly betray the error, however."

"Well, if I was taken for another man," said the puzzled astrologist, "why didn't she say so when she saw me?"

"What did she say when she saw you?"

"Why, she seemed just as tickled to set eyes on me as if I were her Hermann twice over."

"Exactly," replied Kent with satisfaction.

"Well, how do you account for that?"

Passing over the query, the other proceeded: "Now, as I understand it, you put yourself in my hands unreservedly."

"What else can I do?" cried Preston Jax.

"Nothing that would be so wise. So do not try. I shall want you to come to

Martindale Center on call. Pack up and be ready."

"But the police!" quavered Jax. "You said the place was guarded, and I'd be pinched if I tried to get out."

"Oh, no," retorted Kent, with a smile. "That wouldn't have been true, and I never lie. You inferred that, and wrongly, from my little ruse to keep you from running away. That you would be arrested eventually, if you attempted escape was true. It still is true."

"I believe it," replied Preston Jax fervently, "with you on my trail."

"Come, Mrs. Blair," said Kent. "Remember, Jax: fair play, and we shall pull you through yet."

In the taxi, Marjorie Blair turned to Kent. "You are a very wonderful person," she said—Kent shook his head—"and, I think, a very kind one." Kent shook his head again. "Be kind to me, and leave me to go home alone."

Kent stopped the cab, stepped out and raised his hat. She leaned toward him.

"Just a moment," she said. "Perhaps I ought not to ask; but it is too strong for me. Will you tell me who the woman was?"

Kent fell back a step, his eyes widening.

"You don't see it yet?" he asked.

"Not a glimmer of light. Unless she was some—some unacknowledged member of the family."

"No. Not that."

"And you can't tell me who she was?"

"Yes; but not just now. Try to be patient for a little, Mrs. Blair."

"Very well. Your judgment is best, doubtless. Of course you know whose hand wrote the body of that letter?"

"Yes; try not to think of it," advised Kent. "It isn't nearly so ugly as it seems."

She looked at him with her straight, fearless, wistful glance.

"He had left me nothing to love," she said sadly; "but to find disgrace and

shame even to the end of his life! That is hard. That it should have been my husband who gave the thing most precious to me to another woman! But why did he write the letter to Preston Jax for her to sign?”

Chester Kent shook his head.

CHAPTER XIX—THE STRANGE TRYST

Midnight found Kent in the throes of literary effort. He was striving to compose a letter to Sedgwick that should, in turn, compose the recipient's perturbed feelings. It concluded, with some acerbity:

"You've made a pretty complete idiot of yourself once. Don't try to eclipse your own record."

By which he purposed to convey to the artist the fact that his presence in Boston was neither desirable nor advisable. As he was about to affix his signature, a knock brought him to the door of his hotel room.

"Letter for you," announced the messenger boy.

Kent signed the book and received a broad thin envelope sealed in golden hued wax with the impress of a star, and addressed in typewriting to his own name.

"Confound all fools who sign their letters on the outside!" said Kent, scowling at the seal. "What has that planetary lunatic got to say that won't keep?"

What Preston Jax had to say was, first, in the form of a very brief note; secondly, in the shape of a formidable-looking document. The note began "Esteemed sir," concluded "Yours remorsefully," and set forth, in somewhat exotic language, that the writer, fearing a lapse of courage that might confuse his narrative when he should come to give it, had "taken pen in hand" to commit it to writing, and would the recipient "kindly pardon haste?" Therewith, twenty-one typed pages.

"Haste!" cried Chester Kent grievously. "Why, he's written me the story of

his life!”

Indeed, at a cursory glance, it appeared so. The initial paragraph opened, “I was born of poor but honest parents.” Chester Kent groaned. A little farther down the page the phrase, “Oh, that those innocent days of my happy childhood might return!” rose and smote him in the eyes. Chester Kent snorted. A desperate leap landed him in the midst of page five, where he encountered this gem, “With these fateful words the kind old minister laid a faltering hand upon my head. But enough!”

“Quite enough!” agreed Chester Kent, and kicked the Star-master’s document into a corner.

It fell in a crumpled heap with one sheet, curving in upward protuberance, conspicuous to the eye. On this sheet there was handwriting, and the handwriting was the same as that of the note Marjorie Blair had identified. Kent retrieved the paper, laid it on his desk, selected a likely spot for one more plunge, and dived into the turbid flood of words. And behold! as he turned, so to speak, the corner of the narrative, the current became suddenly clear. The muddled eloquence fell away; and the style crystallized into the tense quick testimony of the prime actor in a drama, intensely and shudderingly felt.

The reader ran through it with increasing absorption. Then, pencil in hand, he attacked the first part of the precious screed and emerged from a scene of literary carnage with one brief paragraph in hand and the slaughtered bodies of many eloquent pages strewing the floor. That one paragraph stated that Preston Jax, whose real name was John Preston, had, after a rebellious boyhood, run away to sea, lived two years before the mast, picked up a smattering of education, been assistant and capper for a magnetic healer, and had finally formulated a system of astrological prophecy that won him a slow but increasing renown. The gist of the system was to assign some particular and often imaginary star to every subject, and, by a natural aptitude for worming out secrets from the credulous, lead them along the celestial paths of mysticism to a point where he could reach their pocketbooks. He had been specially successful

with women. One bit of his philosophy Kent had preserved unaltered.

