

KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

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PUBLISHER: William Woolfolk

EDITOR: Dan Roberts

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Whenever detective story experts sit down to discuss their special likes and dislikes (and you murder-and-mayhem members tend to get violent on the subject), four names must invariably be mentioned first: Edgar Allan Poe, A. Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, and Melville Davisson Post. These are the Big Four and they will forever be remembered as the originators of the earliest and best in detective short stories. Uncle Abner—the unpredictable, fast-thinking, mild-talking creation of Melville Davisson Post—has been called “one of the outstanding characters of detective fiction, ranking with Dupin, Lecoq and Sherlock Holmes.” At one time Uncle Abner was so popular with the mystery-reading public that Author Post demanded—and got—as high as \$8000 for a short story, an unheard-of writing rate back in the days of the twenties.

And now we've prepared a little surprise for you:

First read this story of Uncle Abner and “The Concealed Path”. As soon as you finish it, turn to the one that follows, “The Diamonds”, by Frank Atterholt. We think you'll be as delighted as we were by the fortunate coincidence that placed both of these stories into our hands at the same time.

CONCEALED PATH

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

IT WAS NIGHT, AND THE FIRST SNOW of October was in the air when my uncle got down from his horse before the door. The great stone house sat on a bench of the mountains. Behind it lay the forest, and below, the pasture land of the Hills.

After the disastrous failure of Prince Charles Edward Stuart to set up his kingdom in Scotland, more than one great Highland family had fled oversea into Virginia, and for a hundred years had maintained its customs. It was at the house of such a family

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that my uncle stopped.

There was the evidence of travel hard and long on my uncle and his horse. An old man bade him enter.

"Who is here?" said my uncle.

The servant replied with two foreign words, meaning "The Red Eagle" in the Gaelic tongue.

And he led my uncle through the hall into the dining-room. It was a scene laid back a hundred years in Skye that he came on. A big woman of middle age dined alone, in a long, beamed room, lighted with tallow candles. An ancient servant stood behind her chair.

Two features of the woman were conspicuous—her bowed nose and her coarse red hair.

She got up when she saw my uncle.

"Abner," she cried, "by the Blessed God I am glad to see you! Come in! Come in!"

My uncle entered, and she put him beyond her at the table.

"You ought to eat, Abner," she said; "for by all the tokens, you have traveled."

"A long way," replied my uncle.

"And did the ravens of Elijah send you to me?" said the woman. "For I need you."

"What need?" inquired my uncle, while he attacked the rib of beef and the baked potatoes, for the dinner, although set with some formality, was plain.

"Why, this need, Abner: For a

witness whose name will stand against the world."

"A witness!" repeated my uncle.

"Aye, a witness," continued the woman. "The country holds me hard and dour, and given to impose my will. There will be a wedding in my house tonight, and I would have you see it, free of pressure. My niece, Margaret McDonald, has got her senses finally."

My uncle looked down at the cloth.

"Who is the man?" he said.

"Campbell," she answered, "and good man enough for a stupid woman."

For a moment my uncle did not move. His hands, his body, the very muscles in his eyelids, were for that moment inert as plaster. Then he went on with the potato and the rib of beef.

"Campbell is here, then?" he said.

"He came tonight," replied the woman, "and for once the creature has some spirit. He will have the girl tonight or never. He and my husband Allen Elliott, have driven their cattle out of the glades and on the way to Baltimore. Allen is with the cattle on the Cumberland road, and Campbell rode hard in here to take the girl or to leave her. And whether she goes or stays, he will not return. When the cattle are sold in Baltimore, he will take a ship out of the Chesa-

peake for Glasgow."

She paused and made a derisive gesture.

"The devil, Abner, or some witch trick, has made a man of Campbell. He used to be irresolute and sullen, but tonight he has the spirit of the men who lifted cattle in the lowlands. He is a Campbell of Glen Lion on this night. Believe me, Abner, the wavering beastie is now as hard as oak, and has the devil's courage. Wherefore is it that a man can change like that?"

"A man may hesitate between two masters," replied my uncle, "and be only weak, but when he finally makes his choice he will get what his master has to give him—the courage of heaven, if he go that way, or of hell, Madam, if he go that way."

"Man! Man!" she laughed. "If 'the one who is not to be named,' as we say, put his spirit into Campbell, he did a grand work. It is the wild old cattle-lifter of Glen Lion that he is the night!"

