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The Popham Mystery

Its Solution Was to Say the Least a Surprise

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Miss Laura Bamwell's little black eyes blazed with the fire of excitement. Such a tidbit of news had not trembled on the tip of her sharp tongue for many a day, and to add interest to the matter Laura was going to sew that very day at Mrs. Gid Smith's, and it was dollars to doughnuts that Mrs. Gid hadn't heard a word about it, and Henry Popham was her own uncle too!

So Laura settled herself in the sunny south window of the Smiths' sitting room, pinned her knitted pincushion to her apron belt, spread her fashion books on the sewing table and then looked into Mrs. Smith's wide, simple countenance.

"Terrible about your Uncle Henry, wasn't it?" asked Laura.

At this bombshell Mrs. Smith squeaked nervously.

"Uncle Henry! What's happened to him?" she demanded, visions of deep mourning veils, a wreath of carnations—carnations were the least costly of winter flowers—the division of Uncle Henry's money and perhaps herself and family (she had been real good to Uncle Henry), living in Uncle Henry's comfortable house on the Hollow road, whirled through her mind while she waited for Laura's deliberate answer.

"Why, ain't you heard? He's disappeared."

"Disappeared! Where to?"

"Nobody knows," went on Laura complacently. "Postmaster Brown thinks he might have drowned himself in the mill pond."

Mrs. Smith verged on hysterics.

"Oh, poor, dear Uncle Henry!" she sobbed. "I have been expecting most anything to happen to him, he being an old man and living alone."

"He's only sixty years old and considered some spry, and, being a cranky old bachelor, he was most comfortable living alone, most likely," retorted Laura, who in her youth had once tried to ensnare Henry Popham's heart and failed. "If he did commit suicide I guess it wasn't because none of his nieces wouldn't live with him!"

Laura laughed as she slipped open one of the fashion magazines. "Look here, Annie. What do you think of these painted skirts?" she asked.

"Don't talk to me about making up that garnet cashmere," protested Mrs. Smith, rising and twitching the bundle of dress material from the table.

"How do I know but I'll have to be wearing black tomorrow? I guess you better fix up my black taffeta, Laura, and press out that mourning veil. Do you think you could fuss up that bonnet too?"

"Likely enough," said the chagrined dressmaker, for she hated "making over." "But why don't you wait until you find out if he is dead? Maybe he's only gone visiting somewhere."

"Visiting! Uncle Henry ain't been outside of Brooklawn for twenty years except over to Redbridge to the bank. Who told you he was missing?"

"Your own cousin, Belle Wickham. She was coming out of the house scared to death; said it was all swept clean as a pin and the attic door was locked and she was afraid to go up there. He might have hung himself from the rafters, you know, Annie."

"Seems Belle went over to take him some hot corn bread for his breakfast—she certainly does pay him a lot of attention, Annie—and he didn't answer her knock, and so she went in through the sitting room window and found he hadn't even slept in his bed nor had any breakfast. He just wasn't there. So she came to the postoffice, and Mr. Brown said he saw Henry Popham down at the mill pond last night and he reckoned he'd ended his lonely life."

Mrs. Smith went upstairs and brought down an armful of somber hued garments, which she piled on the sewing table before the discomfited dressmaker.

"Do the best you can with 'em, Laura," she said gloomily. "I've got to go over and see Belle and Sarah Tompkins."

Mrs. Smith bustled heavily away, and presently Laura saw her going out through the gate, wrapped in a heavy blanket shawl. She went down the road toward Belle Wickham's, and the dressmaker was compelled to attack the venerable taffeta she could for the return of Henry Popham's niece.

It was 11 o'clock when Annie Smith returned, and her eyes were red with weeping.

"What news?" asked Laura eagerly.

"I guess poor Uncle Henry's gone," sighed Annie, sitting down in the Boston rocker and unpinning her shawl. "I went over to Belle's, and Sarah was there. Seems James Whalen met Uncle Henry last night in Redbridge, and Laura, he was standing on the bridge over the falls, and James says he looked despondent." Mrs. Smith wept noisily for a few moments; then she dried her tears and went on, "So we telephoned to Redbridge and just happened to catch Gideon at Meek's hotel."

"All the Brooklawn men can be found in Meek's bar most any time they go over to Redbridge," put in Laura crisply.

"At Meek's hotel," went on Annie placidly, "and Belle told him all about it. He didn't laugh and make fun of our fears, as we thought he would, but he said that he and Ned Wickham and Loren Tompkins would spend the day investigating the matter and would telephone Belle as soon as they heard anything."

"It's mighty queer," commented Laura Bamwell as she threaded her needle.

Mrs. Smith went out to the kitchen and began preparations for dinner. The dressmaker sewed and snipped and ripped and stitched busily.

Several hours passed uneventfully. It was 3 o'clock when Belle Wickham stalked up the path, her gaunt frame clothed in black mourning garments.

"I guess it's all over, Annie," she said sadly. "I just got a telephone message from Gideon. He said they had found Uncle Henry and would bring the body back with 'em tonight."

"We better go over to the house to be there. It needs fixing up—some fires made and so forth," said Mrs. Smith gravely. So after a while the two cousins departed, leaving the dressmaker with her hands full of mourning garments. "You'll have to come tomorrow, Laura," said Mrs. Smith as she went out.

"I wouldn't miss it for a farm," muttered Laura to herself. "I expect there'll be the greatest kind of jealousy over Henry's will. Each one of those three women will expect the lion's share. They've been watching each other for years, afraid one might get the inside track with Uncle Henry and his money."