“They bite slower than men; but when they do take hold, they swallow the hook so deep that you’re lucky to get it back at all.”

An hour’s work with a pencil that should have been blue resolved the document, under Kent’s skilful and remorseless editorship, into its salient elements. Obviously it was impossible to put it into alien hands for copying. Kent ordered up a typewriter and copied it himself. The duplicate he enclosed in his letter to Sedgwick. The original he put aside to sleep upon. Thus it ran:

“This Astræa affair looked good from the first,” so began Preston Jax’s confession, as beheaded and stripped down by its editor. “It looked like one of the best. You could smell money in it with half a nose. She bit first on one of the occult ads—the number four of the old series, a double-column with display in heavy-faced italics and leaded out strong. That ad always was a good woman-fetcher. Her first letter came in on a Monday, I recollect. It was a big mail. There were a lot of Curiositys and a couple of Suspiciouses, and this was one of half a dozen in the True Believers’ pile. Irene, my assistant, had put the red pencil on it, when she sorted out the mail, to show it was something special. But don’t get her into this, Professor Kent. If you do, it’s all off, jewels and all. Irene has always been for the straight star business and forecast game, and no extras or side lines. Besides, we were married last week.

“What attracted Irene’s red pencil, and caught me right away, was the style of the thing. The handwriting was classy. The paper was elegant. There was something rich about it all. This was no Biddy, pinching out the missis’ stationery to make a play with. She quoted poetry, swell poetry. First off she signed herself ‘An Adept’. I gave her the Personal, No. 3, and followed it up with the Special Friendly, No. 5. Irene never liked that No. 5. She says it’s spoony. Just the same, it fetches them. But not this one. She began to get personal and warm-hearted, all right, and answered up with the kindred-soul racket. But come to Boston? Not a move! Said she couldn’t. There were reasons. It looked like the old game—flitter-headed wife and jealous husband. Nothing in

that game, unless you go in for the straight holdup. And blackmail was always too strong for my taste. So I did the natural thing; gave her special readings and doubled on the price. She paid like a lamb.

"Then, blame if it didn't slip out she wasn't married at all! I lost that letter. It was kind of endearing. Irene put up a howl. It was getting too personal for her taste. I told her I would cut it out. Then I gave my swell lady another address and wrote her for a picture. Nothing doing. But she began to hint around at a meeting. One day a letter came with a hundred-dollar bill in it. Loose, too, just like you or me might send a two-cent stamp. 'For expenses', she wrote, and I was to come at once. Our souls had returned to recognize and join each other, she said. Here is the only part of the letter I could dig up from the waste basket:

Here the specimen of handwriting that had caught Kent's eye was pasted upon the document.

"'You have pointed out to me that our stars, swinging in mighty circles, are rushing on to a joint climax. Together we may force open the doors to the past, and sway the world as we sought to do in bygone days.'

"And so on and cetera," continued the narrative. "Well, of course, she was nutty, that is, about the star business. But that don't prove anything. The dippiest star-chaser I ever worked was the head of a department in one of the big stores, and the fiercest little business woman in business hours, you ever knew. It's the romantic in the sex that sets them skidding when it comes to stars, and such like. And Astræa was not a patch on some of them that has been paying me good sane money for years. That was the letter she first called me Hermann in and signed Astræa to. Said there was no use pretending to conceal her identity any longer from me. Seemed to think I knew all about it. That jarred me some. And, with the change of writing in the signature, it all looked pretty queer. You remember the last letter with the copperplate-writing name at the bottom? Well, they all came that way after this; the body of the letter very bold and careless; signature written in an entirely different hand. I took it to Chorio, the character-reader, and he said so, too. What's more, he advised me to quit the game. Said there was

trouble back of that handwriting. Those character fellows ain’t such fools, either!

“But hundred-dollar bills loose in letters mean a big stake. I wrote her I would come, and I signed it ‘Hermann’, just to play up to her lead. Irene got on and threw a fit. She said her woman’s intuition told her there was danger in it. Truth is, she was stuck on me herself, and I was on her; but we did not find it out until after the crash. So I was all for prying Astræa loose from her money, if I had to marry her to do it. She wrote some slush about the one desperate plunge together and then the glory that was to be ours. That looked like marriage to me.

“You saw the last letter. It had me rattled, but not rattled enough to quit. There was a map in it of the place for the meeting. That was plain enough. But the ‘our’ and ‘we’ business in it bothered me. It looked a bit like a third person. I had not heard anything about any third person. What is more, I did not have any use for a third person in this business. The stars forbade it. I wrote and told her so, and said if there was any outsider rung in, the stellar courses would have a sudden change of heart. Then I put my best robe in a bag and bought a ticket for Carr’s Junction. You can believe that while I was going through the woods I was keeping a bright eye out for any third party. Well, he was not there; not when I arrived, anyway. Where he was all the time, I do not know. I never saw him. But I heard him later. I can hear him yet at night, God help me!