"Do you think," said my uncle, "that a McDonald of Glencoe ought to be mated with a Campbell of Glen Lion?"

The woman's face hardened.

"Did Lord Stair and the Campbells of Glen Lion massacre the McDonalds of Glencoe on yesterday at sunrise, or two hundred years back? Margaret—the fool!—said that before she got my final word."

"Is it not in an adage," said my uncle, "that the Highlander does not change?"

"But the world changes, Abner," replied the woman. "Campbell is not 'Bonnie Charlie'; he is at middle age, a dour man and silent, but he will have a sum of money from a half of the cattle, and he can take care of this girl."

Then she cried out in a sharper voice:

"And what is here in this mountain for her, will you tell me? We grow poor! The old men are to feed. Allen owes money that his half of the cattle will hardly pay. Even old MacPherson"—and she indicated the ancient man behind her chair—"has tried to tell her, in his wise-wife folderol, 'I see you in the direst peril that overtakes a lassie, and a big shouldered man to save you.' And it was no omen, Abner, but the vision of his common sense. Here are the lean years to dry out the fool's youth, and surely Campbell is big shouldered enough for any prophecy. And now, Abner, will you stay and be a witness?"

"I will be one witness," replied my uncle slowly, "if you will send for my brother Rufus to be another."

The woman looked at her guest in wonder.

"That would be twenty miles through the Hills," she said. "We could not get Rufus by the morn's morn."

"No," said Abner, "it would be three miles to Maxwell's Tavern. Rufus is there to-night."

The big-nosed, red-haired woman drummed on the cloth with the tips of her fingers, and one knew what she was thinking. Her relentless will was the common talk. What she wished she forced with no concern.

But the girl was afraid of Campbell. The man seemed evil to her. It was not evidenced in any act. It was instinct in the girl. She felt the nature of the man like some venomous thing pretending to be gentle until its hour. And this fear, dominant and compelling, gave her courage to resist the woman's will.

The long suit of Campbell for the girl was known to everybody, and the woman's favor of it and the girl's resistance. The woman foresaw what folk in the Hills would say, and she wished to forestall that gossip by the presence in her house of men whose word could not be gainsaid. If Abner and his brother Rufus were here, no report of pressure on the girl could gain belief.

She knew what reports her dominating personality set current. She, and not her husband, was the head of their affairs, and with an iron determination she held to every Highland custom, every form, every feudal detail

that she could, against the detritus of democratic times and ridicule, and the gain upon her house of poverty, and lean years. She was alone at that heavy labor. Allen Elliott was a person without force. He was usually on his cattle range in the mountains, with his big partner Campbell, or in the great drive, as now, to Baltimore. And she had the world to face.

"That will be to wait," she said, "and Campbell is in haste, and the bride is being made ready by the women, and the minister is got . . . to Maxwell's Tavern!"

Then she arose.

"Well, I will make a bargain with you. I will send for Rufus, but you must gain Campbell over to the waiting. And you must gain him, Abner, by your own devices, for I will not tell him that I have sent out for a witness to the freedom of my niece in this affair. If you can make him wait, the thing shall wait until Rufus is come. But I will turn no hand to help."

"Is Campbell in the house?" said my uncle.

"Yes," she said, "and ready when the minister is come."

"Is he alone?" said Abner.

"Alone," she said, with a satirical smile, "as a bridegroom ought to be for his last reflections."

"Then," replied my uncle, "I will strike the bargain."

She laughed in a heavy chuckle, like a man.

"Hold him if you can. It will

be a pretty undertaking, Abner, and practice for your wits. But by stealth it shall be. I will not have you bind the bridegroom like the strong man in the Scriptures." And the chuckle deepened. "And that, too, I think, might be no easier than the finesse you set at. He is a great man in the body, like yoursel'."

She stood up to go out, but before she went, she said another word.

"Abner," she said, "you will not blame me," and her voice was calm. "Somebody must think a little for these pretty fools. They are like the lilies of the field in their lack of wisdom; they will always bloom, and there is no winter! Why, man, they have no more brain than a haggis! And what are their little loves against the realities of life? And their tears, Abner, are like the rains in summer, showering from every cloud. And their heads crammed with folderol—a prince will come, and they cannot take a good man for that dream!" She paused and added:

"I will go and send for Rufus. And when you have finished with your dinner, MacPherson will take you in to Campbell."

The woman was hardly gone before the old man slipped over to Abner's chair.

