

## *Link by Link*

The shower was ended. A brisk western breeze was rapidly tearing away the gray thunder-clouds from the face of the June sky, and the sun shone down with renewed fervor.

“As hot as ’twas before the rain!” exclaimed Mrs. Curtis, as she opened her parasol and leisurely stepped from the Heywood drygoods store in which she had, half an hour before, taken shelter from the storm.

“Yes, it is ma’am,” said Mr. Brown, the proprietor, handing her the bundles she had bought from him, and he added: “You have a hot walk under this brillin’ hot sun. Better run in to our house an’ stay ter tea. You hain’t seen the twins yet. Smartest little critters ever was. Mrs. Brown’s getting’ on finely and will be glad to see you.”

“Thanks; I’d like to, but I must hurry home and can my currents. Besides, I wouldn’t undertake that long walk through the pine wood after dark for anything in the world. It’s gloomy enough in the daytime. Give my respects to your wife; tell her I’ll drop in soon and see her and the babies. Good-day.”

“Good-day,” said Brown, and he added, as he saw Mrs. Curtis hurrying down the street, “Queer critter!”

Yes, by all the inhabitants of Heywood, Mrs. Curtis was called peculiar. [She] was upwards of fifty years, tall and erect, with iron-gray hair, ruddy cheeks and keen dark eyes. And decidedly she was a person that minded her own business. She had lived in Haywood over five years, yet in all that time not a single person had been able to glean any information concerning her past life. All that could be ascertained was that she was a widow, childless and with a little property, consisting of a comfortable cottage surrounded by a few acres of land, and with a few hundred dollars in the H[e]ywood bank.

Meanwhile, Mr. Brown returned to his counter to wait on a customer, and Mrs. Curtis pursued her journey homeward. For some distance her road led along the dusty highway, then she turned into a little footpath through the daisy-dotted meadow, then across the creek bridge, until presently she came to the dense pine woods whose shade was very pleasing to her.

When about half way through the woods she came to a small patch of late strawberries. She stooped to pick them. Her brown, hard-working hands were nearly full of the luscious red berries, when a rustling and a footstep startled her. She hastily glanced up. In an instant an iron-like hand was clutching her throat, and—only the frightened wildwood birds could tell the rest!

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About two miles from the village of Heywood, and on the banks of Briar Creek dwelt Peter Groat. He was a German, who, with his family, had lately come to America, and in the previous autumn had bought a few acres of land bordering on the creek. Here he had erected a small but comfortable house, and was, to all appearances, an honest, hardworking man. The only thing that could be said against him by a few grumblers was that he was too “close,” clinging tightly to his hard-earned pennies, and ever on the lookout for more. But this was certainly excusable when it was known that he had a mortgage on his farm, which together with the wants of a rapidly increasing family, was enough to make any man greedy of gain.

It was the evening of the day on which our story began. Peter, surrounded by his wife and children, sat placidly smoking his pipe on the little grass plot in front of [his] house.

The supper had been eaten, the cows milked, the pigs fed, the chickens housed from thievish rats, and all the family, young and old, felt entitled to a season of rest. Hans and Fritz were turning somersaults on the soft grass; Gretchen, the flaxen-haired lassie, was feeding a pet robin; Franz, the six-months baby, was cuddled up to his mother’s breast, contentedly smacking his lips over his evening meal.

The sun went down; the shadows deepened. The clock in the distant village struck the hour of eight. Peter Groat rose, shook the ashes from his pipe, and said:

“Come, kinder, it is late. The dew is falling, and let’s to bed.”

“Vater! Vater!” suddenly cried Hans and Fritz, running up from the gate, “there is a man coming in our yard—a stranger!”

Peter slowly sauntered down to meet the new comer.

He was an elderly man with a tanned and ragged face, sandy hair sprinkled with gray, and dark, deep set eyes, somewhat inflamed. His clothes were of good material, although worn and dusty with travel. In his hand he carried a large satchel.

“Good-evening,” he said, courteously.

“Evening to you, sir,” replied Peter Groat.

“I’m a peddler,” said the man, speaking in German. “I have sold nearly all my goods, and am on my way back to New York. I got left by the train and undertook to walk to the next station. I lost my way and find that I will have to get lodgings for the night. Can you help me?”

“The good book commands us to show hospitality,” said Peter. “And although we are not rich, we never yet turned away a benighted traveler. So, come in, and my frau shall get you something to eat.”

The table was soon spread with a neat, white cloth, upon which was placed a platter of cold boiled meat, garnished with vegetables, then a plate of white bread, a roll of butter, a dish of shining black raspberries and a plate of spicy ginger cookies.

“I feel too dirty to sit down to a decent table,” said the traveler, with a smile. “May I trouble you for a basin of water?”

It was brought. As he took off his coat preparatory to washing his face and hands, Gretchen, who stood beside him with a fresh towel in her hands, uttered a slight scream.

“Blood!” she cried. “There’s blood on your sleeves!”