“She was leaning against a little tree at the edge of the thicket when I first saw her. There was plenty of light from the moon and it sifted down through the trees and fell across her head and neck. As neat a bit of stage-setting for my business as I could have fixed up myself; and I am some hand at that. You have seen my place, and you know. I noticed a queer circlet around her neck. The stones were like soft pink fires. I had not ever seen any like them before and I stood there trying to figure whether they were rubies and how much they might be worth. While I was wondering about it, she half turned and I got my first good look at her face.

“She was younger than I had reckoned on, and not bad to look at, but queer, queer! Something about her struck me all wrong; gave me a sort of ugly shiver.

Another thing struck me all right, though. That was that she had jewels on pretty much all her fingers. In one of my letters to her I gave her a hint about that: told her that gems gave the stars a stronger hold on the wearer, and she had taken it all in. She certainly was an easy subject.

"A bundle done up in paper was on the ground near her. I ducked back, very still, and got into my robe. The arrangement in her letter was for me to whistle when I got there. I whistled. She straightened up.

"'Come,' she said. 'I am waiting.'

"Her voice was rather deep and soft. But it wasn't a pleasant softness. Some way I did not like it any better than I liked her looks. It was too late to back out, though. I stepped out into the open and gave her the grand bow.

"'The Master of the Stars, at your command,' I said.

"'You are not as I expected to see you,' she said.

"That was a sticker. It might mean most anything. I took a chance.

"'Oh, well,' I said, 'we all change.'

"It went. 'We change as life changes,' she said. 'They never found you, did they?'

"From the way she said it I saw she expected me to say 'No'. So I said 'No'.

"'That was left for me to return and do,' she went on with a kind of queer joy that gave me the shivers again.

"'Yes,' I agreed, wishing I knew what she was driving at, but sticking to my text. 'And here we are.'

"'Together,' says she. 'Isn't it wonderful! After all these years. The instant I saw your statement in the newspaper I knew it was your soul calling to mine across the ages.'

"You know, Professor Kent, I thought that was so good I made a note of it for future business use. While I was saying it over to myself she gave me a jar:

"'Our boat is at the shore,' she said.

"In that last letter she mentioned a ship. And, now, here was this boat

business. (Afterward I looked for a sign of either, but could not find any. I thought perhaps it would explain the other part of the ‘we’ and ‘our’.) If I was going to elope by sea I wanted to know it, and I said as much.

“‘Are you steadfast?’ she asked.

“Well, there was only one answer to that. I said I was. She opened her package and took out a coil of rope. It was this gray-white rope, sort of clothes-line, and it looked strong.

“‘What now?’ I asked her.

“‘To bind us together,’ she said. ‘Close, close together, and then the plunge! This time there shall be no failure. They shall not find one of us without the other. You are not afraid?’

“Afraid! My neck was bristling. The woman was proposing, as near as I could make out, that we go out in a boat, tie ourselves together, and jump overboard. She seemed to think it was an encore to some previous performance.

“‘Go slow,’ I said, thinking mighty hard. ‘I don’t quite see the point of this.’

“‘All, all is as it is foreordained in the stars; the curve of the astral courses, the illimitable, unchangeable curve that has made us what we are, and shall draw us on and on to our mighty destiny. You, you have pointed out the way.’

“That is what she gave me, waving her arms in the air.

“Didn’t I curse myself for not remembering what I had written her? No clue, except that the poor soul was plumb dippy—too dippy for me to marry at any price. It wouldn’t have held in the courts. Yet, there might have been five thousand dollars of diamonds on her. It was a tight place. I wanted to duck the whole thing; but the rings held me. I have always been dotty about diamonds. I suppose she felt me weakening. Women are queer, that way.

“‘You dare to break our pact?’ she says in a voice like a woman on the stage. Then she changed and spoke very gently. ‘You are looking at these gewgaws,’ she said, and took a diamond circlet from her finger. ‘What do these count for?’ And she put it in my hand. Another ring dropped at my feet. Mind, she was giving them to me. I do not know if it would hold in law, she being a

lunatic; but I was going to take all I could, on the chance, and watch for a getaway. The diamonds had me hypnotized.

"'These are as nothing compared to what we shall have,' she went on, 'after the plunge. Wait!'

"She had dropped the rope, and now she went into her paper parcel again, kneeling at my side. I had stooped to look for the fallen ring, when I felt her hand slide up my wrist, and then a quick little snap of something cold and close. A bracelet, I thought. And it was a bracelet!

"'Forever! Together!' she said, and stood up beside me, chained to me by the handcuffs she had slipped on my right wrist and her left. Never you think your nerve is sound till you have felt something like that. I thought mine was—and I squalled aloud like a child at a ghost.

"'Hush!' she said, and her free arm pressed across my mouth.

"'How much to let me off?' I asked as soon as I could get breath. You see, it flashed on me that it was a trap. You can never tell, in our line, when the detectives may be after you, or what kind of a game they'll put up. I looked around for the rest of the bunch to come and jump me, but I didn't see a thing. Her next words put me on.

"'The stars! The stars!' she whispered. 'See ours, how they light our pathway across the sea. The sea that awaits us!'

"More breath came back to me. It wasn't a trap, then. She was only a crazy woman, that I had to get rid of. I looked down at the handcuff. It was of iron, and had dull rusted edges. A hammer would have made short work of it; but I did not have any hammer. I did not even have a stone. There would be stones in the broken land beyond the thicket. I thought I saw a way.

"'Yes. Let's go,' I said.