"Mon," he whispered, "ha'e ye

a wee drop?"

"No liquor, MacPherson," said my uncle.

The old man's bleared eyes blinked like a half-blinded owl's.

"It would be gran', a wee drop, the night," he said.

"For joy at the wedding," said my uncle.

"Na, mon, na, mon!" Then he looked swiftly around.

"The eagle ha beak and talons, and what ha the dove, mon?"

"What do you mean, MacPherson?" said my uncle.

The old creature peered across the table.

"Ye ha gran' shoulders, mon," he said.

My uncle put down his fork.

"MacPherson," he said, "what do you beat about?"

"I wa borned," he replied, "wi a cowl, and I can see!"

"And what do you see?" inquired Abner.

"A vulture flying," said the old man, "but it is unco dark beneath him."

Again on this night every motion and every sign of motion disappeared from my uncle's body and his face. He remained for a moment like a figure cut in wood.

"A vulture!" he echoed.

"Aye, mon! What ha the dove to save it?"

"The vulture, it may be," said my uncle.

"The Red Eagle, and the foul vulture!" cried the old man. "Noo,

mon, it is the bird of death!"

"A bird of death, but not a bird of prey." Then he got up.

"You may have a familiar spirit, MacPherson," he said coldly, "for all I know. Perhaps they live on after the Witch of Endor. It is a world of mystery. But I should not come to you to get up Samuel, and I see now why the Lord stamped out your practice. It was because you misled his people. If there is a vulture in this business, MacPherson, it is no symbol of your bridegroom. And now, will you take me in to Campbell?"

The old man flung the door open, and Abner went out into the hall. As he crossed the sill, a girl, listening at the door, fled past him. She had been crouched down against it.

She was half-dressed, all in white, as though escaped for a moment out of the hands of tiring women. But she had the chalk face of a ghost, and eyes wide with fear.

My uncle went on as though he had passed nothing, and the old Scotchman before him only wagged his head, with the whispered comment, "It wa be gran', a wee drop, the night."

They came into a big room of the house with candles on a table, and a fire of chestnut logs. A man walking about stopped on the hearth. He was a huge figure of

a man in middle life.

A fierce light leaped up in his face when he saw my uncle.

"Abner!" he cried. "Why does the devil bring you here?"

"It would be strange, Campbell," replied my uncle, "if the devil were against you. The devil has been much maligned. He is very nearly equal, the Scriptures tell us, to the King of Kings. He is no fool to mislead his people and to trap his servants. I find him always zealous in their interest, Campbell, fertile in devices, and holding hard with every trick to save them. I do not admire the devil, Mr. Campbell, but I do not find his vice to be a lack of interest in his own."

"Then," cried Campbell, "it is clear that I am not one of his own. For if the devil were on my side, Abner, he would have turned you away from this door tonight."

"Why, no," replied my uncle, with a reflective air, "that does not follow. I do not grant the devil a supreme control. There is One above him, and if he cannot always manage as his people wish, they should not for that reason condemn him with a treasonable intent."

The man turned with a decisive gesture.

"Abner," he said, "let me understand this thing. Do you come here upon some idle gossip, to interfere with me in this marriage? Or by chance?"

"Neither the one nor the other," replied my uncle. "I went into the mountains to buy the cattle you and Elliott range there. I found you gone already, with the herd, toward Maryland. And so, as I returned, I rode in here to Elliott's house to rest and to feed my horse."

"Elliott is with the drove," said Campbell.

"No," replied my uncle, "Elliott is not with the drove. I overtook it on the Cheat River. The drivers said you hired them this morning, and rode away."

The man shifted his feet and looked down at my uncle.

"It is late in the season," he said. "One must go ahead to arrange for a field and for some shocks of fodder. Elliott is ahead."

"He is not on the road ahead," returned Abner. "Arnold and his drovers came that way from Maryland, and they had not see him."

"He did not go the road," said Campbell; "he took a path through the mountains."

My uncle remained silent for some moments.

"Campbell," said my uncle, "the Scriptures tell us that there is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen. Did Elliott take that path?"

The man changed his posture.

"Now, Abner," he said. "I cannot answer a fool thing like that."

"Well, Campbell," replied my uncle, "I can answer it for you:

Elliott did not take that path."

The man took out a big silver watch and opened the case with his thumb-nail.

"The woman ought to be ready," he said.

My uncle looked up at him.