The basin of water fell from the stranger’s hands. His face shone white through the glistening drops of water he had dashed upon it. Then with an effort he said, carelessly:

“Ah, yes; those rocks by the creek made quite a gash in my shoulder. You see,” blandly explaining, “while I was lost I thought I’d try to cross the creek. It was getting dark, and when I reached the other side, I found it so rocky that I could scarcely climb up. I got half way, then a sudden misstep made me fall. A sharp piece of rock pierced my shoulder, and, indeed, it had caused me considerable pain.”

“Ach, too bad!” said Frau Groat. “I have a soothing lotion which you may put on before you go to bed.”

“Thanks. And I’ll go to bed right after I’ve had my supper, if you please, for I am very tired. Besides, I will have to rise early to-morrow morning, so that I may take the first train.”

The next morning the whole family was up in time to see their guest depart. He partook with good appetite of Frau Groat’s breakfast of ham and eggs; he listened quietly and with seeming reverence to his host as he read a chapter from the old, black German Bible and offered up the usual morning prayer; then, just as he was ready to start, he inquired what he should pay for his board and lodging.

“Oh, nothings—nothings! You are welcome to the bed and the bite!” said Groat heartily.

“You are very kind,” said the stranger. “But I feel that I ought to repay you in some way. See here”—opening his satchel—“if you will not let me give money, pray do me the kindness of accepting these little tokens of gratitude. Here, Frau Groat, are two pairs of stockings that would just fit your busy feet, and here, Gretchen, is a brand new piece of calico, more than enough for a dress. They are the only things I did not sell, and I do not care to lug them home again.”

The two women accepted his gifts with much pleasure, and, with mutual expressions of good luck, the traveler and his kind entertainers parted. The former wore a blue-checked shirt of Peter Groat’s. He left his won behind him, telling Frau Groat that it was too soiled

for wearing, but that she might keep it in exchange for the one she had given him. As the stranger's shirt was of excellent material, with linen bosom and cuffs, the worthy dame thought she had made a good bargain.

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William Grayson, a farmer in the vicinity of Heywood, missed one of his cows that Friday night, and early on the following morning set out to make search for her. He hunted through the meadow lands, followed the course of the creek quite a way, and finally entered the pine woods. When about half way through, a brown object lying on the grass a little distance from him, attracted his attention. He went to it. It was a large piece of wrapping paper, and a long bit of twine lying beside it. The paper was damp with dew, and, as Grayson carelessly turned it over in his hand he noticed some red spots on it. He examined them more closely. They were the blood prints of a thumb and fingers!

He looked around him keenly. He soon noticed that the bank of ferns bordering the path was in one place crushed and broken. He followed these marks; they led him to the densest and most unfrequented part of the woods, and there, in a hollow, almost covered with low underbrush, lay the body of a woman. It was Mrs. Curtis, lying stiff and stark, with a bloody slash across her throat!

Two hours later, a party of men was haunting the leafy labyrinths of the pine woods. They were endeavoring to find the trail of the murderer.

An hour passed and they had met with no success. Some of them had gathered together for the purpose of consultation, when suddenly a cry from one of their companions, who was a little distance from them, attracted their attention.

“See what I have found!” he cried, holding up a spool of thread. It was dirty and dingy and wet with dew; but Mr. Brown, the merchant, who was with the party, recognized it at once, he said:

“It's one of the spools poor Mrs. Curtis bought of me yesterday. It's pink, you see. She was real particular about the color. She was piecing a chair cushion, and wanted the right shade. Now, it's evident that the villain who murdered her too this route through the woods. See how the ferns are crushed dew this way. Hurry, we've got a clew now!”

The trail led them out of the woods into the meadow, and opened right into the yard of Peter Groat. They were going around to the back door to knock, and ask if any of the inmates had seen a stranger lurking about the premises when Mr. Brown chanced to look in the window.

A look of extreme consternation overspread his ruddy face.

“My God!” he cried, “see there!”

All turned and looked in the window.

The room was unoccupied. The clock ticked cheerfully in one corner. A cat was cozily curled upon a chair-cushion, purring contentedly. But on the table in the center of the room lay two pairs of stockings, and near them, half-unrolled, was a dress pattern of lilac calico.

“That calico,” said Mr. Brown, impressively—“that calico is the identical piece I sold to Mrs. Curtis yesterday afternoon. I should know it anywhere. It’s peculiar, you see—a bunch of white lilacs on a purple ground. It was all I had. Besides, I should know the piece because on one end there is about half a yard imperfectly printed, which has holes in it, too. I remember I let Mrs. Curtis have it a bit cheaper on that account. Now Peter Groat knows where the murderer is, or”—solemnly and slowly—“he did the deed himself!”

The party of men went silently and soberly to the back-door, and here they were horrified in finding fresh evidence—Frau Groat was engaged in washing a blood-stained shirt!

They sternly asked her to whom it belonged, but the poor woman, who could speak no English, could only look at them in a frightened way.

