

# KEYHOLE MYSTERY

## *Magazine*

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*DON'T READ THIS STORY—unless you've already read the preceding one by Melville Davisson Post. The name of that story is "The Concealed Path" (Page 28). It's about the famous detective, Uncle Abner, and it's told from the point of view of his nephew. This story, "The Diamonds" was written by Frank Atterholt. Frank Atterholt is the nephew of Melville Davisson Post, and this is Mr. Atterholt's first published short story. We think it's a darned good one, too.*

*Mr. Atterholt, long an admirer of his famous uncle, is a retired banker (he was Vice-President of one of the biggest banks in New York City) and currently spends his winters in Arizona, where he is a free-lance investment counselor. Summers he spends in West Virginia, the home state, as it happens, of his uncle Melville Davisson Post.*

# THE DIAMONDS

*by FRANK ATTERHOLT*

ONE HOT AUGUST AFTERNOON about half way to evening, I was sitting on the porch of my uncle's law office well out in the country on the waters of Foxes Run in Western Virginia. It was a typical dog day, muggy and humid, and as I sat quietly I could feel the sweat drip down between my shoulder blades.

My uncle, the lawyer, had in-

structed me to fix the water gap in the Perkins line fence and I had learned through hard experience that his instructions were not to be lightly regarded.

To be perfectly truthful, he was not my uncle, and from various erasures and markings I noticed on the diplomas and certificates in his law office, I had a very strong belief that he was not a lawyer,

either. When my parents were alive, we had all shared the same house, and when they died, I just went on living with him. I called him "uncle", but there was no love lost between us, and I lived for the day when I would be able to leave.

At any rate, there I was sitting on the porch in the heat, when suddenly in the mid-distance, I could hear the hoof beats of a horse coming toward us at a dead run on the narrow clay road and the rattle of the buggy as it crossed the plank bridge over Foxes Run.

This was the manner in which many of my uncle's clients came, so it must either be one of them or the biggest idiot in the county. Sure enough, in a minute or so, around the corner came a buggy on two wheels and pulled up at the porch rail with the horse lathered and quivering.

A big man jumped out, fear written in a plain hand across his white face, and hurried into my uncle's office. His whip lay in the dirt where he had dropped it and I could see his derringer on the buggy seat where it had fallen from his coat-tail pocket in his great haste.

But all this was nothing to me. Many such people came to see my uncle on personal as well as legal matters. I attended to the horse and went about my business.

When I came back, my uncle

was sitting in the door of his office tapping on the plank floor with the iron ferrule of his cane.

"Roy," he called. "Put on your shirt and shoes and come in here." Which I did.

The big man was sitting in a caned rocker looking intently out the window. My uncle said, "Roy, this is Mr. Stuart Brandon, President and Cashier of Brandon's Bank at Uxley in Wray County. Mr. Brandon has a problem in that he has been visiting the Charles Town racetrack too often on the bank's time and at its expense, with the result that he now finds himself some thirty-five thousand dollars short on his accounts. Moreover, he has good reason to believe that this will almost instantly come to light."

Then he introduced me: "Stuart, this is my nephew, Roy. While he can never claim to have the keenest mind in the county or even on Foxes Run, you will observe that he is young and muscular. He can hold his own with anyone with his spring knife and, thanks to my training, he can shoot the pip out of an ace with either hand at forty paces. He is precisely suitable for our purpose."

Suddenly my uncle spoke to Mr. Brandon, who was peering intently through the window.

"Stuart, what do you see? Have we an eavesdropper?"

Mr. Brandon turned toward us, large diamonds flashing on his fingers, in his cuffs and on his shirt front.

"No," he answered. "What I see out of the window is the penitentiary. No expense is too great or pain too severe which will prevent my going there."

"There you are, Roy," said my uncle. "You will observe that this is no ordinary legal problem. The best minds at Jefferson Law School could do nothing with it. Nevertheless, I have already evolved a solution which, with a little assistance from you, should prove effective.

"Now, I want you to listen carefully because I have other business to attend to this evening and by dawn tomorrow you should be well away from here. Fortunately, Mr. Brandon has had the foresight to bring with him the bank's remaining cash reserves, amounting to some forty thousand dollars, and this will be your working fund. If you will observe him closely, you can see the slight bulge of his money belt.

"As early as possible in the morning I want you and Mr. Brandon to be on your way in the buggy toward the river. Take Nelly along as lead horse. When you reach Thatcher's Landing, book passage on the next steamer to St. Louis. I have given Mr. Brandon certain advice and instructions with respect to river

poker, which, if properly executed, should be successful. Your duty is to see that he is not prevented by force from carrying out these instructions and to take such steps as may be necessary to protect the working fund which naturally is to be returned to me.

"I trust that Mr. Brandon's efforts at poker will be successful. If not, however, he feels that he cannot bring further disgrace on his family. Therefore, you and he will wait inconspicuously, using no hotels, in St. Louis until about midnight. You will then proceed to a small path which leads from the north side of the docks up the bluff through the woods.

"When you have gone about one hundred yards along this path, you will shoot Mr. Brandon in the chest at a point about one inch to the left of the second button of his waistcoat. As he falls, you will then quickly shoot him again through the mouth at an upward angle of about thirty degrees in such a way that the bullet will pass through the brain vertically.