"We set out. At the edge of the thicket was a flattish rock with small stones near it. Here I pretended to slip. I fell with my right wrist across a rock, and caught up a cobblestone with my left hand. At the first crack of the stone on the handcuff I could feel the old iron weaken. I got no chance for a second blow. Her

hands were at my throat. They bit in. Then I knew it was a fight for my life.

“She was light; but she was strong like a panther. If her dress bound her, I was as bad off in my robe. At the first grip I was forced back into a bush, and sprawled there, in a tangle of branches and flying cloth. Somehow, I twisted her fingers from my throat. We struggled out into the moonlight again. I got a fair look at her face, and I guess I went mad myself, with the terror of it. The next thing I remember clearly she was quiet on the ground and I was hammering, hammering, hammering at my wrist with a blood-stained stone. I do not know if it was her blood or mine. Both, maybe, for my wrist was like pulp when the iron finally cracked open and I was free. I caught a glimpse of blood on her temple. I suppose I had hit her there with the stone. She looked dead.

“All I wanted was to think—to think—to think. How could I think with her lying there? I crept out of sight of her and kneeled down. Her star, the star I had faked for hers, was shining in my eyes like a cold glare. That very minute a wisp of cloud blew across and wiped it out, and I heard myself squeal again. I was pretty much dotty, I guess.

“While I was trying to think she came alive. She didn’t stir slow and moan like I have seen men, in my sea days, when they were knocked out. She was on her feet before I knew it, and off at a dead run. The broken handcuff went jerking and jumping around her as she ran. That was an awful night full of awful things. But the one worst sight of all—worse, even, than the finding of her afterward—was that mad figure leaping over the broken ground toward the cliff’s edge.

“Even if I had tried to follow I never could have caught her. And she was going straight for her death. She dropped down out of sight into a hollow and came up on the rise beyond. I yelled to her to stop, for God’s sake to stop. Then I held my breath to listen for her scream when she went over. I never heard it.

“But I heard something else. I heard a man’s voice. It was clear and strong and high. There was death in it, I tell you, Mr. Kent, living horror gripped at the throat that gave that cry. Then there was a rush of little stones and gravel down the face of the cliff. That was all.

“Beyond me the ground rose. I ran up on it. It gave me a clear view of the cliff-top. I thought sure I would see the man who had cried out, from there. Not a sight of him! Nothing moved in the moonlight. I thought he must have gone over the cliff, too. I threw myself down and buried my face.

“How long I lay on the ground I do not know. The wisp of cloud had blotted out the woman’s star, now, and by that I knew she was dead. But the moon was shining high. It gave me light enough to see my way into the gully, and I stumbled and slid down through to the beach.

“I found her body right away. It lay with the head against a rock. But there was no sign of the man’s body, the man who had yelled. So I thought perhaps he had not gone over the cliff, and I sat and waited to see if he would come and care for her. It was quite clear to me what I must do, if he did not come. Perhaps my own brain was queer from the shock and the beating she had given me with her manacled wrist; but I felt that before I went away from there I must conceal the cause of her death, and everything about it that I could. If it was known how she was killed, they would be more likely to suspect me.

“I went back and got the rope. I got an old grating from the shore. I dragged the body into the sea and let it soak. I lashed it to the grating. I stripped the jewelry from her. But I could not take it. That would have made me a murderer.

“There is a rock in the gully that I marked. Nobody else would ever notice it. Under it I hid the jewelry. I can take you to it, and I will.

“I got on my coat and sunk my robe in a creek, and got myself to the railroad station for a morning train. And when I got home I married Irene, and I am through with the crooked work forever.

“This is the whole truth. I did not kill her. I do not know to-day who or what she is. I have looked in the papers, and there is nothing, and that is so strange that I would think it was all a fearful dream, if it was not for my smashed-up wrist. But if any human being knows more about the death of Astræa, it must be the man who shouted as she fell from the cliff, and who went away and did not come back.

“And may God have no mercy for me if this is not all a true statement, so far as I know the truth.

“(Signed) *Preston Jax*, S-M.”

CHAPTER XX—IN THE WHITE ROOM

"*Annalaka,* July 15.

"*To Hotel Eyrie*, Martindale Center: Dust 571 and send up seven chairs. *Chester Kent.*"

"Now I wonder what that might mean?" mused the day-clerk of the Eyrie, as he read the telegram through for the second time. "Convention in the Room of Mystery, maybe?"

To satisfy his curiosity he went up to the room himself. Its white bareness confirmed a suspicion of long standing.

"Any man," he remarked to the scrub woman, "who would pay five a day for a room just to put nothing at all in it, has sure got a kink in his cogs."

Nor did the personnel of the visitors who, in course of the late afternoon, arrived with requests to be shown to 571, serve to efface this impression. First came the sheriff from Annalaka. He was followed by a man of unmistakably African derivation, who gave the name of Jim and declined to identify himself more specifically. While the clerk was endeavoring, with signal lack of success, to pump him, Lawyer Adam Bain arrived, and so emphatically vouched for his predecessor as to leave the desk-lord no further excuse for obstructive tactics. Shortly afterward Alexander Blair came in, with a woman heavily veiled, and was deferentially conducted aloft. Finally, Chester Kent himself appeared, accompanied by Sedgwick and a third man, unknown to the clerk, pompously arrayed in frock coat and silk hat, and characterized by a painfully twitching chin.

