

The
**Shed
Chamber**

LAURA E. RICHARDS

“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”

Period Short Stories of Mystery, Crime & Intrigue

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“Vintage Short Mystery Classics” have been selected by Daniel Elton Harmon, author of “The Harper Chronicles,” with the intent of introducing new readers to notable works of short historical fiction in the mystery/gothic/crime vein. For more information, please visit the author’s Web site at www.danieleltonharmon.com.

If you’re not familiar with the works of Laura E. Richards (1850-1943), you’re undoubtedly familiar with at least one of her parents: Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe and Julia Ward Howe. Both were noted abolitionists during the mid-1800s; her mother penned the words of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” among many other writings.

In her own right, Richards became known for her children’s literature, including nonsense verse, Captain January (a best-seller on which the Shirley Temple movie was based) and numerous juvenile story collections.

The tale at hand, which casts as its heroine a teen-age “accidental sleuth,” is from The Green Satin Gown, published in 1903.

Richards won the Pulitzer Prize for her 1915 biography of her mother.

The Shed Chamber

“Well, I once answered an advertisement in the *Farmer's Friend*, girls, and I have always been glad I did. It was that summer when father broke his arm and the potato crop failed, and everything seemed to be going wrong on the farm. There were plenty of girls to do the work at home, and I thought I ought to get something outside to do if I could. I tried here and there, but without success; at last my eye caught a notice in the *Farmer's Friend*, just the same kind of notice as that you are speaking of, Lottie: ‘Wanted, a capable, steady girl to assist in housework and take care of children. Address, with references, A.B.C., Dashville.’ I talked it over with mother, and she agreed with me; father didn't take so kindly to the idea, naturally; he likes to have us all at home, especially in summer. However, he said I might do as I pleased; so I answered the notice and sent a letter from our pastor, saying what he thought of me. I was almost ashamed to send it, too; he has always been more than kind to me, you know; if I'd been his own daughter he couldn't have said more. Well, they wrote for me to come, and I went.

“Girls, it was pretty hard when it came to that part, leaving the house, and mother standing in the doorway trying not to look anxious, and father fretting and saying it was all nonsense, and he shouldn't have hands enough to pick the apples. Of course he knew I knew better, but I was glad he didn't want me to go, after all. Sister Nell and Sister Margie had packed my trunk, and they were as ex-

cited as I was, and almost wished they were going instead, but not quite, I think; and so Joe whistled to old Senator, and I waved my handkerchief, and mother and the two girls waved their aprons, and off I went.

“I didn’t really feel alone till I was in the train and had lost sight of Joe standing and smoothing Senator’s mane and nodding at me; then the world seemed very big and Topham Corner a very small corner of it. I will not say anything more about this part; you’ll find out soon enough yourselves, when you go away from home the first time.

“It was a long journey, or it seemed so then; but everything comes to an end some time, and there was plenty of daylight left for me to see my new home when I arrived. It was a pleasant-looking house, long and rambling, painted yellow, too, which made me more homesick than ever. There were two children standing in the doorway, and presently Mr. Bowles came out and shook hands with me and helped me down with my things. He was a kind, sensible-looking man, and he made the children come and speak to me and shake hands. They were shy then and hung back, and put their fingers in their mouths; I knew just how they felt. I wanted to hang back, too, when he took me into the house to see Mrs. Bowles. She was an invalid, he told me, and could not leave her room.

“Girls, the minute I saw that sweet, pale face, with the look of pain and patience in it, I knew what I had come for. I do think we understood each other from the first minute, Mrs. Bowles and I; for she held my hand a good while, looking into my face and I into hers, and she must have seen how sorry I was for her, and how I hoped

I could help her; for when I went into the kitchen I heard her say, with a little sigh, as she lay back again, 'O John, I do believe this is the right one at last!' You may believe I made up my mind that I would be the right one, Lottie!

