

UNCLE ABNER MASTER OF MYSTERIES

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TO
MY FATHER

WHOSE UNFAILING FAITH IN
AN ULTIMATE JUSTICE BEHIND
THE MOVING OF EVENTS HAS
BEEN TO THE WRITER A
WONDER AND AN INSPIRATION

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CHAPTER XI: *The Hidden Law*

WE had come out to Dudley Betts' house and were standing in a bit of meadow.

It was an afternoon of April; there had been a shower of rain, and now the sun was on the velvet grass and the white-headed clover blossoms. The sky was blue above and the earth green below, and swimming between them was an air like lotus. Facing the south upon this sunny field was a stand of bees, thatched with rye-straw and covered over with a clapboard roof, the house of each tribe a section of a hollow gum-tree, with a cap on the top for the tribute of honey to the human tyrant. The bees had come out after the shower was gone, and they hummed at their work with the sound of a spinner.

Randolph stopped and looked down upon the humming hive. He lifted his finger with a little circling gesture.

"Singing masons building roofs of gold," he said. "Ah, Abner, William of Avon was a great poet."

My uncle turned about at that and looked at Randolph and then at the hive of bees. A girl was coming up from the brook below with a pail of water. She wore a simple butternut frock, and she

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was clean-limbed and straight like those first daughters of the world who wove and spun. She paused before the hive and the bees swarmed about her as about a great clover blossom, and she was at home and unafraid like a child in a company of yellow butterflies. She went on to the spring house with her dripping wooden pail, kissing the tips of her fingers to the bees. We followed, but before the hive my uncle stopped and repeated the line that Randolph had quoted:

“‘Singing masons building roofs of gold,’ . . . and over a floor of gold and pillars of gold.” He added, “He was a good riddle maker, your English poet, but not so good as Samson, unless I help him out.”

I received the fairy fancy with all children’s joy. Those little men singing as they laid their yellow floor, and raised their yellow walls, and arched their yellow roof! Singing! The word seemed to open up some sunlit fairy world.

It pleased Randolph to have thus touched my uncle.

“A great poet, Abner,” he repeated, “and more than that; he drew lessons from nature valuable for doctrine. Men should hymn as they labor and fill the fields with song and so suck out the virus from the curse. He was a great philosopher, Abner—William of Avon.”

“But not so great a philosopher as Saint Paul,” replied Abner, and he turned from the bees toward

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old Dudley Betts, digging in the fields before his door. He put his hands behind him and lifted his stern bronze face.

"Those who coveted after money," he said, "have 'pierced themselves through with many sorrows.' And is it not the truth? Yonder is old Dudley Betts. He is doubled up with aches; he has lost his son; he is losing his life, and he will lose his soul—all for money—'Pierced themselves through with many sorrows,' as Saint Paul said it, and now, at the end he has lost the horde that he slaved for."

The man was a by-word in the hills; mean and narrow, with an economy past belief. He used everything about him to one end and with no thought but gain. He cultivated his fields to the very door, and set his fences out into the road, and he extracted from those about him every tithe of service. He had worked his son until the boy had finally run away across the mountains. He had driven his daughter to the makeshifts of the first patriarchal people—soap from ashes, linen from hemp, and the wheel and the loom for the frock upon her limbs.

And like every man under a single dominating passion, he grew in suspicion and in fear. He was afraid to lend out his money lest he lose it. He had given so much for this treasure that he would take no chance with it, and so kept it by him in gold.

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But caution and fear are not harpies to be halted; they wing on. Betts was dragged far in their claw-feet. There is a land of dim things that these convoys can enter. Betts arrived there. We must not press the earth too hard, old, forgotten peoples believed, lest evil things are squeezed out that strip us and avenge it. And ancient crones, feeble, wrapped up by the fire, warned him: The earth suffered us to reap, but not to glean her. We must not gather up every head of wheat. The earth or dim creatures behind the earth would be offended. It was the oldest belief. The first men poured a little wine out when they drank and brought an offering of their herds and the first fruits of the fields. It was written in the Book. He could get it down and read it.

What did they know that they did this? Life was hard then; men saved all they could. There was some terrible experience behind this custom, some experience that appalled and stamped the race with a lesson!

At first Betts laughed at their warnings; then he cursed at them, and his changed manner marked how far he had got. The laugh meant disbelief, but the curse meant fear.

And now, the very strangest thing had happened: The treasure that the old man had so painfully laid up had mysteriously vanished clear away. No one knew it. Men like Betts, cautious and secretive, are dumb before disaster. They conceal the deep

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mortal hurt as though to hide it from themselves.

He had gone in the night and told Randolph and Abner, and now they had come to see his house.

