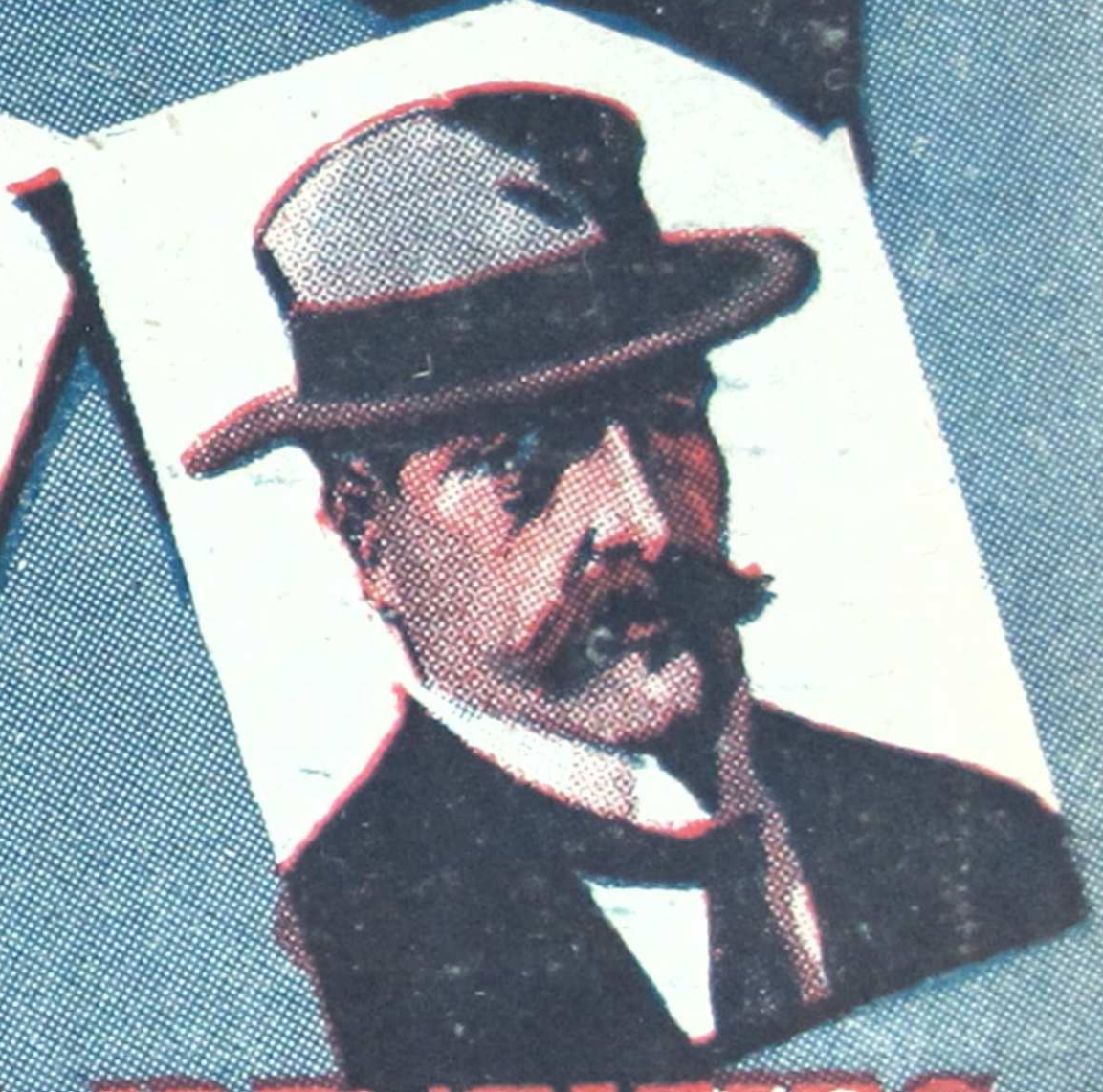


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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD.

Introduces Dr. Mortimer Crane—Also Stuyvesant Roper, the American Millionaire.

SELDOM in the annals of crime has there arisen a more sinister, more cunning, or more daring criminal than the man who on occasion called himself Dr. Mortimer Crane.

Dr. Mortimer Crane, the brilliant brain and nerve specialist of Harley Street, to whom the jaded and the nerve-sapped flocked from all parts of the globe. I say sinister, because his exploits were typically of the sombre cunning; because the crimes which he conceived and carried out were almost fiendishly clever—daring; because once he had laid his plans and provided for the covering of his tracks, he stopped at nothing—not even murder, if it meant a swifter achievement of his purpose.

From the time when the weird tale of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was presented to the world, there have arisen many cases of dual personality, some genuine and some assumed; and at New Scotland Yard, in the archives of the C.I.D., one may come upon many records of criminals having assumed such an existence.

But in treating of the criminal career of Dr. Mortimer Crane, we must go much deeper into the cunning of the human brain—we must treat of a man who moved about the orbit of the metropolis under four separate and distinct personalities, and stranger than all, stamped those four distinct and separate individualities upon his fellows.

It is little wonder that he baffled the police. It is still less wonder that very soon after the effect of his depredations upon society became evident, that Nelson Lee, the eminent criminologist, should have been called in to endeavour, by the unique and scientific methods which he employed, to run the criminal to earth.

It was no time for the meddling of the amateur detective. It was a time when the very finest points of the Science of Modern Criminology must be

pitted against the scientific attainments of one of the most brilliant brains of the age.

Why this great specialist, who had the world at his feet, so to speak, whose income ran into thousands, should have chosen to lead a life of secrecy and crime, can never be explained—except in one way, that in his nature there was that “kink” which caused a decadence of mind and a blunting of the moral outlook.

At any rate, he did exist; and there are many who can tell you strange things about him. It remained for Nelson Lee to apply the only science which would probe the mystery which he set for solution.

CHAPTER I.

The Prideaux Diamonds.

IN the downstairs grill-room of the Hotel Venetia, two gentlemen sat at an alcove table. It was a trifle early for the main dinner crowd, but there was, nevertheless, a fair sprinkling of persons about the room; and a stranger entering at the moment might have noticed, had he been of an observing nature, that here and there a glance of curiosity and covert admiration was shot towards the table in the alcove.

Had the observing one summoned Rex, the head waiter, and inquired as to the identity of the two gentlemen, he would then have understood why they were the object of a certain amount of attention. One of them, Rex would have informed the inquirer—he of the big frame and smoothly-shaven countenance, was Stuyvesant Roper, the well-known American millionaire and art connoisseur. The other, he would have added, was the world-famous brain and nerve specialist, Dr. Mortimer Crane of Harley Street.

In contradistinction to his companion, Dr. Mortimer Crane was thin and dark, with a long, straight nose, deep-set, steely eyes, and a high, nervous forehead. His hands were the hands of the ascetic; his face the face of an intellectual; his whole person the product of a highly specialised modernity.

In his thick black hair there was not a sign of grey, though even a close observer would have found it difficult to hazard his age. As a matter of fact, he was still under forty, while his companion had already passed the half century.

They were dining together, those two, because on the morrow Stuyvesant Roper was off to the States. Not that they were intimate friends. Until he had sought the advice of Dr. Mortimer Crane two weeks before, Stuyvesant Roper had never met the other. But in those two weeks the specialist had changed him from a shaking, sweating bundle of nerves, back into the human machine he had been before the rush of Wall Street “got him.”

Two thousand guineas he had paid the specialist for his services; and now on his last evening he had asked him to dine with him. Even had his host been a misogynist, which he was not, it would have been churlish to refuse to dine with a man who had just handed him a two-thousand-guinea fee.

And yet, had Fate whispered to Stuyvesant Roper that the man before him was harbouring in that brilliant mind of his a scheme to despoil him before he left the shores of England, he would have laughed in sheer delight at such an impossibility.

That was because he did not dream of the flame which lurked behind the

shadowed eyes of the specialist. Because Dr. Mortimer Crane had counselled early hours they were dining at this time and now, when they had already reached the coffee and liqueurs, the grill-room was only beginning to fill up.

It was a hot evening in early June, and because they knew there would be a pleasant current of air in the big lounge upstairs, they elected to have their coffee served there.

They had been chatting indifferently during the meal, but now as they lit cigars and strolled out to the short staircase which led to the lounge, Stuyvesant spoke, and as his voice issued forth one could not help but notice that there was scarcely a trace of the twang which most of our cousins over the Atlantic seem to have developed.

He was a pure cosmopolitan, was Stuyvesant, schooled in England and France during his early years, with a finish at Yale, and years of foreign travel throughout his life. Such a combination had put its stamp on the man.

"My dear doctor," he was saying, "morals are purely and simply a matter of point of view. Here, in England—or in our New England, which is even more hidebound by convention than its godmother—there is a narrow code to fit each hour of the day and night. If one deviates from that code, there is an elaborate series of punishments to face; and society—civilisation, if you will—deals out the punishment to the last grain.

"Yet even a narrow strip of water like the English Channel is sufficient to divide that system from one entirely different. In France the outlook is—radical, shall we say.

"In New York they still fail to realise that they have shed their swaddling clothes. They play about in the Tenderloin—they start cabarets after the prevailing fashion—they turn night into day and day into night in a feverish desire for excitement; and all the time they fool themselves that they are getting the real thing. There you have still a different code.

"But if you leave the limits of white civilisation and plunge into the reeking mystery of the East, you find a code thousands of years old, which is a direct antithesis of ours.

"We gaze with hands held up in horror at some of the things they do. We think they are, on occasion, depraved, decadent, heathen. Yet in their hearts they despise us as peurile.

"You may go a step further, and pause in New Guinea, or the Solomons. There you will find still another point of view—a code that even countenances cannibalism. It is a horrible thing, I grant you, when looked at from our point of view. And yet those savages are not immoral. It is that they are simply unmoral.

"It is merely a living exhibit of how Nature has worked out the destiny of different types of man. Here, within the bounds of white civilisation, we have set up stern laws against the thief, let us say. I know for a fact that in some districts in Java, the native girls find most attractive as husbands the young men who show the greatest proficiency in sneak thieving.

"And in the Solomons the most eligible man of the tribe is he who is the keenest and most successful head hunter. So, you see, it is merely the point of view after all."

Dr. Crane smiled.

"Your arguments are most convincing," he replied, in a voice of curious timbre. "We seem to have drifted somewhat from our original argument, which was criminology. However, I can but agree with you in these later statements; but I still stick to my original point in saying that through the whole history of crime we can pick very, very few criminals

who have revealed the amount of brain power which we find in other professions, shall we say.

"In my study of the brain and nerves of the human being, I have naturally come upon a good many different types; and while the facial type of the criminal has changed during the past ten or twenty years, the brain shows inevitably the decadence which made the man a criminal.

"I simply maintain that a well-ordered brain—a brain which is the product of refinement—if trained carefully, as one would train a man, say, for the engineering profession or the medical profession, or any other, in fact, would evolve a criminal who would be able to operate almost with impunity.

"If we had a curriculum for criminals at our universities, such a product would be evolved. And then what would our police systems do? That was my contention, and I still think it a sound one."

"Perhaps," rejoined the American, as he puffed at his cigar. "But if a man trained for crime in that way, then you can bet your bottom dollar the police system would be reorganised to meet it, and the science of criminology would keep pace with it."

"Yes; but the science of investigation must always be a step behind the clever criminal, because until the criminal makes his play, so to speak, the criminologist has no basis to go upon. If it is a new type of crime, then the investigator must seek for the solution, and in doing so much valuable time has been lost."

"You speak from the point of view of a man who has mastered the intricacies of the human brain," remarked Roper, after a pause. "I speak from the point of view of a man who has studied life at close quarters. At any rate, I am willing to wager that our own Detective Burns, or your British criminologist, Nelson Lee, would soon ferret out any criminal of the sort you describe. And, anyway, I hope such a one doesn't begin to operate until I have reached the States safely. The Prideaux diamond collection which I am taking back with me would make a pretty haul."

"You have decided to take them yourself, then?" inquired the doctor idly.

Stuyvesant Roper nodded.

"I have," he said. "And that reminds me, doctor; I promised you a sight of them before I left. I have them in the hotel safe at present, but I am placing them in the bag I have had made for them to-night. If you would really care to see them, I will show them to you."

"I should like it very much," responded the other. "The Prideaux collection is very famous."

"And very costly," grunted the millionaire as he rose. "They held me up for sixty thousand pounds for that collection, but I had my heart set on it. It will make a magnificent addition to my collection. Come along, doctor, and I will have them sent up to my room."

They made their way out to the lobby, where Roper sent for Varden, the manager, and told him what he wanted. Then they took the lift to the first floor, where Stuyvesant Roper had a sumptuously furnished suite.

As they entered the sitting-room, Mr. Mortimer Crane saw on the floor by the bed a heavy pigskin case, built after the fashion of a despatch case. It was some eighteen inches long, by twelve wide, and about ten inches in depth.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Mortimer Crane knew the measurements of that case to the last fraction of an inch, for he had seen it several days before, and during a short space of time when he had been left alone in the sitting-room, he had measured it.

In reality, it was a sort of despatch box, for while the outside was covered with pig-skin, the inside was of solid steel, and, beneath the leather flap in front, was a miniature combination of the type which is placed on small safes.

It was nothing more nor less than a safe, in its guarantee of security. Stuyvesant Roper was busy opening it, when there came a knock at the door, and a moment later Varden, the manager, entered, with a long packet in his hands.

It was sealed in several places, and when he had handed it to Roper, he stood by until the latter broke the seals and, unwrapping the paper, revealed a heavy leather case. He opened it in the presence of the manager, and, after a cursory glance at the interior, nodded.

