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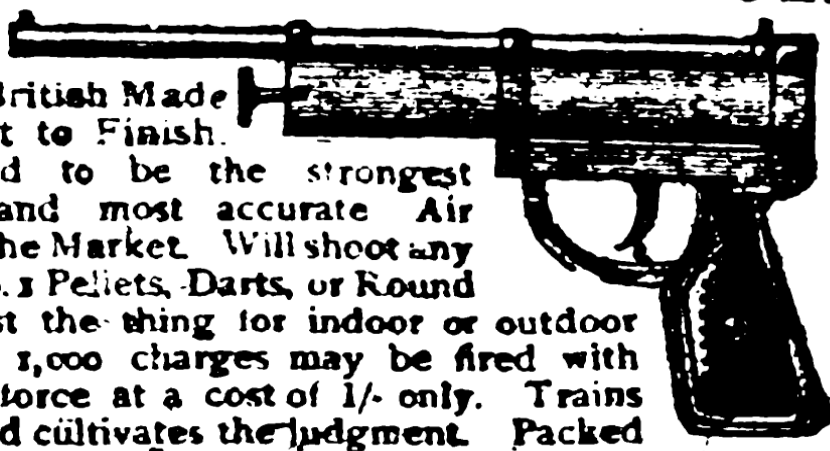
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CHAPTER I.

Dr. Mortimer Crane Back in London—Bitter Thoughts—The Hunchback Earl.

DR. MORTIMER CRANE was back in London. It would have been difficult to find a greater contrast than between his present way of living and the easy, well-fed existence which had been his when, as a Harley Street brain and nerve specialist, he had taken all the gods had to offer.

Now, instead of the big, roomy house in the exclusive thoroughfare of the medical profession, he was occupying a tiny, shabby, three-room flat over a small shop in Soho. Crane's career of late years had been a chequered one. Five years before, the name of Dr. Mortimer Crane had been an honoured one in the world. He had been sought by the greatest in the land, and wealth and fame had flowed into his coffers.

Then the accursed kink in his nature had asserted itself, and Crane, with a bigger brain-box than most men, had embarked upon a life of deception and crime. It is well known how, under four distinct identities, he committed crime after crime with seeming impunity, until the great criminologist, Nelson Lee, read the riddle and forced him to flee from the country.

Even then it was not generally known why Dr. Mortimer Crane had so suddenly abandoned his great practice. There was gossip, to be sure, and somehow the impression got abroad that he had been mixed up in some shady business. But to the man in the street nothing more was revealed, and, like greater men than himself, Crane dropped out of the public eye and the public mind.

Only a few kept fresh in their minds the doings of this super-criminal, and those few could have been found among the police and the criminologists of Europe and America.

Crane had come to light in South America, in Australia, in British Guiana, in Paris, and in New York. His last escapade, in the United States, had ended disastrously for himself, and on that occasion he had escaped by the skin of his teeth, so to speak.

The United States had been too hot to hold him. Canada had offered no asylum, and, thinking that after a lapse of time London might prove attractive again, he had drifted back to the great metropolis in exactly the same way as countless others before him.

He had reached Liverpool, and had made his way to London with less than fifty pounds left of all the money he had had. In London he looked for some avenue by which to recoup himself, but after a week in the great city it must be confessed that he could see little hope of gaining what he sought.

All his old haunts were closed to him. One tiny suspicion that he was in London, and the police net would be spread with speed and precision. He had slipped through that net once, but Scotland Yard would see that he didn't escape the second time.

For a week he had skulked about the city searching—searching like a human vulture, and, as his search went unrewarded, growing more desperate as time wore on. By day he remained in retreat in the tiny flat he had taken, and at night he went abroad, only returning in the early morning.

And now, after a week, he was ripe for anything that might offer. Strangely enough, it was to come not from his nightly searchings, but through the medium of one of the illustrated papers with which he loaded himself on his homeward way as a means of getting through the barren hours of the day.

It was exactly a week after he had taken the flat, and the previous night had been the same as the others. He had supped in the flat, cooking his own meal, for he would not trust himself in even the smallest Soho restaurant. At nine he had gone out, half his face hidden by the upturned collar of his coat, and his eyes shaded by the low-drawn soft hat he wore.

All night long he had tramped the streets seeking for some inspiration which he could turn to financial profit, but by morning he had returned as empty of ideas as ever. On the way he bought several papers, as was his wont; then, as the great city began to make its voice heard with the busy hum of the day, he made his way up the dingy staircase, and, unlocking the door of his flat, entered.

It was an unsavoury place, was that flat. The three rooms of which it consisted seemed to retain the odours of countless tenants who had come from Heaven knows where, and gone into mystery.

Poles, Jews, Bavarians, Armenians, Russians, French, Italians, Spaniards, and a dozen other unnamed and unnameable races, had that three-roomed flat had as tenants in its time, and from each there had been left some intangible something which gave the flat a polyglot air.

The furniture was of the most primitive sort, and rickety in the extreme. The front room was a bedroom, furnished with a crazy wooden bedstead, a plain table, two wooden chairs, and a couple of cheap lithographs. The walls were unpapered, and here and there the cracked plaster made strange patterns on the walls and ceilings, looking like the grotesque plan of some mythical railway.

The floor was bare, though in front of the bed was a dirty nondescript rug—the remains of what had once been a cheap carpet. The feet of the nations had worn it to a rag.

The next room—the room into which one entered from the outer staircase—was a sort of sitting-living-room. It was furnished with an old couch having only three legs, an old box serving for the missing member. Three cane-bottomed chairs, a round table with a soiled red cover on it, a cheap glass lamp, and the inevitable coloured chromos completed the arrangement of the room.

Like the bedroom, it was unpapered, and here, too, the cracks in the

plastered walls made grotesque patterns. A dirty grey rug, torn and full of holes, burned there by innumerable cigarettes, was thrown on the floor.

A door led into the small, dark kitchen beyond. A stove, which might have been the first of its kind, a few burnt and battered pots and pans, a single gas jet, controlled by a penny meter, a wooden chair, and a small wooden chest made up the furnishings of the kitchen.

From Harley Street, from wealth and honour, to this had Mortimer Crane descended. He himself had grown shabby of late. A grey suit, much the worse for wear, covered his body, but it was in the frayed linen on the down-at-heel boots where he revealed mostly his present condition.

On the morning in question, Crane stood just within the door of the repellent room and gazed with distaste at his surroundings; then, with a curse, he threw his bundle of papers on the table and carried the few packages he had into the kitchen.

Soon there came the sound of sizzling in a pan, and, accompanying it, the odour of cooking bacon. While the cooking process was going forward Crane removed his coat and laid a soiled white cloth on the table in the sitting-room. Next he placed fork and knife and spoon, adding a chipped cup and saucer on his second trip.

He disappeared into the kitchen once more, but soon emerged carrying a plate loaded with rashers of bacon, and another plate bearing a loaf of bread. Another journey secured a saucer of butter and a pot of tea, and with this as his morning meal Crane set to work.

He ate ravenously, wolfing his food as one who had not eaten for hours. Nor had he, for his last meal had been the previous evening at eight, and he had been abroad ever since. Nor would his next meal come until eight in the evening, for after reading the papers he would sleep most of the day. At least, that was his programme.

When he had finished the bacon, and had eaten half a dozen slices of bread and butter, washing it down with the tea, he drew out a pipe, and, stuffing it with shag, lit up. It may be said that such radical economy on his part was not altogether necessary, seeing that he had something like fifty pounds in cash tucked away; but no one knew better than Crane the need of having a nest-egg by him.

When something did turn up, ready cash might be an absolute necessity for carrying it through, and he preferred to live closely rather than to squander what he had for the sake of animal comfort. And that very day he was to congratulate himself that he had followed this policy.

With his pipe going, he picked up the first of the papers and glanced hastily through it, scanning the employment columns with the ready eye of custom. The paper was thrown to the floor with another curse, and the next one requisitioned. So it went, his eye scanning page after page and then the paper going to join its fellows on the floor.

He had gone through three or four when he came to an illustrated paper which he glanced at idly. There were no vacancies advertised there, but Crane had always been fond of the illustrated journals, and the pictures served to break the monotony of his present existence. If he was in a back-water, he could at least gaze upon the pictures of those who were doing things.

Page after page he turned until he came to the very last one, and then he suddenly bent forward, a flicker of interest lighting up his sombre eyes. The picture which had caught his attention was that of a hunchback, and, reading the title underneath, Crane made out:

“A recent photograph of the Earl of Grendale.”

Then in smaller print was the following paragraph:

"The Earl of Grendale has just celebrated his sixtieth birthday. The above photograph, taken in the garden at Grendale Hall, shows the earl as he is to-day. Those of the older generation will remember that as a boy the earl met with a severe accident in the hunting field—an accident from which it was thought he would never recover. It changed the course of his whole life, and to-day the earl lives almost the life of a hermit.

"His contributions to the critical school of literature are remarkable for their insight, and probably no man in England has a finer collection of first editions than has the Earl of Grendale. Owing to his unfortunate affliction he has made books his hobby. The earl has never married, and the heir to the earldom is his nephew, the Hon. Rupert Grant, now in Uganda."

Dr. Mortimer read the paragraph a second time, then he scrutinised the photograph closely. It showed an elderly man of aristocratic features, standing by a shady garden seat. It revealed, too, the twisted back with the hump on it, which was the result of the accident he had had in the hunting field when a boy.

Though the paper stated that the earl lived the life of a hermit, his face was serene, and the eyes gazed out upon the world with nothing of the expression of the mysogonist. His hair was plentiful, and his well-modelled mouth and chin were scarcely concealed by the pointed grey beard and the close-cropped moustache which he wore.

Crane studied the photograph for a long time, taking in every detail of the earl's person, then he allowed the paper to sink to the floor, and, leaning back, closed his eyes with deep thought. His pipe went cold, yet he did not stir. The hour when he usually retired to sleep passed, and he did not move.

There in that picture of the hunchbacked earl Dr. Mortimer Crane had received an inspiration, and in that fertile mind of his he was working out the details of a scheme which he was determined would put him on his feet again, no matter at what cost. For over an hour he sat there in silent thought, then he roused himself, and, picking up the paper, tore out the portion containing the photograph of the Earl of Grendale.

Then he rose, and, donning his coat and hat once more, passed down the rickety stairs to the street. For the first time since arriving in London Dr. Mortimer Crane was venturing out during the day.

Keeping to the quieter streets, he walked through Soho, and came out at Oxford Street. Crossing that, he made his way by side streets until he reached the neighbourhood of Russell Square. From there it was only a few minutes' walk to the British Museum, and, entering the great building with an air of confidence, Crane made his way to the reading-room.

He remained in the reading-room at the Museum for the better part of an hour, and, during that time, he consulted Burke's, Debrett's, and other reference books dealing with the peerage and the nobility. When he finally emerged into the street again he wore a very thoughtful mien.

He walked as one abstracted back to his flat in Soho; but before mounting the stairs to his rooms he entered the little second-hand shop underneath and called for the proprietor.

"I am leaving here to-night," he said to that worthy when he made his appearance. "I wish to pay you a week in advance."

Since most of the previous tenants had flitted away in the night without troubling over such a trifling matter, Crane's landlord was highly satisfied with the thoughtfulness and honesty of his tenant, even though he had been

there but a week. When that detail was completed, Crane mounted the stairs and proceeded to pack his meagre belongings.

They were all contained in a large sole-leather trunk which he had managed to keep from the wreckage of the past. Locking the trunk, he went out once more, and for the next two or three hours he was busy shopping, spending some of his precious hoard of money.

Then, with his purchases packed in a large second-hand leather bag, which he had bought in Covent Garden, he returned to his rooms. When he finally emerged that evening he presented a far different appearance than he had earlier in the day. A new suit of dark grey replaced the shabby garments he had worn. His hat was the product of one of the best makers. His boots were well cut, though serviceable, and his linen was immaculate.

He had assumed a pair of very faintly tinted glasses, which gave him a studious air, and it must be confessed that even in his shabby clothes Dr. Mortimer Crane had still presented an air of refinement about his person. He had looked like a gentleman run to seed.

Now he appeared to be a cultured and prosperous professor, with not a care in the world. He dined that evening at a restaurant in Soho, and for once he did himself well. He topped the dinner with a good cigar, and when he finally left the place it was with a sense of well-being.

He returned to his rooms about ten, and from that until eleven he sat smoking and thinking. At eleven sharp he went out and procured a taxi, into which his trunk and bag were piled. Then he ordered the man to drive to Euston, and climbed in. Crane took the midnight train from Euston to Glasgow, where he arrived early the following morning. At ten o'clock he caught a train for Perthshire, and early that afternoon he descended at the little Scotch village station of Grendale.

The village trap took his belongings to the Grendale Inn, and Crane followed on foot. Shortly after, under the name of Professor Halkett Ross, he was installed in the most comfortable room at the inn, and in the privacy of his room was inditing a careful letter to the Earl of Grendale at Grendale Hall, situated, as he had already ascertained, about a mile out of the village.

CHAPTER II.

The Game Progresses—Crane Persona Grata at the Hall—Crane Strikes.

“**A** LETTER by hand from the village, your lordship.”

The Earl of Grendale glanced up from the book he was reading, and frowned at the footman, who stood holding a tray, on which reposed a single letter.

“A letter from the village by hand,” echoed the earl irritably. “Who is there in the village to send me a letter by hand?”

“It has come from the inn; your lordship. It was brought by one of the inn servants.”

“Very well,” grunted the earl, taking the letter from the tray. “Give the fellow some refreshment. If there is an answer, McNab can take it in.”