"Campbell," he said, "put off this marriage."

The man turned about.

"Why should I put it off?" he said.

"Well, for one reason, Campbell," replied my uncle, "the omens are not propitious."

"I do not believe in signs," said the man.

"The Scriptures are full of signs," returned Abner. "There was the sign to Joshua and the sign to Ahaz, and there is the sign to you."

The man turned with an oath.

"What accursed thing do you hint about, Abner?"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "I accept the word; accursed is the word."

"Say the thing out plain! What omen? What sign?"

"Why, this sign," replied Abner: "MacPherson, who was born with a cowl, has seen a vulture flying."

"Damme, man!" cried Campbell. "Do you hang on such a piece of foolery. MacPherson sees his visions in a tin cup—raw corn liquor would set flying beasts of Patmos. Do you tell me, Abner, that you believe in what Mac-

Pherson sees?"

"I believe in what I see myself," replied my uncle.

"And what have you seen?" said the man.

"I have seen the vulture!" replied my uncle. "And I was born clean and have no taste for liquor."

"Abner," said Campbell, "you move about in the dark, and I have no time to grope after you. The woman should be ready."

"But are you ready?" said my uncle.

"Man! Man!" cried Campbell. "Will you be forever in a fog? Well, travel on to Satan in it! I am ready, and here are the women!"

But it was not the bride. It was MacPherson to inquire if the bride should come.

My uncle got up then.

"Campbell," he said, in his deep, level voice, "if the bride is ready, you are not."

The man was at the limit of forbearance.

"The devil take you!" he cried. "If you mean anything, say what it is!"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "it is the custom to inquire if any man knows a reason why a marriage should not go on. Shall I stand up before the company and give the reason, while the marriage waits? Or shall I give it to you here while the marriage waits?"

The man divined something be-

hind my uncle's menace.

"Bid them wait," he said to MacPherson.

Then he closed the door and turned back on my uncle—his shoulders thrown forward, his fingers clenched, his words prefaced by an oath.

"Now, sir,"—and the oath returned,—"what is it?"

My uncle got up, took something from his pocket, and put it down on the table. It was a piece of lint, twisted together, as though one had rolled it firmly between the palms of one's hands.

"Campbell," he said, "as I rode the trail on your cattle range, in the mountains, this morning, a bit of white thing caught my eye. I got down and picked up this fragment of lint on the hard ground. It puzzled me. How came it thus rolled? I began to search the ground, riding slowly in an ever-widening circle. Presently I found a second bit, and then a third, rolled hard together like the first. Then I observed a significant thing: these bits were in line and leading from your trail down the slope of the cattle range to the border of the forest. I went back to the trail, and there on the baked earth, in line with these bits of lint, I found a spot where a bucket of water had been poured out."

Campbell was standing beyond

him, staring at the bit of lint. He looked up without disturbing the crouch of his shoulders.

"Go on," he said.

"It occurred to me," continued my uncle, "that perhaps these bits of lint might be found above the trail, as I had found them below it, and so I rode straight on up the hill to a rail fence. I found no fragment of twisted stuff, but I found another thing, Campbell: I found the weeds trampled on the other side of the fence. I got down and looked closely. On the upper surface of a flat rail, immediately before the trampled weeds, there was an impression as though a square bar of iron had been laid across it."

My uncle stopped. And Campbell said:

"Go on."

Abner remained a moment, his eyes on the man; then he continued:

"The impression was in a direct line toward the point on the trail where the water had been poured out. I was puzzled. I got into the saddle and rode back across the trail and down the line of the fragments of lint. At the edge of the forest I found where a log-heap had been burned. I got down again and walked back along the line of the twisted lint. I looked closely, and I saw that the fragments of dried grass, and now and then a rag-weed, had been pressed down, as though by something

moving down the hillside from the trail to the burned log-heap.

"Now, Campbell," he said, "what happened on that hillside?"

Campbell stood up and looked my uncle in the face. "What do you think happened?" he said.

"I think," replied Abner, "that some one sat in the weeds behind the fence with a half-stocked, square-barreled rifle laid on the flat rail, and from that ambush shot something passing on the trail, and then dragged it down the hillside to the log-heap. I think that poured-out water was to wash away the blood where the thing fell. I do not know where the bits of lint came from, but I think they were rolled there under the weight of the heavy body. Do I think correctly, eh, Campbell?"

"You do," said the man.