"They are quite in order, thank you," he said.

"Will you be placing them in the safe again to-night, Mr. Roper?" asked Varden.

The millionaire shook his head.

"No; I shall lock them up in the case I have had made for them and keep them by me."

"It would be more secure to put them in the safe," ventured Varden tentatively.

Stuyvesant Roper smiled.

"I guess they will be all right with me," he said. "I shall keep them close by me, and I haven't forgotten how to use a six shooter yet. If anyone comes after me, I can promise them a warm time of it."

Varden bowed and retired.

When he was gone, Roper held out the case to Dr. Mortimer Crane.

"There you are, doctor," he said genially. "Those are the famous Prideaux diamonds. There are none finer in the world."

Dr. Mortimer Crane gasped as Roper opened the lid of the case. Within was a collection of cut, but unset diamonds, which, from the smallest to the largest, were flawless. He had heard of them—who had not?—but never before had he seen them; and in keeping from the Press the fact that he had bought them, Stuyvesant Roper had accomplished something.

They were of all sizes and shapes, each one perfect in its way; and beneath the artificial light, they scintillated like fire of Paradise. Sixty thousand pounds they represented, and, while he drank in their beauty, Dr. Mortimer Crane kept his eyes veiled, lest the other should see the fire of terrible greed in them.

Yet his thin hand was steady as a rock when he handed them back, responding with a conventional phrase of admiration. Roper, who was a connoisseur of no mean order, held them in his hand and talked interestingly of each stone—its size and fire and colour.

Then, when he finished his dissertation with the largest and most magnificent stone of all, he closed the case with a snap and lifted the lid of the pig-skin covered despatch box. Inside was a special compartment made to hold the jewel case, and when he had locked the stones within it, he closed the lid, turned the tiny knob of the combination, then locked the outer flap.

"There," he said, when he had thrust the keys in his pocket, "I fancy they will be all right there."

"It would take, I think, a criminal such as I described to-night to spirit them away from you," remarked the doctor, with a smile. "But I must not forget that you are still my patient, Mr. Roper. It is already past your bedtime."

"I have nothing more to say about your case, except to impress upon you the necessity for following out strictly the regime I have outlined for

you, and to report to me how you are every month. I think and hope, however, that you will be all right now. Only—don't burn the candle both ends. If you do, I shall have you back as a patient within twelve months."

"I assure you I shall follow most strictly your advice, doctor; and once more let me tell you how very, very grateful I am for what you have done for me. I shall look you up when I come back to London."

"I shall be delighted," responded Crane, as he shook hands. "Many thanks for your magnificent fee, and—'bon voyage.' I trust you will arrive safely in New York."

They shook hands warmly; then, with a final glance in the direction of the pig-skin case, from the surface of which the initials 'S. R.' seemed to be winking at him, Doctor Mortimer Crane opened the door, and, with a final wave of the hand, departed.

It was almost unthinkable that this great and brilliant specialist had determined to possess himself of that pig-skin case before another twenty-four hours had passed.

CHAPTER II.

Strange Doings.

It was only a few minutes past nine when Dr. Mortimer Crane issued forth from the "Venetia" and hailed a taxi. Instructing the man to drive to his house in Harley Street, he climbed in and sank back in a corner.

As the cab picked its way through the traffic the doctor's eyes were closed, and one might have thought him somewhat exhausted. But that brain was working swiftly—plotting, probing, anticipating. And the sum and substance of his thoughts were concentrated in the single phrase he murmured as he descended before his door in Harley Street:

"It cannot fail—to-morrow they will be mine!"

Paying off the taxi, he walked leisurely up the steps, and, inserting a latchkey in the lock, stepped into the lobby. The door leading into the main hall opened at the same moment, and a manservant appeared. With a deferential motion, he relieved the doctor of his silk hat and coat, and stood waiting.

"Any messages, Peters?" asked the doctor as he paused.

"Sir James Philman telephoned, sir, asking if you could arrange a consultation for Friday. Then there were two calls at the door, sir—one, a lady who wished to see you this evening, if possible; and the other a gentleman, who said he had been sent to you by Doctor Gifford.

"I put the lady down for an appointment at eleven o'clock Friday, sir, and the gentleman for four o'clock Friday afternoon. I left the hours from one to three vacant on Friday, because Sir James Philman asked for a consultation between those hours."

Doctor Mortimer Crane nodded.

"Very good, Peters," he said. "Telephone Sir James, that I am at his service between one and two, Friday. If there are any further calls to-night say I am out. I am going to my laboratory to do some research work, and I shall be there until late. Do not disturb me under any circumstances. You may leave my milk and biscuits on the stand outside the door of my apartment. I shall get them when I have finished."

"Very good, sir. Will you go up now?"

"Yes." Crane walked along the hall until he came to a small narrow door

set in the white panelling. Peters pressed a button and the door slid apart to reveal a tiny white lift. Into this the doctor stepped, and, closing the door after him, pressed a button which was numbered 'Three.'

The lift at once shot upwards, and automatically stopped at the third floor. Stepping out, the doctor pressed a button in the panelling, which sent the lift down again, then he made his way along the thickly-carpeted hall, until he came to a heavy green baize-covered door.

From his pocket he took a bunch of keys, and, fitting one in the lock, swung the door open. He passed through and closed and locked the door after him. He was in a small hall now, which, about ten feet farther on, came to another green baize door. This he unlocked, and, passing through, locked it after him.

Then his hand went along the wall until it encountered a switch, and a moment later the apartment was flooded with light. It was a strange apartment, was that—part laboratory, part study, and part living-room.

It was big and lofty—perhaps forty feet long, by twenty wide and thirty high. There was no window in the room, but overhead a heavy coloured glass skylight permitted light to enter during the daytime. At the end near the door by which he had entered were all the details of a perfectly equipped laboratory—tables and shelves, bottles and retorts, and a big electric furnace in one corner.

Half way down the room on either side, the book shelves began, and at a modest estimate they must have held a thousand volumes. At the far end of the room was a big open fireplace; though, so warm was the evening, it was fireless on the present occasion. There, too, was a wide, comfortable couch, several easy chairs, a big table littered with books and magazines, and a smaller tabourette with cigars, cigarettes, and pipes upon it.

The walls of the room were done in a series of wide white panels, and each of these had been painted by a famous artist. The space of the ceiling, too, between the rim of the skylight and the top of the walls, had been painted with allegorical subjects.

It was a truly magnificent apartment, and only a true ascetic could have conceived it. Dr. Mortimer Crane had told his man, Peters, that he would be busy until late with research work, and that he was not to be disturbed. But his actions, once the door was locked after him, were very strange for a man with those intentions.

He first walked to a white cupboard at the far end of the room, and, unlocking the door with a key taken from his pocket, he took out some garments. Under the light they showed greased and shabby; but this seemed not to worry the doctor at all. He laid them over the back of a chair and now made his way to the other end of the room.

From one of the shelves over the experimenting table he took a tiny phial of tablets, and, uncorking it, allowed a few of them to fall into his hand. He recorked the bottle and set it back on the shelf.

He next returned to the upper part of the room, and, laying three of the tablets on the table, thrust one into his mouth. When it had dissolved, he removed his outer clothing and hung them up in the cupboard from which he had taken the shabby suit.

Now he closed the door of the cupboard, and, standing before a huge full-length mirror, he threw both hands above his head until they met. He grasped his right hand firmly in the left; then, with a slow motion, he began to bend. Slowly—ever so slowly—he twisted himself until the muscles of his shoulder protruded in great lumps.

An observer would have deemed such a twisted attitude must cause excruciating pain, and it would have, but for the tablet which the man

had swallowed. For twenty minutes his whole body would be numbed. He might have been seared with hot irons and he would not have felt it.

Well, indeed, was it for him that this was so, for at that moment Dr. Mortimer Crane was about to do something which was uncanny—freakish. Gradually, but insistently, there began to appear a great lump in his back, just to the right of the spine. It was as though by some terrific pressure and twisting he was causing the right shoulder blade to stand out from the body—to stretch the skin until it threatened to split. And this was exactly what was happening.

A childhood accident had twisted and deformed the body of Mortimer Crane so that for several years he had been that most pitiable of mortals—a hunchback. Then, under the hands of a master surgeon, the bent and twisted back had been gradually forced back into shape, until, when Crane was dressed, it was practically impossible to notice it.

In fact, not a single soul of his acquaintance guessed that the famous specialist had in childhood been a hunchback. Yet though the bones had pressed gradually back into place, the weakness was always there, and it was during his sophomore year at university that Crane had discovered by accident that the shoulder-blade could be thrown out.

Then he had been prostrated for three days, so terrible had been the pain; but since a certain idea had been born in his mind, since it had come to him that this peculiarity might be turned to account, he had devised a form of anæsthetic for the nerves, which would deaden them for a full twenty minutes.

Yet it left the brain clear; and he had by long practice discovered how he could, at will, turn himself into a hunchback in exactly four minutes. When he had finished straining and twisting before the glass he staggered towards the table and rested there for a minute.

What a change there was in the man! He had entered that room an upright-figured man—thin, austere, and intellectual. Now he was a crouching hunchback, his body bent at a sharp angle, his long straight nose seeming almost hooked and predatory, his brow drawn tight and shiny, his eyes deeper than usual and full of craft.

With the form of the hunchback, his whole personality seemed to assume the bitterness of those afflicted in that way—the savage bitterness of his youth. Now he slowly assumed the shabby garments which he had taken from the cupboard, and when he was fully clad he looked still more the part he had assumed.

Dr. Mortimer Crane, the famous nerve and brain specialist, had entirely disappeared. Not even a Bertillon measurement would have identified him. In his place there had appeared a repulsive-looking hunchback—a new personality—one who was known in more than one part of London as Caspar Trouдини, an Italian.

And it is indicative of the thoroughness of the man that in the pockets of Caspar Trouдини were all the things which Caspar Trouдини would need. Not a single thing belonging to Dr. Mortimer Crane did he place in the pockets. After a final look round the room the hunchback smiled craftily, and shuffled towards a narrow green baize door which had been let in near the wide fireplace.

From his pocket he took a key with which he turned the lock, and, opening the door, revealed a long, narrow passage. He closed and locked it after him, leaving the light burning in the big room. He walked along the passage until he came to another door. He unlocked this, and, passing through, locked it after him.

He was now standing at the top of a flight of stairs. He descended these

almost noiselessly until he had counted eighty steps in all: then he arrived at another passage. A third green baize door gave into a small hall, and after locking this he drew out still another key.

A dozen yards brought him to a heavy street door, and before opening this he stood close to it, listening. Then, ever so cautiously, he pressed back the spring lock and allowed it to swing open. He stepped forward, peered out, then slipped forth, closing the door after him.

He was now in a narrow lane bounded by high stone walls and mews. It was the lane at the back of Harley Street, and he had come out by a private way, which had been built when the house was remodelled.

Now he shuffled up the lane until he came to a cross street, by which he made his way into Harley Street. Straight past his own house he went, coming to a cab-rank a little farther on. Entering a taxi there, he ordered the man to drive to Shaftesbury Avenue.

The trip did not take long, and, getting out at Greek Street, the hunchback shuffled on for a couple of streets until he came to a small restaurant. He pushed open the swing door and entered.

He was evidently known, for the woman behind the desk nodded to him and received a surly inclination of the head in return. He made his way to a table in the corner, and an Italian waiter at once approached him.

In Italian, Caspar Trouдини ordered a frugal meal, with instructions to hasten with it. As Dr. Mortimer Crane he had dined, and dined well, at the Venetia; but now, as the hunchback, Caspar Trouдини, he had ordered another meal. In Soho, Caspar Trouдини was well-known in more than one place.

In establishing a distinct identity as the hunchback Italian he had taken good care that was so. His was a concrete personality there, and he did not make the mistake of jeopardising what he had achieved by too great haste. If Caspar Trouдини, the hunchback, were to be known, and to live, in Soho, then he must eat there at intervals—and he took care that he did so.

Dr. Mortimer Crane was supposed to be busy in his laboratory; Caspar Trouдини was eating a frugal meal in Soho. Between the hunchback and the great specialist there could be no possible connection—or so it would seem.

Nor did the hunchback hurry. He worried over his food, growled at the waiter in Neapolitan patois, haggled with the women behind the desk over the price, and, finally purchasing a cheap and execrable cigar, departed.

"The Signor Hunchback does not improve in temper," remarked the woman, as the swing-door closed.

"It is an affliction," responded the waiter. And there they left it.

As for Caspar Trouдини, he shuffled along, turning now to the left and now to the right, until he came to a gloomy, shabby house which stood on a corner. Up the steps he went, and opened the door by a latchkey.

The interior of the house was as shabby as the exterior. The hall was bare, and the living-room, which he entered on the right, was almost devoid of furniture. But there was one piece which was substantial enough. It was a huge iron chest which stood in the corner.

The hunchback went across to it, and, after lighting a small gas-jet, unlocked it. It was empty but for one thing, and, kneeling there before the chest, Caspar Trouдини feasted his eyes on the sight. It was an exact duplicate of the pigskin despatch-case which Stuyvesant Roper had had made to hold the Prideaux diamonds. On the top were the gilt letters, "S. R.," exact in detail.

"It will do—it will do! It is perfect," muttered the hunchback, as he closed the lid of the chest and locked it.

Now he shuffled into a back room, which was furnished with an iron bed and washstand and only one chair. On the floor was an old gladstone bag, and, opening this, the hunchback took out a grey suit of a cut which is specialised in by the cheaper tailors. It was such a suit as a respectable hard-working man might have worn—not new and not shabby.