The footman bowed and withdrew, and with a careless motion the earl tossed the letter to the desk near by. Then he returned to the study of the first edition in which he had been engrossed when the footman entered, and all thought of the letter passed entirely from his mind.

He was a strangely pathetic figure was the Earl of Grendale, though any reference to or condolence regarding the affliction which was his angered

him mightily. As a boy he had given fine promise of manhood—slim and straight as a young sapling. But when only fifteen an accident in the hunting-field had twisted his back badly, and for nearly two years his life was despaired of.

But he had pulled through, though only to be condemned to go through life a hunchback. The years had passed slowly at first until he had dipped into old literature, and found in it a consolation.

Then, what had at first promised but a means for temporary forgetfulness, became a passion, and now, in his sixtieth year, the Earl of Grendale could look back on a life which, while it had been far, far different from what he had dreamed of as a boy, was rich with memories and achievement.

His deformity, though, was a sensitive point with him, and for that reason he had lived more or less the life of a hermit. Not that he had been embittered. At first, yes; but later his innate sweetness of nature had conquered, and the few friendships he had permitted himself to form were even more highly prized by the recipients of his hospitality than by him.

He had never married, though years before there had been a woman who would have gladly become his wife, for she loved him. But the earl could not bring himself to inflict another with the limitations imposed by his deformity, and thus, so far as the amenities of the ordinary home went, he had missed it all.

Perhaps it was as well, for with nothing else to interest him, his whole mind was given to the study of the literature he loved, and the result had been some remarkably brilliant articles from his pen. He had few relatives, his nearest being the Hon. Rupert Grant, now coffee-planting in Uganda, and who was also the next heir to the title.

For himself, the earl was loved and respected by all who came into contact with him. The servants in the house and on the estate swore by him, and his occasional periods of irritableness were never noticed.

Seated, he presented no hint of the deformity which had changed his life. His head was fine and intellectual, with thoughtful eyes, strong, shapely nose, and firm, decisive chin. It was the face of a man who would have made his mark in whatever line he had taken up, and not even his accident had prevented him from fulfilling his destiny.

Unlike a good many men who live alone, he had never permitted himself to grow careless in his dress. At all times he was immaculately garbed, and, in fact, clothes were one of his few extravagances. Such was the present Earl of Grendale—the hunchback earl—when Dr. Mortimer Crane, under the name of Professor Halkett Ross, arrived in the village of Grendale.

It was the same day of his arrival that Crane had written his letter to the earl, and had sent it to Grendale Hall by hand, but, owing to the earl's absorption in the first edition he was studying, it was nearly dark before the letter received his attention. It was when it was too dark to read that the earl rose, and, laying aside his book, walked to the wide window of the library where he had been sitting.

It was a noble view from the window, and one in which, even after sixty years, he delighted. Straight ahead was the broad sweep of the park, and then beyond, rising in a mass of mauve and purple and brown, high into the sky, was Ben Grendale, one of the finest mountains in Scotland.

As far as the eye could reach stretched the acres of Glendale—field and valley and moor and mountain and glen—an estate which was a small kingdom in itself, for there were few wealthier men in Scotland than the Earl of Grendale. For a few minutes the earl studied the view, then with

a faint sigh he turned back into the room, and as he passed the desk his eye fell on the letter.

"I had forgotten all about it," he murmured, as he picked it up and peered at the inscription. "It is the hand of an educated person. It is not from Schofield, though. I wonder who has written to me? I hope it is not from another journalist. I feel it was a mistake to allow that other man to photograph me in the garden. It is the first time I have broken my rule, but I thought perhaps Rupert might like to see how I looked."

All the time he had been muttering to himself the earl had been opening the letter, and now, straightening out the folded sheet of paper it contained, he walked to the window in order to read it. This is what he read:

"My Lord,—I trust your lordship will pardon my presumption in writing to you. My only excuse is that I happened to be in the neighbourhood, where I shall remain for some days, and that for some years I have found great pleasure in your lordship's writings.

"At the risk of failure, I beg to ask your lordship to grant me an interview while I am here. I venture to think that your lordship is in error in one conclusion you draw in your last monograph on Boccaccio. I should be honoured if your lordship would consent to discuss this point, when I think I could produce matter of some interest gained by my own researches regarding the works of Boccaccio.

"Permit me to add that I am staying at the Grendale Inn.

"I am, my lord,

"Most respectfully yours,

• "(Signed) HALKETT ROSS,

"Professor of Ancient Literature,

"The University of Hartford, U.S.A."

"Eh, eh, what's this?" ejaculated the earl, when he had finished reading the letter. "The fellow ventures to disagree with one of my conclusions, does he? Well, well, now I wonder which one? H'm! Professor Halkett Ross. It seems to me the name is slightly familiar. I shall look him up."

Crossing to one of the huge well-filled bookcases, the earl opened the glass door, and took out a reference book. He turned the pages until he came to the letter "R," and then ran his eye down the columns until he came to the name "Ross."

"Ross.—Professor Halkett Ross, Professor of Ancient Literature, The University of Hartford, U.S.A.

"Professor Halkett Ross was born in San Francisco in 1862. Was educated at Brown's Institute and later at Ponder's Military Academy. Entered Harvard University in 1880, graduating with the degree of M.A. Later went to Europe and studied Literature at Oxford, Heidelberg, and Paris. Gained the degree of Doctor of Literature in London, and returned to America in 1888. Was made Assistant Professor of Ancient Literature at the University of Hartford in 1890 and Professor in 1898. Is one of the leading authorities on the literature of Ancient Greece and Rome, and has written several monographs on the Italian literature of the Middle Ages.

"Chief recreation: Travelling.

"Clubs: Oxford and Cambridge, London; Travellers', Paris; St. Nicholas, New York, and the University, Boston, Mass."

A gleam of interest filled the earl's eyes as he finished the particulars relating to Professor Halkett Ross. It revealed Crane's passion for detail

when he took the name of a well-known professor of literature, though a man of less intellect would have found it difficult to sustain the rôle.

It was fortunate, too, for him, since he could not anticipate that the first thing the Earl of Grendale would do on receiving the letter would be to look up the professor in a book of reference. The earl had just replaced the book in the bookcase, when a manservant entered to draw the blinds and turn on the lights. As the man was turning to go the earl said:

"David, you will tell McNab to harness up and be prepared to take a letter into the village. I shall write it at once."

"Yes, my lord. When shall I return for it?"

"In about ten minutes."

The footman bowed and retired, and when he was alone the earl seated himself at the desk.

"It will be interesting to discuss things with him," he murmured, as he drew a sheet of paper towards him. "I must invite him to come often. It will be a rare treat, and a man of some standing, too. Ha! ha! So he thinks he has caught me napping in my monograph on Boccaccio, does he? I must go over it carefully before he comes."

And so, chuckling contentedly to himself, the earl wrote a courteous acknowledgment to the letter he had received, inviting Professor Halkett Ross to come to lunch at Grendale Hall on the following day.

McNab, one of the grooms, posted off to the village with the letter, and that evening, as he was at supper, Mortimer Crane received it. He spent the evening carefully perusing the earl's monograph on Boccaccio, and, himself no mean critic of ancient literature, Crane was really able to discover a discrepancy—the one he had already discovered in the first reading of the monograph.

He spent half the night priming himself on monographs written by the earl, which he had purchased before leaving London, and the following morning he went over in review the germane facts of each. At twelve o'clock sharp a trap from the Hall was at the door of the inn, and, climbing in, Dr. Mortimer Crane composed himself for the part he must soon play.

The earl was awaiting him in the magnificent library where he spent most of his time, and certainly, as he entered, Dr. Mortimer Crane presented a distinguished appearance. It must be remembered that he himself had stood at the top of his profession, and in any conversation he could take up and hold a definite position.

The earl welcomed him genially, touched on a few ordinary topics, then led the way into luncheon. During the meal they discussed matters in general, and not until they were seated in the library again, each puffing at a fragrant cigar, did the earl broach the subject of his monograph.

"Now then, Professor Ross," he said with a smile, "I must confess that your letter has filled me with curiosity. I am all agog to hear your criticism on my monograph."

Mortimer Crane made a deprecatory gesture.

"It was, perhaps, impertinent of me to suggest such a thing, my lord," he said, "but for some time I have been a keen follower of your lordship's critical articles, and my excuse must be that I am a student of them. At the same time, in your monograph on Boccaccio—I think you will find it on page six and in paragraph two—you state that Boccaccio was influenced to turn monk only after he had received a superstitious warning that he was about to die. Now, if your lordship will pardon me, I should like to venture the statement that, in my opinion——"

Then followed a long and deeply critical dissertation on the life of Boccaccio, which would have been almost meaningless to the layman. Crane spoke well—he had never argued better. He took up the life of Boccaccio, the famous Italian writer of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, from the earliest known records of it, and, step by step, brought his arguments down to the time when it is commonly stated Boccaccio embraced monkhood.

Then he brought forward points of a complicated sort, which, he asserted, tended to prove that Boccaccio was already contemplating monkhood when he received the superstitious warning that he could not live long.

To substantiate his arguments, he mentioned writers and papers dealing with the subject, which were, to the earl, of a highly interesting nature. For the better part of an hour Crane talked, and never once did his arguments, or the earl's interest, flag. Both cigars had gone cold; both men were tense with absorption in the subject.

Crane was surprised at his own keenness to make his point. Not until he had quite finished did the earl speak. Then he took up the subject from his point of view, and in pleasantly modulated tones proceeded to state his case. He talked well and to the point, yet it must be confessed that against the wall of some of Crane's arguments he broke his case.

There was no doubt, as he himself conceded after a vast amount of argument and reference to volumes in the bookcases, that "Professor Halkett Ross" was in the right, and the earl himself was the first to acknowledge the fact. He ended the argument by saying, as only a good sportsman could say:

"My dear professor, I haul down my flag. You have convinced me that I am wrong on that point. I shall recall every one of the monographs I can get hold of, and issue a new one, based on the point you have proven. Ah, here comes David with tea. I had no idea we had talked so long. It has been most interesting—most interesting to me. I hope, professor, you will give me the pleasure of your company as much as possible before you leave. After tea, if you would care to see them, I should be delighted to show you the gardens."

Crane murmured his thanks, and addressed himself to the delightful tea which was served. Inwardly he was congratulating himself that the first step—the most difficult step of all—had been safely negotiated. He had come to the earl posing as one of the most brilliant authorities on literature. He had crossed swords with one of the keenest minds in the kingdom, and he had come out victorious.

Not once had he been lost for an argument, and the earl's good sportsmanship made Crane's victory but a plank for prolonging the acquaintance. Some men would have been disgruntled, and the victory of Crane would have been the signal for the cutting of the acquaintance. But not so the Earl of Grendale. He was made of different fibre.

Crane had inspired the utmost confidence in that first visit, and as he drove back to the inn that evening, after having promised to lunch at the Hall again the following day, he puffed his cigar with every evidence of enjoyment. To look at him one would hardly have believed that twenty pounds would have covered his whole worldly wealth.

Crane was playing for a big stake, and he had risked everything on it. But once the die was cast he played his cards as coolly as though the stake were a mere bagatelle. Nearly a week passed, during which Crane spent much time at Grendale Hall.

Day after day he and the earl grew more intimate. Crane, an intellectual man, and, when he wished, a more than ordinarily fascinating man, exerted

himself to the utmost, and by the end of the week the solitude loving earl was quite enchanted with the professor of ancient literature from America.

On the sixth day after Crane's arrival in Grendale, he announced his intention of leaving the following morning. The earl expressed deep regret, and, while showing his pleasure at meeting "Professor Ross," he extended a strong invitation for Crane to spend his last night at Grendale Hall.

During the past two days they had been absorbed in a discussion of some first editions which the earl possessed. Crane showed an unusual grasp of the history of some early first medical editions which the earl had, and in his enthusiasm the earl had started a monogram on them which Crane was assisting him with. This alone was sufficient for him to spend his last night at the Hall, and when he consented, with apparent reluctance, the earl rubbed his thin hands with glee, congratulating himself that they would make a memorable evening of it.

McNab, the groom, was sent to the inn for Crane's bag, and they dined early. Crane was to be driven to the station early in the morning, so immediately after dinner they set to work. Now, it was the custom of the servants in the earl's household to retire at ten o'clock sharp. The butler saw that the other servants were abed, looked to the securing of the windows and the doors, and wound up by bringing a nightcap to the library about ten minutes past ten.

On this night he followed his usual procedure, though instead of one nightcap he took two to the library. Crane and the earl were absorbed in the compilation of the monograph, and as the butler set the drinks down on a small tabourette, the earl absently wished him good-night.

Crane nodded also, and then the butler retired, softly closing the door after him. For another hour or so the earl and Crane worked over the monograph, and then, rousing himself out of his absorption, the earl apologised and invited Crane to help himself to a nightcap. Crane poured out his own drink, and then, with lifted brows, asked the earl if he might pour his as well. The earl nodded absently, and Crane measured out a stiff whiskey, filling the glass with soda.

They each took a sip, then returned to their work. The tabourette, as it had been placed, was just between them, although a little nearer to Crane than to the earl. It was less than half a minute before the earl's whole attention was absorbed in the construction of a technical phrase for the monograph, and consequently he did not see Crane's hand go to his waistcoat pocket, and then, with a stealthy motion, pause for the fraction of a second over the earl's glass.

A tiny white pellet dropped into the whiskey, and for about five seconds infinitesimal bubbles rose; then all was as before. Mechanically the earl reached out from time to time and sipped his drink until it was all gone.