“Who have come?” Kent asked the clerk.

That functionary ran over the list. “Looks like something to do with the woman found in Lonesome Cove last week,” he essayed hopefully.

Kent glanced out of the window. “It looks like rain,” he observed, “and it looks like wind. And it looks like a number of things that are anybody’s business. Furthermore, I may mention that we shall not need, in 571, ice-water, stationery, casual messages, calling-cards, or any other form of espionage.” He favored the wilting clerk with a sunny smile and led his companions to the elevator.

Sedgwick put a hand on his arm. “The woman with Blair?” he asked under his breath.

Kent nodded. “I rather hoped that she wouldn’t come,” he said. “Blair might better have told her—so far as he knows.”

“Then he doesn’t know all?”

“No. And perhaps she would be content with nothing else. It is her right. And she is a brave woman, is Marjorie Blair, as Jax here can testify. We have seen her under fire.”

“She is that,” confirmed the man with the twitching chin.

“This, then, is the final clear-up?” asked Sedgwick.

“Final and complete.”

“Thank God! It will be a weight off my shoulders.”

“Off many shoulders,” said Kent. “Here we are.”

Greetings among the little group, so strangely and harshly thrown together by the dice-cast of the hand of Circumstance, were brief and formal. Only Preston Jax was named by Kent, with the comment that his story would be forthcoming. The seven guests seated themselves, the Blairs at one end of the half-circle, Sedgwick and the astrologer at the other. Kent, leaning against the wall, fumbled uncertainly at his ear.

“I hardly know where to begin,” he said, his eyes roving along the intent line. “Not that the case isn’t perfectly clear; but there are certain startling phases

which—which—” He glanced toward the Blairs.

Marjorie Blair smiled bravely at him. “Don’t be alarmed for me, Professor Kent,” she said. “What I most want is to have everything cleared up—everything!”

“First, your jewels, then.”

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.”

Alexander Blair leaned from his seat the better to take Preston Jax, at the other end of the crescent, under consideration.

“It was you who found the body?” he demanded.

“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 to-day.”

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—”

“Steady, Mr. Blair,” broke in Chester Kent. “Perhaps, considering who is present, we would better approach this in a somewhat calmer spirit.”

“I didn’t kill or rob any one.”

The words seemed to be jerked out from between Preston Jax’s teeth by the spasmodic quiverings of his chin.

“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 Astræa 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 identified. 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 amongst ourselves,” said the sheriff. “Gansett Jim’s tight as a clam. Nobody’ll ever get anything out of him. And, Lord knows, the less that’s known of it the better I’m suited. I ain’t none too proud of my part in it.”

“There is no reason why it should ever be known outside of this room,” said Kent, and, at the words, Alexander Blair exhaled a pent-up breath of relief. “But it is due to one person here that she should know everything. The question is how to make it clear in the best and—and kindest way.”

“If it will make it easier for any one here to speak,” said Marjorie Blair, “I can say that I understand certain phases of my husband’s past life, thoroughly. There is no need to spare me on that ground.”

“But this pertains to a phase that you do not understand at all.”

“Yes, I think so,” she persisted gently. “This dead woman had some hold over my husband. To maintain it she came to live near Hedgerow House, and

while she was blackmailing Wilfrid, she got into communication with Mr. Jax."

"Perhaps they were in collusion," suggested Lawyer Bain.

"Oh, no, no!" broke in Alexander Blair impatiently. "You're wide of the truth."

"I understand," persisted the young woman, "that the woman persuaded or compelled Wilfrid to write the letter to Mr. Jax, which she signed Astræa. And that, when she went to keep the rendezvous, she took my jewels, which, I suppose, she forced poor Wilfrid to steal for her. Am I not right, Professor Kent?"

"No. Far from it."

"Why not?" cried Sedgwick eagerly. "She certainly had the jewels on when she met me. And the handcuffs must have been in the bundle. I heard them clink."

"Exactly; the handcuffs," said Kent dryly. "What use, to your mind, would a woman of that sort have for manacles, in those circumstances?"

"Yes," put in Adam Bain: "they fit in about as nice as a pink silk hat at a funeral."

"I know what use she had for 'em," muttered Preston Jax, caressing his wrist. "It's simply a case of crazy woman; isn't it, Professor Kent?"

"No. Not if you mean that your assailant was a crazy woman," said Kent patiently.

"Then who, in heaven's name, is or was Astræa?" cried Sedgwick.

"Astræa is, I take it, a lady long since dead. A very strange and interesting lady who adopted that name for her own peculiar pursuits along our friend Jax's lines of interest."

"They call themselves all sorts of things," observed the astrologer philosophically. "I had a follower once that used to sign herself Carrie Nation, and she wasn't the real Carrie at all. No name is sacred to 'em when they go dippy over the stars."

"Then the woman of Lonesome Cove borrowed that name from some old

record?” asked Sedgwick.

“Follow me through a page of unwritten local history,” said Chester Kent, straightening up. “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 Astræa, 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 a ghost as you are ever likely to encounter, probably," answered Kent.