"The kitchen was in a scandalous condition. It was well I had seen Mrs. Bowles first or I should have wanted to run away that very minute. The eldest little girl—it seems strange to think that there ever was a time when I didn't know Barbara's name!—followed me out,—I think her father told her to,—and rubbed along against the wall, just exactly as I used to when I felt shy. When I asked her a little about where things were, and so on—they were everywhere and nowhere; you never saw such a looking place in your life!—she took her finger out of her mouth, and pretty soon I told her about our yellow coon kittens, and after that we got on very well. She said they had had one girl after another, each worse than the last. The shoe factory had taken off all the good help and left only the incapable ones. The last one, Barbara said, had almost starved them, and been saucy to Mrs. Bowles, and dirty—well, there was no need to tell me that. It was a shame to see good things so destroyed; for the things were good, only all dirty and broken, and—oh, well! there's no use in telling about that part.

"I asked when her mother had had anything to eat, and she said not since noon; I knew that was no way for an invalid to be taken care of, so I put the kettle on and hunted about till I found a cup and saucer I liked, and then I found the bread-box—oh, dear! that bread-box, girls! But the mold scraped right off, and the bread wasn't really bad; I made some toast and cut the crust off, and put just a thin scrape of butter on it; then I sent Barbara

in with a little tray and told her to see that her mother took it all. I thought she'd feel more like taking it from the child than from a stranger, if she hadn't much appetite. My dears, the child came out again in a few minutes, her face all alight.

"She drank it all, every drop!' she cried. 'And now she's eating the toast. She said how did you know, and she cried, but now she's all right. Father 'most cried too, I think. Say!'

"Yes, dear.'

"Father says the Lord sent you. Did he?"

"I nodded, for I couldn't say anything that minute. I kissed the little girl and went on with my cleaning. Girls, don't ever grudge the time you spend in learning to cook nicely. Food is what keeps the breath of life in us, and it all depends upon us girls now, and later, when we are older women, whether it is good or bad. No, Sue, I'm not going to preach, but I shall never forget how that tired man and those hungry children enjoyed their supper. 'Twas mother's supper, every bit of it, from the light biscuit down to the ham omelette; I found the ham bone in a dark cupboard, all covered with mold, like the bread, but 'twas good and sweet underneath. I only wish mother had been there to see them eat. After supper Mr. Bowles came and shook hands with me. I didn't know then that he never used any more words than he had to; but I was pleased, if I did think it funny.

"I was tired enough by the time bedtime came, and after I had put the children to bed and seen that Mrs. Bowles was comfortable, and had water and crackers and a candle beside her—she was a very poor sleeper—I was glad enough to go to bed myself. Barbara showed me my

room, a pretty little room with sloping gables and windows down by the floor. There were two doors, and I asked her where the other led to. She opened it and said, 'The shed chamber.' I looked over her shoulder, holding up the candle, and saw a great bare room, with some large trunks in it, but no other furniture except a high wardrobe. I liked the look of the place, for it was a little like our play room in the attic at home; but I was too tired to explore, and I was asleep in ten minutes from the time I had tucked up Barbara in her bed, and Rob and Billy in their double crib.

"I should take a week if I tried to tell you all about those first days; and, after all, it is one particular thing that I started to tell, only there is so much that comes back to me. In a few days I felt that I belonged there, almost as much as at home; they were that kind of people, and made me feel that they cared about me, and not only about what I did. Mrs. Bowles has always been the best friend I have in the world after my own folks; it didn't take us a day to see into each other, and by and by it got to be so that I knew what she wanted almost before she knew, herself.

"At the end of the week Mr. Bowles said he ought to go away on business for a few days, and asked her if she would feel safe to stay with me and the children, or if he should ask his brother to come and sleep in the house.

"No, indeed!" said Mrs. Bowles. "I shall feel as safe with Nora as if I had a regiment in the house; a good deal safer!" she added, and laughed.