Crane coolly proceeded to assist at the work, though all the time he was watching the earl like a hawk.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen, twenty, then with a polite gesture the earl hid a yawn. A few seconds after it was repeated, and following that the yawns followed in quick succession.

"M-u-s-t par—don m-e!" gasped the earl. "Unaccountably sleepy. Don't understand. A-h-e—ow!"

And that prodigious yawn was the last articulate utterance of the earl for some time to come. His head fell to one side, and then dropped to the desk at which he had been working. Half a minute later he was sleeping heavily.

Now came the most critical moment of all. Absolutely everything depended on how Crane managed the next hour or so. During the week he

had been an intimate and welcome visitor at the Hall; he had used his eyes and his ears to good purpose. He had a fair idea of the arrangement of the place. He knew how many servants the earl employed, and their separate functions in the establishment.

He knew in which wing were the earl's private apartments, and knew, moreover, that the small square tower surmounting that wing had at one time been used by the earl as a work-room, and now only served the purpose of a sort of private box-room to which the earl alone had access.

It was this seclusion of the earl's private wing, and the existence of this tower-room, which had enabled Crane to crystallise his plans before he had been visiting the Hall very long. His immediate need was to convey the earl to that quarter without being seen.

It was now just a little past eleven. If the servants followed their usual course, they should all be in bed and asleep. On one occasion Crane had accompanied the earl to his private apartments in order to inspect some very rare first editions which the earl kept there, and, taking careful note of the way at the time, he had memorised the plan of halls and the staircase.

For a few moments he stood over the unconscious earl, thinking carefully; then, with a sudden access of energy, he bent down and picked the earl up in his arms. He strode to the door with his burden, and, turning the handle with some difficulty, stepped out into the dark main hall.

He stood there for some seconds listening; then, gripping his burden more firmly, he began his perilous journey. He passed up the full length of the main hall until he came to the foot of the grand staircase. He took this a step at a time with scarcely a creak. Arriving at the top, he turned to the left.

He followed the course of the main corridor, keeping his elbow against the right-hand wall. When that ceased, he turned to the right, and continued his course, guiding himself by the left-hand wall until he came to the next turn.

He swung to the left now, and advanced with still more caution, until his probing foot encountered a step. He mounted another short staircase until he had counted eleven steps. Then he paused. This he knew should be a short hall leading into the earl's private sitting-room, and on searching about with his toe he found the open door.

He walked straight ahead now for a few steps until he came up against another door. He was compelled to bend down and turn the handle, but when he had done so he kicked the door open and found himself on the threshold of a huge, comfortably furnished sitting-room.

Crane kicked the door to after him, and, crossing to a wide, leather couch, laid his burden upon it. He crossed to the door and locked it. He next walked across to a door in the right-hand corner, and, unlocking it, drew it open. A tiny hall was revealed, and the first of a flight of steps. These steps, Crane knew, led up to the tower-room.

He went back to the unconscious figure of the earl, and took his keys from his trouser's pocket. With these in his hand he mounted the steps to the door leading into the tower-room, and after a little delay found the right key.

Like the rest of the house, the tower-room was lighted by electricity made on the estate, and just inside the door, on the left, Crane found the switch. He turned on the light, and found that the tower-room was a sort of combined bed and sitting-room, with, at the moment, a litter of books and packing-cases about it.

Silently as possible Crane shifted these aside, and opened the skylight a

little. Then, leaving the light on, he returned to the sitting-room below and searched in a wall cupboard until he had found some rough tweed garments. He removed the clothes the earl was wearing, taking care to secure every article of personal use and adornment as well. Then he clad the earl in the tweeds, and, once more lifting him up, carried him to the tower-room, laying him on the bed.

Another trip to the sitting-room, and he ascended once more with cords and a large silk handkerchief to be used as a gag. In five more minutes he had effectually bound and gagged the earl, and, turning out the light, locked the door.

He also locked the door leading into the sitting-room, and thrust the key in his pocket with the others. His next act was to enter the earl's bedroom and to pound the pillows and ruffle the bedclothes as though the bed had been slept in. Then he turned out the light, and stole softly along the hall.

He descended to the library, turned out the lights there, and reascended to his own room, with no attempt at secrecy. He disrobed leisurely, puffing a cigarette the meanwhile, and a few minutes later was in bed.

For important reasons, Crane had announced his intention of taking the early morning train, which left Grendale at six o'clock. This intention was based on that hour, because it enabled him to rise early, and because the earl was a late riser and would naturally bid his guest good-bye the night before.

It would not be light until seven, or a few minutes later, for it was late autumn, and the intervening hour of darkness between six and seven would, Crane hoped, give him time to perfect his plans. There was a tremendous risk to be run, but now that he had started on the game he was determined to play his last card, and, as far as possible, he had arranged for every detail.

At a quarter-past five he was called, and he was downstairs at half-past five. A single sleepy footman provided him with a light breakfast, and then escorted him out to the waiting dogcart. His bag had already been put in. Crane had left word at the inn the day before to send his trunk to the station, and on arriving there, at a quarter to six, he found it on the platform ready.

He thanked McNab, the groom, and, tipping him, dismissed him. He then bought a ticket for London, and had his trunk—from which, by the way, he had already taken everything of any value—labelled "Euston." He walked up and down, fuming with impatience, until the train pulled in. He jumped into a first-class carriage and drew the blinds. He waited until the train had started again, then, opening the door opposite the station, he dropped to the line, taking his bag with him.

Without the slightest hesitation he struck off through the woods, on a course previously mapped out, and by a roundabout way reached the grounds of Grendale Hall. Before going to bed he had unlatched the library window, and the day before had marked out a fairly safe approach to it.

This approach he followed, and, working swiftly, was inside the library without, so far as he knew, being seen. It was ticklish work getting along the main hall and up the staircase, and once the footsteps of an approaching servant sent his heart into his mouth. But luck was with him, and he reached the corridor on the first floor in safety.

He stole stealthily along the turning corridors until he came to the steps leading to the earl's room. It was unlikely that any servant would have been there so early, but he couldn't tell. He went up the steps softly

and gently pushed open the door. Everything was in darkness, and everything was silent. He closed the door after him, and stood listening. Then he reached for the switch and turned on the light.

Everything seemed exactly as he had left it the night before. He locked the door, and now began to work swiftly. It had been a long time since Dr. Mortimer Crane had drugged himself with that strange powder which permitted him to throw his shoulder out with a minimum of pain.

The last time he had used it had been in America, and he had no fancy for it now. But, in order to carry through his plans, it was essential, so, opening his bag, he took out a tiny phial of capsules. He swallowed two of them, then, when the drug had done its work, he set to work raising his hands high, then twisting them back of him.

Straining and twisting until the perspiration streamed off his forehead, he wrenched at his shoulder until suddenly his whole body twisted, and then, from being a straight, rather tall man, he was suddenly changed into a crouching hunchback.

For a few moments after the change Crane was so exhausted he could scarcely move, but when he had recovered his strength somewhat he hastily disrobed. He locked his own clothes and bag in the wall cupboard. He next took up a small black case which he had brought in the bag, and, opening it, took out several details of make-up.

He had studied the earl closely during the past week—his appearance, his gestures, his speech, his mannerisms, and now, with that model in mind, he stood before the glass. For nearly half an hour he worked, making each touch with the greatest care, and when he finally turned away from the glass, the likeness to the earl was uncanny. It was the earl to the life.

Crane put away the box of make-up, and scrutinised the room carefully for any signs of forgotten details. Satisfied that all was in order, he turned out the light, unlocked the door, then entered the bedroom and calmly turned into bed.

From that moment he was to be the Earl of Grendale—until he could get in his own grasp the wealth of the estate. It was a daring scheme, born of a daring brain, and if any man living could carry it through to a successful conclusion, Dr. Mortimer Crane was that man. Could he do it?

It remained to be seen.

CHAPTER III.

Sir Andrew Schofield Calls on Mr. Nelson Lee—An Invitation and Its Sequel.

“HELLO, Lee! You are just the man I wanted to see.”

Nelson Lee, who was just emerging from the Hotel Venetia, in Piccadilly, turned round sharply on hearing his name, then smiled with pleasure on seeing who had addressed him.

“Why, Sir Andrew,” he said, putting out his hand and gripping that of the red-faced, bluff-looking Scot, who had just jumped out of a taxi, “what brings you to town during the shooting season?”

“I have already told you—to see you,” replied the baronet, as they shook hands. “I have just been to Gray’s Inn Road, and the lad there told me I should probably find you at the Venetia. So I came on at once. I want to see you rather importantly, Lee, and I have several other things to attend to before I go back to Scotland to-night. Where can we talk?”

"In the lounge of the Venetia," responded Lee promptly. "Come along, Sir Andrew."

They entered the hotel, and Lee led the way to a quiet corner of the great lounge. He ordered two cups of coffee and some cigars, and while they were waiting for them they discussed the Scottish shooting. But when they had been served and the waiter had departed, Sir Andrew Schofield turned to Lee, and, lowering his voice, said:

"I had to come to London on other business, Lee, and while here I thought I would consult you about a rather intimate matter."

"Go ahead, Sir Andrew; I am listening," said Lee briefly.

"Lee, do you know anything about the Earl of Grendale?"

Lee shook his head.

"No; that is to say, nothing that everybody else doesn't know. I saw his picture in one of the illustrated papers the other day, and until then I did not know the Earl of Grendale was a hunchback."

"He has lived a very secluded life," went on the baronet. "He has made few friends, on account of his sensitiveness regarding his affliction. But I have known Grendale ever since we were boys. Our estates adjoin, you know. My father was in the field when Grendale met with his accident. Therefore I know him probably more intimately than anyone else.

"For years and years I have gone to see him, and of late years my visits have developed into a regular once-a-fortnight period, when I would go to dinner and play picquet during the evening with him. Well, I went there as usual nearly two weeks ago—in fact, it will be two weeks to-morrow, and several things about the earl worried me. He did not seem himself.

"I might explain better by saying that, beyond ancient literature, picquet was his only passion. He was one of the first players I have ever seen, and his interest in the game was unflagging. But on the last night I was there he gave but a perfunctory attention to the play.

"In fact, he made some of the most inexcusable blunders. Not that his mind seemed elsewhere, but he simply didn't seem to know the game. I rallied him about his shocking play, but it did no good. Then I thought perhaps he was not well. But he denied anything of the sort.

"Now you may say that, simply because he was off his game one night is little reason why I should make such a lot of it; but that is only the beginning of what I have to say. As I have already told you, our estates adjoin. On my place there is one stretch of land which the earl has always wanted in order to round off one corner of his place. I have always joked with him about it, but would never sell.

"However, just before his sixtieth birthday I told him that I would let him have the land at the price he had offered on countless occasions. He was vastly pleased over that, and made me promise to have the papers prepared at once and to bring them with me when I came again. I did so, and after our game I took out the papers and gave them to him.

"Lee, he had forgotten all about the matter. He didn't even seem to remember that we had ever talked about it, and the discussion of that land was a standing argument with us. That worried me, I can tell you. I passed the matter off and took the papers back, but at the time I asked myself, was his mind growing feeble? I can't understand why it should. He has lived a quiet, unworried life; his intellect has always been of the keenest, and his health is splendid, despite his affliction.

"For about twenty years we have thrashed out arguments over that bit of land, yet two weeks ago I might have been speaking of it to a total stranger, so utterly had he forgotten about it. I went home in a very

worried state of mind, and even thought of cabling to Rupert, his nephew in Uganda.

"But I decided to give it a few days, and instead of waiting for the two weeks to go by before calling on him, I went back a few days later. But I could not see him. I was told by David, the footman, that he had driven into the village—an almost unheard-of thing for him to do.

"David has been in the service of the earl ever since he was a lad, and his father and grandfather before him also served the Grendales, so David is somewhat privileged. I talked with him for a little, trying to sound him, and he acknowledged to me that lately the earl had not seemed like himself at all. But that is all I could get out of the canny fellow, and I returned home knowing as little as when I went.

"But that evening another thing came up which increased my worry. In Glendale there is a bank, which is a branch of one of the Glasgow banks of which I am a director. The manager of the Grendale bank is a splendid fellow, and he comes up to Schofield Park quite often. He came up that night.

"Of course I do all my own local business with the bank, and it also has the handling of all the earl's business. Well, Stretton, the manager, came up, as I have said, and seemed rather worried. I asked him what was the matter, and he told me that during the last few days the earl had given orders to realise on some of his very best investments. In fact, some of them he had put by for the sole use of his nephew Rupert; but he had lately ordered the sale of some of these, regardless of the fact that they were now depressed, and he would stand a loss on them.

"I found out all I could from Stretton, then I set myself to ponder. I could not understand it—I cannot understand it. The Grendales have always been a careful, shrewd race, and none more so than the present earl. Yet now he is doing things utterly foreign to what I know of him.

"I made one more attempt to see him, but while I know he was at the Hall all the time, I was told he was not at home. I told David frankly that he was lying to me, and the fellow could not help but acknowledge it. But he had his orders, and he obeyed them.

"Now, Lec, if Grendale had relatives, or if there was anyone living with him to take care of him, I wouldn't trouble myself about the affair. But it is because he is alone, and because I have known him so intimately all my life, that I feel it is my duty to take some steps to discover what is wrong.

"I have studied the matter from every point of view, and, based on my studies, I have come to the conclusion that either his mind is breaking or—well, it would be unfair to you to state the alternative. But, so serious do I consider the case, that I have determined to ask someone of judgment and discretion to try to discover what is wrong.