"But, see here," said Adam Bain, "I'm a lawyer. The law doesn't deal with ghosts or near-ghosts. Are you trying to tell us, Professor Kent, that the soul of this long-dead Astræa-Camilla Grosvenor, came back to inhabit the body of the Jane Doe of Lonesome Cove?"

"Not precisely that, either. Everything is strictly within the limits of the law's cognizance, Mr. Bain, as you will see. Now I'm going to make a long jump down to the present. If I fail to keep the trail clear, anywhere, you are any of you at liberty to interrupt me. First, then, I want you to follow with me the course of a figure that leaves Hedgerow House on the late afternoon of July fifth. 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 Astræa," 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 the 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," said Marjorie Blair quietly.

"You sat to Sedgwick? For your picture? Why didn't you tell me of this?"

“No explanation was due you. It was a matter of chance, our acquaintance. Mr. Sedgwick did not even know who I was.”

“Nor who his other visitor was, I suppose!” said Blair with a savage sneer.

“No,” said Sedgwick, “nor do I know to this day.”

“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.”

“Why was Mr. Sedgwick so eager to recover the trail, if he had not murder in his mind?” demanded Blair.

“You are proceeding on the theory that Sedgwick, knowing who Mrs. Blair was, and who the strange visitor was, deliberately killed the latter for motives of his own. But Sedgwick can prove that he was back in his house by nine 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 Star-master 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 clue to their purpose goes back again, I fancy, to the strange mysticism of the original Astræa. The disordered mind, with which we have to deal, seems to have been guarding against any such separation as divided, in death, Astræa from her Hermann.”

“But, Chester,” objected Sedgwick, “you speak of a disordered mind, and yet you’ve told us that it isn’t a case of insanity.”

“Never,” contradicted Kent. “You’ve misinterpreted what I said. In the early stages of the affair I told you, if you remember, that a very bizarre situation indicated a very bizarre motive. What could be more bizarre than insanity?”

“Was it suicidal insanity, then?” asked Bain.

“Not in the ordinary and intentional sense.”

“Then 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 clue 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.

“You were out through the countryside that night trying to trace the wanderer.”

“Yeh.”

“And later when I showed you the footprints at the scene of the struggle, you saw that they were not Mr. Sedgwick’s?”

“Yeh.”

“You examined the cliff for footprints. Do you think any one pushed or pursued the victim over the brink?”

“No.”

“Whose were the footprints, that you found, Jim?” demanded Alexander Blair.

The half-breed pointed, in silence, to Preston Jax.

“Of course. His and—and the other’s. But there were the marks of a third person, weren’t there?”

“No.”

“There must have been,” insisted Mr. Blair. “Are you positive?”

“Yeh.”

“Then did the other man, the man whom Jax heard cry out, walk without leaving any trace?”

“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 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 Doctor 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.”

“God knows I had suffered enough of that!” murmured Blair.

“Let us hope it is now ended. 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, however, I saw the body on the beach. The most important discovery of all, I missed at that time very stupidly—the more so in that I had a clue, in the character of the assault upon Sedgwick—but I could not overlook the fact that the corpse had not been washed ashore. Moreover, the matter of the manacles stimulated my interest. Not until the inquest, however, did I realize the really startling and unique feature of the case. There is where you and Doctor 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 court room."

"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. Naturally being suspicious, I looked at it pretty close; but I didn't see anything queer."

"Possibly you didn't notice a cut on the cheek?" suggested Kent.

"Yes. Dennett spoke of it and the sheriff shut him up. But what of it? It might have been done in any one of a dozen ways."

"But it wasn't there when the body lay on the beach."

"In the rolling and tossing of the journey there might easily be minor scarifications," said Sedgwick.

"True. But, Frank, what did you suppose that sudden shift on the part of the officers of the law meant?"

"Perhaps that the body was not in fit condition to be viewed."

"In that case what could they have done to make it more fit?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I didn't consider that."

“I rather opined,” said Lawyer Bain, “that some one had changed bodies on ’em.”

“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; “since you didn’t see the growth of beard on the dead face yourself?”

“By the cut on the cheek. You see, the sheriff had failed to foresee that telltale beard. So, when in deference to Mr. Bain’s protest against burial without a formal view of the body, they opened up the casket and saw the obvious change in the face, there was nothing for the officials to do but remedy their carelessness. 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—”

“Astræa 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.

Sedgwick took a swift involuntary step toward Marjorie, but Kent was before him, setting a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Not now, Frank,” he said. Then, turning to the girl-widow, “You see, Mrs. Blair,” he said very gently, “it isn’t so bad as you feared. There was no other woman in the case, no disgrace, no shame. You need feel nothing but pity for an unhappy wrecked mind, for which death was the happiest refuge.”

Marjorie Blair sat very still and white. “Let me think!” she whispered. “Let me think!”

“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.”

“Astræa!” 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. There were her letters, in the library, to give color to his unconscious imitation. As is common in this form of dementia, he was secretive. But there can be no doubt that from the time when he recognized in Preston Jax’s advertisement, the call of Astræa’s kindred soul, Hermann von Miltz, his one overwhelming desire was to reenact the drama of the last century, in his own assumed personality. Jax has told us how cleverly and secretly the plan for the double suicide was matured. This obsession must have been of long standing.”

“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

body-guard."