In the Popham homestead, on the Hollow road, there was a scene of great activity, although the three cousins found the house remarkably neat and clean for a bachelor abode. Black Hannah, who came once a fortnight to clean and wash and iron, declared that Uncle Henry must have cleaned it himself since her last visit, and the grief-stricken nieces admitted that Uncle Henry's suicide had been premeditated.

Fires were made in the seldom used front parlor and in empty bedrooms, and the beds were aired and remade. Perhaps the nieces found comfort in hard work, for they drudged uncomplainingly.

At dusk they prepared from the supplies in the pantry, and then, gowned in deep black dresses, they sat down in the best parlor to await Uncle Henry's homecoming.

In her mind each woman was planning how she would refurbish the room when she came to live there.

If their grief was soothed by a certain complacency in the recollection of Uncle Henry's comfortable thousands they made no utterance to one another.

At 6 o'clock there was the sound of wheels along the Hollow road.

The three cousins turned pale and shivered a little. A sudden pity for Uncle Henry's last homecoming swept over them, and they advanced to the front hall and threw wide the door.

They stood there blinking out into the darkness of the winter night. Before the gate was Mason Winship's best black, the one with silver lamps, and alighting from it were several people.

It was not until they had crowded into the hall and parlor that the three cousins received a sudden, stunning surprise.

"Uncle Henry!" they screamed in unison.

And it was not Uncle Henry's corpse that confronted them, but a rejuvenated Uncle Henry, with crisp, gray curls combed over his ears and a sparkle in his eyes and a smile on his ruddy face. He was dressed in a brand new pepper and salt suit and a fur lined overcoat, and he carried a new sealskin cap in his gloved hand.

On Uncle Henry's arm leaned a very small lady, his junior by a dozen years perhaps, brown haired, sweet faced, with quick, birdlike movements and appealing brown eyes. She wore gray, too, with a scarlet wing in her gray velvet hat.

"Uncle Henry!" repeated the nieces more faintly.

"My dear nieces," replied Henry Popham soothingly, "don't be frightened if vague rumors of my death by drowning have reached you. Many people have spoken of the matrimonial sea, you know, and er—well, I've been getting married today, that's all. Let me introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Hester Popham, formerly Miss Hester Weed of Redbridge. Now, Annie, Belle, Sarah, kiss your Aunt Hester!"

And they did with the best grace they could muster, and when their three husbands, who had entered with the bride and groom, had fetched in a large wedding cake the relatives spread a wedding feast in the dining room, while Uncle Henry took his wife on a tour of the house. And if Uncle Henry's eyes twinkled at sight of the many preparations which had been made for a different homecoming he did not breathe a word of the joke to his wife, and she praised the thoughtfulness of his nieces and said that surely she was going to be fond of all three of them, for had they not made her warmly welcome?

And Annie and Belle and Sarah, having decided that they just make the best of it, went on with the preparations for the feast, but it must be confessed that the three husbands, who had been in Redbridge that day to witness Uncle Henry's marriage and who had jokingly telephoned a fictitious message to Belle Wickham, came in for hours of stern reproof from the dejected women. But it ended well after all, and Uncle Henry has generously remembered his nieces by handsome presents, so that now they give little thought to his possible demise.

Hester, his wife, is a bright, cheery little body, and no one begrudges Henry Popham his years of belated happiness.

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FORM OF THE EARTH.

It Has Changed but Very Little in Many Millions of Years.

The earth's form is that which its rotation period demands. Undoubtedly if the period has changed the form has changed. Given a little time, solids under great pressure flow quite readily into new forms.

Now, any great slowing down of the earth's rotation period within geological times would be expected to show in the surface features. The strain should have wrinkled, so to speak, in the equatorial regions and stretched in the polar regions if the earth changed from a spheroid that was considerably flatter than it now is to its present form. Mountains, as evidence of the folding of the rock strata, should exist in profusion in the torrid zone and be scarce in or absent from the higher latitudes of the earth.

Such differential effects do not exist, and it seems to follow that changes in the earth's rotation period and in its form could have been only slight while the stratification of our rocks was in progress. Geologists estimate from the deposition of denudation and sedimentation that the formation of the rock strata has consumed from 60,000,000 to 100,000,000 years.

If the earth had substantially its present form 80,000,000 years ago we are safe in saying that the period of time represented in the building up of the earth from a small nucleus to its present dimensions has been vastly longer, probably reckoned in the thousands of millions of years.—W. W. Campbell in Scientific Monthly.

VIRTUE OF A GOOD LAUGH.

A Tonic That Stimulates the Body and All its Organs.

There is not the remotest corner or little inlet of the minute blood vessels of the human body that does not feel some wavelet from the convulsion occasioned by good hearty laughter.

The life principle, or the central man, is shaken to the innermost depths, sending new tides of life and strength to the surface, thus materially tending to insure good health to the persons who indulge therein.

The blood moves more rapidly and conveys a different impression to all the organs of the body as it visits them on that particular mystic journey when the man is laughing from what it does at other times.

For this reason every good, hearty laugh in which a person indulges lengthens his life, conveying, as it does, new and distinct stimulus to the vital forces.

Doubtless the time will come when physicians, conceding more importance than they now do to the influence of the mind upon the vital forces of the body, will make up their prescriptions more with reference to the mind and less to drugs for them and will, in so doing, find the best and most effective method of producing the required effect upon the patient.

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"You may have one wish," said the good fairy, "and it shall be granted."

"Well," replied Johnny Wise, "I wish that I may have everything I want."
—Indianapolis Star

Told No Lie.

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—Boston Transcript

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