"I know no one more suited for the job than yourself. You are a student of the workings of the human mind and human emotions. You are thoroughly conversant with the inspiration of motive. I, as an amateur, feel that there is some hanky-panky business afoot.

"I want to know what is influencing the earl to do as he is doing. I feel I owe it to Rupert to take these measures of precaution. I thought you might be able to arrange to run up to Schofield Park with me for some shooting, and while there look into the matter. What do you say?"

Lee knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Are you certain it is not just a passing indisposition, Sir Andrew? You know, when a man has lived a solitary life for years he is apt to get

distorted ideas of things. Perhaps the Earl of Grendale is passing through some such phase?"

The baronet shook his head.

"I do not think so, Lee. If you knew him as I know him, you would realise that only a tremendous mental upheaval would cause him to do as he is doing. Why, just think, man! I suppose we have discussed that piece of land once a fortnight for twenty years or more. And now, when I take him the papers for him to sign, he doesn't remember anything about it."

"Just what did he say on that occasion?" asked Lee.

"He said that he did not feel inclined to add to his present holdings of land. Fancy saying that to me! I thought he was joking. I said:

" 'Well, Grendale, am I to understand that you have been pulling my leg for twenty years?'

"He said: 'What do you mean, Schofield?' He had never called me anything but Andy!

"I said: 'Why, man alive! how about the times you have pestered me to sell you this piece of land?'

"Then he seemed to change his tone, and said: 'Quite so—quite so; but I have changed my mind. I am not buying land. In fact, I am thinking of selling some.'

"I got angry then, for I thought he was making game of me. Why, the very idea of a Grendale selling any land is preposterous. That was about all that was said."

Lee was silent for a little, then he looked the baronet in the eye.

"You said, Sir Andrew, that on thinking the matter over, you had come to a conclusion embracing two possibilities. You mentioned one, but suppressed the other. Do you care to tell me what it is?"

The baronet toyed with his cigar for a little, then he said:

"Well, Lee, it is perhaps rather a far-fetched theory, and I had rather you went to work with nothing to colour your first ideas. However, if you wish it I will tell you."

"It might help," remarked Lee.

"Very well, then. I have thought that perhaps Grendale was under the influence of someone, but whom I haven't the remotest idea. No one goes there but myself."

"Has there been no one else there lately?"

"Yes, there has; but he would be beyond suspicion."

"Who was it?"

"A Professor Ross, of America. It seems that he is Professor of Ancient Literature in one of the American universities, and spent a week in Grendale. He got in touch with the earl in some way, and visited him frequently while he was staying in the village. From what I can make out, they spent hours discussing ancient literature, and I believe the earl enjoyed the professor's company exceedingly.

"But the professor went away in a week, and, of course, there would be no undesirable influence in that direction. Beyond him and a journalist, who photographed the earl in the garden, he has had no other visitors to my knowledge.

"Nor is he under any outside influence. I think it must be a written influence, or else, as I said, his mind is breaking. In either case, he is acting in a very strange manner, and, if this new phase develops, Heaven only knows what he may take it into his head to do."

Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"All right, Sir Andrew. When are you going back?"

"On the midnight from Euston to-night. Will you come?"

"It will be necessary for me to take my assistant with me."

"By all means. Bring your guns and get some shooting, and during your visit I shall make it possible for you to see the earl and study him."

"Very well, you can count on me," said Lee, rising. "If I am going north I shall have to attend to several things. Shall we meet you, say, at Euston to-night at a quarter to twelve?"

"That will suit me perfectly, Lee. I shall be on the watch for you."

After a few more words they parted, the baronet driving citywards to his solicitors and Lee taxi-ing through to Gray's Inn Road. There he informed Nipper of the plans afoot, and while the lad set to work to clean up the tag-end of matters in town, Lee did a little investigating on his own.

There was nothing complicated in what Lee had set out to do. He was simply discovering all he could about the Grendale family, and, incidentally, all that was known about the present earl. Nor did he confine himself to the reference books in the British Museum, as Mortimer Crane had done.

He went there, it is true, and, in addition, he studied all his own reference books on the matter. He also bought several of the monographs published by the earl, which he studied most carefully. Then he read a brief resume of the life and work of the present earl, in a volume entitled, "Personalities in Literature."

That done, he felt that he had found all he could find out until he got to Grendale. He and Nipper dined at the Venetia, having sent their luggage on to Euston. They sat in the lounge until about eleven, listening to the music and chatting. Then they drove to Gray's Inn Road, changed into tweed travelling clothes, and on to Euston, where they met Sir Andrew.

They boarded the midnight express for Glasgow, arriving in the city early the next morning. They caught the ten o'clock train for Perthshire, and, as Crane had before them, arrived in Grendale during the early afternoon.

A large station trap was there to meet them, and, piling in, they drove the two miles to Schofield Park. After the briefest of ablutions, they ate a late lunch, and then, in company with Sir Andrew, Lady Schofield, and Miss Christina, a lively and charming young girl of about sixteen, they shot over one of the near edges of the moor, bagging a few brace of grouse.

They returned to the Park in time for tea, and then Lee and Sir Andrew went up to change, for this was the evening on which the baronet was due for his fortnightly game of picquet with the earl, and he had decided to take Lee with him.

Nipper was to remain at the Park this evening with Lady Schofield and Miss Christina. Lee and the earl left the Park about half-past six. It was already dusk, and the drive to the Hall was a matter of some three miles.

It did not take long to cover it, though, for the high-stepping cob which had been hitched up was a magnificent animal. They entered the gates leading to the Hall, and reached the portico just on seven. Sir Andrew dismissed the cart, telling the man to return for them at eleven; then he rang the bell.

In answer to his ring the door was opened by David, the footman. He glanced at Sir Andrew in a curious way, then with some surprise at Lee. He hesitated noticeably, then his eyes spoke a request to the baronet.

"What is it, David?" asked Sir Andrew sharply. "Do you want to say something?"

"Yes, sir," replied the footman, with a side glance at Lee.

"Then you may say it in front of this gentleman," went on Sir Andrew.

"Come, man, what is it?"

"I—I do not think the earl expected you to-night, Sir Andrew,"

whispered the footman in a sheer funk. "Please, sir, but no orders were given about dinner."

"Nonsense, David!" said the baronet. "Go along to the earl and tell him I am here. What nonsense, after all these years. Tell him, too, that I have brought a friend with me. Then see that covers are laid for three."

Grumpily Sir Andrew pushed himself into the hall, and began to take off his coat. Lee followed, and when David had relieved them of their outer clothes he went away to inform the earl.

He returned a few moments later, saying that the earl was in the library and requested them to go there. They did so, and, opening the door, the footman stepped aside. Although it was dark outside, the lights in the library had not yet been lighted.

A bright fire was the only illumination, and, standing on the threshold of the door, Lee saw a misshapen figure lying back in a deep easy-chair. David announced them and then withdrew. The earl rose slowly, assisting himself with a stick. He held out his hand to the baronet.

"My dear Schofield," he said, in tones which Lee could not help but notice were beautifully modulated, "I owe you an apology. I had forgotten that you were coming to-night."

"Your memory is not very good after all these years," rumbled the baronet, as he took the earl's hand. "Grendale, I have brought a friend with me to-night. He does not play picquet, but he can look on, and you will find pleasure in talking your hobby with him. Permit me to introduce you to the Earl of Grendale, Nelson. Grendale, this is Mr. Nelson."

Lee thrust out his hand and took the one which the earl proffered. The earl muttered some conventional words of greeting, which Lee answered, then he bade them be seated. In the flickering light cast by the fire Lee could not make out the earl's features very distinctly, but while he and Sir Andrew chatted, Lee used his ears and eyes as well as he could.

He watched each gesture the earl made, he listened carefully to the intonation of the earl's sentences, but he could discover nothing whatsoever abnormal in either. Dinner was announced at half-past seven, for the earl dined early.

The dining-room proved to be a magnificent old apartment panelled in oak, and still retaining the heavy oak beams of another day. On the walls were a few portraits of former Grendales, and the table service was of the most massive description. But as they entered the room Lee saw that Sir Andrew was frowning. A moment later he spoke bluntly.

"What's all this, Grendale?" he said, turning to the earl. "Why this gloom? It makes the room as mournful as a deserted kirk."

Lee gathered that the heavy shades on the lights must be a new departure for the baronet to refer to them as he did. A moment later he saw that he was right.

"My eyes have been bothering me a good deal of late," responded the earl briefly. "I fancy I have been using them too much."

"Better have them seen to," grunted Sir Andrew, as he seated himself.

The meal could not by any means be called a brilliant affair. Lee—or, as it had been agreed that he should be called, "Nelson"—and Sir Andrew did most of the talking. Sir Andrew tried to interest the earl with details of his trip to London, but the earl seemed uncommunicative, and not until he had drunk a couple of glasses of wine did his tongue loosen.

Then Lee drew him into a discussion of literature, feeling that the earl would be naturally pleased at meeting a man who had read and could discuss intelligently the monographs which he had written.

"Have you read my monographs on Boccaccio?" asked the earl suddenly.

"Yes, my lord," answered Lee.

"Have you noticed anything wrong in it?" went on the earl, signing to David to pour him another glass of wine.

Lee puckered his brows.

"I do not think so," he replied.

"Ah, you should have—you should have!" exclaimed the earl sharply. "You have read it carelessly. If you will take the trouble to read it again, you will find on page six, paragraph two, that there is a very serious mistake. It deals with the time when Boccaccio was inclined towards monkhood.

"In my monograph I stated that it was only after he had received a superstitious warning that his life was in danger that he turned to monkhood. But that is wrong. It has been proven so to me. Boccaccio turned to monkhood before he received that warning. I have recalled all the editions I can find of that monograph, and I am writing a new one on the subject."

Lee was nettled. To begin with, the earl had spoken in a manner verging on rudeness, and at the same time left such an opening for a countershaft that Lee could not resist taking it.

"No doubt it was careless of me, as you say," he said coolly; "but then, you see, my lord, it is hardly possible that I, a layman, so to speak, should discover such a mistake when you yourself, the author of the monograph, believed it to be correct when you wrote it."

There was no answer forthcoming for the moment, since the earl was busy having his glass refilled. Lee caught a glance of amazement in the baronet's eyes just before the earl looked up. Though he had now had four glasses of wine, and though it had loosened his tongue, it had not blurred his wits. He had livened up considerably, and during the next ten minutes he talked in a manner which Lee found most interesting.

He acknowledged Lee's countershaft gracefully, yet all the time he was talking Lee could not help but fancy that he was talking with his lips, and not with his mind, if the phrase can be used.

They sat until nine over the port and coffee, then Sir Andrew suggested a game of picquet.

"I hope, Grendale, that you will play better to-night," he said, as he rose. "At any rate, I shall give you every opportunity to take your revenge."

The earl uttered some commonplace phrase, and led the way to the library, where David had already set out the table and the cards. The earl and the baronet seated themselves on opposite sides of the table and cut for deal. It fell to Sir Andrew, and, after seeing that the cards below the seven had been taken from the pack, he dealt the hands.

Lee had dropped into an easy-chair drawn up close to the table, and, lighting a cigar, set himself to watch. For the first ten minutes he was interested, but during the next half hour his interest flagged considerably, and after an hour's play it was torture to watch the game, for never in his life had he seen a more shocking exhibition of play than that made by the earl.

He himself realised that he was playing a grotesque game, for, as the time passed, he grew angrier and angrier, and finally, when it had become a perfect farce, he cast the cards down in a rage and refused to go on. Sir Andrew had through it all managed to refrain from comment on his

opponent's play, but as the earl threw the hands down he lit a cigar, and, leaning across the table, said evenly:

"Grendale, what is the matter with you? You and I have known each other since we were boys together. We have played picquet together for nearly a quarter of a century. If there is any choice between us, you have always been the better player. Yet to-night, and two weeks ago, you play the game like a novice. What has got into you, man? I am hanged if I can understand you!"

Only a very intimate and very privileged friend of the earl's would have dared to speak to him as Sir Andrew spoke, but an intimacy of half a century gives one privileges. But the earl seemed indisposed for argument. He pushed his chair back until his face was in the shadow, then he waved his hand deprecatingly.

"I am sorry, Schofield," he said quietly. "I have played badly, I know. Another time I shall do better."

"Schofield—Schofield!" snorted the baronet. "Why 'Schofield' from you. For fifty years you have called me Andy, and now it is Schofield. I don't understand you, man, and——" But here the baronet broke off, as there came a knock at the door, and David entered to announce that the trap had come for Sir Andrew and Lee.

Sir Andrew bade the earl good-night curtly, for it was plain that he was deeply offended. As Lee shook hands the earl said:

"I trust I shall see something of you, Mr. Nelson, before you return to town."

Lee replied conventionally, and a few minutes later, wrapped up in their cloaks, they were speeding down the drive to the main road. Not until they were outside the gates did the baronet speak.

"Lee, I can't understand it," he said. "I lost my temper with him to-night, which, I suppose, was unwise. Did you ever see such a miserable exhibition as he made at that game? It was shocking. Lee, there is something wrong, and I can't figure out what it is. I'll tell you something else that struck me as queer. Did you notice how freely he drank at dinner?"

"Yes, Sir Andrew, I did notice it."

"Well, that, too, is unlike him. In all the years I have known him I have never known him to take more than one glass of wine at dinner, and not always that. Why, to-night, man, he drank like a toper. Tell me, Lee, did you notice anything peculiar about his manner or speech?"