With swift movements the hunchback stripped off the clothes he was wearing, and taking from his pocket one of the tablets which he had brought with him, thrust it in his mouth. When it had dissolved, he stretched his arms above his head once more, and, twisting and turning, bent himself until the right shoulder-blade had slipped back into place.

Once again he stood erect as man is supposed to stand, and, laying aside the clothes of the hunchback, he assumed the other garments.

When he had finished, he thrust his hand into an inner pocket and took out a small leather case. From it he drew out a black moustache—a masterpiece of the wig-makers art—and, moistening it with his tongue, adjusted it. Next he rubbed a bit of pencil over his cheeks and chin, until the skin was blue—until it had an appearance of needing the razor. Next he put on a soft grey hat, and when he finally left the room he was the perfect representation of a commercial traveller who finds things not too prosperous.

He turned out the gas; then, emerging into the bare hall again, walked along towards the rear until he came to a flight of stairs. These took him to the basement, a dirty, unfurnished series of cellars, revealed by the light of a single match. A low door let him out into a narrow alley at the back, and, by many devious, odorous turnings, he finally came once more into Creek Street.

In Shaftesbury Avenue he hailed a taxi, and ordered the man to drive to Euston. At Euston he took a luggage-check from his pocket, and, bidding the man to wait, made his way along to the left-luggage office. There in exchange for his check he was given two sample-cases, such as are ordinarily used by commercial travellers, and, re-entering the cab once more, gave the man instructions to drive to Finsbury Park.

When he had passed through Camden Town and down the hill to the Nag's Head, he ordered the driver to stop. He descended at the Nag's Head, paid off the man, and, when he had driven away, crossed the road to the public-house which stands on the corner.

He entered the saloon bar, and, on approaching the bar, was greeted by the barmaid with a "Good-evening, Mr. Sellerman!" He returned the salutation cheerfully, and ordered a glass of beer. He drank slowly, chatting with the barmaid the while; then, having finished his drink, he picked up his sample-cases once more and left the bar.

At the Nag's Head Corner he turned up and walked on some distance until he came to Tollington Park. He opened the gate of a small, somewhat dingy house, and, mounting the steps, drew a key from his pocket.

As, when he had taken on the personality of Caspar Trouдини, the hunchback, he had used none of the personal trinkets of Dr. Mortimer Crane, so, as James Sellerman, commercial traveller, his clothes were provided with keys, money, fountain pen, and all the knick-knacks which James Sellerman would need.

He had neglected not a single item to make the establishing of different identities perfect. It can be seen how Dr. Mortimer Crane, the Harley Street specialist, was utterly and completely removed from Caspar Trouдини, the Italian hunchback, and in like manner was the personality of James Sellerman, commercial traveller, established in the neighbourhood of Finsbury Park.

The house which he entered was typical of that part of the district, inhabited by small wage earners. It was the house of a man making something like a couple of hundred a year, and the furniture within bore out the impression.

On entering the somewhat shoddily furnished hall, James Sellerman set down his two sample cases and gave a call. Almost at once a door at the end of the small hall opened, and a woman appeared. As she came within the penumbra of the flaring gas-jet in the hall, it could be seen that she was a woman well past middle-age—a woman of hard, masculine features and a bitter expression in the eyes. She was a woman with whom life had dealt harshly, and she showed it.

As housekeeper for James Sellerman, who was at home only seldom and who paid well, she was better off than she had ever been, and with a desire to keep the sinecure which she had at last achieved she was not the type to bother herself about the comings and goings of her master.

“Well, Mrs. Savage, I am home again,” remarked James Sellerman. “How is everything?”

“Just the same, sir,” replied the woman, in a voice of peculiar harshness. “There are some letters for you. Will you have some supper now?”

“Not just yet,” answered the man. “I am going out for an hour or two, and will have a bite when I return. I shouldn’t have bothered about coming out home to-night, for I must get away to-morrow morning by an early train. I’ll have supper later, then go on up west and sleep for the night. But I want some clean linen. You might have it laid out for me.”

“Very good, sir. About what time will you be back?”

James Sellerman drew out a cheap silver watch, engraved with the initials, “J. S.,” and glanced at it.

“It is now half-past ten,” he said. “I shall be back before midnight. If you will have supper ready about a quarter to twelve, that will do. Then I can catch the last tube to the West End.”

The woman nodded and disappeared kitchenwards. When she had gone, James Sellerman opened a door on the left and turned on the light. It was a small parlour, furnished in keeping with the rest of the house. He set the sample-cases inside the room, then, crossing to the table, took up a few letters which had been placed there. Hurriedly he glanced through them—a few trade circulars, a bill or two from local tradespeople, a communication from the church which he at times attended, asking for a subscription, and two letters from a firm of manufacturers whose boot and stove polish James Sellerman was supposed to sell on commission.

And the remarkable part was that James Sellerman turned in quite a few orders to this firm. The letters were notifications of a slight change in prices, and expressed a hope that the traveller would be able to make more sales, since they were accumulating surplus stock.

James Sellerman thrust all the letters in his pocket for attention later, then he turned out the light and made for the street. He walked briskly back towards the Nag’s Head, entered the bar once more, and bought another glass of beer; then, bidding the barmaid “Good-night!” swung aboard a ’bus.

By changing ’buses, he finally boarded one bound for Aldgate and Whitechapel. He sat on the top with his collar turned up, and so dark was it, that even had he been of an observing nature, which he wasn’t, the conductor would not have noticed that the man who sat in the front seat had a moustache when he climbed aboard, but was minus that hirsute decoration when he descended in the Whitechapel High Street.

From the High Street, James Sellerman struck down a side alley, and

then by several turnings came to a narrow dark street, which was lined with very old and very rickety buildings. They were storehouses of a sort, and before one of the oldest, James Sellerman drew up.

He unlocked a low door in one side of the warehouse, and entering, closed and locked it after him. In that dark thoroughfare there was none to observe him. Up a dilapidated flight of stairs he felt his way, until he came to a door at the top. This he unlocked, then feeling about on the floor inside the door, found a candle.

He lit this, and by the flickering flame, there was revealed a large loft, which, in days gone by, might have resounded with the chatter and reeked with the odour of the sweated creatures who had toiled there. Now it was bare and dirty and, with the exception of a plain table, a small iron cot, and a big slop chest, was quite devoid of furniture.

James Sellerman set the candle down on the table, and, unlocking the chest, took out some garments. He threw these on the bed, then disrobed and placed the clothes he had been wearing in the chest. He now donned a rough woollen shirt and a suit of soiled but flashily-cut American clothes—American clothes of the ready-made sort, with wide, padded shoulders and peg-top trousers.

He removed the conservative black boots he had been wearing and donned a pair of dirty, bulging-toed atrocities, which an American shoe company called shoes. A small, round soft hat completed the transformation, yet, before parting, he took from the chest a heavy automatic pistol and several cigars.

One of these he thrust in his mouth, and with the gun on his hip, made ready to depart. As he now stood, the man looked a typical American of the East Side tough class. His facial control was a marvel of muscular training. Two little rubber rings thrust within his nostrils made a radical change in the shape of the nose. It broadened it perceptibly, and both full face and in profile altered the whole appearance of the man. It was a slight change—it was just the little touch which only the artist could think of, and it achieved more than a whole assortment of disguises would have done.

He blew out the candle now and even as he made his way to the door through the darkness, he swaggered in keeping with his appearance. He locked the door of the loft after him, descended the stairs, emerged into the street, locked the outer door, then, puffing at his cigar, swaggered along until he came once more to the Whitechapel High Street. He walked along for some distance, then turned down another street and kept on until he came to a corner gin palace. He entered there and, lurching across to the bar, loudly demanded in a strong nasal twang—made easier by the rubber rings in his nostrils—that he be served with whisky.

He nodded to one or two disreputable-looking characters who hung about the bar and asked them to join him. Then, when he had tossed the drink down, he leaned across the bar and beckoned to the stout, bleary-eyed man who had served him.

“Have you seen Jim to-night?” he asked in a low tone.

The barman nodded.

“He was here early,” he said. “He went out, but ought to be back any minute.”

“All right. I guess I’ll wait, then,” replied the inquirer, and, leaning against the bar, this strange man, who, in Whitechapel had established a distinct personality among the denizens of the lower world as “Two Gun Ike,” the Yankee tough, talked in the lingo of his class.

That he was well-known was evident, for almost every newcomer nodded to him, and it might have been noticed, that, in their manner towards him,

lurked a certain sort of animal admiration and fawning. That Two Gun Ike was not only popular, but feared as well, was plain.

Then, when he had been there for half an hour or more, the swing door of the bar opened and a short, stocky, red-headed man entered. As his eyes rested on Two Gun Ike they lit up with a sort of pleasure, and he came quickly across to the other.

"Where have you been this last dog's age?" he asked, in a throaty voice.

Two Gun Ike shifted his cigar to a higher angle.

"I've been rusticitin' down in the country," he replied, with a wink, which took the whole bar. "But have a drink, Jim, and then I want to talk to you."

Once more he bought for the whole bar, then, when the red-headed one, whom he called Jim, had swallowed a double drink of rank poison, Two Gun Ike drew him aside, and at a nod from the barman, opened a door leading to a small private room. When the door had been closed Two Gun Ike bent close to his companion and said:

"I have just heard from the chief. You are to take the car early in the morning and drive through to Exeter. You will put up at the Central Commercial Hotel there and wait until someone hands you something. As soon as you get it, drive back to London and lie low. Meet me here tomorrow night at ten o'clock and hand it over to me. There is an even five hundred in it for you. The chief is on a big thing, I guess!"

Jim nodded his red head with satisfaction.

"That listens good to me, Ike," he said in his husky tones. "I am getting short of cash and was wondering what had become of you."

"I had to lie low after that last affair," returned Two Gun Ike. "Now, be sure you don't make any hitch," he cautioned. "Here is twenty-five pounds for expenses and emergencies. Don't fail to do just as he orders. Wait at the Central Commercial Hotel until you are handed something, no matter by whom, then beat it for London while the going is good. Do you get me?"

"I get you," grinned Jim. "All right! One more drink then I must get along."

Two Gun Ike led the way back to the bar and once more revealed the colour of his money. When he had tossed down a drink, he nodded a good-night to the crowd and swaggered towards the door. He walked briskly round to the Whitechapel High Street and made his way to the loft occupied by Two Gun Ike. Then he changed swiftly back into the habiliments of James Sellerman, and, catching a 'bus in the High Street, travelled back to Finsbury Park, and once more entering the house, found Mrs. Savage, the hard-faced housekeeper, had laid out supper for him. He disposed of the bread and cheese and ale hastily, then he unpacked one of the cases which he had brought with him and stowed in the clean linen which the woman had laid out.

He handed her a five-pound note to meet expenses while he was away; then, bidding her good-night, left the house carrying with him the two sample cases. He walked to the Finsbury Park Tube, and entering a train there, travelled on to King's Cross. He alighted from the train at King's Cross, deposited one of the sample cases at the left luggage office, and, carrying the other, sought a taxi.

He was driven through to Shaftesbury Avenue and from there, walked into Soho, making his way round to the rear of the dilapidated house occupied by Caspar Trouдини, the hunchback. By the rear door he opened the place, and in the meagrely furnished bedroom, once more disrobed. Again he allowed one of the tablets to dissolve in his mouth, and when it

had deadened the nerve centres, he threw his arms above his head, turning and twisting and bending, until at last the right shoulder blade was thrust outwards from its place.

Then he dressed in the garments of Caspar Troudini, and when he finally shuffled across the room towards the chest, he was once more the hunchback known in Soho.

From the black sample case which he had brought with him, he took the contents, and dumping them into the chest, drew out the pigskin-covered despatch-box, which bore the initials "S. R." He placed it inside the sample case and closed the lid. It fitted perfectly, and as he snapped the catch, the hunchback snarled with satisfaction.

He thrust the case into the iron chest, closed the lid and locked it. Then he turned out the gas and shuffled along to the front door of the house. He let himself out, locked the door after him, and walked to Shaftesbury Avenue. From there he taxied to Cavendish Square, where he descended. He walked along Harley Street until he came to a small branching lane and followed that, until he reached the narrow passage which ran at the back of the houses.

He shuffled down this lane until he once more came to the private door which led into the rear of Dr. Mortimer Crane's premises, and, after a cautious look round, opened the door and slipped inside. Up the steps he went until he came to a green baize door at the top, then, passing through, he at last entered the great apartment, which was the sanctum of the specialist.

His change back to the personality of Dr. Mortimer Crane was rapid, and when the clothes of Caspar Troudini had been safely locked away, Dr. Mortimer Crane, tall and thin and intellectual-looking, walked with a springy step to the upper end of the room and opened first one then the other green baize door, which shut off the apartment from the rest of the house.

On a small table in the hall outside was a glass of milk and some biscuits. Beside them some letters had been placed, and, carrying the tray into the laboratory, the specialist closed the door after him.

He sipped the milk and nibbled the biscuits, while he perused the letters—letters they were from prominent physicians and scientists—several invitations from exclusive hostesses—for in the eyes of London society, Dr. Mortimer Crane was most eligible—communications from patients, a long report from the Brain and Nerve Hospital, which he had founded, and of which he was the governor, and several other letters, such as a man in his position is always receiving.

He made notations on the margin, to guide his secretary in her replies, and then laying them aside, crossed to the book-case and took out a book. Seating himself in one of the easy chairs he began to read—his invariable custom before retiring—and on this occasion he had chosen Parkman's "Conspiracy of Pontiac."