He put down his hoe when we came up and led us in. It was a house like those of the first men, with everything in it home-made—hand-woven rag-carpets on the floor, and hand-woven coverlets on the beds; tables and shelves and benches of rude carpentry. These things spoke of the man's economy. But there were also things that spoke of his fear: The house was a primitive stockade. The door was barred with a beam, and there were heavy shutters at the window; an ax stood by the old man's bed and an ancient dueling pistol hung by its trigger-guard to a nail.

I did not go in, for youth is cunning. I sat down on the doorstep and fell into so close a study of a certain wasp at work under a sill that I was overlooked as a creature without ears; but I had ears of the finest and I lost no word.

The old man got two splint-bottom chairs and put them by the table for his guests, and then he brought a blue earthen jar and set it before them. It was one of the old-fashioned glazed jars peddled by the hucksters, smaller but deeper than a crock, with a thick rim and two great ears. In this he kept his gold pieces until on a certain night they had vanished.

The old man's voice ran in and out of a whisper as he told the story. He knew the very night,

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because he looked into his jar before he slept and every morning when he got out of his bed. It had been a devil's night—streaming clouds drove across an iron sky, a thin crook of a moon sailed, and a high bitter wind scythed the earth.

Everybody remembered the night when he got out his almanac and named it. There had been noises, old Betts said, but he could not define them. Such a night is full of voices; the wind whispers in the chimney and the house frame creaks. The wind had come on in gusts at sunset, full of dust and whirling leaves, but later it had got up into a gale. The fire had gone out and the house inside was black as a pit. He did not know what went on inside or out, but he knew that the gold was gone at daylight, and he knew that no living human creature had got into his house. The bar on his door held and the shutters were bolted. Whatever entered, entered through the keyhole or through the throat of the chimney that a cat would stick in.

Abner said nothing, but Randolph sat down to an official inquiry:

"You have been robbed, Betts," he said. "Somebody entered your house that night."

"Nobody entered it," replied the old man in his hoarse, half-whispered voice, "either on that night or any other night. The door was fast, Squire."

"But the thief may have closed it behind him."

Betts shook his head. "He could not put up the bar behind him, and besides, I set it in a certain way.

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It was not moved. And the windows—I bolt them and turn the bolt at a certain angle. No human touched them.”

It was not possible to believe that this man could be mistaken. One could see with what care he had set his little traps—the bar across the door precisely at a certain hidden line; the bolts of the window shutters turned precisely to an angle that he alone knew. It was not likely that Randolph would suggest anything that this cautious old man had not already thought of.

“Then,” continued Randolph, “the thief concealed himself in your house the day before the robbery and got out of it on the day after.”

But again Betts shook his head, and his eyes ran over the house and to a candle on the mantelpiece.

“I look,” he said, “every night before I go to bed.”

And one could see the picture of this old, fearful man, looking through his house with the smoking tallow candle, peering into every nook and corner. Could a thief hide from him in this house that he knew inch by inch? One could not believe it. The creature took no chance; he had thought of every danger, this one among them, and every night he looked! He would know, then, the very cracks in the wall. He would have found a rat.

Then, it seemed to me, Randolph entered the only road there was out of this mystery.

“Your son knew about this money?”

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"Yes," replied Betts, "'Lander knew about it. He used to say that a part of it was his because he had worked for it as much as I had. But I told him," and the old man's voice cheeped in a sort of laugh, "that he was mine."

"Where was your son Philander when the money disappeared?" said Randolph.

"Over the mountains," said Betts; "he had been gone a month." Then he paused and looked at Randolph. "It was not 'Lander. On that day he was in the school that Mr. Jefferson set up. I had a letter from the master asking for money. . . . I have the letter," and he got up to get it.

But Randolph waved his hand and sat back in his chair with the aspect of a brooding oracle.

It was then that my uncle spoke.

"Betts," he said, "how do you think the money went?"

The old man's voice got again into that big crude whisper.

"I don't know, Abner."

But my uncle pressed him.

"What do you think?"

Betts drew a little nearer to the table.

"Abner," he said, "there are a good many things going on around a man that he don't understand. We turn out a horse to pasture, and he comes in with hand-holts in his mane. . . . You have seen it?"

"Yes," replied my uncle.

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And I had seen it, too, many a time, when the horses were brought up in the spring from pasture, their manes twisted and knotted into loops, as though to furnish a hand-holt to a rider.

"Well, Abner," continued the old man in his rustling whisper, "who rides the horse? You cannot untie or untwist those hand-holts—you must cut them out with shears—with iron. Is it true?"

"It is true," replied my uncle.

"And why, eh, Abner? Because those hand-holts were never knotted in by any human fingers! You know what the old folk say?"