"Remove the money belt from Mr. Brandon and bring it back to me. Bring the diamonds also and we will see that in some way they get back to Mrs. Brandon. Of course, you must turn his pockets inside out and create all the other signs you can of armed robbery. In this way, the double indemnity provisions of his insurance poli-

cies will more than adequately provide for all bank creditors whereas, under the suicide provisions, they would pay nothing.

"Now," asked my uncle, "do you have any questions?"

"Uncle," I started to say but he interrupted me.

"Roy," he said, "kindly do not waste my time with any twaddle about the proprieties of taking money illegally from the insurance company. You should be thoroughly familiar with my views on this point."

"It isn't that," I managed to answer. "I just wondered if with a man of Mr. Brandon's size and only two shots—?"

My uncle was annoyed. "Roy," he told me, "if you expect to bungle, you will always bungle. However, if you have to, why, shoot him a third time. Make it through the belly. That will fix it no matter how inept you have been."

My uncle extended his hand to Mr. Brandon.

"Good luck," he said. "I hope you will retain your bank and your standing, but in any event my way is better than yours because at least the depositors will be paid in full, and your wife will not be left penniless."

We were on the road with the first pink streaks in the morning and in due course found ourselves

on the paddle steamer "City of St. Elmo" bound for St. Louis.

Our first step was to scrutinize the methods and characteristics of each of the members of the gambling fraternity aboard. At the same time, we established ourselves a reputation by breaking large bills at the bar and by carefully confiding our worry about the large sum of money we were carrying to St. Louis to be invested in the New Orleans trade.

In the end, Mr. Brandon had his choice among the gamblers. He selected a group headed by an old character in a long-tailed black broad-cloth suit with a square white beard completely covering the lapels of his coat. This splendid beard was, in fact, the old man's greatest asset because under it attached to his clothing he carried two full decks of cards which he was able to exchange adroitly and at will with those in play. These decks, having been previously arranged, were known as "cold decks" and it was for this type of shenanigan especially that my uncle had issued his most particular warnings.

And so one afternoon, we were persuaded to join this group in the customary "small friendly game". However, because of my inept handling of the cards and since I was regarded only as Mr. Brandon's young traveling companion, there were no objections when I dropped out. I took up a

chair between Mr. Brandon and the old gentleman on his right where I could observe Mr. Brandon's hand.

I will say for Mr. Brandon that as a highly respected member of a small community, he played an unusually fine game of poker. Had he restricted his speculative activities to two-legged opponents, I doubt if we would have ever been aboard the "City of St. Elmo."

By three o'clock in the morning, Mr. Brandon was about twenty thousand dollars ahead. Our friends were not pleased. All limits had now been removed and since we were due in St. Louis in the morning, a climax was near.

It was now the old gentleman's turn to deal and while his right hand was too fast for me, I could see from his left and the slight motion of his beard that the exchange of decks had been made. I allowed the lurch of the boat to throw me lightly against Mr. Brandon so that he would know the old man had switched the decks.

The cards were dealt and heavy betting began. Mr. Brandon held the usual hand for this type of operation—four aces and the trey of hearts. When the betting stopped there was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the table.

The dealer picked up the deck in his left hand and turned to

Mr. Brandon:

"Cards," he said.

Mr. Brandon answered, "Two".

So great was the dealer's surprise that he laid the deck down on the table but almost at once started to pick it up again. This was a situation he could handle.

However, he had not counted on me. While all this was going on, I had moved my chair up near his and now I slipped my right arm up under his left with my coat sleeve against his side.

"My friend," I told him, "would like you to leave the deck on the table and deal the cards by sliding them off with the tip only of your index finger."

"Why should I do that, bub?" he grunted. "Besides, you might wind up in a lot of trouble minding other people's business."

So I poked him a little with the sharp point of my spring knife that I had in my right hand. Just enough to cut the broadcloth of his suit and perhaps the slightest sliver of skin. I answered him politely:

"Why, you can't deal any other way with seven inches of knife blade slipped up under your rib. Also, I have your friends well covered with the little over-and-under pistol I carry in my left coat sleeve."

The others hadn't moved, so he could tell that was so. His beard quivered a little, but he reached down and pushed two cards to

Mr. Brandon and two to the next man, although he hadn't asked for any. The third man threw his hand on the floor and the man next to Mr. Brandon let his fall over face up on the table as he started to get up.

I could see the unfilled straight flush lying there that could never get filled without fancy dealing after Mr. Brandon's two-card draw.

Mr. Brandon announced, "Three aces", and gathered the money into his hat. The dealer threw his hand away and started to get up.

Now he looked at me. "My memory is good, bub," he said.

I spoke up. "Gentlemen, we should not leave each other in anger. Perhaps a little walk on the deck would help us cool off and arrive at a better mutual understanding. The door is right behind you."

So out we all went, me last. Outside the deck was damp and the darkness filled with heavy

mist. Not a light was showing except for one lantern wobbling around away down in the stern.

As I expected, they tried to jump me in the dark. I took out my little over-and-under and shot it out. The report was drowned in the roar of the paddle wheel. Nobody moved for a minute. Then:

"Goodbye," said the dealer and in they went, leaving Mr. Brandon and me alone in the twisting mist.

All of this was a long time ago. I live in California now and having come here well supplied with capital, I have done well and am respected in the community. I often think of my uncle back in Virginia and wonder whatever became of him. I do not have to wonder about Mr. Brandon. Neither does it bother me that on misty evenings my diamonds sometimes seem to take on a muddy watery tone very much like the turbulence of a large river.