What could be more remote, more impossible, more unbelievable, that any connection between this great Harley Street specialist, sitting in his beautiful private apartment quietly reading after a long day, and Caspar Troudini, the snarling hunchback mysoginist of Soho, James Sellerman, the respectable hard-working commercial traveller of Tollington Park, and Two Gun Ike, the Yankee tough, who had become a well-known person among the under dwellers of Whitechapel?

Yet, strange though it might seem, it was so. It was a combination carefully thought out and perfectly acted. In each sphere the separate and distinct identities of the characters had been established, so that many

persons knew them as such. He did not make the mistake of simply disguising.

He had established the personalities by impressing them upon neighbours and tradespeople and in the little things of everyday life. That was where the true artist was revealed, and under such a combination of personalities, this man was a potent, a sinister and terrible force for evil.

It remained to be seen if such an application of scientific comprehension of human nature would succeed against the science which is eternally fighting the criminal, for it followed, as a matter of course, that such a science must inevitably become arrayed in opposition.

CHAPTER III.

The Robbery.

OF four personalities known in four different quarters of London, there was, as far as anyone might have known, a disposition as follows:

Dr. Mortimer Crane left his house in Harley Street at eleven o'clock in the morning with the avowed intention of calling at the Brain and Nerve Hospital to make his customary rounds of the wards, after which, he would lunch out and return to Harley Street some time during the evening.

His engagement book had been kept free for that day, and the impression in his household was, that the doctor had a consultation on that afternoon. He might or might not return for dinner. In that he was usually most erratic, and in any event, the meal would be prepared as usual against his coming.

Caspar Troudini, the hunchback Italian of Soho, might have been seen to issue forth from his house at almost exactly half-past eleven to go along to the small Italian restaurant which he usually patronised, and, after a hasty repast, to make his way back to his gloomy house in an equally gloomy street.

James Sellerman, the commercial traveller, of Tollington Park, one might have been informed had one inquired at his home in that district, was away on a business trip, and the date of his return was uncertain.

"Two Gun Ike," known to certain circles in Whitechapel, had been seen the evening before, but his present whereabouts were unknown. He might appear at the gin palace, which he usually favoured with his custom, that day; or, again, he might not turn up for a week. He was a gentleman of uncertain habits, was "Two Gun Ike," the Yankee "tough."

It was just lacking a few minutes of twelve o'clock when Caspar Troudini, the hunchback, re-entered his house in Soho, and it was nearly half-past twelve when from the rear door of the house there issued forth James Sellerman, commercial traveller. James Sellerman was quite unknown in Soho, and even if he had been it would have made no difference, for no one saw him leave by the back door of the hunchback's house.

Once in Greek Street, he walked at a sharp pace towards Shaftesbury Avenue, where he hailed a taxi and ordered the man to drive to King's Cross Station. He had been carrying a large black commercial sample-case, and, leaving this in the cab, he entered the station.

At the left-luggage office, he got another sample-case which had been left there the previous evening; and now, once more in the cab, he was driven to Paddington. There he descended and, handing his two sample-cases to a porter, paid off the taxi.

He bought a first-class return ticket for Exeter, and, followed by the

porter, pushed his way through the crush of people about the station. On the platform, beside which stood the ocean express train for Plymouth—the train which would pick up a certain well-known Atlantic liner bound for New York—James Sellerman walked slowly, seeking apparently for a vacant carriage.

He walked the full length of the train, and not until he was retracing his steps did he decide which carriage he should occupy. The carriage in question was a first-class compartment, occupied at the moment by two persons. One of them was a pale-looking curate, and the other was a somewhat distinguished-looking gentleman, with several pieces of expensive hand luggage about him.

Each piece of luggage was stamped with the initials "S. R.," and, with the exception of one new pigskin bag which reposed on the seat close to the owner, were all more or less covered by labels of hotels of every continent. Those who know their cosmopolitan Europe could have told that the gentleman was none other than Stuyvesant Roper, the American millionaire.

James Sellerman, however, scarcely glanced at him as he entered the carriage and disposed his two sample-cases to his satisfaction. Rewarding the porter modestly, he bought a paper from a lad who passed at the moment, and, settling himself in a corner seat, began to read. After a cursory glance at him—a glance in which both the other occupants of the carriage immediately recognised him as a member of the great class of "bagmen," they turned their attention idly to the passing throngs on the platform. A few minutes later the train drew out.

The first stop would be Woking; then came Yeo Junction, next Exeter, and, with the exception of those stops, no others until Plymouth was reached. The pale-faced curate drew out a small, leather-covered volume, the title of which was, "A New Method of Conducting Mothers' Meetings," and immediately became immersed in the contents.

Stuyvesant Roper produced a copy of the "Wall Street Journal," and scanned the market reports with the eye of long experience.

After he had finished the paper, James Sellerman, not to be outdone, took from his pocket a copy of the "Grocers' Journal," and so the three occupants of the carriage read until Woking was passed.

It was then that Stuyvesant Roper drew out a very handsome cigar-case, and, after inquiring of his two travelling companions if they objected, lit a cigar. The curate ventured a cigarette, and James Sellerman produced a calabash pipe. At Yeo Junction the curate left the carriage, and from that on only James Sellerman and Stuyvesant Roper occupied it.

The train was some miles out of Yeo Junction when Stuyvesant Roper laid down his paper and allowed his head to fall back against the cushions. His eyes closed for a moment, but the next instant he had jerked them open and had sat up. A few seconds later, however, his head went back again, and this time his eyes remained closed for a longer time.

Once more he forced them open, and regarded his travelling companion. James Sellerman had also laid down his paper, and, with his pipe clutched in his hand, was lying back dozing. Stuyvesant Roper made one or two ineffectual efforts to shake off the drowsiness which was stealing over him; then he surrendered, and, allowing his head to fall back, was soon sleeping. Nor would he have believed for a single instant that it was other than natural drowsiness which had impelled him to doze.

Five minutes passed, ten minutes went by; then, ever so gently, the lids of James Sellerman's eyes opened.

He regarded Stuyvesant Roper in silence for some moments; then he straightened up, and reached for the sample-case nearest him. He drew it towards him and pressed the catch. When the lid went up, there was

revealed a yellow pigskin case which was, strangely enough, an exact duplicate of the bag on the seat opposite, even to the gilt letters, "S. R.," on the top.

As he slept, Stuyvesant Roper's arm rested across his own bag; but, leaning over, James Sellerman drew the case very, very gently from beneath the arm. Once it was clear, he lifted it up and laid it on his own seat. Then he took the case which he had lifted from inside the sample-case and thrust it back beneath the arm of the millionaire. That done, he placed the other pigskin-case within the sample-case and closed the lid and snapped it.

Then he lay back once again in his corner; but, before doing so, he carefully emptied the contents of the calabash pipe out of the window. The tobacco had been impregnated with a powerful drug, the fumes of which had caused the sleepiness on the part of Stuyvesant Roper, though a very simple antidote had made James Sellerman immune from them.

He dozed in his corner for half an hour or more, and then he became aware that his neighbour was stirring. He heard the other window open, and a fresh current of air struck him on the face.

Yawning and rubbing his eyes, he sat up, to find Stuyvesant Roper lighting another cigar. He himself lit a cigarette this time, and, picking up the "Grocers' Journal," read until they approached Exeter.

At Queen Street Station he gathered up his bags and handed them to a porter. Five minutes after, he had left the train and was in a cab, being driven to the Central Commercial Hotel, while the express was carrying Stuyvesant Roper on to Plymouth, all unconscious that the pigskin bag, initialled "S. R.," which lay on the seat beside him, was not the same bag which he himself had placed there.

At the Central Commercial Hotel, James Sellerman did not book a room, but, leaving his two sample-cases in the office, strolled into the bar. Almost the first person he saw there was a stocky, red-headed man, dressed in the garb of a chauffeur. James Sellerman paid no attention to him, but ordered a glass of beer. When he picked it up, he turned slightly, and held the glass in such a way that his little finger stuck out from his hand. He drank the beer slowly, then left the bar.

In the hall he was overtaken by the red-headed chauffeur. Passing his two sample-cases, James Sellerman kicked one of them, and the next moment Redhead had picked it up. A few minutes later, while lounging in the doorway, Sellerman saw a car drive out of the yard. The red-headed individual was at the wheel, and he took the London road.

James Sellerman remained at the Central Commercial Hotel for another half-hour; then, patronising the bar once more, he sent for a cab to take him to the station. By the other station he left on the London express, and at ten minutes past nine James Sellerman, commercial traveller, checked a sample-case at Paddington left luggage office.

From Paddington, he taxied to Shaftesbury Avenue. He walked from there to Tottenham Court Road, where he boarded a 'bus. By changing, he got one for Whitechapel High Street, and when he had descended made his way to the loft which was the secret "hang-out" of "Two Gun Ike."

Ten minutes later, "Two Gun Ike," the Yankee "tough," walked down the High Street, and made his way along a side alley to the gin palace where he had been the night before. In the bar was the stocky, red-headed individual whom he had addressed as "Jim," and who had been posing as a chauffeur in Exeter earlier in the day.

After treating the crowd in the bar, "Two Gun Ike" followed Redhead into the private room, where, on the floor, reposed a black sample-case. Slowly and methodically "Two Gun Ike" counted out five hundred pounds

in notes, which he handed to "Jim." The latter took them with a husky grunt of satisfaction, remarking as he did so:

"The chief is the sort of man I like to work for, Two Gun! He pays well, and pays promptly."

"Two Gun Ike" nodded and grinned.

"You stick to the chief, Jim, and he'll stick to you," he said. "I'll let you know in the usual way when there is anything else on. Remember, a still tongue means good money and plenty of it to you. If you talk, I'll know it, and drop you like a hot brick!"

"You needn't worry, Two Gun," responded Jim. "This is too good a lay to take chances with."

"Two Gun Ike" picked up the sample-case, and, with another nod, passed out by a side-door into the street, while Jim returned to the bar. "Two Gun Ike" walked briskly back to his loft, and a little later there once more emerged James Sellerman, commercial traveller. By 'bus routes, Sellerman got back to Shaftesbury Avenue, and from there walked into Soho.

By the rear way, he entered the house of Caspar Trouдини, the hunchback, and later still the hunchback emerged by way of the front door. He was carrying the black sample-case, and in Shaftesbury Avenue hailed a taxi. He got out at Cavendish Square, walked down Harley Street and round by the lane to the rear of Dr. Mortimer Crane's house. There he entered by the private door in the wall.

In the big apartment which was the doctor's private sanctum the metamorphosis from hunchback to specialist took place, and twenty minutes later Dr. Mortimer Crane slipped out into the lane from the private door in the wall. He walked round to Harley Street, ascended the steps of his own house, and entered by the aid of his latchkey.

In the hall he was met by his man Peters, who handed him the letters and messages which had come during the day. Then Dr. Mortimer Crane ascended by the little white lift to the third floor and made his way through to his own apartment. The day was finished; the door was locked. He was alone, where none could disturb him, and at his feet lay a pigskin-covered despatch-box containing sixty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds.

Who would ever dream that the Prideaux diamond collection, which Stuyvesant Roper was taking to New York with him, was reposing in the private apartment of Dr. Mortimer Crane, the eminent and impeccable Harley Street specialist?

CHAPTER IV.

Stuyvesant Roper gets a Grim Surprise—"Five Thousand Pounds Reward and No Questions Asked"—Nelson Lee Tackles the Problem.

SOMETHING like a week after the events just recorded, Stuyvesant Roper, the American millionaire, sat in the consulting-room of Nelson Lee, the eminent criminologist.

He was leaning back in one of Lee's easy-chairs, chewing the end of a cold cigar and wearing a look of irritability. Nelson Lee was busy at the moment making notes on a pad of paper, but just as Stuyvesant Roper opened his lips to speak, Nelson Lee looked up.

"I have made a resume of the work of the past few days, Mr. Roper," he said. "It will be better if I outline the different points, for then you will be able to follow step by step the process as it develops. Then we can discuss what step we shall take next."

"I guess it won't be much good to do that," grumbled the American gloomily. "In my opinion the diamonds are gone for good."

Nelson Lee shrugged.

"I grant you the case is a difficult one, but I am not yet prepared to acknowledge defeat," he replied. "Just give me your attention, please. My notes begin with the morning when you first came to see me and asked me to take the case. Since the pigskin despatch-box, in which you placed the jewels, is the concrete fact round which most of the mystery circles, I have dealt with that first.

"You had it made at Poole's, specially to your own designs. It was constructed of ordinary safe steel, and covered with heavy pigskin. The manufacture of the box was Poole's own work, and the pigskin which covered it was bought by them from Goring and Wilson, the wholesale leather merchants.

"The lock was a miniature safe lock of a new design—in fact, I have made inquiries from Poole's and am informed that the lock was invented less than six months ago. This case was delivered to you at the Hotel Venetia three days before you sailed for the United States, or, I should say, before you intended to sail for America.

"According to the facts with which you yourself have provided me, it seems that this case rested in your bedroom at the Venetia until the eve of your departure. That afternoon you carried it out to the sitting-room of your suite, and the same evening you placed in it the Prideaux diamonds, which you had bought.

"Now, anyone who was interested could have ascertained easily enough that you had bought the Prideaux diamonds, for the statement was made by more than one journal, and, as a matter of fact, I knew it several days ago. Therefore we have that single fact to place on the other side of the matter—the fact that it was generally known that Stuyvesant Roper had bought the Prideaux diamond collection for a huge sum of money.