Marjorie Blair got to her feet. She was ghost-white; but her voice and eyes were steady, as she faced Kent.

"I must understand this all," she said. "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. I'd have bribed a hundred officers of the law rather than have had you dragged to the witness-stand, and have been compelled to give testimony myself. There has been enough of public shame in my life."

"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. "You didn't know of his visit to me in women's clothes. You knew nothing of the quarrel, it seems, until just now. For what possible reason, in your belief, should I have killed him?"

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.

“And that my father-in-law charged you with being my husband’s murderer.”

“My dear Mrs. Blair!” said Kent uncomfortably. “Remember what justification he thought he had.”

She considered a moment. “You are right,” she said with an effort. “I don’t mean to be unjust.” Her head dropped in thought. “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.

“Silence is best,” said Sedgwick.

“What the papers would do with this,” opined Preston Jax, “would be a plenty.”

“My advice is to let be,” proffered Lawyer Bain.

“Yeh,” grunted the half-breed.

“Oh, are you all against me?” she cried. “Mr. Kent, you, too? Do you think me wrong?”

“No,” said Kent.

“Will you drag our name, hers as well as mine, in the mud?” cried the head

of the house of Blair.

“No,” said Kent again.

“But how, then—tell me what you intend—”

“No,” said Kent, and with such absolute flat finality that the others looked at him in blank silence.

The silence 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 about me?” asked the Star-master miserably.

Kent’s fingers twitched at his ear lobe. “Well, what about you?” he repeated.

“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!”

For the space of five seconds Preston Jax’s chin was motionless. Then a minor cataclysm convulsed it. Speech emerged from that facial quake, in a half-stutter, half-blubber, wholly absurd and laughter-provoking and heart-moving.

“Wh-wh-whut’ll I say? Whut’ll I do, to thank you, ma’am? I—I—I’ll just 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 A-1, 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 Star-master 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.”

Again he smiled at her, with a courage shining through his pain that brought the quick tears to her eyes.

"Yes. I can wait and trust—and love." Again he leaned to her:

> "'And think how she, far from me, with like eyes
> Sees, through the untuneful bough the wingless skies.'"

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

CHAPTER XXI—REWARDS

Summer had waned from the coast and with it had passed the keenness of local interest in the strangest victim of Lonesome Cove. Even the indefatigable tongue of Elder Dennett had almost ceased to clack on the topic, by the fall of the first snow. Other subjects of absorbing interest supervened during the long winter: the wreck of the schooner yacht off Dead Men's Eddy; the coming of the new Presbyterian minister at Martindale Center whose wife was reported to be a suffragette; the mysterious benefaction that had befallen old Mrs. Orcutt late in February, enabling her to leave her home next to Annalaka churchyard and take her asthma southward in search of a cure; the rumor that Hedgerow House was to be sold before summer.

"And young Blair's body along with it, I expect," remarked the Elder 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, studying first the cold grays and browns of November, and later the wonderful blazing whites and subtle blues of drift and shadow spread before him in winter's endless panorama, with the same enthusiasm that he had devoted to October's riot of color. Though the work prospered, the worker had paled. It was the opinion of Martindale Center and Annalaka alike that the "painter feller" was looking right peaky and piny, like one whose conscience ached. But Sedgwick had nothing worse than a

heartache, and the fates were making medicine for that.

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. Leaving Austin that morning, with his light valise slung to his shoulder, he had footed the fifteen miles of soggy earth to Sedgwick's place, in a luxurious tussle against the wind. 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. Brings into action some muscles of his soul that might otherwise have atrophied from disuse."

"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.

"When a man once declines employment with me," said Alexander Blair to Kent, "I never give him a second chance. That rule I am going to break. I need your assistance."

"Honored, indeed!" murmured Kent.

“Will you accept the commission?”

“Not if it is like your former offer.”

“It is not. It is bona fide. Some one has been tampering with my son’s grave.”

“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?”

“No.”

“Then you are stupider than I ever took you for,” growled the magnate.

“Like most things, it depends on the point of view. I don’t think that you are in any danger of blackmail. But, if I understand the matter, you want your mind relieved of anxiety on the point. Very well, I’ll take the case.”

“That is settled, then,” said the older man briskly. “Now, this being a strictly business deal, we will discuss terms.”

“Oh, there is no room for discussion as to my terms,” said Kent easily. “I make them and you accept them, that’s all.”

Alexander Blair’s eyebrows drew down in a heavy scowl.

“Do you know of an old lady named Orcutt in Annalaka?” pursued the scientist.

“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!”

“She has no monopoly on being mystified,” observed Mr. Blair, with pursed lips.

“Probably she never will understand. That’s where you have the advantage of her, for I think you’ll see quite clearly the reason for her trip, and the propriety of your footing the bills.”

“Go on.”

“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. Technically, what we did there amounts to grave robbery, I suppose. But we covered our tracks well, and I don’t think anybody will ever discover what has been done.”

“Well?” queried his hearer, with twitching jaw.

“What lay, nameless, in Annalaka churchyard,” said Kent gravely, “now rests in its own place at Hedgerow House. The marks found by Gansett Jim were made by us. So your alarm is groundless. But I wish that you might have heard the little prayer made by that simple country lawyer over your son’s grave. Once in a while I meet with a really, through-and-through good man like Adam Bain, and then I have to reconstruct my whole formula of the average cussedness of human nature.”