Her husband now came in from the garden, and him they sternly interrogated, while some of the more impetuous boldly accused him of the murder of the unfortunate Mrs. Curtis.

His frightened face, his confusion, his incoherent utterance, his trembling denials were only so much more against him. Besides, he knew scarcely any more English than did his wife, and later, when calm, his story of the traveler who had sto[p]ped at his house was received with disbelief and derision. Poor, friendless and a stranger, things looked very dark against him.

Weeks passed; his trial came. He was sentenced to be hanged!

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Rev. Mr. Marshall, rector of St. John’s church, Brookdale, a village some two hundred miles distant from Heywood, was in his study one September morning, 1878. He was suffering out an attack of influenza which he had taken the night before while on a visit to a sick parishioner. Consequently complying with his wife’s request that he should do no studying or writing, Mr. Marshall was lazily stretched on the lounge in front of a cheery fire. His eight year old son Tom was in the room, every now and then running up to this father with some request. At last one was: “Papa, it’s Saturday, how shall I spend the day? Wish I had a kite! Do you know how to make one, papa?”

“I used to, Tom. I don’t know whether I’ve forgotten how to do it or not. Give me the newspaper on the table, please, and the scissors. Then run out in the woodshed and get

me some of those sticks on the shelf, also a hammer and small nails. Stay, don't be in such a hurry; and ask Hannah to make a little flour paste."

Tom hurried away, and while waiting for him to return, his father glanced over the columns of the newspaper he was cutting. It was on that his friend, Mr. Brown, of Heywood, had sent him. His eyes chanced to fall on these words:

"The German, Peter Groat, who murdered Mrs. Curtis, has been sentenced to be hung on the second Friday in next month. Groat, although a stranger, was supposed to be a respectable man and one not at all capable of perpetrating such a horrible crime. But the evidences of his guilt are most conclusive. The morning after the murder his wife was found washing a bloody shirt, also a knife stained with blood was found hidden in near a woodpile. Besides [the] goods belonging to the murdered woman were found in Groat's house. The only thing missing is a curious old snuff-box of some black wood, quaintly carved in the shape of a toad. Her name Hepsibah Curtis, is engraved inside. But without this, the evidence is strong enough to hang him."

"Poor fellow!" murmured Mr. Marshall, as he laid down the paper. "It makes one dread to read the news—one comes across so many horrors."

"Papa! Papa! you needn't mind about the kite now!" cried Tom, rushing in with shining eyes. Uncle George just called me over to his house—he is going fishing, and say he will take me along. May I go?"

"If mamma is willing."

"She is. I asked her. And I've been digging grubs and fish worms—for bait, you know. But see what a nice bait-box I've got."

"An old snuff-box. Where did you get it?"

"Myron Mason gave it to me."

"Who is Myron Mason?"

"Oh, a new man Uncle George got to work in his garden. He's gathering pears and trenching the celery. Myron was a tramp who came along, but he is real nice. The box is nice, too. See what a funny shape it is!"

"A toad. Quick! Let me see, Tom!"

Mr. Marshall had not closely observed the box until now, and it was with trembling fingers that he opened it.

"Hepsibah Curtis" was the name engraved on the inner cover!

Mr. Marshall's face was white, but his voice was calm, as he said:

"Tom, just run over and tell your Uncle George to come over here a few minutes—I want to talk with him on a little business."

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Three days later Myron Mason, alias Jasper Armand, was arrested for the murder of Mrs. Curtis.

He made no resistance; he told no falsehoods; he simply confessed the whole affair, stating that he had murdered the woman out of revenge. Ten years before the two had lived in a distant town. He had always been wild and dissolute, but had been the betrothed of Mrs. Curtis' sister, a gentle and lovely woman. Mrs. Curtis had opposed the match, knowing that it would cause her sister a life of misery. Also, finding that Armand belonged to a gang of counterfeiters, she promptly gave evidence against him.

He was condemned to ten years' imprisonment. This he bore patiently, mentally vowing that, when released, he would at once wreak vengeance on the woman who had foiled his plans and blighted his life.

When the time was expired and the prison doors opened to let him pass out, he found that the woman he loved was dead, and that the woman he hated was living in Heywood. Thither he went. He had seen Mrs. Curtis go to town, had concealed himself in the woods to await her return. He did not take the articles she carried merely for the sake of robbery, but to have suspicion point its finger at some other party. At the conclusion of his confession, he said that he had no desire of concealing it any longer. His life was made wretched by the horrible crime he had committed, and death and exposure were not unwelcome. The next day after his confinement in the jail he was found dead in his cell. He had ended his life by poison.

As for Peter Groat he was at once released, and all the inhabitants of Heywood strove to express their regret and regard for him, but to these Peter only shook his head, saying:

"He did not care for to live in a blace where de folks vas so ready to plieve him a pad man!" So he sold his little home, packed his goods, and, with his wife and children, moved to the Far West, where, it is to be hoped, in spite of sweet charity's sake, he was more careful in entertaining benighted travelers!

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