"The next step brings us to the point where this information must have been extended to a minute and careful inquiry as to your intentions regarding the stones. Would you send them to the United States through the channels of one of the American express companies, with offices in London? Would you send them by registered post, by a special messenger, or would you take them yourself?

"We know now that the thief, or thieves, were able to ascertain that you intended taking them yourself. Comes the third step. How would you do it? There we come once more to the pigskin despatch-case. The thief, or thieves, were able to ascertain that point, and during the four days it rested in your apartment at the Venetia they must have been able to gain access to your rooms and to take the most careful and detailed measurements of the case.

"That would have been done while the case was still empty. Probably scarcely a soul guessed that the diamonds were reposing in the safe at the Venetia. It was on the eve of your departure that you sent for the collection. They were brought to you by Varden, the manager of the Venetia. In his presence you opened the case and announced that they were all right.

"This was also done in the presence of your medical attendant—or, I should say, in the presence of the specialist under whose care you had been since coming to London—Dr. Mortimer Crane, of Harley Street. So there we have two witnesses besides yourself that the stones were safe enough at nine o'clock of the eve of your departure.

"You showed the collection to Dr. Mortimer Crane; then you placed them in the case which you had had made for them, and locked them away. You retired soon afterwards, and before going to sleep placed the case

beside your bed. In the morning you opened the case once more, and found the diamonds safe enough.

"You had breakfast in your rooms, and did not descend until after eleven o'clock. While you were downstairs you left the case in a closet in your bedroom, with the door of the closet locked, and the key in your pocket. You returned to your room about an hour later, and, on opening the closet, found the case all right—or, at least, from what we now know, you think the case was all right.

"From that on until you departed for Paddington Station the case was not out of your possession. You took it with you in the carriage, and it was beside you all the way to Plymouth. In the same carriage with you there travelled a curate and a commercial traveller.

"You judged the curate by his clerical clothes and the literature which he was reading. You estimated the commercial traveller by his sample cases, and the fact that he was reading the 'Grocers' Journal.'

"The curate left the train at Yeovil Junction, and the commercial traveller departed at Exeter. You assure me that, with the exception of a very brief nap between Yeovil Junction and Exeter, you did not sleep on the way, and that when you alighted from the train at Plymouth the case was safe.

"After seeing to your luggage, you went at once on the tender which took you out to the steamer by which you were to sail. Your first duty was to seek the purser, with the intention of confiding to his care the despatch-case.

"In his presence you opened the case—or were about to open it—when you at once detected something wrong with the combination which locked the case proper. While it appeared to be the same as the one on the case you had had made, you soon discovered that it was nothing more than a dummy, and a few seconds later you became aware that you had been hoaxed.

"The diamonds were gone; the despatch-case, while covered with pigskin and initialed with your initials, was only a dummy. You at once returned to London and consulted me. It was at that point I took up the preliminary investigation.

"Now we come to the work I and my assistant have been able to accomplish in the past few days. Naturally, the first object of my attention was the dummy case which you brought me. I may say that I have examined that case as carefully as it could be examined, and I regret to add that I have discovered very little from it.

"Unfortunately, I did not see the case which you had had made, but I took the dummy case to Poole's, and went over it with them. Regarding the steel of the case proper, they assure me that it is of the same weight as the steel of the case they made, and, while not being as tough, is a very good imitation.

"The dummy lock, they feel certain, could never have been fashioned, except the real lock on the case they made had been studied and sketched carefully. As to the pigskin covering, they tell me that the duplication of that would not be so difficult. The lock in it, while shaped similar to the lock they made, was of a more simple nature.

"In measurements it exactly coincided with the case they fashioned, and the initials 'S. R.' only varied in size from the stencil they had cut by the tiniest fraction of an inch. It is plain from these facts that the case they made for you was carefully studied after it was finished.

"It seems that it was finally completed the day before it was delivered to you at the Venetia. It appears to be impossible to suspect any of the workmen at Poole's. The only men who had anything to do with the work



Leaning over, James Sellerman drew the case very, very gently from beneath the arm. Once it was clear, he lifted it up and laid it on his own seat. Then he took the case which he had lifted from inside the sample-case and thrust it back beneath the arm of the millionaire.—(See page 17.)

have been in the firm's employ for many years, and are thoroughly trustworthy. Nevertheless, they were each interrogated by the manager in my presence, and I am satisfied that they are innocent.

"The possibility of the guilt of any one of them is a contingency which for the present we shall put aside. Therefore, for the time being we must go on the theory that the case was measured while it lay in your rooms at the Venetia, and, because such a case could not be fashioned in a few hours, we can place the time not later than the second day. Some time during those two days, and more probably during the first day, someone gained access to your rooms and took the measurements.

"How carefully they did their work is proven by the case which you brought me. You yourself carried it about, and never noticed the difference until you opened it. From that point we go to the next step. That is the problem of when and how the substitution was made.

"On the evening before you left the Venetia it had not been carried out. The next morning it had not been done, for you opened the case you had had made, and it and the diamonds were quite safe.

"Now we come to a period of time during which you were parted from the case. I speak of the time during which it was locked up in the closet in your bedroom and you were downstairs in the hotel. That period of time comprises about an hour.

"Was it possible for the thief, or thieves, to enter your room, to open the closet door, to substitute the dummy case for the real one, to close and lock the closet door, and get away with the case without being seen?

"It would have been most risky, particularly the get-away, but, in my opinion, it was quite possible to a clever man. Apropos of that, I may say that I have made a most careful examination of the lock of the closet door in the bedroom which you occupied at the Venetia. I even took it out completely, but could find not a single scratch which might have been made by a skeleton-key.

"If it was opened while you were downstairs, then it was done with a duplicate key. Moreover, I have interrogated every servant on that floor, and can discover nothing of a suspicious nature.

"It seems that the chambermaid was in your room a little after eleven, and the valet took some clothes into the room just before twelve. But, of course, that by no means precludes the possibility that the room was entered and the substitution made. It might have been done by someone who had taken a room near you.

"By Varden's courtesy, I have examined the list of occupants of the rooms on that floor, but I gained nothing from it. Leaving that point for the moment, we come next to your journey to Plymouth. As I have said before, you had two travelling-companions on the journey—a curate and a commercial traveller.

"On that journey you have stated that the pigskin case was on the seat beside you or under your arm all the time, and that you did not on any occasion leave the carriage. You did state, however, that between Yeovil and Exeter you had a nap.

"At Yeovil the curate left the train, leaving only the commercial traveller. How long you slept you do not know, but we will say, for the matter of reckoning, that it was at least a quarter of an hour. The train did not stop between Yeovil and Exeter, therefore no one could have entered the carriage, and I have already understood from you that it was a non-corridor train."

"That is quite right," murmured Stuyvesant Roper.

"Very well," said Lee, "let us continue. As a principle of thoroughness, we must consider the possibility of the substitution of the cases having

taken place during that quarter of an hour. Such a hypothesis would at once bring the commercial traveller under suspicion.

"It would also assume that he was not really a commercial traveller, but the thief in disguise. You say he had two sample cases with him, and that they were both of good size.

"Now, was it possible for him to make the substitution while you slept? We must consider that. You say that when you awoke the case was still on the seat beside you, that your arm rested across it, as it had done when you dozed off, and that you noticed nothing wrong.

"On the face of it, it seems a little improbable to think that the man who travelled with you made the substitution, but, beyond the hour when the case lay in the closet in your bedroom, there is no other period of time when the change would have been possible, and, that being so, we must investigate it until we are either convinced that it holds nothing, or that there is something beyond.

"To that end I have sent my assistant, Nipper, to Exeter to try to follow up the movements of this commercial traveller, from the description with which you provided me. I have given him orders to comb thoroughly every hotel in Exeter. He should have been back in London before now.

"Next we come to the police authorities. In addition to coming to me, you notified the Criminal Investigation Department, at Scotland Yard. The matter was turned over to Inspector Brooks, and only this morning I had a long conversation with him.

"He has already done a good deal on the matter. Every pawnshop in the metropolis has been provided with a list of the diamonds, and the fences, as suspected by the police, are under a sharp surveillance. But, in my opinion, the man who was clever enough to steal the Prideaux diamonds is not fool enough to try to dispose of the stones through any such channels. He will either keep them or get rid of them in driblets, as it is safe.

"That, Mr. Roper, is as far as I have been able to go up to the present. You can depend that your magnificent offer of a reward of 'five thousand pounds, and no questions asked,' will inspire the police to their greatest efforts. Such a reward will create the possibility of a leakage from the underworld, if anything is known there of the affair. Five thousand pounds is a sufficient sum to tempt many wealthy men, let alone the crooks of the underworld.

"But, so far, no one has come forward. Myself, I am not depending on anything of that nature. This robbery was most carefully planned. In every particular it reveals the power of a remarkable organising brain. The motive is evident enough. That is supplied by the diamonds themselves.

"It is the utter absence of clue which makes the case so difficult. In all my consideration of the different points I can only find two periods of time when the substitution could have been made; and then we have to consider the most important point of all—when was the pigskin case studied and measured in order that a duplicate might be made?

"It is because I deem that the most important point to be elucidated at present that I want you to give a good deal of thought to the matter. Reflect what you were doing during the hours of the four days and nights preceding your departure from the Venetia.

"Make a list of all the visitors who came to your rooms, no matter how far above suspicion they might be. Then try to recollect any who may have been left alone in the room where the case was. Let me have those particulars as soon as possible, and from them I may gain an idea. If my assistant brings back any clue from Exeter, I shall of course follow it up at once."

"Very well, Mr. Lee," replied the millionaire slowly, "I shall make you a full report on what I did during those four days and nights. It ought

not to be difficult, for I keep a diary, and the main particulars of my doings will be there."

"That is good," rejoined Lee in a tone of satisfaction. "I should like it as soon as possible, and then——" He broke off as the door suddenly opened and Nipper appeared. Then, without raising his tone, he continued:

"Ah, here is Nipper now! We shall have his report at once."

Nipper, who was clad in a grey lounge suit and cap and was carrying a brown club-bag, set the bag on the floor, threw his cap aside, and, after greeting Lee, shook hands with Stuyvesant Roper. Then, at a nod from Lee, he drew up a chair and took out a notebook.

"I tried to get back this morning, sir," he said, "but I was following a bit of information, and I was compelled to remain over in Exeter. At your suggestion, sir, I travelled down to Exeter by the train which left Paddington at the same hour when Mr. Roper departed. There are one or two tunnels on the way, but before entering the tunnels the lights are invariably turned on, and nothing could be done under cover of darkness.

"At Yeovil I made inquiries about a curate answering the description furnished by Mr. Roper, and from one of the porters who used to work at Yeovil and is now employed at Yeovil Junction, I ascertained that a curate of one of the small villages outside Yeovil had passed through that way one day last week.

"I went to the village in question, and hung about until I saw the curate walking down the street. I managed to get a photograph of him with my vest-pocket kodak. I developed the film last evening, and, after printing it, enlarged it this morning. Here is the print, sir."

Nipper drew out an envelope, and, taking from it a snapshot, handed it across to Lee.

"Exhibit 'A,'" murmured Lee, as he studied it for a moment, then passed it to Stuyvesant Roper.

The American took it eagerly, and, affixing his glasses, bent over it. He studied it for a few moments, then laid it on the desk.

"You are a clever lad," he remarked. "That is the curate who travelled down on the train with me. There isn't a doubt about it."

"I made inquiries about him," went on Nipper, flushing at the praise. "He is quite an irreproachable sort of person, sir, and I think he can at once be eliminated from suspicion. When I had got the snapshot I travelled on to Exeter and started to comb out the hotels, making my inquiries as quietly as possible. It was only yesterday morning that I managed to strike a clue at all.

"It was at the Central Commercial Hotel, and from the barmaid there I made inquiries. I had to drink about a dozen lemonades while doing so, and I haven't recovered from the effects yet."

Lee and Roper smiled at the lad's remark, but said nothing.

"Well, sir, I managed to get her thinking, and mentioned the day and time when a passenger from the train in question would have arrived at the hotel. She had a recollection of a man coming in about that time—a commercial traveller, who visited Exeter very occasionally. She remembered it, because this man travels for stove and boot polishes, and while he was there tried to book an order from the hotel.

"They had bought his goods once before and found them all right, but they had plenty of stock then and didn't give him an order. He remained only a short time at the hotel, and then had a cab called. She doesn't know where he went, but I followed up the inquiries at the hotel stable and found the cabman who had driven a man away from the hotel that day.

He went to the other station in Exeter, and the cabman thought he took the London train.

"But here comes a discrepancy, sir. Mr. Roper states that the commercial traveller who travelled down on the train with him had two sample cases. The cab-driver is certain the man he drove from the hotel only had one, for he carried it into the station himself.

"It was useless for me to describe the man to him. He had no recollection at all, and only said 'yes' to everything I suggested. But about there being only one sample case, he was most positive.

"I went back into the hotel then, and managed to get hold of a tin of the polish sold by this man. It is manufactured by a London firm with offices in Queen Victoria Street. Here is the name, sir."

As exhibit "B," Nipper handed across a slip of paper bearing the name and address of the firm which manufactured the polish.

"After that, I made further inquiries, sir, and got the names of five other arrivals at the hotel that day, but none of them came within the period of time specified. There was one, however, who left at that time. This man was a chauffeur, who had come in from the London road. He drove away from the hotel not long after the London train was in. The car he drove was an American car—a Winton. I know the car pretty well, sir, and there are not many in London. She was one of the newest models, for she was a 'six,' and had an aluminium body.

