

The Secret of Lonesome Cove

By Samuel Hopkins Adams

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CHAPTER XVII.

The Master of Stars. "JULY 5," 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. Blair's Nook."

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Mrs. Blair glanced at the announcement. "I want you to go there with me to-day," said Kent. "To that charlatan? Why, Professor Kent, I thought you were a scientific man, I can't understand your motives, but I know that I can trust you. When do you wish me to go?"

"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. With drooping head and chin twitching the master of stars stood studying Mrs. Blair and Kent 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, 'Astraea,' was in very fine, minute, detached lettering. The note read: All is now ready. You are 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 5th 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."

"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. Come, Mrs. Blair. Remember, Jax, fair play, and I 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."



"You are a very wonderful person," she said. 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."

CHAPTER XVIII. The Astrologer's Tale. MIDNIGHT found Kent in his hotel room. A knock brought him to the door. "Letter for you," announced the messenger boy. What Preston Jax had to say was, first, in the form of a very brief note, second, in the shape of a formidable

looking document. The note began: "Esteemed sir," concluded "Yours respectfully," 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. "Quite enough," said Chester Kent, and dived into the turbid flood of words. And behold! As he turned, so to speak, the corner of the narrative he current became suddenly clear. The reader ran through it with increasing absorption. Preston Jax, whose real name was John Preston, and, after a rebellious boyhood, run away to sea, lived two years before he was picked up by a smattering of education, being assistant and capper for a magnetic healer and had finally formulated a system of astrological prophecy that won him a slow but increasing renown.

"This Astraea affair looked good from the first." So began Preston Jax's confession, as he headed and tripped down by its editor. "It looked like one of the best. You could smell it in it with half a nose. Her first offer came in on a Monday. I recollect, 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 same—and no extras or side-lines. Besides, we were married last week." She quoted poetry, sweet 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 spooky. 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—fitter headed in 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 it 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 wastebasket. Here a page 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."

let 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 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. 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," she said. "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. "The instant I saw your statement in the newspaper I knew it was your soul calling to mine across the ages. "Our boat is at the shore. "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 clothesline, 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. "Go slow," I said, thinking mighty hard. "I don't quite see the point of this." "Didn't I curse myself for not remembering what I had written her? No clever, 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 \$5,000 of diamonds on her. I suppose she felt me weakening. "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. 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. "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 police trap. Her next words put me on. "The stars! The stars!" she whispered. "See across—how they light our path-way 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 flatish 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. "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! I was pretty much dotty, I guess. "While I was trying to think she came alive. 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. 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 or dead, 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. A wisp of cloud had blotched out the woman's star, now, and by that I knew she was dead. But the moon was shining high. It gave the 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. 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. If any human being knows more about the death of Astraea it must be the man who shouted as she fell from the cliff and who went away and did not come back. (Signed) PRESTON JAX, S.M."

CHAPTER XIX. In the White Room. ANNALAKA, July 15.—(To Hotel Elyrie, Martindale Center; Dust 571 and send up seven chairs, Chester Kent. "Now, I wonder what that might mean?" mused the day clerk of the Elyrie as he read the telegram, through for the second time. "Convention in the room of mystery, maybe?" Nor did the personnel of the visitors who, in the 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 unmistakable 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. "We shall not need in 571 ice water, stationery, casual messages, calling cards or any other form of espionage," said Kent. He 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 in 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." Greetings among the little group in the white hung room, so strangely and harshly thrown together by the discast of the hand of Circumstances, were brief and formal. Only Preston Jax was named by Kent, with the comment that his story would be forthcoming.

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