"I know," answered my uncle. "Do you believe it, Betts?"

"Eh, Abner!" he croaked in the guttural whisper. "If there were no witches, why did our fathers hang up iron to keep them off? My grandmother saw one burned in the old country. She had ridden the king's horse, and greased her hands with shoemakers' wax so her fingers would not slip in the mane. . . . Shoemakers' wax! Mark you that, Abner!"

"Betts," cried Randolph, "you are a fool; there are no witches!"

"There was the Witch of Endor," replied my uncle. "Go on, Betts."

"By gad, sir!" roared Randolph, "if we are to try witches, I shall have to read up James the First. That Scotch king wrote a learned work on demonology. He advised the magistrates to search

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on the body of the witch for the seal of the devil; that would be a spot insensible to pain, and, James said, 'Prod for it with a needle.' "

But my uncle was serious.

"Go on, Betts," he said. "I do not believe that any man entered your house and robbed you. But why do you think that a witch did?"

"Well, Abner," answered the old man, "who could have got in but such a creature? A thief cannot crawl through a keyhole, but there are things that can. My grandmother said that once in the old country a man awoke one night to see a gray wolf sitting by his fireside. He had an ax, as I have, and he fought the wolf with that and cut off its paw, whereupon it fled screaming through the keyhole. And the paw lying on the floor was a woman's hand!"

"Then, Betts," cried Randolph, "it's damned lucky that you didn't use your ax, if that is what one finds on the floor."

Randolph had spoken with pompous sarcasm, but at the words there came upon Abner's face a look of horror.

"It is," he said, "in God's name!"

Betts leaned forward in his chair.

"And what would have happened to me, Abner, do you think, if I had used my ax? Would I have died there with the ax in my hand?"

The look of horror remained upon my uncle's face.

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"You would have wished for that when the light came; to die is sometimes to escape the pit."

"I would have fallen into hell, then?"

"Aye, Betts," replied my uncle, "straightway into hell!"

The old man rested his hands on the posts of the chair.

"The creatures behind the world are baleful creatures," he muttered in his big whisper.

Randolph got up at that.

"Damme!" he said. "Are we in the time of Roger Williams, and is this Massachusetts, that witches ride and men are filched of their gold by magic and threatened with hell fire? What is this cursed foolery, Abner?"

"It is no foolery, Randolph," replied my uncle, "but the living truth."

"The truth!" cried Randolph. "Do you call it the truth that creatures, not human, able to enter through the keyhole and fly away, have Betts' gold, and if he had fought against this robbery with his ax he would have put himself in torment? Damme, man! In the name of common sense, do you call this the truth?"

"Randolph," replied Abner, and his voice was slow and deep, "it is every word the truth."

Randolph moved back the chair before him and sat down. He looked at my uncle curiously.

"Abner," he said, "you used to be a crag of common sense. The legends and theories of fools

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broke on you and went to pieces. Would you now testify to witches?"

"And if I did," replied my uncle, "I should have Saint Paul behind me."

"The fathers of the church fell into some errors," replied Randolph.

"The fathers of the law, then?" said Abner.

Randolph took his chin in his hand at that. "It is true," he said, "that Sir Matthew Hale held nothing to be so well established as the fact of witchcraft for three great reasons, which he gave in their order, as became the greatest judge in England: First, because it was asserted in the Scriptures; second, because all nations had made laws against it; and, third, because the human testimony in support of it was overwhelming. I believe that Sir Matthew had knowledge of some six thousand cases. . . . But Mr. Jefferson has lived since then, Abner, and this is Virginia."

"Nevertheless," replied my uncle, "after Mr. Jefferson, and in Virginia, this thing has happened."

Randolph swore a great oath.

"Then, by gad, sir, let us burn the old women in the villages until the creatures who carried Betts' treasure through the keyhole bring it back!"

Betts spoke then.

"They have brought some of it back!"

My uncle turned sharply in his chair.

"What do you mean, Betts?" he said.

"Why this, Abner," replied the old man, his voice

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descending into the cavernous whisper; "on three mornings I have found some of my gold pieces in the jar. And they came as they went, Abner, with every window fastened down and the bar across the door. And there is another thing about these pieces that have come back—they are mine, for I know every piece—but they have been in the hands of the creatures that ride the horses in the pasture—they have been handled by witches!" He whispered the word with a fearful glance about him. "How do I know that? Wait, I will show you!"

He went over to his bed and got out a little box from beneath his cornhusk mattress—a worn, smoke-stained box with a sliding lid. He drew the lid off with his thumb and turned the contents out on the table.