"There were no passengers, and if the man had any luggage he did not take it out of the car. Only the chauffeur was in it, and there seems to be no particular reason for his having come to the hotel at all. The only description I could get of him was that he had very red hair and was short and stocky. That ends the report of what I discovered in Exeter, sir.

"On my return to London I went to see one of the insurance tax commissioners, and from him managed to get a list of all the employees of the polish firm, whose address I have given you.

"They employ six travellers altogether, and when I had the list of those names I went to Queen Victoria Street, where their offices are situated. I posed as the son of a merchant in Devon, stating that I had just come up from Exeter, and inquiring the prices of their goods.

"They gave me a price list, and asked me for a name, in order that their traveller for that district might call upon me. I gave them a fictitious name, and in return was told that their traveller, Mr. Sellerman, would call upon me when he next visited Exeter.

"I then asked if he would be down soon, and was told that he had just returned from that district. When I left there I got hold of a directory and looked up the name of Sellerman. There were only two names like that—one was a Philip Sellerman, machinist, and the other, James Sellerman, commercial traveller. That seemed like our man, so I took his address. It is number 6a, Tollington Park. That, sir, is what I have to report."

As Nipper finished speaking, Nelson Lee looked up and nodded in approval.

"And a very good report, too, my lad," he said. "I do not recall a single point which you have neglected to follow up. There seems a strong possibility that the man whom you traced to the Central Commercial Hotel in Exeter may be the same man who travelled down on the train with Mr. Roper.

"Of course, he may be perfectly innocent. As a matter of fact, it seems rather far fetched to suspect him at all. But as we have investigated the curate, so must we also satisfy ourselves regarding this man. As soon

as you have got something to eat, my lad, you had better go at once to Tollington Park and find out all you can about this man, James Sellerman.

"If you come upon anything which rouses your suspicions, communicate with me at once. You will find me either here at Gray's Inn Road, or at the Venetia. In the meantime I shall probe a little deeper into the four days preceding Mr. Roper's departure from the hotel, and during which the pigskin bag lay in his rooms. If we could but put our fingers on the man who had the time and the opportunity to take measurements of the bag, we should be a long way on the road to a solution."

"Very well, sir," replied Nipper, rising. "I shall get bite on the way, and see what I can find out in Tollington Park."

Nodding to Roper, the lad left the room, and when the door had closed upon him the millionaire turned to Lee.

"If that lad ever wishes to branch out into another line of business, you can send him to me," he said. "It was a real pleasure to listen to his report. He forgot nothing, and he showed a perspicacity in following up an idea which would have done credit to you or me, who have so much more experience and so many more years."

Lee smiled with pleasure.

"He is a good lad," he murmured. "He is keenly interested in the profession he is studying, and one day he will be one of the greatest criminologists of his generation. I prophesy that. But now, I think, Mr. Roper, that we had better go on to the Venetia. I want that list which you are to make out, and also I wish to have a talk with Varden, the manager."

They donned their hats and, leaving the consulting-room, passed out to the street. Nipper had gone out just ahead of them, and they could see him down the street hailing a taxi. On the other side of the road, shuffling along in aimless fashion, was a hunchback.

Only a casual glance did they cast in his direction, then they, too, hailed a taxi, and ordered the man to drive to the Venetia. If they had only known that as soon as they had disappeared that same hunchback jumped into a taxi and went off after Nipper! If they had only known who that hunchback was, and what was his purpose!

Stuyvesant Roper made a big mistake when on his return to London he told Dr. Mortimer Crane of the loss of the Prideaux diamonds and that he intended putting Nelson Lee on the case. It was putting a powerful weapon in the hands of the enemy. And before that night was out, this strange, sinister figure was to strike, and strike hard.

He was a believer in the theory that the best defensive is an offensive.

CHAPTER V.

Nipper on the Trail—James Sellerman Arrives at Tollington Park—The Telephone Message—"Two Gun Ike" Strikes.

NIPPER stopped at a restaurant in Holborn, dismissed his taxi there, and ordered a hurried meal.

On the opposite side of the street another taxi drew up and waited, and from time to time the sinister features of Caspar Trouдини, the hunchback, might have been seen as he peered through the window. It was less than a quarter of an hour later when Nipper emerged, and crossing the road, walked along to the Holborn Tube Station.

Just below the station, Caspar Trouдини left his taxi and shuffled along after the lad. He was next to him at the ticket window when Nipper bought a ticket for Finsbury Park, and then as the line moved on, Caspar Trouдини

shuffled out of the station. His face was lowering as ever, and owing to the deformity which was his, he seemed to walk sideways as he made his way along Holborn.

His eyes glared morosely about him, and the expression on his face was forbidding. What the man might have been thinking a casual passer-by would never have guessed. Of his sad affliction no doubt they would have hazarded. But, as a matter of fact, Caspar Troudini was repeating over and over to himself:

"They have traced James Sellerman in some way. The lad is on his way to Tollington Park. Nelson Lee is sharper than I thought. He must be stopped, and stopped at once!"

A little way along he hailed another taxi, and climbing in, ordered the man to drive to Shaftesbury Avenue. There he descended, and walked along through Soho until he came to the dingy house on the corner.

Up the steps he went, and, inserting a key in the lock, entered the barely-furnished hall. Once in the sitting-room—if the apartment might be dignified by that name—the hunchback worked swiftly.

Discarding the outer clothes he had been wearing, he slipped a tablet in his mouth; then, stretching his hands above his head, went through the terrible contortions which threw his shoulder-blade back into alignment. Then donned the garments peculiar to James Sellerman, commercial traveller.

He left the house by the rear door, and making his way round to the front of the street, walked briskly along to Shaftesbury Avenue. Once more he took a taxi, and ordered the man to drive to the station, where he had checked his sample case several days before.

He handed in his receipt, and, carrying the sample case, emerged from the station. From King's Cross he drove in the taxi to the Holloway Road, where he descended and walked along to the Nag's Head. Though he suspected his house in Tollington Park was already under surveillance, he did not hasten his movements. Instead, he acted with deliberation, following out his usual routine.

Entering the public-house on the corner at the Nag's Head, he ordered a drink, and while he drank it, chatted with the barmaid. Then, picking up his bag, he left the saloon and walked leisurely along, until he came to the corner of the Seven Sisters Road and the Finsbury Park Underground Station.

He turned up there and continued on his way until, by turning to the right, he arrived at the foot of Tollington Park. As he turned into his own street he caught sight of a lad idling along about half-way up, but with scarcely a glance in that direction, James Sellerman mounted the steps of No. 6a, and, inserting his key in the door, passed inside.

No one seeing the lad up the street would have for a minute guessed that he was the same who had left Gray's Inn Road an hour or so before. Then he had been sprucely garbed in a light grey lounge suit, with neat, black shoes and a grey cap. Now he was dressed in shabby brown. His immaculate linen had given place to a soft roll-collar shirt, and his cap was very frayed. Yet the disguise adopted by Nipper had not been sufficient to deceive James Sellerman. Unfortunately for the lad he had been seen to depart.

It was now getting on for the hour when a certain class of suburbanite discusses that meal known as "high tea"—a blend of tea and supper. It is a movable meal, and may take place any time between six o'clock and eight, but in this instance it was just a little past six, and the mingled

ouour of kippers and frying bread told Nipper that in some houses, at least, it was already under preparation.

It was still broad daylight, for the June sun would not sink for another two hours or so, and now that he had seen a man enter No. 6a, Nipper was in a quandary what to do.

That it was James Sellerman, commercial traveller, he did not doubt for a single moment. He had managed to get a squint at the man as he walked up the steps, and he had coincided remarkably well with the description given by Stuyvesant Roper.

True there seemed nothing suspicious in the man's movements. It was certainly no crime to travel in the same carriage with the millionaire, and the possibility that he had had any hand in the substitution of the pigskin cases seemed more and more improbable.

His appearance was distinctly commonplace. His attitude as he walked up the street and ascended the steps was exactly that of a traveller returning home after a hard week on the road. His sample case was extremely business-like.

His house was the type of place just within the means of a man earning the salary such a traveller would have. How could such a man be connected with the robbery of sixty thousand pounds worth of diamonds? It seemed ludicrous!

Yet the fact remained that James Sellerman had travelled to Exeter in the same carriage with Stuyvesant Roper—that the same James Sellerman had been alone with the millionaire from Yeovil Junction to Exeter—that during the time, Stuyvesant Roper had slept for a quarter of an hour or so—that there was at least a possibility that the substitution could have been made during that time, and finally that James Sellerman had had two sample cases in the train, while at the Central Commercial Hotel he had had only one.

It revealed a very tiny discrepancy, to be sure, but more than once the solution of some of the most difficult cases which had come Lee's way had rested on just such tiny points, and Nipper knew the folly of judging too quickly.

He had been ordered out to Tollington Park to watch James Sellerman, and watch him he would. It was a piece of luck, so he thought, to reach there almost at the moment when the man was returning from a trip. If he had only known!

It was nearly three hours later, and dusk was beginning to herald its approach, when James Sellerman once more emerged from No. 6a. Without a glance in the direction of the lad who was still idling along the street, he walked down to the corner and turned to the right. Nipper was after him at once, and cautiously shadowed him down to the Nag's Head.

There he saw his quarry enter the public-house on the corner, and it was nearly half an hour before he came out again. At the Nag's Head he caught a 'bus, going up on top.

Nipper jumped on after him, but contented himself with sitting inside. By a series of changes, James Sellerman made his way by 'bus to the Whitechapel High Street, and more and more Nipper wondered.

Along the High Street went Sellerman until suddenly he turned down a side lane to the right. Nipper was at his heels, finding it much easier to keep the trail, now that darkness had quite descended.

At last, along a narrow, dingy street Nipper saw his man disappear, and managed to get along just in time to hear the slam of a door. Although the lad did not know it he was standing before the old warehouse whose loft was the "hang out" of Two Gun Ike, the Yankee tough.

Nipper stood irresolute for a few seconds, then as he saw the gleam of a light somewhere above he made a quick decision. He counted the number of the buildings on the right hand side of the street, finding the old warehouse to be the ninth along. Then at a gentle lope he set off for the Whitechapel High Street.

From a passing constable he found out where he could telephone, and, hurrying on to the address given, he entered the booth and called up Gray's Inn Road. As luck would have it Lee was not at home, but, hanging up the receiver, Nipper called a second time, on this occasion giving the number of the Venetia.

After a search about the hotel, Lee was found in the grill-room, and a few minutes later Nipper heard his voice at the other end of the wire.

"It is Nipper, guv'nor," said the lad, speaking close to the mouthpiece.

"Where are you?" came back Lee's voice quickly.

"In Whitechapel, sir," answered Nipper. "Listen, guv'nor, I want to tell you what has happened."

"Fire away, my lad!" responded Lee.

"Well, sir," said Nipper, "I went to Tollington Park, as you suggested, and was there only a little time when our man turned up. From his appearance I feel sure it is the same man with whose description Mr. Roper furnished us.

"He stayed in the house there until nearly nine, when he came out and walked down to the Nag's Head. He entered the public-house on the corner, where he remained for about half an hour. Then he came out and boarded a 'bus. I followed, and by several changes finally reached Whitechapel High Street. He got out here and walked down a side alley. He finally stopped before an old warehouse in Cutler Street.

"It is the ninth building along on the right-hand side, and he went to the loft overhead. He is there now, or was when I left. I hurried round here to report to you, and will go right back. It looks kind of queer, don't you think, sir?"

Lee did not reply at once, then his voice came low and clear:

"Go back there at once, my lad, and keep watch. I shall send for a car and leave within a few minutes. I shall telephone to Scotland Yard to see if I can get Inspector Brooks to come along with me. It certainly is queer what a respectable commercial traveller living in Tollington Park would want in Cutler Street, Whitechapel, in an old loft, at this hour of the night. If he leaves and you have to follow, leave a sign on the ground outside the door of the loft."

"Right you are, sir," answered Nipper. "If he leaves and I have to follow him I shall drop an empty matchbox on the ground to the right of the door, and will telephone later to Gray's Inn Road what has happened. If the matchbox is not on the ground you will know I have not left the place."

"That will do all right, my lad, and—be careful."

"I will, sir. Good-bye."

With that Nipper hung up the receiver, and, hurrying from the chemist's shop where he had been telephoning, he walked briskly round until he was once more in Cutler Street. He crossed over to the right-hand side and slipped along quietly in the shadow, until he was abreast of the warehouse into which he had seen James Sellerman disappear.

He could see no signs of a light now, and for a moment he thought his man must have left the place, while he was telephoning to Lee. Between the near corner of the warehouse and the building next to it there

was a narrow passage, very dark and very suggestive of things existing but unseen.

It was by a door opening on to this passage that he had seen the quarry enter the place, and now, as he was swallowed by the blackness of the passage, Nipper trod very warily.

He had advanced perhaps eight or ten feet along it when suddenly a sound caught his ear, and he paused, crouching close against the other building.

It had been more of a scraping sound than anything else, as though a foot had dragged along over the ground. Pressing close against the wall of the other building, Nipper peered into the depths of the passage. Was there someone standing there, watching him? Had he been observed to enter the passage? Was the quarry perhaps wise to the fact that he was under surveillance?

For what seemed an eternity, Nipper stood scarcely breathing and certainly not moving, waiting for the sound to repeat itself. Away in the distance he could hear the distant roar of traffic on the High Street, but along Cutler Street not a single footfall sounded.

It was not a popular thoroughfare after nightfall. Just opposite him was the door. If his quarry were still inside the building and should use a match to light himself out, he would see the lad at once. Yet Nipper could not bring himself to make another move until he had satisfied himself regarding that scraping sound he had heard.