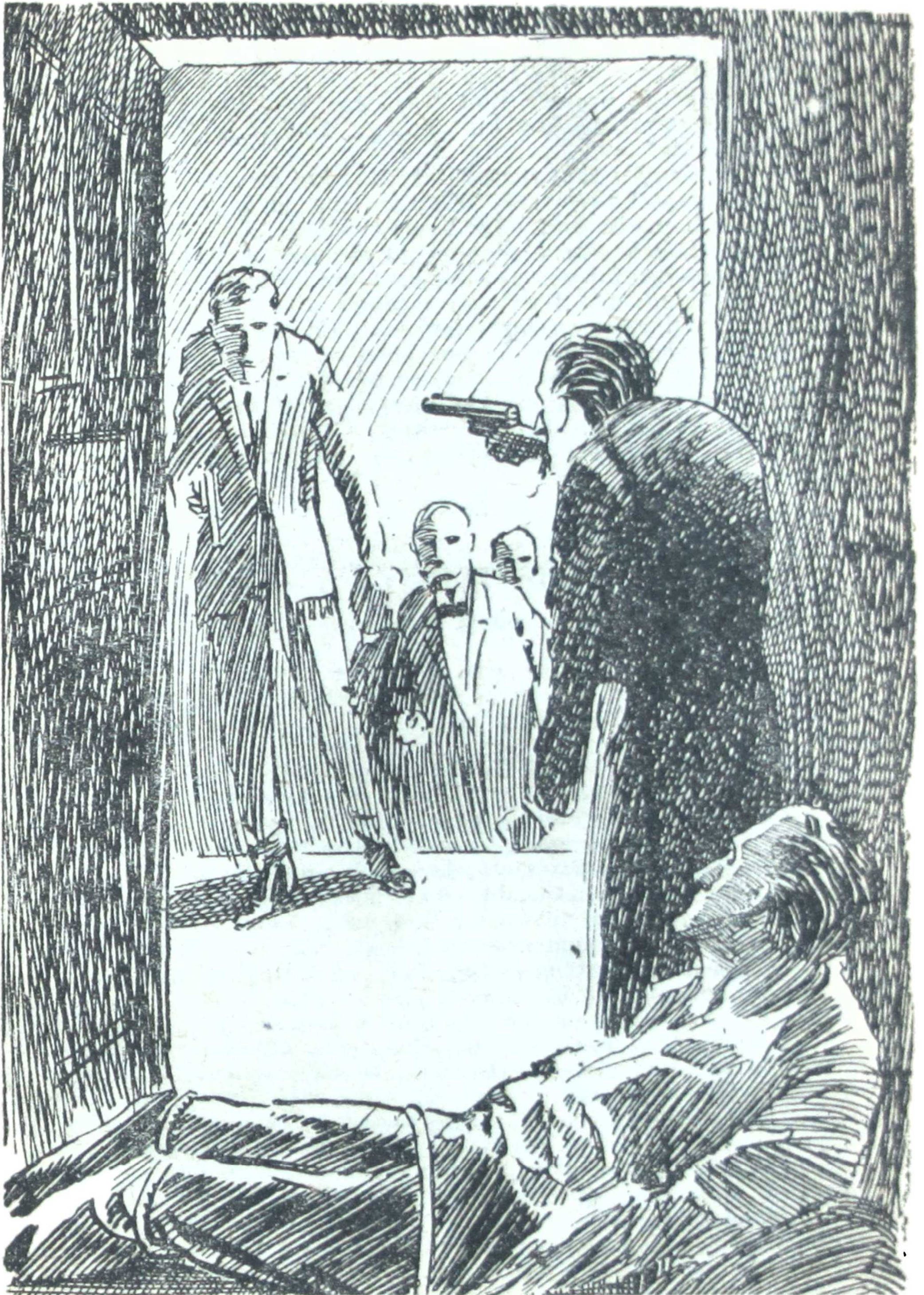
"I must confess that I did not," replied Lee. "But it is too soon yet for me to pass an opinion. He has invited me to go to see him. While he did not set a day, I shall take the bull by the horns and go to-morrow afternoon. Perhaps then I shall be wiser than I am now."

"A good idea, Lee," rejoined the baronet. "I shall send you over in the trap."

They dropped into silence then, and no more was said until they reached the Park.

Back in Grendale Hall the "earl" had closed and locked the library door. His nightcap had been brought in, but it still sat on the tabourette untouched. The earl was walking up and down the room with the queer shuffle which was a part of his deformity, his hands raised up and clenched, his face distorted with hate and passion.

"What does it mean? What does it mean?" he was muttering over and over again. "Mr. Nelson! Faugh! What a miserable attempt to hide



The door was jerked wide open, and a hunchback, strangely like the Earl of Grendale, stood covering the staircase with a heavy automatic.—(See page 38.)

his identity! Nelson Lee here, and a guest of Schofield! Curse the man, Schofield! He has been a thorn in my side ever since I came here.

"How was I to know that the fool upstairs played picquet once a fortnight with him? How was I to know that Schofield had been coming here regularly for years and years? Had I known that, I might have taken some measures to guard against his coming. But it is too late now. I wonder if he suspects?"

"Is Nelson Lee here for that reason? Or is it but an accident? I'll swear Schofield doesn't suspect the truth. He never would have acted as he did to-night had that been the case. Yet Lee is visiting him. Why?"

"My heavens! I took over a complicated game when I tackled this, and all the time I thought I had only the servants to fool. But I have set my hand to this thing, and I will go through with it.

"To-morrow I will have an interview with the earl, and if he is wise he will be more amenable than he has been up to now. If not, then I shall know how to deal with him. And as for Nelson Lee, I swear that if he is up here to stand between me and success, as he has done in the past, then let him look to his guard. If necessary, I shall kill him."

With that the hunchback unlocked the door, and, turning off the light, went up to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

An Interview and Its Result—Bold Measures—The Waiting Guest.

AS Sir Andrew Schofield had told Lee, even the servants at the Hall had of late noticed certain peculiarities in their master. Not only in his manner of speaking to them, but in his personal habits as well.

For one thing, the earl had always been satisfied with a very light breakfast, which had been served in his own private sitting-room. Of late, however, he had seemed to become possessed of a prodigious appetite, for instead of the light morning meal, he now had served a breakfast sufficient for two men, and, strangely enough, he ate it all.

Another thing. David, who acted as his master's own personal servant, had always been accustomed to wake his lordship, then, while his lordship bathed and shaved, to arrange his breakfast. The earl would seat himself at the table in the sitting-room, and, while toying with the food, read the papers and any letters there might be.

In the meantime, David would lay out his master's clothes for the day, and generally busy himself round the room. During this time, too, the earl would make remarks to the man, which would indicate what he proposed doing that day. But now all that was changed.

David had instructions to bring the breakfast—a most ample one—to the sitting-room, and leave it on the table. Then he was to retire, and not come back until his master rang for him. Once—absent-mindedly—David had presented himself before the earl rang, and, to his astonishment, he had found the door locked.

And, on the morning after the visit of Sir Andrew and Lee, the "earl" followed his usual procedure since he had put the new rule into effect. At eight o'clock David brought the breakfast in, and laid it out on the table. Then he called his master, and retired.

The "earl" rose, and, entering the sitting-room, locked the door. Then, taking the plate, he placed a small portion of bacon and eggs on it, after

which he poured out a cup of coffee. That done, he unlocked the door opening to the stairs leading to the tower room, and, carrying the food up, set it on the topmost step.

He next unlocked the door leading into the tower room, carried in the food, and closed the door after him. On the bed lay a figure asleep. It was the Earl of Grendale.

Crane crossed to the bed and shook him. The earl was bound, but after the second day he had pledged his word of honour that if Crane would remove the gag he would not cry out, and Crane, knowing he would respect his word of honour, had consented.

On this morning in question the earl, looking dishevelled and unshaven, glared at his captor with the same unquenchable spirit that had marked the whole of his captivity.

"Good morning, gaoler," he said briefly. "How much longer is this farce going to continue?"

"Just as long as necessary," replied Crane savagely. "But I have come to have a talk with you this morning, and, if you wish, you can shorten it materially. If you agree to my proposals, then you will be free in a few days at the outside. If not, well, then—" and Crane shrugged.

He released the earl's hands while he ate, and then, when he was finished, Crane proceeded:

"Look here, I am going to talk, and you would do well to listen. I have told you frankly why I have taken you prisoner, and why I am impersonating you."

"And you must be doing it mighty well to fool the servants," muttered the earl. "But go on."

"I have also told you that I have staked everything on this throw, and that I do not propose letting go until I have cashed in. Now, when I first started, I was determined to make a clean sweep of it all. But since then I have been thinking things over, and I am willing to compromise."

"Indeed!" sneered the earl. "I judge, then, that you are beginning to see the weak spots in the position you have taken up."

"Not at all," said Crane hastily. "I have impersonated you successfully. Not a soul suspects. But I want to cash on and get away. And, to that end, I wish to make you a proposition.

"What is it?"

"If you will give me a written order on your bank, instructing it to dispose of fifty thousand pounds' worth of bonds, and to turn the cash over to you, then I shall clear out, and, twenty-four hours after I am gone, you will be released. I should, of course, demand your word of honour that you would take no measures to track me. If you agree to that, then you can be free in a day or two. If you refuse, well, then I can forge your name just the same, and achieve my purpose—with more difficulty, it is true; but I shall achieve it just the same."

The earl regarded Crane with contempt.

"I suppose you flatter yourself you are generous," he said. "Well, I can tell you that, no matter what you do to me, will I give you the order you wish. Your offer is only impelled by the discovery of a weakness in your position, and you are trying to get out from under while you think it is safe."

"I shall not give you the order on the bank, nor will I pass my word of honour that I shall not track you down as soon as I am free. For the present you hold the winning cards, but soon—very soon—I trust you will stumble, and then, my bold adventurer, you will fall with a crash. Then

will my opportunity come, and, believe me, when it does, I shall be as merciless to you as you have been to me. That is my answer, and if you knew anything of the Grendales you would know that it is final."

Crane rose with a passion-distorted face.

"All right," he said thickly. "You have given me your final word. Now listen to mine. I shall follow up my hand, and play things to a finish. If I win then I shall realise on the profits. But if I lose you will not benefit. I swear to you that, if necessary, I shall put you where you can do me no harm."

"If that is a threat of death, then you do not frighten me," said the earl coolly. "I have lived a long life and a contented one. I am ready when my time comes, and I fear not that I shall be avenged."

Crane departed abruptly. He knew that nothing would cause the earl to change his mind, and yet the time had not come for him to take extreme measures. He might hold the earl in his power, but he could not break that proud spirit. He returned once more to the sitting-room, and, eating a hasty breakfast, rang for David.

While David cleared away in the sitting-room, Crane dressed himself in the garments laid out by the man, and then descended to the library. Giving orders that he was not to be disturbed until he rang, he locked the library door, and crossed to the big safe which stood in the corner.

Crane had already investigated the contents of that safe, and knew well enough what it contained. One item he had found on his first search had proved of no little value to him. This was a thousand pounds in notes, which had served for the running expenses of the place, and had enabled him to get along without being compelled to forge the earl's name to a cheque.

He had practised the earl's signature on every possible occasion, however, and the fact that the written order he had handed in at the local bank—the order in which he had given instructions to sell some ten thousand pounds' worth of securities—had been accepted without question was proof that he was able to write the earl's signature with a fair degree of skill.

Of course he had himself given that order in at the bank, and the manager had firmly believed it was the earl himself. Therefore it was unlikely that more than a very superficial glance would be given to the signature. But now that he had determined on taking another step, and a bigger one, Crane knew there must be no slip in the work.

The first thing to do was to pitch on the securities which would reach the amount he desired, and also be of a class which would find a ready market. Then to put through the forged order.

In the safe he had some days before come upon a list of securities held by the earl, and this was what he now sought. The list was in an envelope in a small drawer in the upper part of the safe, and, unlocking the drawer with one of the keys on the bunch he had taken from the earl, Crane took out the envelope.

He walked across to the desk, and drew out the enclosed sheet. Spreading it out before him, he studied the list with extreme care. It began with several lots of Consols, then came securities of different foreign governments, and, following that, mortgage bonds, railway bonds, American and Canadian railway securities, bank shares, and a few very choice industrials.

The whole list, with the exception of a few of the railway shares and some of the industrials, had a ready market; but that was not the only thing to consider. To get any information about them from the earl himself Crane knew was hopeless. He knew when he was beaten, and he

knew full well that he might torture the earl to the last extreme, but he would not make him speak.

Therefore he must use his own judgment. There would naturally be a ready market for Consols, but, on the other hand, it was always possible that some of the shares must be trust shares, and in that case the earl would never dream of selling them—always supposing that he wished to get rid of any shares at all. For that reason Crane passed over the Consols and the debentures of foreign governments.

He paused for some little time over the list of mortgage bonds, but finally decided to pass them, and eventually fixed on some of the bank shares and railroad bonds. He made out a list of bank shares, which totalled some thirty thousand pounds, and made the balance up to fifty thousand with railroad bonds and one well-known industrial.

Having decided on that, the next thing to do was to compose his order to the bank. He had ascertained by now that all the earl's securities were at the local bank, which did all the earl's business. Taking a sheet of the earl's private monogram paper, Crane made a rough draft of the letter which he would write. When he had altered it here and there, he drew out a fresh sheet, and, taking several of the earl's manuscripts as a model, he set to work.

From the moment when he wrote in the date until he had written the last word in that letter, Mortimer Crane did not make a single character without a close study of a like character in several parts of the manuscript. It was close work and tedious, and once, when the letter was about half written, he had to destroy the whole effort.