"So it was settled, and the next day Mr. Bowles went away and I was left in full charge. I suppose I rather liked the responsibility. I asked Mrs. Bowles if I might go all

over the house to see how everything fastened, and she said, 'Of course.' The front windows were just common windows, quite high up from the floor; but in the shed chamber, as in my room, they opened near the floor, and there was no very secure way of fastening them, it seemed to me. However, I wasn't going to say anything to make her nervous, and that was the way they had always had them. If I had only known!

"After the children went to bed that evening I read to Mrs. Bowles for an hour, and then I went to warm up a little cocoa for her; she slept better if she took a drop of something hot the last thing. It was about nine o'clock. I had just got into the kitchen, and was going to light the lamp, when I heard the door open softly.

"'Who's there?' I asked.

"'Only me,' said a girl's voice.

"I lighted my lamp, and saw a girl about my own age, pretty, and showily dressed. She said she was the girl who had left the house a few days ago; she had forgotten something, and might she go up into the shed chamber and get it? I told her to wait a minute, and went and asked Mrs. Bowles. She said yes, Annie might go up. 'Annie was careless and saucy,' she said, 'but I think she meant no harm. She can go and get her things.'

"I came back and told the girl, and she smiled and nodded. I did not like her smile, I could not tell why. I started to go with her, but she turned on me pretty sharply, and said she had been in the house three months and didn't need to be shown the way by a stranger. I didn't want to put myself forward, but no sooner had she run up-stairs, and I heard her steps in the chamber above me, than something seemed to be pushing, pushing me to-

ward those stairs, whether I would or no. I tried to hold back, and tell myself it was nonsense, and that I was nervous and foolish; it made no difference, I had to go upstairs.

“I went softly, my shoes making no noise. My own little room was dark, for I had closed the blinds when the afternoon sun was pouring in hot and bright; but a slender line of light lay across the blackness like a long finger, and I knew the moon was shining in at the windows of the shed chamber. I did a thing I had never done before in my life; that silver finger came through the keyhole, and it drew me to it. I knelt down and looked through.

“The big room shone bare and white in the moonlight; the trunks looked like great animals crouching along the walls. Annie stood in the middle of the room, as if she were waiting or listening for something. Then she slipped off her shoes and went to one of the windows and opened it. I had fastened it, but the catch was old and she knew the trick, of course. In another moment something black appeared over the low sill; it was a man’s head. My heart seemed to stand still. She helped him, and he got in without making a sound. He must have climbed up the big elm-tree which grew close against the house. They stood whispering together for a few minutes, but I could not hear a word.

“The man was in stocking feet; he had an evil, coarse face, yet he was good-looking, too, in a way. I thought the girl seemed frightened, and yet pleased, too; and he seemed to be praising her, I thought, and once he put his arms round her and kissed her. She went to the wardrobe and opened it, but he shook his head; then she opened the great cedar trunk, and he nodded, and measured it and

got down into it and sat down. It was so deep that he could sit quite comfortably with the cover down. Annie shut it and then opened it again.

“I had seen all I wanted to see. I slipped down-stairs as I heard her move toward the door; when she came down I was stirring my cocoa on the stove, with my back to her. She came round and showed me a bundle she had in her hand, and said she must be going now. I kept my face in the shadow as well as I could, for I was afraid I might not be able to look just as usual; but I spoke quietly, and asked her if she had found everything, and wished her good night as pleasantly as I knew how. All the while my head was in a whirl and my heart beat so loud I thought she must have heard it. There was a good deal of silver in the house, and I knew that Mr. Bowles had drawn some money from the bank only a day or two before, to pay a life-insurance premium.

“I never listened to anything as I did to the sound of her footsteps; even after they had died away, after she had turned the corner, a good way off, I stood still, listening, not stirring hand or foot. But when I no longer heard any sound my strength seemed to come back with a leap, and I knew what I had to do. I told you my shoes made no noise. I slipped up-stairs, through my own room, and into the shed chamber. Girls, it lay so peaceful and bare in the white moonlight, that for a moment I thought I must have dreamed it all.