My uncle was astonished, for Campbell faced him, his aspect grim, determined, like one who at any hazard will have the whole of a menace out. "Abner," he said, "you have trailed this thing with some theory behind it. In plain words, what is that theory?"

My uncle was amazed.

"Campbell," he replied, "since you wish the thing said plain, I will not obscure it. Two men own a great herd of cattle between them. The herd is to be driven over the mountains to Baltimore and sold. If one of the partners is shot out of his saddle and the crime concealed, may not the other

partner sell the entire drove for his own and put the whole sum in his pocket?

"And if this surviving partner, Campbell, were a man taken with the devil's resolution, I think he might try to make one great stroke of this business. I think he might hire men to drive his cattle, giving out that his partner had gone on ahead, and then turn back for the woman he wanted, take her to Baltimore, put her on the ship, sell the cattle, and with the woman and money sail out of the Chesapeake for the Scotch Highlands he came from! Who could say what became of the missing partner, or that he did not receive his half of the money and meet robbery and murder on his way home?"

My uncle stopped. And Campbell broke out into a great ironical laugh.

"Now, let this thing be a lesson to you, Abner. Your little deductions are correct, but your great conclusion is folly.

"We had a wild heifer that would not drive, so we butchered the beast. I had great trouble to shoot her, but I finally managed it from behind the fence."

"But the bits of lint," said my uncle, "and the washed spot?"

"Abner," cried the man, "do you handle cattle for a lifetime and do not know how blood dis-

turbs them? We did not want them in commotion, so we drenched the place where the heifer fell. And your bits of lint! I will discover the mystery there. To keep the blood off we put an old quilt under the yearling and dragged her down the hill on that. The bits of lint were from the quilt, and rolled thus under the weight of the heifer."

Then he added: "That was weeks ago, but there has been no rain for a month, and these signs of crime, Abner, were providentially preserved against your coming!"

"And the log-heap," said my uncle, like one who would have the whole of an explanation, "why was it burned?"

"Now, Abner," continued the man, "after your keen deductions, would you ask me a thing like that? To get rid of the offal from the butchered beast. We would not wash out the blood-stains and leave that to set our cattle mad."

His laugh changed to a note of victory.

"And now, Abner," he cried, "will you stay and see me married, who have come hoping to see me hanged?"

My uncle had moved over to the window. While Campbell spoke, he seemed to listen, not so much to the man as to sounds outside. Now far off on a covered wooden bridge of the road there was the faint sound of horses. And

with a grim smile Abner turned about.

"I will stay," he said, "and see which it is."

It was the very strangest wedding—the big, determined woman like a Fate, the tattered servants with candles in their hands, the minister, and the bride covered and hidden in her veil, like a wooded figure counterfeiting life.

The thing began. There was an atmosphere of silence. My uncle went over to the window. The snow on the road deadened the sounds of the advancing horses, until the iron shoes rang on the stones before the door. Then, suddenly, as though he waited for the sound, he cried out with a great voice against the marriage. The big-nosed, red-haired woman turned on him:

"Why do you object, who have no concern in this thing?"

"I object," said Abner, "because Campbell has sent Elliott on the wrong path!"

"The wrong path!" cried the woman.

"Aye," said Abner, "on the wrong path. There is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen, Job tells us. But the path Campbell sent Elliott on, the vulture did see."

He advanced with great strides into the room.

"Campbell," he cried, "before I

left your accursed pasture, I saw a buzzard descend into the forest beyond your logheap. I went in, and there, shot through the heart, was the naked body of Allen Elliott. Your log heap, Campbell, was to burn the quilt and the dead man's clothes. You trusted to the vultures, for the rest, and the vultures, Campbell, over-reached you."

My uncle's voice deepened.

"I sent word to my brother Rufus to raise a *posse comitatus* and bring it to Maxwell's Tavern. Then I rode in here to rest and to feed my horse. I found you, Campbell, on the second line of your hell-planned venture!

"I got Mrs. Elliott to send for Rufus to be a witness with me to your accursed marriage. And I undertook to delay it until he came."

He raised his great arm, the clenched bronze fingers big like the coupling pins of a cart.

"I would have stopped it with my own hand," he said, "but I wanted the men of the Hills to hang you And they are here."

There was a great sound of tramping feet in the hall outside.

And while the men entered, big, grim, determined men, Abner called out their names:

"Arnold, Randolph, Stuart, El-nathan Stone and my brother Rufus!"