But he persevered, and at the end of two hours he raised his head with a sigh of relief. He had completed the letter, and, after another hour spent in trying to pick out even a single fault in it, he decided that it would do. It ran as follows:

"The Manager,

"The Northern Bank, Grendale.

"Sir,—Following you will find a list of bonds and shares which I desire sold."

Then followed the list Crane had decided on.

Continuing, the letter said:

"You will please instruct your brokers to dispose of this list and the number of each indicated at the open market. When you have received the proceeds you will kindly arrange to hand the actual cash over to me personally.

"Your prompt attention to this matter will oblige.

"Faithfully yours,

"GRENDALE."

It was lunch-time before Crane had finished, and, thrusting the envelope in his pocket, he unlocked the door and repaired to the dining-room. After lunch he gave orders for McNab to bring the cart round, and, donning a heavy overcoat and soft hat, he climbed into the trap.

"Drive to the bank," he ordered curtly.

McNab touched the horse with the whip, and away they went down the drive at top speed. It took only a few minutes to cover the mile or so to the village, and there the trap drew up in front of the bank. To the clerk who came to the door the "earl" said:

"Present my compliments to Mr. Stretton, and ask him to attend me here."

The clerk disappeared, and a moment later Stretton, the manager, a

young, keen-looking man, came out. He crossed the footpath to the trap and bowed.

"What can I do for your lordship?" he asked, with just that deference which should be used to one of the bank's best customers and to an earl as well.

"I have written an order," replied the "earl," drawing out the letter. "I wish Stretton, you would attend to this at once. I wish to make some changes in my investments."

"Certainly, your lordship," replied the manager. "You can depend that it will have my best attention."

"Thank you! Please notify me as soon as you have put the matter through."

With a curt nod the "earl" ordered McNab to drive back to the Hall. But on his arrival there the "earl" was due for a shock. David met him in the hall and announced that "Mr. Nelson had called, and had been shown into the library, where he was now waiting."

CHAPTER V.

An Unwelcome Visitor—Fencing—A Startling Denouement.

DAVID'S message came to Crane as a good deal of a shock. The previous night, when he had invited Lee to come and see him, he had deliberately made it vague, thinking that until he set a definite day and hour Lee would not come. Now he was in the library waiting.

Was it the proof Crane had been seeking? Was Lee there to spy on him? Was there a definite suspicion against him, or was Lee just visiting Sir Andrew Schofield incog. and was really interested in discussing ancient literature with the Earl of Grendale.

Whatever the reason of his call, Crane could not get out of seeing him. Nor did he make the mistake of revealing his chagrin in front of his manservant. He nodded curtly, and when he had handed his hat and coat to David he walked along to the library. For the barest fraction of a second his hand hesitated before turning the handle, then he gathered himself together and entered the room.

Lee was sitting in one of the big easy-chairs in front of the fire, glancing at a book. He put the book down and got up as the "earl" entered and shook hands.

"I hope your lordship does not mind my coming so soon again," said Lee suavely, "but I was greatly interested in discussing Boccaccio with your lordship, and since last night I have once more read your monograph on the subject."

"Indeed," said the "earl," seating himself. "And what conclusion did you come to, Mr. Nelson?"

"In the absence of proper works of reference I could not determine," replied Lee. "But, of course, if your lordship has investigated the matter, then I must accept the correction. Truth to tell, I have not studied Boccaccio much since I was in Italy. It would be interesting to know how your lordship discovered the mistake."

"Have you ever heard of Professor Halkett Ross?" asked Crane, who had seated himself opposite Lee and was determined to play his part.

Lee nodded.

"Yes, I have heard of him," he said. "His name is very well known among the students of ancient literature."

"Professor Halkett Ross was here a short time ago," continued the "earl," "and had apparently studied my monographs very closely. He it was who argued that in the monograph on Boccaccio I had made a mistake, and after some few days he produced sufficient proof to convince me of my error. That is how I discovered it, Mr. Nelson."

All the time the "earl" had been speaking Lee was studying him closely. It was, of course, impossible for Lee to make a comparative study of the other, for it must be remembered he had never seen the real earl in the flesh. Yet if Sir Andrew Schofield saw nothing in the appearance of the "earl" to create suspicion—and he had known the Earl of Grendale from boyhood—then it was hardly likely that Lee would discover anything having only a newspaper photograph to go on.

Still, in a certain nervous twitching of the "earl's" hands, in a dogmatic way he had of speaking, in several insignificant but nevertheless distinct ways there was something familiar about the man to Lee. He reminded Lee of someone, and to save his life Lee could not remember whom.

On the other hand, while he talked so glibly of ancient literature Crane was watching Lee like a hawk. He was still asking himself why Nelson Lee was there. If Lee was simply visiting Sir Andrew Schofield incog., and his visit to the Earl of Grendale was only the desire to discuss literature, then Crane was willing that things should remain on that basis.

But, on the other hand, if Lee was there because there was a definite suspicion he realised that he would be compelled to take radical measures to secure his position. His mind was a turmoil. Never before had Mortimer Crane played quite such a big or such a desperate game as now.

He had come back to Britain, where he was surrounded by danger. He had taken the bull by the horns and had thrown his whole future into the scale. It was no bagatelle, this forcible imprisoning of an earl and the assumption of his identity. If any man was capable of carrying it through, Crane was that man, and when it had simply been a case of fooling the servants in the Hall he had been on firm ground. That had not been difficult.

But it was when an outside element had intruded, in the form of Sir Andrew Schofield and, later, of Nelson Lee, that Crane saw how perilous was the way he trod. No amount of study of the earl and his habits, of the Hall and the arrangements there, could have told him that for over twenty years Sir Andrew Schofield had been in the habit of coming there fortnightly for a game of picquet.

It was only after the actual assumption of the position of the earl and the plunge into the daily routine of the place that such knowledge would arise. On the first night when David had entered the library, and with a word of apology began to lay out the table for picquet, Crane saw something on which he had not reckoned was about to eventuate.

In the most guarded manner he had discovered that it was customary for Sir Andrew Schofield to come to the Hall once a fortnight. For a little while Crane had been in a panic. From the imprisoned earl he had heard nothing of this; in fact, the earl had proved most stubborn, and though Crane had more than once threatened him with torture he knew in his heart that nothing he could do would make the earl speak.

He might hold his body prisoner, but he could not control the Grendale will. Crane knew absolutely nothing of the game of picquet. When David had withdrawn, and before the baronet arrived that first night, he had sought feverishly in the bookcase for a book, and had come upon one dealing with the game.

He had studied it as well as possible in the short time at his disposal, but how badly he played was proved by what the baronet had told Lee in London. Crane knew he had played badly.

Moreover, he did not know how to address Schofield. He had risked the usage of the baronet's last name, not knowing exactly how intimate he and the earl were, and there he had made another mistake. The earl had never called the baronet anything else but Andy. Crane called him Schofield—a suspicious thing in itself, though, to be sure, Sir Andrew never dreamed the truth.

Crane was aware of the baronet's visit to town, and he knew that Lee had returned with Sir Andrew. Now, the great question which was racking him was an obvious one. If Lee had been brought back by Sir Andrew in order to spy upon him—Crane—then it followed that the baronet must be suspicious in some way. Suspicious of what? And how? That was what Crane could not figure out.

If Schofield guessed for a single moment that the earl was being impersonated, then he was blunt enough to come right out with an accusation. But he had not done so, and from the way in which he acted Crane was certain the baronet did not suspect the truth. But he suspected something, and there Crane was at a loss.

These thoughts had been torturing his mind for some time now, and all the time he was talking so glibly with Lee he was thinking of other things. Lee, on his part, was there to draw the earl out—to study him and to endeavour to discover if there was some outside influence at work on his life. That was why Lee had led the conversation round to Professor Ross; yet he could see nothing suspicious in the brief visit of the professor to Grendale and his friendship with the earl.

The truth was Sir Andrew had started Lee on the wrong trail. He did not suspect that the "earl" was not the earl. He only suspected that his mind might be failing, or that some sinister influence had come into the life of his old friend.

Insensibly the conversation shifted from the discussion of literature to foreign travel. It was the subject of Boccaccio which got them talking about Italy. Lee spoke of Rome and Naples, and the "earl" favoured him with his opinions on Venice.

It was only a step from that to speaking of Spain and Portugal, and in discussing the different countries under consideration the "earl" spoke with knowledge and appreciation of them.

Lee deliberately led the talk wider and wider afield, until they had argued the merits of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and even the northern coast of Africa.

It was nearly two hours later that Lee begged to be excused from remaining to tea, and, rising, prepared to take his leave.

The trap in which he had driven over was to return for him at half-past four, and it was now at the door. Lee took leave of the "earl" in the library, then climbed into the trap. On the way back to Schofield Park he was in a very thoughtful mood.

Something of the most important nature had arisen during his talk with the "earl," and he was anxious to get back and question Sir Andrew on the subject. But on entering the great hall at the Park he found Sir Andrew in a state of obvious excitement, and, without even giving Lee time to throw off his coat, he dragged him into the study.

"Well," he inquired quickly, "what do you think now?"

Lee smiled a little at the baronet's impatience.

"There is one point of some importance which I wish to discuss with you, Sir Andrew, but——"

"All right. But I have something to tell you, Lee. I have just been in the village, and, while there, dropped into the bank. Stretton, the manager, told me that the earl had called at the bank just after lunch and had given him a written order to dispose of something like fifty thousand pounds' worth of bonds and shares.

"Listen, Lee! I asked Stretton to let me see the list. He gave me the earl's order. It was all correct, right enough, but, Lee, some of the shares and bonds which he has ordered to be sold he is in reality holding in trust for Rupert Grant, his nephew. He has no moral right to dispose of them, although, of course, he has a legal right.

"Fifty thousand pounds! And it is only a few days since he gave orders to sell ten thousand pounds' worth of stuff. The funny part is he has requested Stretton to hand over to him the proceeds in cash. Now, what do you make of that?"

Lee took out his cigarette-case and selected a cigarette.

"Just a moment, Sir Andrew," he said, as he lit it. "This puts rather a different face on matters as I see them. Before I give you my opinion on what you have told me, I should like to ask you one or two questions."

"Fire away, Lee," responded the baronet.

"When you came to London and asked me to come up here with you I took the opportunity of finding out all I could about the Grendales and particularly about the present earl. I looked him up in the different books of reference, and incidentally read a rather comprehensive article in a book dealing with personalities in literature. In this latter book I read that while he was interested in travel the present Earl of Grendale, owing to his affliction, had never been out of the British Isles. Can you tell me if that is correct?"

The baronet nodded, a look of surprise on his face.

"That is quite true," he said. "I know it for a fact. He has only been to London once in the last twenty-five years."

"You are absolutely sure of that—beyond the shadow of a doubt?"

"Of course," rejoined the baronet.

"In that case," said Lee slowly, "I can pass an opinion on what you have told me. Either—either the orders which Stretton, the manager of the local bank, has received from the Earl of Grendale to dispose of bonds and shares are rank forgeries, and the man who poses as the Earl of Grendale is not the earl at all, or else the Earl of Grendale is one of the most accomplished liars I have ever met!"

CHAPTER VI.

Lee Eluc'dates—Bold Measures—The Raid—The Fight—A Great Surprise—Finis.

"WHAT do you mean, Lee?" The baronet was gazing at Lee as though the criminologist had suddenly taken leave of his senses. "What do you mean?" he repeated sharply.

Lee puffed nonchalantly at his cigarette.

"Exactly what I say, Sir Andrew," he replied. "Either those orders are a forgery, and the man at Grendale Hall is not the earl, or else, as I said, he is a most accomplished liar!"

"I do not understand you, Lee."

"I will elucidate. Let us go back a little. Do you recall the night, about two weeks ago, when you went to Grendale Hall for your usual game of picquet?"

"Yes."

"It was then, I think, that the earl first showed signs of a change?"

"Yes."

"This change was so pronounced that it worried you?"

"Yes."

"You gave the matter some thought, and then, hearing from the bank that he had given orders to dispose of some shares, it added to your worry?"

"Yes."

"More than that, the thing which struck you as most remarkable of all was his apparent forgetting about a piece of land which you and he had discussed for over twenty years?"

"Yes."

"In fact, it all struck you as so queer that you decided to have another opinion on the matter, and when in town you sought me out?"

"Yes, that is so."

"But previous to that night you noticed not a single thing out of the ordinary?"

"Not a thing. He was exactly the same as he had always been. I was with him on his birthday, and I thought to myself how magnificently he was carrying himself into later middle age, considering the affliction which had burdened him all his life."

"Quite so. And now another thing. Did he ever in your life call you Schofield?"

"Never until two weeks ago. I was dumbfounded. I had always been Andy to him."

"Very well, Sir Andrew. Let us consider last evening. You say that he played a terrible game of picquet. I myself know that, because I have never seen a worse exhibition in my life. But I studied his play very closely, and, Sir Andrew, I came to the conclusion that the man who was your opponent last night was not off his game, but that he was attempting to play a game which was absolutely new to him."

"By thunder! Lee, that is exactly the impression I got," exclaimed the baronet. "But how could it be? He and I have played picquet together for years."

"You and the Earl of Grendale have played it together for years," corrected Lee.

"But he is the earl—he must be the earl," protested Sir Andrew. "You surely don't mean to say he isn't?"

"I am not willing to pin myself down to any definite statement yet," said Lee, "but I am prepared to stick to the two possibilities I mentioned. Now to come to the point where I got definitely suspicious. This afternoon, while talking with him, I drew the conversation round to the subject of travel. We spoke of Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and the northern coast of Africa, and the earl not only said that he had visited every one of those countries, but he spoke of them in a way which would have been quite impossible had he never been there. What do you think of that?"