“It seemed half a mile to the farther end, where the great cedar trunk stood. As I went a board creaked under my feet, and I heard—or fancied I heard—a faint rustle inside the trunk. I began to hum a tune, and moved about among the trunks, raising and shutting the lids, as if I

were looking for something. Now at last I was beside the dreadful chest, and in another instant I had turned the key. Then, girls, I flew! I knew the lock was a stout one and the wood heavy and hard; it would take the man some time to get it open from the inside, whatever tools he might have. I was down-stairs in one breath, praying that I might be able to control my voice so that it would not sound strange to the sick woman.

“Would you mind if I went out for a few minutes, Mrs. Bowles? The moonlight is so lovely I thought I would like to take a little walk, if there is nothing you want.’

“She looked surprised, but said in her kind way, yes, certainly I might go, only I’d better not go far.

“I thanked her, and walked quietly out to the end of the garden walk; then I ran! Girls, I had no idea I could run so! Strength seemed given me, for I never felt my body. I was like a spirit flying or a wind blowing. The road melted away before me, and all the time I saw two things before my eyes as plain as I see you now,—the evil-faced man working away at the lock of the cedar chest, and the sweet lady sitting in the room below with her Bible on her knee. Yes, I thought of the children, too, but it seemed to me no one, not even the wickedest, could wish to hurt a child. So on I ran!

“I reached the first house, but I knew there was no man there, only two nervous old ladies. At the next house I should find two men, George Brett and his father.

“Yes, Lottie, my George, but I had never seen him then. He had only lately come back from college. The first I saw of him was two minutes later, when I ran almost into his arms as he came out of the house. I can see him now, in the moonlight, tall and strong, with his sur-

prised eyes on me. I must have been a wild figure, I suppose. I could hardly speak, but somehow I made him understand.

“He turned back to the door and shouted to his father, who came hurrying out; then he looked at me. ‘Can you run back?’ he asked

“I nodded. I had no breath for words but plenty for running, I thought.

“‘Come on, then!’

“Girls, it was twice as easy running with that strong figure beside me. I noticed in all my hurry and distress how easily he ran, and I felt my feet, that had grown heavy in the last few steps, light as air again. Once I sobbed for breath, and he took my hand as we ran, saying, ‘Courage, brave girl!’ We ran on hand in hand, and I never failed again. We heard Mr. Brett’s feet running, not far behind; he was a strong, active man, but could not quite keep up with us.

“As we neared the house, ‘Quiet,’ I said; ‘Mrs. Bowles does not know.’

“He nodded, and we slipped in at the back door. In an instant his shoes were off and he was up the back stairs like a cat, and I after him. As we entered the shed chamber the lid of the cedar trunk rose.

“I saw the gleam of the evil black eyes and the shine of white, wolfish teeth. Without a sound George Brett sprang past me; without a sound the robber leaped to meet him. I saw them in the white light as they clinched and stood locked together; then a mist came before my eyes and I saw nothing more.

“I did not actually faint, I think; it cannot have been more than a few minutes before I came to myself. But

when I looked again George was kneeling with his knee on the man's breast, holding him down, and Father Brett was looking about the chamber and saying, in his dry way, 'Now where in Tunkett is the clothes-line to tie this fellow?'

"And the girl? Annie? O girls, she was so young! She was just my own age and she had no mother. I went to see her the next day, and many days after that. We are fast friends now, and she is a good, steady girl; and no one knows—no one except our two selves and two others—that she was ever in the shed chamber."

—*LAURA E. RICHARDS*

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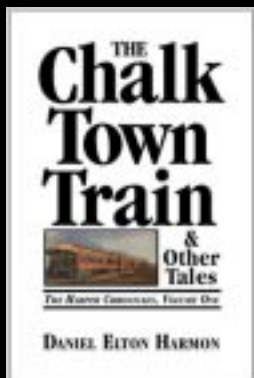
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