Alexander Blair's clenched 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."

"And now," said the older man, "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. I have the satisfaction of knowing now that this is forever settled and done with. Besides there was a promise—practically a promise—as near a promise as I often permit myself to go, in a world of accidents, errors, and uncertainties—made to Mrs. Blair. Is she back from Europe?"

"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 pick-up 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. He seemed to have difficulty in going and embarrassment in staying. He coughed and cleared his throat, looked over Kent's head and down at his feet; and finally got himself into words.

"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 up-stairs to Sedgwick, “Go on with your work, Frank. I want to loaf and invite my soul for an hour. Where’s your reading matter?”

“Shelf in the corner,” answered the artist. “You’ll find a few things in your line,—Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Le Conte’s—”

“The devil take Darwin!” cried Kent impiously. “I want *Bab Ballads*, or *Through the Looking-Glass*, or something like that, really fit for an aspiring intellect. Never mind. I’ll forage for myself.”

Three minutes later he 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. Then the gale rose again, and the loose end of a garment flapped softly against the glass. He half rose, listening. There was silence outside.

“Have I fallen into another mystery?” groaned Kent. “Is there no rest for the weary?”

The footsteps mounted the side porch. Kent awaited a knock. None came.

“Odd!” he observed to his pillow. “Few people find the outside of a door so fascinating that they stand for two minutes in a wet gale admiring it.”

Tiptoeing to the door, he threw it open. There was a startled cry from without and an equally startled grunt from within. Chester Kent and Marjorie Blair stood face to face.

“I—I—I beg your pardon,” gibbered Kent, whelmed instantly in a morass of embarrassment. “I—I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

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, yet without forfeiting anything of that quaint appealing wistfulness which made her charm unique. But there glinted now in her deep eyes an elfish spirit of mischief, partly inspired by the confusion of the helpless male creature before her, partly the reaction from the mingled dread and desire of the prospective meeting with Sedgwick; for she had come on a sudden uncontrollable impulse to see him, and would have turned and fled at the last minute had not Kent surprised her. Perhaps there was a little flavor of revenge for this, too, in her attitude toward him.

“What a surprise to find you here, *Mrs.* Kent!” she remarked sweetly. “Or are you calling youself Mr. Blair nowadays? And how is your poor ear?”

Chester Kent immediately seized that unoffending member and clung to it with much the lost and anguished expression of the pale martyr in the once popular *Rock of Ages* chromo. His tormentor considered him with malicious eyes.

“Did any woman ever say ‘Boo!’ to him suddenly, I wonder?” she mused aloud.

Like a saving grace, there came into Kent’s mind a fragment of *The Hunting of the Snark*, in which he had just been reveling. Said he gravely:

> “He would answer to ‘Hi!’ or to any loud cry
> Such as ‘Fry me’ or ‘Fritter my wig’!”

She caught up the stanza:

> “To ‘What-you-may-call-um’ or ‘What-was-his-name!’

But especially ‘Thing-um-a-jig.’”

“So you know Lewis Carroll. How really human of you!”

“It is better to be humane than human,” murmured Kent, relinquishing his aural grip as he began to touch bottom.

“Is that a plea? Very well. I shall be very gentle and soothing. But, oh,” she burst out irrepressibly, “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 the matter of returns for your trouble,” he remarked. “To come through all this wind and rain and then be content merely to contemplate the outside of a door—that argues an humble spirit. To be sure, however, it’s a very good door; one of the most interesting features of our local architecture, and may lead to—all sorts of things.”

It was her turn to grow red.

“You haven’t asked me about Sedgwick,” he continued.

“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. Then I saw the light, and I wanted so to come in; but I didn’t dare. I can’t see him now! I must go! Don’t tell—”

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. The bungalow shook to his long tread across the floor. The studio door opened and flew shut behind him. 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 a hell of uncertainty and longing as I've lived in since you left; to wait, and hope, and lose 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, then turned away.

“Finished!” he said. “*C’est conclu. Finis. Telos. Das Ende.* And any or all other words of whatever language, meaning a sound conclusion!”

Half an hour later he entered, with due preliminary stamping of mud from clogged feet. Instantly Marjorie went over to him.

“Why, you’re wet as a rag!” she cried with a sweetly unconscious assumption of proprietary interest. “You must go and change at once!” she added, patting his shoulder.

Kent reached for his ear, changed his mind midway, and scratched his nose. “All right,” he said meekly. Over his rather stern-set face there came a singularly winning smile. “You two—” he said: “that’s as it should be. That’s worth everything.”

“No other congratulations will ever sound so good as that, Chet,” said Sedgwick in a low voice; “or so unselfish. You’ve had all the heat and toil of the great game, and I have all the happiness.”

“Not quite all, I fancy,” returned Kent, smiling at Marjorie.

She took his wet hand between her own. “But it doesn’t seem quite fair,” she protested. “Frank and I have found each other. But you, who have fought our battle for us so splendidly, what reward do you have?”

Chester Kent shook his head. “My dear,” he said gently, “the great game isn’t played for prizes.”

THE END

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Spelling and punctuation inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling is preserved.

The author's punctuation style is preserved.

Hyphenation has been made consistent.

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