The baronet was silent with amazement.

"Do you mean that, Lee?" he asked, after a little

"I do," rejoined Lee curtly.

Sir Andrew shook his head.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "I know that Grendale has never been abroad. I tell you, man, I know it for a fact. I have lived here all my life, and if he had been abroad for even a week I should have known all about it. He would have discussed the preparations, and when he returned he would have discussed the actual journey with me.

"But a hundred times I have heard him regret that, owing to his affliction, he could not bring himself to go abroad amongst strangers, much as he desired to do so. So you can take it from me, Lee, that point is settled. And I can tell you something else. Grendale would not say he had been there if he hadn't. He is a man of the strictest sense of honour and truthfulness. He is no liar."

"In that case," said Lee, "I must then bring my statements down to one—the man who is at Grendale Hall is not the Earl of Grendale."

"But how do you mean, Lee?" cried the baronet. "If Grendale were like other men, then I could suspect some sort of impersonation was possible. But Grendale is a hunchback. I have known him all my life. It would be impossible for any man to fool me; and, besides, even if there was a criminal with the nerve to impersonate him and the cleverness to carry it out, the chances of that criminal being a hunchback are about ten million to nothing."

Lee nodded slowly.

"I quite see your point, Sir Andrew," he said; "but—good heavens!"

Lee broke off sharply, and stood gazing into space with a look in his eyes which one sees in the eyes of a sleepwalker.

"What is it, Lee? What is the trouble?" exclaimed the baronet, taking Lee's arm, and shaking him. "What is wrong with you, man?"

Lee paid no attention to the words of the other. He was by no means in a trance, but such a startling thought had come to him, so utterly had his mind been hurled back into the mazes of the past, that he was deaf to all other influences.

Mechanically he laid a restraining hand on the baronet's arm, and for fully five minutes they stood thus, Lee utterly absorbed in his thoughts, and Sir Andrew watching him closely. At last Lee gave himself a shake, and turned to his friend.

"Sir Andrew," he said, "in looking upon me, you look upon a benighted ass."

"For Heaven's sake, Lec, have you suddenly taken leave of your senses?" cried the baronet.

Lee smiled.

"No," he said, "I have regained them, and, incidentally, I think, Sir Andrew, that I have found the explanation of the mystery at Grendale Hall. But please do not ask me to explain until after tea. I want to readjust my present knowledge of the case as I now see it."

Sir Andrew, seeing that Lee had stumbled on something of an important nature, said no more, but led the way back into the hall, where he waited until the man took Lee's coat and hat. Then they went into tea, where Lady Schofield, Miss Christina, and Nipper were awaiting them.

They said nothing of the matter in hand during tea, but discussed the shooting, and listened to the verbal rag which Nipper and Miss Christina were carrying on. In the few hours they had been at the Park, Nipper and the girl had become fast friends, and already they had reached that stage which young people on becoming intimate regard as a bounden duty of youth—ragging.

After tea Lee suggested that Nipper go into the garden with him, and when he and the lad were alone he said:

"Nipper, you know, of course, why we came up here?"

"Yes, sir, and I have been wondering how things are going," replied the lad. "How is the earl, guv'nor? Is it as Sir Andrew thinks—a mental breakdown?"

"No, my lad. It is, in a way, something far more serious. Listen, Nipper. You know, of course, that the earl is a hunchback?"

"Of course, sir."

"A hunchback is not very often met with in life, my lad."

"No, sir."

"I fancy," proceeded Lee, "that if one were to count over on one's fingers the hunchbacks one knows, the number would be very small."

"I fancy it would, sir."

"For instance," went on Lee carelessly, "how many could you yourself count, Nipper?"

Nipper wrinkled his brows.

"Why, sir, now that you put it to me, I am blest if I can think of one at all. Oh, hold on though, guv'nor! There is the hunchback paper boy at the corner of Aldersgate Street. That is one. Now let me see! I must know more than that. Oh, yes! Then there is the hunchback who always goes to the races, and gets sixpence a time for letting the superstitious racegoers touch his hump for luck. That is two.

"Then there is a hunchback who always hangs about the Grand Central Station in New York. That makes three. Scott, guv'nor, I know more than I thought. There is a hunchback, too, in Hong Kong, whom I have often seen near the docks, and there is another one in Melbourne. I shouldn't have thought I knew so many. It just shows how one can be mistaken."

"Quite so, my lad," smiled Lee. "You have counted five, I think. Just rack your brains, and see if you can't remember some more."

Nipper glanced at his master sharply. At first he thought Lee had brought up the subject simply to pass the time, but now he knew differently. He was sufficiently well enough acquainted with his master's idiosyncrasies to know that underneath his apparently trivial questions there was some definite purpose.

What it might be Nipper could not yet guess. But he knew that, for some reason or other, Lee wished him to try hard to remember all the hunchbacks he had ever come across, or, at least, as many of them as possible, so while they paced up and down a garden path Nipper racked his brains. By dint of much thinking he recollected two more—one a hunchback in Paris, and another in Montreal. He named them to Lee, and his master nodded encouragingly.

"Try again," he said. "Have you no recollection of any in cases of the past?"

Again Nipper tried, then suddenly he paused in the path, and gazed up at Lee quizzically.

"You wouldn't include Dr. Mortimer Crane in the category of hunchbacks, would you, guv'nor?"

Lee smiled with satisfaction.

"Good boy," he said. "I was wondering if you would hit it. I meant just Crane, and no other."

"But why, sir? How does he enter into the matter?"

"Nipper, you and I have seen more of the criminal life of Dr. Mortimer Crane than probably anyone else. Do you recall the case of the Stuyvesant Roper diamonds? Do you recollect how Crane, who was then at the crest of popularity and wealth in his Harley Street life, was eventually proven to

be the thief? Do you remember how, when we had a cordon drawn in White-chapel, he escaped through it as a hunchback?

"For a long time I could not conceive why this hunchback was always mixed up in the cases where suspicion pointed to Crane. But I eventually ferreted it out. I made a close investigation into Crane's life, and more particularly the time when he was a medical student.

"While I was unable to get any comprehensive particulars about him, I discovered a few things of interest, and I think—at least, I have a vague idea how he managed to create so many different distinct personalities, of which the hunchback was one. It was that faculty, too, which made him so elusive. But now I think, my lad, that we have run Dr. Mortimer Crane to earth. If we play our cards properly, then I feel sure we ought to win out."

"But what do you mean, sir?" asked Nipper, in amazement. "Has Crane anything to do with the Earl of Grendale?"

"Crane is the Earl of Grendale—or, at least, he is posing as the Earl of Grendale," responded Lee, in low tones. "I will stake my professional reputation on that, Nipper. And to-night we shall prove whether I am right or wrong."

Lee and Nipper returned to the house then, and a few minutes later Sir Andrew, Lee, and the lad were gathered in the baronet's study holding a council of war.

Sir Andrew, while recognising Lee's ability and respecting the long line of successes which the great criminologist had behind him, was at the same time somewhat sceptical as to the present opinion advanced by Lee. Lee, seeing this, and being determined that there should be no doubters that night, faced the baronet, and said quietly:

"Sir Andrew, I am first going to postulate a theory, and then I am going to align my arguments to convince you that I am right. Firstly, as to the theory. I say that the man living at Grendale Hall as the Earl of Grendale is not the earl, but another posing as the earl. Furthermore, I am prepared to state it as my firm conviction that the written orders received by the manager of the local bank here, purporting to come from the earl, and instructing him to sell certain securities, are both forgeries.

"Now I shall state my case as briefly as possible. To begin with, you yourself have known the Earl of Grendale intimately for half a century, and for nearly a quarter of a century you have been visiting him fortnightly. Two weeks ago you noticed certain things about the earl which caused you to comment to yourself upon them and then to worry. Those things were many, but chiefly they embraced the earl's apparent ignorance of the game of picquet, a game which he had been playing for over twenty years; his apparent utter forgetfulness about your having agreed to sell him a piece of land which you and he had discussed for many years; his sudden change in his manner of addressing you, and his instructions to sell certain shares and bonds, some of which he held in trust and which he has no moral right to sell.

"Now it is inconceivable that a man whom you have known for half a century can change so radically in one day, so to speak. If the earl's mind were breaking, or if, as you suggested, he may have fallen under some outside influence, it would not exhibit itself as it has done. In either case he would have changed gradually. I am willing to wager the mind of the Earl of Grendale is clearer to-day than it has ever been.

"I have read several of his monographs, and in them there is nothing but the clearest sanity. They could not have emanated as they have from a mind even slightly diseased. As to an outside influence, in the way you

mean it, I dismiss it utterly. I have already told you that, in my opinion, the man at the Hall is not the earl, but an impostor. I realise just how impossible that sounds.

"I have never seen the earl in the flesh, but I can believe that in appearance this impostor is sufficiently like him to deceive you and the servants at the Hall. But don't forget one point, Sir Andrew, and, in my opinion, it is of great importance.

"During the last two weeks the man who calls himself the Earl of Grendale has had most of the lights at the Hall shaded, giving as his reason that his eyes were failing. But this afternoon, while conversing with him, I satisfied myself that in some ways the man was disguised; but how I could not exactly determine. So much for that.

"On my return here you told me what had occurred at the bank. I began to think from another point of view. Why should the Earl of Grendale give instructions for some sixty thousand pounds' worth of securities to be sold, and the proceeds paid over to him in actual cash?

"If the earl desired to change some of his investments an order to sell would be quite natural. But what did he want with that amount of money in ready cash? There was no good and sufficient reason. But for a man to take pains to get possession of sixty thousand pounds in cash there must be a very strong motive indeed.

"From that line I approached my first theory, and in joining up the two I came upon what I strongly feel is the explanation of the matter. The Earl of Grendale did not give those orders to sell. Both orders were a forgery, and the man at Grendale Hall was not the earl. Then came the most difficult part of the whole thing. The Earl of Grendale is marked by a peculiar deformity.

"If any criminal had brains enough to conceive a plot for getting possession of the earl's person and impersonating him, how would he surmount that difficulty? It could not be done by clever padding. Such a device might work for a solitary occasion, but to live there in the Hall from day to day, to be under the gaze of the servants day after day, to be running the risk at all times of meeting friends of the earl's—such a scheme was too risky.

"Then was it possible that there existed a criminal who was a hunchback, and who physically was sufficiently like the earl to make up successfully after him?

"As I remarked to you, Sir Andrew, the chances were about ten million to nothing. Then what was the explanation of it, presuming I was not on the wrong road? There my inspiration came.

"Back into the mazes of the past my mind leaped and probed about until it lit on one man—a man who is a man of culture and education, a man who is capable mentally of great achievements, a man who unfortunately possesses a criminal streak, and a man who, by the result of an accident in his youth, possesses the power—I do not understand it fully yet—of so twisting his shoulder-blade out of place that he makes of himself a hunchback.

"It has fallen to my lot to meet this man more than once in a professional capacity. I have tried many times to catch him, but so far have failed to do so. And I say this—if the man at Grendale Hall is not the Earl of Grendale, if the man there is impersonating the earl, then there is, in my opinion, very strong reason to think that it can be only one person, and that person is the man I speak of—Dr. Mortimer Crane."

"Dr. Mortimer Crane!" exclaimed the baronet quickly. "I have heard of him somewhere."

"No doubt," responded Lee. "He was, at one time, a very able brain and nerve specialist in Harley Street. Unfortunately, he yielded to the criminal kink in his nature, and gradually fell away from the pinnacle he had reached. He gave up a life of honour for a life of crime, and eventually—perhaps very soon—he will pay the price of what he has done.

"Let me impress you with my belief, Sir Andrew. If this man at the Hall is Mortimer Crane, he will not be taken easily, and if we are to catch him, then we must move swiftly and certainly. That is why I have called you in here for a council. My plan is that we adopt bold measures and raid the Hall this very night. Are you game?"

"My heavens, yes!" cried the baronet. "You can count on me to the limit for whatever you plan."

Then Lee bent lower and spoke for some minutes with great earnestness. When he had finished it was almost dinner-time, and he, the baronet, and Nipper rose, determined on a radical plan of action.

That evening, about ten o'clock, the trap was brought round from the stables, and the three climbed into it. They were driven at a moderate pace to the gates of Grendale Hall, and there they got out. Sir Andrew told the man to drive back a bit and wait for them there. He himself led the way along the boundary wall for about a hundred yards, and there came to a stop.

"I haven't used this place to enter the grounds since I was a lad," he said, "but if I remember it rightly we can manage easily enough."

He was right. The great gnarled trunk of a tree made a convenient place for climbing up, and, allowing the baronet to lead the way, Lee and Nipper followed. They dropped over to the other side, and there took whispered counsel again.

"We want to come round by the side of the house," said Lee. "The idea we originally sketched is the best, I think."

"We can reach the side by making a detour," said Sir Andrew. "I used to know every inch of the grounds, and they haven't changed much. I fancy I had better take the lead."

"All right," assented Lee. "We shall follow closely."

The baronet started off through the trees, and, taking a roundabout way, travelled for what seemed nearly a couple of miles. As a matter of fact, it was a good mile. At last he stopped, and, pressing aside some bushes, peered out.

"Hallo!" he said quickly. "There is a light in the tower-room."

"The tower-room!" whispered Lee. "What is that?"

"See that light on the roof," said Sir Andrew?

"Yes."

"That is the room. Grendale used to use it years ago as a work-room, but for a long time it has only served as a box-room of sorts. Now, I wonder what he is doing up there at this hour of the night?"