At that moment it came again, this time nearer than before, and as he crouched back against the wall, he knew there was someone creeping towards him along the passage. Holding his breath and moving with all the silence he could command, Nipper began to edge along towards the street.

Now he felt positive Sellerman had become aware that he was being followed, and he had no fancy to be caught in a hand-to-hand struggle there in that dark alley. One step he took towards the street, dragging the other foot after the first, and then close to him there came a sudden hiss as something launched itself upon him through the darkness.

Almost before he could turn to defend himself Nipper was in the grip of a pair of powerful arms, and one sinewy hand was forcing his head back against the wall. He stiffened every muscle and heaved outwards with all his strength. It availed him for a moment, giving him an opportunity to get his feet more firmly braced and to lift his arms a little.

But then he was banged back against the wall with terrific force, and millions of stars danced before his eyes from the shock. His assailant, he knew, was much bigger than himself, and about his methods there was a viciousness of purpose, which told the lad more plainly than anything that the other had murder in his heart.

Only a heavy panting revealed the fact that his antagonist was straining every nerve, and as he realised how desperate his condition really was, Nipper struggled with a super strength—the strength of desperation.

He opened his lips to cry for help, but long fingers gripped his throat and forced his head back, until he thought his neck would be broken. Bang! bang! bang! went his head against the wall of the building, the thuds hammering through his brain like thunder.

He kicked out in a desperate attempt to get free, but his assailant met his move with a wicked return kick, which nearly dislocated the lad's knee, and sent him slithering downward.

Then, while he held him by the throat, his assailant drew back his clenched fist and drove it time after time full into the lad's face. It caught him

with terrific force, splitting his cheek and his chin and closing his eyes one after the other.

He tried frantically to dodge, or to minimise the blows as they landed, but that terrible grip on his throat did not relax for a single moment, and at last, with a red flame searing his eyes, and flashing into his very brain, his body grew limp and he relaxed into unconsciousness.

As he collapsed the man who held him by the throat threw his arms about him, and, lifting him, carried him across the passage to the door leading to the warehouse. Up the stairs to the loft he went, and, throwing him on the floor, lit a candle.

Then as the flickering flame grew brighter the man crossed and stood gazing down at the unconscious form of the lad. His eyes were heavy with a savage rage, and his lips were drawn back in a snarl of murderous intent. It was the face of Two Gun Ike, the Yankee "tough."

"I'll teach you a lesson," he muttered, as he touched the lad with his toe. "I'll teach you to go nosing into my affairs. You'll go out of here a dead one, and, by thunder, I'll ship your body on to your master! It will be a warning to him not to meddle in my business any more."

With that he bent down, and dragging the lad across the floor, dumped him on the iron cot, after which he began to prepare for his avowed purpose.

CHAPTER VI.

A Journey in Force—Where is the Empty Matchbox—A Mysterious Shot— The Assault—The Fire—The Escape of Sellerman.

NELSON LEE wasted no time after receiving Nipper's telephone message from Whitechapel. He agreed with Nipper that it was certainly a strange thing for a commercial traveller living in TOLLINGTON PARK to go to an old warehouse in CUTLER STREET, WHITECHAPEL, at night.

Nelson Lee knew Cutler Street, and he was perfectly aware that very few persons sought it after dark, unless their purpose was as sinister as the street. It was the most suspicious thing which had so far appeared against James Sellerman.

While he was determined to investigate the character of the man, as he would satisfy himself regarding every person who had the slightest connection with the case, Nelson Lee had really hoped for little in that direction. True, there was a discrepancy about the luggage the man had been carrying, but he realised that such a point might be explained very simply.

One of the chief reasons, too, why he anticipated—or had anticipated—very little from that direction was the fact that he did not see how James Sellerman could have managed to get the measurements of the pigskin bag in order to have the duplicate made.

Along that line Lee had discovered very little. He had so far been unable to trace whence the metal or the pigskin of the dummy bag had been procured, and the thing had resolved itself, as far as Lee was concerned, into a search for the person who might have had a sufficient length of time in Stuyvesant Roper's bedroom to make the necessary measurements of the case.

True to his promise, Roper had made out a list of all the persons he had admitted to his rooms during the four days preceding his departure from the hotel. That list comprised only six names. There was, to begin with,

the chambermaid of the floor and the valet, both of whom Varden, the manager, could not possibly suspect.

Then came the name of a prominent London banker, who acted as the London correspondent for the Wall Street firm of which Roper was the head. Next on the list was Dr. Mortimer Crane, the Harley Street specialist, who had been attending the millionaire. Then the agent through whom Roper had purchased the Prideaux diamond collection, and, finally, Varden, the manager of the hotel.

It was a list which yielded little even on the closest examination. Nelson Lee knew Varden intimately, and could therefore eliminate him from suspicion at once. On Varden's assurance he could likewise cross off the names of the chambermaid and valet of that floor.

To suspect the banker, who was Roper's agent in London was ridiculous, and likewise he could hardly consider the agent, who had put through the sale of the diamonds.

That left only one name on the list, that of Dr. Mortimer Crane, the specialist. Lee did not personally know Dr. Mortimer Crane, but he had heard a good deal about him and his work, and it seemed most improbable that the eminent specialist could be for a moment suspected. Roper, on his part, pooh-poohed the idea at once, and on his side Lee was inclined to agree with him.

Under these circumstances the list yielded nothing, and Lee was forced to fall back on the theory that some unknown person had entered the room in the absence of the millionaire and had made the measurements of the case.

That supposition opened up a wide range of speculation. It would include everyone who might have been staying in the hotel at the time, everyone who was employed in the hotel, and anyone who could have slipped into the hotel and made his way to that floor unseen.

So wide must such a net be stretched to include all that it was almost certain that several possibilities would slip through. Already had Lee studied the list of the guests staying in the hotel during those four days, but the Venetia was one of the most cosmopolitan caravanseries in Europe, and there were many, many names totally unknown to Lee.

To investigate each one, to follow up those who had already left the hotel, would be an utter impossibility. He must have a more definite clue—something concrete on which to build.

The more he delved into the matter, the more did he realise the calibre of the brain which had conceived the robbery. It left less of a trail than any case Lee had ever been up against.

At present the only things he could concentrate on were the two periods of time during which Stuyvesant Roper had not had his attention on the case after he had received the diamonds from Varden—the hour during which the case had rested in the closet in the bedroom and the time while he had been on the train—that quarter of an hour during which he had slept between Yeovil Junction and Exeter.

And because Nipper had found something of a definitely suspicious nature regarding James Sellerman, Lee was determined to follow it up at once.

His first action, after hanging up the receiver, was to telephone through to Scotland Yard, and to get in touch with Inspector Brooks, of the C.I.D. The inspector was in his office, and, on hearing what Lee desired, promised to pick him up at the Venetia in a very few minutes.

Stuyvesant Roper would not be denied, and perforce Lee was compelled to agree to take the millionaire along with him. After all, Roper was paying

for the tune that was being piped, and he had a right to be in on anything which might happen.

Inspector Brooks was true to his promise, for it was only ten minutes later that word was brought to Lee in the lounge that the inspector had arrived. In the long, roomy police-car which stood at the kerb, Lee saw three figures besides that of the driver, and, on inquiring, was informed by the inspector that he had brought along three plain-clothes men in case of eventualities.

Not until he saw the American did the inspector guess that Lee wanted him for something in connection with the Prideaux diamonds, and on the way to Whitechapel Lee related briefly what they had discovered. It was more than the police had so far done, as the inspector freely acknowledged, but he was doubtful of anything coming of the evening's work.

Inspector Brooks was due for a grim surprise before very many minutes had passed. The chauffeur—a police orderly—broke all the traffic laws on the way to Whitechapel, and it was not very long after the receipt of Nipper's telephone message that the big police car drove along the High Street until it came to a corner which would take them down to Cutler Street.

They turned down, and at the end of Cutler Street the car drew up. Lee and the inspector consulted for a few seconds, then at Lee's suggestion the inspector stationed his men at strategic points. The chauffeur slipped away to the High Street to rake in any ordinary constables he could find, and then, keeping well in the shadow, Lee, Inspector Brooks, and Roper moved along towards the ninth building on the right—the building which Nipper had said James Sellerman had entered.

They counted carefully as they went along, until, after passing the eighth building, they reached the narrow alley between it and the ninth. They slipped into the narrow passage, and while the inspector and Roper guarded the entrance Lee drew out his electric pocket-torch and cast a circle of light on the ground to the right of the door.

Not a sign of the empty matchbox was there to be seen. He extinguished the light quickly, and stole back to the others.

"Nipper must still be about," he whispered. "There is no sign, as he promised to leave if he should go away. I'll signal."

Drawing in his breath, Lee gave vent to a long, low whistle, which would carry a considerable distance. Then he followed by two short whistles. They waited for some seconds, then he repeated the signal. But through the night there came no answer from the lad.

"I don't understand it," muttered Lee. "He distinctly said if his man left, and he followed, he would leave an empty matchbox on the ground to the right of the door. The matchbox is not there, and yet he is nowhere to be found. I don't know, unless——"

"Unless what?" whispered the inspector.

"Unless our man took the initiative," replied Lee grimly. "What do you think, inspector? Shall we force the door and go up to the loft?"

"Under the circumstances I think we are justified in doing so," responded Inspector Brooks. "Yes, I think we had better do that, Lee. My men are well placed, and it will be difficult for anyone to leave the building without being seen. Ah, what is that?"

They heard footsteps just then coming along the street, and a few moments later the chauffeur appeared, accompanied by a couple of constables. Inspector Brooks placed them at different points; then, with Lee and Roper beside him, he approached the door.

He tried it as a beginning, but when it did not yield to his pressure he pounded on it. Only the echoes came back from the interior, and then, at a sign from the inspector, Lee and Roper placed their shoulders against

the door. All three heaved at once, and with a splintering and crashing of wood the door flew inwards.

As they stumbled into the passage at the foot of the stairs, there was a sharp roar from above them, and a jagged flame cut the darkness. A bullet whistled past their heads and thudded into the wood behind them. Lee's automatic was out like a flash, and as another line of flame stabbed the darkness above, he fired.

He heard Roper give a groan and go down, and heard the inspector rush to the door and whistle. Then another roar came from above, and flame after flame cut the gloom as a hail of bullets fell about him. Lee was firing quickly. Bullet after bullet he sent upwards, aiming at the spot where the flame appeared; then, as he felt the inspector beside him once more, he rushed the stairs.

There could be no doubt now that they had stumbled on something serious. It might not be the man they were after, but it was someone who had very strong reasons for evading capture—reasons strong enough to cause him to open a murderous fire on the police.

Firing as he went, and only stopping to insert a fresh clip of cartridges, Lee rushed up the stairs. The man at the top was not firing now, and Lee reckoned he, too, must be inserting a fresh clip of cartridges.

If he could cover the remaining steps before the clip was thrust home and a cartridge pumped into the barrel he might overpower the other, or at least hold him until help came. He could hear the inspector panting after him, and a clatter below told him the constables were coming as well.

Just at that moment the man at the top began firing again, and Lee felt something hot singe his cheek. The automatic squirted out the lead like a fountain, and one of the constables went down with a bullet in his side.

Still Lee and the others kept on, Lee firing regularly and changing from one side of the stairs to the other after each shot. It was this strategy which saved him from nothing more than a scratch.

Suddenly the firing above ceased, and they heard a door slam. Lee cried out to the inspector, and rushed the remaining steps. He fumbled about in the darkness for a little, until his fingers encountered the door, then he heaved against it. It burst inwards, but at the same moment he staggered back with a sharp cry.

A terrific flame had suddenly sprung up and had shot across in front of him. Through it he got one fleeting glimpse of the interior of the loft—of a low iron bed on which something was lying, of an iron chest and table, then of a figure just disappearing through a window at the end of the loft.

The man was endeavouring to escape, and had fired the place before leaving. On the smoke which poured out of the loft there came the strong smell of petrol. A touch of a match had fired the whole place, setting up a wall of fire between the police and their quarry.

Inspector Brooks, who was standing just behind Lee, gave a shout as he saw the man disappearing through the window, then he caught Lee by the shoulder, and, with bulging eyes, pointed towards the low iron bed which lay beyond the wall of flame.

"There is someone on that bed, Lee!" he shouted hoarsely.

Lee shifted his position; then, as he gazed through the flames at the bed, he gave an involuntary cry.

"It is Nipper," he said tensely. "Good heavens! The lad is bound and gagged, and the flames will reach him in a few minutes. I must get to him first."

He made as though he would rush through the wall of fire, but the inspector held him back by sheer force.

"Don't be mad!" he shouted. "You can never make it that way!"

Lee threw him off, and, turning, dashed down the stairs. All thought of the quarry was gone from his mind now. His sole and only idea was to rescue the lad whom he had seen lying bound and gagged on the iron bed.

He reached the passage, and, by the light of the flames overhead, saw Roper and one of the constables lying on the ground. From some mysterious quarter a crowd had already gathered, and the plain clothes men and some fresh constables who had come up were keeping a cordon about the building.

The fire department had been called, and the engines should be on the job in a few minutes. Lee made his way round to the other side of the building, and gazed upwards at the window through which the quarry had escaped.

There was no sign of the man, and Lee was not looking for him. He knew he must act quickly, and his only way of reaching the loft was through the window. The roof of the adjoining warehouse came down low just there, but without assistance he could not reach it.

He ran back round the front of the building and beckoned to one of the constables. He placed him close against the wall of the adjoining warehouse, then he made a leap, and, using the constable's shoulders as a brace, gained the roof.