"Now look," he said; "look, there is wax on every piece! Shoemakers' wax, mark you. . . . Eh, Abner! My mother said that—the creatures grease their hands with that so their fingers will not slip when they ride the barebacked horses in the night. They have carried this gold clutched in their hands, see, and the wax has come off!"

My uncle and Randolph leaned over the table. They examined the coins.

"By the Eternal!" cried Randolph. "It is wax! But were they clean before?"

"They were clean," the old man answered. "The wax is from the creatures' fingers. Did not my mother say it?"

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My uncle sat back in his chair, but Betts strained forward and put his fearful query:

"What do you think, Abner; will all the gold come back?"

My uncle did not at once reply. He sat for some time silent, looking through the open door at the sunny meadowland and the far off hills. But finally he spoke like one who has worked out a problem and got the answer.

"It will not all come back," he said.

"How much, then?" whispered Betts.

"What is left," replied Abner, "when the toll is taken out."

"You know where the gold is?"

"Yes."

"And the creatures that have it, Abner," Betts whispered, "they are not human?"

"They are not human!" replied my uncle.

Then he got up and began to walk about the house, but not to search for clues to this mysterious thing. He walked like one who examines something within himself—or something beyond the eye—and old Betts followed him with his straining face. And Randolph sat in his chair with his arms folded and his chin against his stock, as a skeptic overwhelmed by proof might sit in a house of haunted voices. He was puzzled upon every hand. The thing was out of reason at every point, both in the loss and in the return of these coins upon the table, and my uncle's comments were below the

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soundings of all sense. The creatures who now had Betts' gold could enter through the keyhole! Betts would have gone into the pit if he had struck out with his ax! A moiety of this treasure would be taken out and the rest returned! And the coins testified to no human handling! The thing had no face nor aspect of events in nature. Mortal thieves enjoyed no such supernal powers. These were the attributes of the familiar spirit. Nor did the human robber return a per cent upon his gains!

I have said that my uncle walked about the floor. But he stopped now and looked down at the hard, miserly old man.

"Betts," he said, "this is a mysterious world. It is hedged about and steeped in mystery. Listen to me! The Patriarchs were directed to make an offering to the Lord of a portion of the increase in their herds. Why? Because the Lord had need of sheep and heifers? Surely not, for the whole earth and its increase were His. There was some other reason, Betts. I do not understand what it was, but I do understand that no man can use the earth and keep every tithe of the increase for himself. They did not try it, but you did!"

He paused and filled his big lungs.

"It was a disastrous experiment. . . . What will you do?"

"What must I do, Abner?" the old man whispered. "Make a sacrifice like the Patriarchs?"

"A sacrifice you must make, Betts," replied my

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uncle, "but not like the Patriarchs. What you receive from the earth you must divide into three equal parts and keep one part for yourself."

"And to whom shall I give the other two parts, Abner?"

"To whom would you wish to give them, Betts, if you had the choice?"

The old man fingered about his mouth.

"Well," he said, "a man would give to those of his own household first—if he had to give."

"Then," said Abner, "from this day keep a third of your increase for yourself and give the other two-thirds to your son and your daughter."

"And the gold, Abner? Will it come back?"

"A third part will come back. Be content with that."

"And the creatures that have my gold? Will they harm me?"

"Betts," replied my uncle, "the creatures that have your gold on this day hidden in their house will labor for you as no slaves have ever labored—without word or whip. Do you promise?"

The fearful old man promised, and we went out into the sun.

The tall straight young girl was standing before the springhouse, kneading a dish of yellow butter and singing like a blackbird. My uncle strode down to her. We could not hear the thing he said, but the singing ceased when he began to talk and burst out in a fuller note when he had finished—a big,

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happy, joyous note that seemed to fill the meadow.

We waited for him before the stand of bees, and Randolph turned on him when he came.

"Abner," he said, "what is the answer to this damned riddle?"

"You gave it, Randolph," he replied—" 'Singing masons building roofs of gold.' " And he pointed to the bees. "When I saw that the cap on one of the gums had been moved I thought Betts' gold was there, and when I saw the wax on the coins I was certain."

"But," cried Randolph, "you spoke of creatures not human—creatures that could enter through the keyhole—creatures——"

"I spoke of the bees," replied my uncle.

"But you said Betts would have fallen into hell if he had struck out with his ax!"

"He would have killed his daughter," replied Abner. "Can you think of a more fearful hell? She took the gold and hid it in the bee cap. But she was honest with her father; whenever she sent a sum of money to her brother she returned an equal number of gold pieces to old Betts' jar."

"Then," said Randolph, with a great oath, "there is no witch here with her familiar spirits?"

"Now that," replied my uncle, "will depend upon the imagery of language. There is here a subtle maiden and a stand of bees!"