"If my theory is correct I fancy I can make a guess," whispered Lee.

"What is it?"

"How do you get up to that room?" went on Lee, ignoring the baronet's question.

"There is a private staircase leading up from the earl's sitting-room."

"Ah! Then doesn't it occur to you, Sir Andrew, that if one wished to keep the earl in confinement there could not be a better place than that room?"

"Good heavens, Lee! I wonder if you are right?"

"We shall soon know," said Lee grimly. "Nipper and I will wait here,

Sir Andrew, until you slip across and knock up David. If you ever go quietly in your life, Sir Andrew, now is the time. Remember, if I am right, we have a remarkably resourceful and desperate man to deal with."

"You can wager I'll go silently," responded the baronet.

He advanced then, and soon was lost to view in the gloom. Lee and Nipper waited in silence for a quarter of an hour or so, and then a faint rustle told them someone was approaching. A moment later Sir Andrew had joined them.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I reached the window of the butler's room all right. I knew David used to sleep there, and had heard of no change. I tapped on the window and woke him. I told him as much as was necessary, and he will do everything he can to help us. He is waiting at the window to let us in."

"Good!" muttered Lee. "Then let us move on."

Guided by Sir Andrew, they made their way through the park and round the end of the garden until they came up against the side of the house. Following close to the wall, Sir Andrew reached the window opening to the butler's room, and a short whispered colloquy took place. Then Lee saw Sir Andrew disappear from view, and a second later he had boosted Nipper through the window. He himself followed, and David, who assisted him, closed the window, taking care to draw the blind.

Lee had brought a small pocket-torch, and by its light they removed their shoes. Their next precaution was to see to their weapons, and then, extinguishing the torch, they followed David, who was to pilot them on their way.

They ascended to the first floor by means of the service staircase, and went along a corridor until, by many twistings and turnings, they came out in the upper hall at the head of the grand staircase. There Sir Andrew paused.

"Remain here, David," he said in a low whisper. "I know the way well enough now. Be ready if I call to you."

The man stood aside, and, taking the lead, Sir Andrew started on again with Lee and Nipper keeping in close touch with him. Along the turning corridors they went until Sir Andrew had come to the foot of the small staircase leading up to the earl's private apartment.

The baronet paused there for a moment, as though to gather himself together for the most critical part of the journey, then, step by step, he crept up the stairs. Lee was so close to him that his head brushed the tail of the baronet's coat, and Nipper had one hand on Lee's ankle. So they mounted the stairs until the baronet came to a pause.

Lee worked up close beside him, and, bending low, the baronet breathed:

"The door is just here. If it is locked what shall we do?"

"Let's try it first," suggested Lee, "then we can decide."

Cautiously, inch by inch, he worked his hand up until it touched the handle of the door. With infinite stealth he turned the handle and pressed ever so gently. He drew a sharp breath as he felt the door suddenly yield, and now, taking the lead, he crept into the room.

The sitting-room was lighted by an electric table-lamp, and, pausing just inside, Lee gazed about him. There was no one in the room, and beyond, where the door opened into the bedroom, he could see that all was dark. But in the corner, on his right, there was an open door. Instinctively Lee knew it opened to the staircase leading to the tower-room.

He signalled to the baronet and Nipper to follow, and keeping close to the wall, his automatic ready for any emergency, he made his way, foot by foot, until he was close to the door. Slowly Lee crept ahead until he could

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"Nelson Lee Library," 9/12/18.

twist the forward part of his body round the edge of the doorway and gaze up the stairs.

What he saw caused him to pull back hastily and sign sharply for the baronet and Nipper to keep close behind. Then Nelson Lee crept through the doorway and started to mount the stairs on as perilous a mission as he had ever entered in his life.

Step by step, watching carefully for any sign of movement through the half open door at the top of the stairs, and tense with readiness for any betraying creak, he went up. Sir Andrew and Nipper kept close behind, watching Lee as Lee watched the doorway above.

At last the moment came when Lee was only a couple of steps from the top, and suddenly on their ears broke a voice. Lee stopped and strained to listen. The voice was raised in anger one minute, then lowered to cold, incisive accents the next. But it was not the voice of the Earl of Grendale.

Another step Lee went up, then like the crack of a pistol there sounded the creaking of the step. The voice in the tower-room stopped at once; there followed a rush of footsteps, and the next moment, as Nelson Lee sprang up with levelled weapon, the door was jerked wide open, and a hunchback, strangoly like the Earl of Grendale, stood covering the staircase with a heavy automatic.

But now Lee knew it was Crane, for in one swift glance he had seen the figure of another man on the bed behind. Crane and Lee fired almost at the same moment. Lee fired low for the legs, and the sudden swaying of the other told him he had struck his mark. It was this fractional advantage of his which caused Crane's bullet to barely graze Lee's head, and the next moment two crashes broke out behind him as Sir Andrew and Nipper fired.

Crane hesitated the barest fraction of a second, then, with a curse, he backed into the room and tried to slam the door. Lee threw himself against it and drove it inwards, and Crane, leaping back, raced for the bed, his revolver pointed at the helpless earl.

Then something happened which at first Lee could not understand. There was a terrific noise behind him, and he was hurled aside as something rushed past him. As he straightened himself he saw David, wild with a terrible anger, throw himself fully upon Crane.

Crane tried to fire his revolver at this new enemy, but David struck his arm up, and the two men went crashing madly about the room. In the midst of the melee Crane's revolver spoke, and, as David's grasp relaxed and he sank to the floor, Lee rushed Crane again.

But Crane, with a flying leap, cleared the bed. Free of his antagonists for a moment, he thrust his hand into his pocket. Lee, reading the sign only too well, took the bed at a leap also, and came to grips with his man; but he was too late.

Crane turned on him with a smile of mockery, but as he sank to the floor he made frantic signs for Lee to bend down.

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

If you are not getting your right PENSION

"You've got me at last," he whispered. "But I want you to do something for me?"

"What is it?" asked Lee.

"I want you—to straighten—my back before—I am buried. You just—take hold of the shoulder—and pull hard. Thanks——"

With that he gave a deep sigh, and his stormy spirit fled to the place from which it came. Lee straightened up, and found that Sir Andrew and Nipper had released the earl. Their next care was for David, whom they found had received the bullet full in the shoulder.

On the bed where the indomitable earl had lain for so long they placed Crane's body, drawing a sheet over the still features. But Lee kept his promise, for, after he had assisted in the dressing of David's wound, he and Nipper went up again to the tower-room and there performed Crane's last wish.

It was a strangely different figure which the sheet covered now, and as he stood gazing down at the outline Lee murmured:

"What a pity—what a terrible pity! A fine intellect—a fine brain devoted to following a game which he must have known he couldn't win."

Then slowly and thoughtfully he and the lad descended to the library, where the earl was waiting for an explanation of how Nelson Lee had ferreted out the truth.

And upstairs in the tower-room the man whom Lee had tracked for so long lay sleeping the last sleep of man.

THE END.

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is the title under which next week's story will appear. It is a magnificent extra long complete Tale of NELSON LEE v. JIM THE PENMAN and simply thrills with incident from start to finish.

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They meet with many adventures. One day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN. They appear friendly, and Storbin tells Clive and Alec that Pedro Diego, a rascally "blackbirder," has an eye on the chums' expedition, for what reason he does not know. The next day the enemy makes an attack; a desperate fight ensues, in which Oltra and his band play a great part in gaining a well deserved victory. That same night the talk reverts to the original object of the expedition—the search for the "gold stones."

(Now read this week's thrilling instalment.)

In Dire Peril.

"YES, I'm sorry you had to abandon the boat," the doctor observed. "Captain Barron won't like it; he complains that we're already short of boats."

"Oh, but we can get it back, sir," Clive declared.

"Well, well—let us hope so. We will make the attempt, at any rate—as soon as I am well enough to go too. I shall want to see that curious underground lake, and the place where you got those pebbles. Of course, to see them is very gratifying to me. It is certainly an encouragement to prosecute our search."

"It's a proof that the cave of gold exists, and that we shall all make our fortunes," cried Alec enthusiastically.

"Well, no, my young friend, it does not say all that," said the doctor mildly, "it is merely a proof that, at some period, something existed hereabouts—a stream of water most probably—which had the power of coating pebbles and other objects with gold.

"But that, my friends, does not prove that the said something—spring of water or whatever it may be—is still in existence here to-day. It is easy to see that the coating of these pebbles took place a long time ago. They have certainly been knocking about in the bed of that underground stream for a great many years, as shown by their present state. Therefore, as I say,

they are no proof that the wonderful spring still exists. Indeed, to my mind—I say it with much regret—it rather suggests that it has ceased its operations for a long period of time. Else, if it is still in existence to-day, still at work covering pebbles with golden coatings, how is it that you did not come across some fresher specimens? No, my friends—I can read your disappointment in your faces, and I feel very sorry to have to say this—but I am bound to tell you honestly what I think. I repeat the question, because it governs all the rest. If the spring is still in existence, how is it you did not come upon some more recent examples of its handiwork alongside these ancient survivals?"

"Does that mean that you think it useless to prosecute the search further, doctor?" Alec asked despondently.

"Oh, dear, no! Certainly not!" Dr. Campbell replied, with decision. "In volcanic formations like this island, all sorts of changes may take place at times, and there is no saying what may or may not have happened. Here we have a proof that something of the kind once existed. Also, that it existed somewhere where it came in contact with these pebbles—wherever they were at that time. Then changes may have taken place which diverted the strange spring into another channel altogether, one which is at present hidden away from our sight, but which it may be possible for us to find.

"I will even go so far as to say I think it extremely likely—in view of the proof we have here that it exists, or did exist—that we shall discover it if we are only able to search long enough. And, as far as my personal wishes and intentions are concerned, I shall most certainly carry on the search as thoroughly and for as long a time as may be necessary—unless, of course, anything unforeseen intervenes to prevent it."

The doctor then went on to comment further upon the other strange and exciting experiences they had passed through, and to express his deep thankfulness that they had escaped practically unhurt from so many dangers.

"Well, lads," he said heartily at last, "you have had your first experience of hard fighting, and have evidently acquitted yourselves well. I am sorry the necessity arose, but I am glad that it was in a good cause, and—take it altogether—I'm bound to say I'm proud of you, lads, I am proud of you."

Later in the day Oltra's canoes arrived, and with them came—rather to the surprise of the doctor and his friends—quite a number more natives.

"Hullo, hullo!" said Dr. Campbell good-humouredly. "How are we going to feed so many mouths?"

"I mentioned that to Storbin," Clive remarked. "But he says there will be no difference. They will feed themselves—by fishing. He declared they are the cleverest fishers he ever came across—and the best swimmers and divers."

"I can well believe that," observed the doctor. "All the islanders of the South Seas are wonderful swimmers."

"Well," said Alec, "it's a good thing to know they can fish for themselves. I shouldn't care for the task of supplying them with fish. In fact," he added, with a glance at Clive, "I think I've had my fill of fish for the present."

Clive nodded.

"Same here," he confessed. "The fishing we had yesterday morning will last me for some time."

"Yes, man!" Alec replied. "Goodness—yes! It was only yesterday

(Continued overleaf.)

morning. Why—so many things have happened—it seems already quite a week or more ago."

"I wish a week had passed," the doctor put in. And as the two young fellows looked at him in some surprise, he explained. "I say that because I should be a week farther on the road to recovery. I am getting tired of inactivity. I want to be up and doing. I want to see this underground watercourse, with its golden pebbles, and," he declared finally, with what was for him a very fierce look, "I want to have my revenge on the creature that was the cause of it all—I want to go and catch that big iguana with the long tongue!"

They were a merry party in the camp that night. As is usually the case after a fight, the natives made up songs about what had happened, and Clive and Alec's names figured alongside those of Oltra and Storbin in their praise of the heroes of the day.

Then there were dances, and after that, as it happened to be a brilliantly moonlight night, the natives must needs finish up with a sort of water frolic.

They entered into this with such gusto, and they were all enjoying it so thoroughly, that Clive and Alec, after watching for some time with interest, became possessed with a desire to take part in it.

Storbin, who was already enjoying himself immensely, welcomed this proof of interest in their sport, and told off a couple of his men to assist and instruct them where necessary.

In ordinary swimming they needed no coaching, being already well experienced in that way so far; that is, as regards our English form of the sport. But they quickly found that the swimming feats of these Kanakas surpassed anything they had ever dreamed of.

So they willingly put themselves under the tuition of the two Storbin had selected for the purpose. They were, in fact, reckoned the most expert performers of any there, and their new pupils were astonished at some of the feats they performed by way of introduction to their lessons.

The pupils were apt, and quickly grasped some of the most important points, and all was going well, when a great shouting arose, and cries were heard which, this time, were not cries of merriment or enjoyment.

Alec was the farthest out just then of all in the water. He had swum out, to a small rock which rose above the surface, forming a small island, and after a short rest there, was on his way back to his friends, when the noise of the shouting came to his ears.

Though he did not exactly know the meaning of the sudden excitement, he instinctively looked back over his shoulder to see if there was anything behind him to account for it.

He saw a curious, dark, flat, upright object just above the surface, cutting through the water, and evidently following him. And then, with a shock of horror, he understood. This was the dorsal fin of a great shark, and the dread creature was pursuing him!

Alec gave himself up for lost. It seemed impossible that anything could intervene to save him. He saw, it is true, a canoe approaching; there were two, in fact, one just behind the other, manned by natives, and they were being driven furiously in his direction.

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand yarn next week.)