From there he worked his way round the sloping roof, until he was opposite the open window of the loft. It was about six feet from the edge of the roof across to the window, but gathering himself together Lee jumped. His hands shot out as he went through the air, and as he struck the wall of the building his fingers gripped the lower edge of the window.

For a few moments he hung swaying, struggling to overcome the drag of his weight. It needed every ounce of strength he possessed to do so, but he finally managed it, and then, drawing himself up until his chest was on a level with the lower edge of the window he fell, rather than crawled, inside.

The interior of the loft was now nothing but a mass of flame. The fire had worked its way almost across to the cot on which Nipper lay unconscious. Choking and coughing, Lee made a dash to the bed, and, drawing out his knife, cut the ropes which bound the lad. Then he jerked the gag out of Nipper's mouth, and, picking him up, carried him to the window.

The constable was waiting below, and taking hold of Nipper's feet Lee lowered him out of the window. His head came about three feet above the officer's outstretched arms, and after a short pause Lee let go.

The constable caught Nipper's shoulders as he fell, and clung on while the lad's body turned over. He pulled him in quickly just before his feet touched the ground, then he eased him down gently. It was pretty work. Lee stood for a moment gazing about the loft before climbing over the sill of the window.

As his eye once more caught sight of the iron chest, he rushed towards it and dragged it along to the window.

"Might be a clue to the identity of the man in this," he muttered.

With difficulty he upended it and heaved it over the sill. He called out to the constable to stand clear, then he let it fall. It struck with terrific force, bursting open the lid as it rolled over; then Nelson Lee went over the sill after it, and dropped to the ground, just as there came a loud roar from the loft and the floor fell in.

A body of firemen rushed round the corner of the building at that moment,

and as Lee staggered away a great column of water went sizzling into the flames. Inspector Brooks met him at the corner of the building.

"We have taken Nipper round here!" he shouted above the din. "He is being revived now. Have you seen any signs of our man?"

Lee shook his head.

"No," he answered thickly, for the smoke was still in his throat. "I haven't seen him since he went through the window. Did he get past the cordon?"

"They say not," responded the inspector irritably. "My men have practically surrounded the building, and no one has passed through but a little old hunchback who came up the lane from somewhere below."

Lee leaned against the adjoining building in order to recover his breath.

"Only a hunchback," he muttered. "I don't see how our man could have got clear, and he certainly was not a hunchback. And he can't be in the warehouse."

"He must have gone over the roof of the other building, and got clear that way," grunted the inspector. "I'd like to get my hands on him. He has shot one of my men, not to mention Mr. Roper."

"Is Roper badly hurt?" asked Lee quickly.

"No; it is a nasty flesh wound, but nothing serious. But I fancy our bird has got clear. If he is through the cordon, then you can wager any amount he is hot-footing it for a different part of the city by now.

"Anyway, I have sent for reserves, and I will throw a cordon round several of these streets, and during the night I will go through it with a 'fine-tooth comb.' I haven't any hope of catching him now, but there is always a possibility, and we may discover whose hang-out this loft is."

Lee nodded, and was turning away when he heard a cry, and, turning round, saw the constable who had helped him into the loft approaching carrying something.

"I found this in the chest which you threw out of the window," he panted, as he came up.

Lee gave one look at the object he held, then he grabbed it and held it up for the inspector to see. It was a pigskin-covered despatch-case, with the initials "S. R." on the top of it.

"It is Roper's despatch-case," said Lee. "Good heavens! I wonder if the diamonds are inside!"

Accompanied by the inspector, who was already having visions of sharing that five thousand pounds reward which had been offered, he made his way to where Roper was lying. The millionaire looked up wanly as they approached, but on catching sight of the bag his eyes dilated.

"Do you feel strong enough to work the combination?" asked Lee.

Roper nodded, and while Lee held the bag close to him he turned the knob of the combination until the lock was released. Then, with fingers which trembled just a little, Nelson Lee lifted the lid and revealed a black case inside.

He took this out, and, unfastening the catch, allowed the lid to fly up. The next moment the inspector gave a cry of joy, as there before them lay the Prideaux diamonds.

Lee held the case so Roper could see the collection, then he closed it with a snap and thrust it into his pocket. The pigskin case was handed over to the constable to take care of, and arranging with the inspector that he, Roper, and Nipper should go on at once to Gray's Inn Road, and that the car should be sent back for the inspector, Lee went across to where the lad was lying.

Nipper was recovering rapidly now, but his face was still badly swollen

from the blows it had received. He smiled wanly as Lee approached, and sat up gamely when Lee told him of the find they had made. Then the police car took them through to Gray's Inn Road, where medical attention was got for Roper.

At his request, Dr. Mortimer Crane, of Harley Street, was sent for, and some twenty minutes later the specialist, accompanied by Lee's own physician, appeared. Dr. Mortimer Crane displayed great pleasure at hearing that the Roper diamonds had been recovered, and while he talked kept fingering a clean white bandage on his left hand.

Little did Nelson Lee dream that the bandage hid a new bullet wound caused by a forty-five calibre automatic belonging to himself. Inspector Brooks arrived an hour later, and there in the consulting-room, after Roper and Dr. Mortimer Crane had departed, Lee and he discussed the case.

It was arranged that the house of James Sellerman should be kept under surveillance by the police, and in Whitechapel the inspector had discovered that the loft was the hang-out of a crook known as Two Gun Ike—a Yankee. His men were already combing out the district in search for this crook, and the inspector hoped for some word by morning.

Yet never more would either Two Gun Ike or James Sellerman appear. They were gone, never to return, yet the man who had conceived their personalities was still free, and already, while chagrined at the triumph of Nelson Lee, his keen brain was active, planning a coup that not only would enrich the insatiable greed which was his, but would eliminate once and for all Nelson Lee and his assistant, Nipper.

THE END.

Another Dr. MORTIMER CRANE Story in a week or two.—YOUR EDITOR,

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The Island of Gold

*A Thrilling Story of Adventures
of Treasure Hunters in the
Southern Seas*

By FENTON ASH

The Old Sailor's Yarn—"A Land of Gold!"

"THIS be a funny idea, Mr. Alec, as I bin readin' about in the paper-- gettin' gold from sea-water. It 'minds me of a queer thing as happened t' me once in the Southern Seas, when I rescued a pore mad chap from a lonely island."

"Does it, Ben? I must hear that yarn. Fill up your pipe and start straightaway. I've got an hour to spare this morning."

Ben Grove, retired mariner, ex-bo'sun, shook his head deprecatingly; while his companion, Alec Mackay, a bright, good-looking young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, waited patiently for what was to come.

"No, sir; theer bain't no yarn, exactly. The pore chap thought he'd found a reg'lar folderado--"

"Eh?" queried Alec, looking puzzled. "Oh, ah! H'm! Eldorado, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; that's it. Means a land of gold, don't it?"

"Yes, yes! Something of the sort. That's near enough, anyway! Steam ahead, Ben!"

"Well, this pore chap thought he'd found a reg'lar land of gold. It came about in this way. I wur actin' mate at the time on a small schooner as had been doin' some tradin' among the South Sea Islands, an' we passed an island as nobody seemed t' know much about 'cept that it wur believed t' be uninhabited, an' theer wur a volcani in the middle of it. The volcani wur there, anyhow, 'cos we could see the smoke. But when we seed a man on the shore, we was puzzled, 'cos we didn't expect t' see annybody, an' when we seed him makin' frantic signs to us, we wondered what was up.

"'Better go ashore to him an' see what he wants,' our skipper said. 'He may 'a' bin shipwrecked, an' be theer alone; an', if so, we can't go away an' leave him to his fate.'

"'Ay, ay, sir,' I says; an' they got out a boat, an' off I goes ashore to the chap.

"Soon as I landed, he takes me aside an' asks me if I'd like t' be a mil-linairy, an' have a kerridge an' pair, with servants in livery, an' all that silly nonsense. 'Cos, he said, if I would, all I had t' do would be to go to a place on the island he had found out, wheer theer was lots o' gold t' be had fur the pickin' of it up.

"He said he'd been shipwrecked, as the cap'n had thought, an' he'd bin theer all by hisself, a-livin' on shellfish an' fruits, an' sich-like; an' I thought as his troubles had turned his brain an' made him fancy things. He looked so wild an' talked so excited that I told him, at last, I'd have to go aboard an' tell the skipper about it. And if the skipper believed it all, p'r'aps he'd come back later on.

"Then the strange johnny grew frightened o' bein' left on the island alone agen, so he said he'd come along, an' I took him back t' the schooner. But the cap'n, he said he'd got no time t' go foolin' around treasure-huntin'. So we sailed away, taking the stranger with us.

"At first he wur very upset at havin' to go away an' leave his treasure island, but after a while he settled down a bit, an' he seemed t' take a great fancy t' me. He wanted me t' join him, to promise to go back with him to the island later on. He even give me a paper with a sort o' map on it, showin' wheer the gold was t' be found, an' offered me half shares if I'd go an' help him bring the gold away. An', to prove his story, he showed me a bag with a lot o' what looked like lumps o' gold in it."

At this point, Alec suddenly became intensely interested. At first he had listened without much concern, thinking, perhaps, that this was only one more yarn of the kind of which most sailor-men are generally supposed to have a practically inexhaustible stock. But the mention of a bagful of lumps of gold was a different matter. It began to look like business!

"Lumps of gold!" he exclaimed. "Are you serious, Ben? How is it I've never heard this tale before?"

"Ye'll hear d'reckly, Mr. Alec. I looks at the lumps, an' an idea comes into me head. I takes a hammer an' bangs one, an' it flew t' picces! 'Twarn't no lump o' gold at all! 'Twor only a pebble caked over wi' some bright-lookin' stuff.

"We tried other lumps, but they was all the same.

"Then the pore chap went clean off his nut wi' the dis'pintment. He chucked his lumps o' gold overboard—all but a few which I kep' fur cur'osity's sake—an' he took to his bunk an' died, two days after, ravin' mad. An' that's all, sir. Ye see, 'tain't much of a yarn, after all."

"Poor chap! One can sympathise, in a sense, with his disappointment," commented Alec thoughtfully. "It's a curious story, so far as it goes. But what has it to do with the extraction of gold from sea-water?"

"Not much, I s'pose," Ben admitted, "'cept as I reckoned them pebbles were coated over that way by water running over 'em. The chap as found 'em said something of the sort, too."

"H'm! I see what you mean, Ben. And perhaps you're not far out. I

know there are what they call petrifying wells in some places. In Derbyshire they make show places of them. There you can see all kinds of articles of various materials which have become covered with a coating of lime through the water of the petrifying well being allowed to drip upon them. You may even see birds' nests so treated.

"But what you speak of is stranger still. It reminds me of a fairy-tale my nurse used to tell me when I was a child about a 'gold-water' which turned everything it touched to gold. In the end, the lucky—or unlucky—

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finder of the wonderful water splashed it on his fingers, and turned them into gold!

"But you said that you kept some of those curious pebbles. What became of them? I suppose you have not got them now, by any chance?"

"Why, yes, sir. I have got 'em right enough! They be locked away in a old sea-chest o' mine. You bide here a bit. I dessay I can hunt 'em out."

Ben went off, and presently returned, bringing with him three or four pebbles and some small shells and other articles of different shapes. They were all covered with a metallic coating which, though somewhat dulled by time, still looked curiously like gold.

Alec examined them with great attention, and finally asked permission to take them to show to his guardian, Dr. Campbell.

Ben raised no objection, and Alec started at once for the doctor's house, which was not a great distance from the old sailor's cottage.

During his absence, Ben puffed away at his pipe and, as he gazed dreamily out over the sea, his thoughts went back to the unhappy madman whom he had taken off the deserted island and his final, miserable fate.

"Shows what comes o' bein' greedy, an' bein' smitten wi' the gold-huntin' fever!" he soliloquised, wagging his head with an air of supreme wisdom. "Ben, me boy, ye should thank yer stars as ye wur never smitten wi' the thirst fur gold, an' never went a-huntin' fur treasure!"

These and other philosophic reflections upon the foolishness of desiring to be rich occupied his mind all the time till Alec reappeared, and afforded him, apparently, much mental satisfaction.

He was surprised when Alec came bursting in on his cogitations, with sparkling eyes and face all aglow.

"Ben!" cried the young fellow. "Ben, what do you think? The doctor has tested those things, and he declares that they are coated with gold—real gold! Even for the gold on them, he says, they are worth several pounds, while, as scientific curiosities, he says, any museum would give you a good price for them!"

"But that's nothing to what we have been talking of. The doctor was wondering only this morning where he could go to for his next exploring expedition. Now he's got an idea—a grand idea! Why not go in search of this island you were yarning to me of, and see if we can find the treasure that poor fellow told you about?"

"Could you take us to the island, do you think? Have you got the latitude and longitude? Would you come with us as guide if the doctor paid you well, and gave you a liberal share of whatever gold me might find?"

Up sprang Ben.

"Just wouldn't I!" he exclaimed, waving his cap in the air, and suddenly oblivious of all his sage reflections of a few minutes previously.

"Hooroo! I'll be a millinairy yet afore I dies, as that pore chap said I could be, an' ride in me own kerridge-an'-pair. I'll 'ave a coachman an' footman, too, in leveries! D'ye think, sir, as I could have silver-an'-blue leveries, like the grand people up at the Hall have?"

Alec laughed good-humouredly.

"Can't say as to that, Ben," he said, "but we can postpone a decision on the point till we get back. And now I'm off to find my chum, Clive Lowther—for, of course, he'll have to come, too."

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