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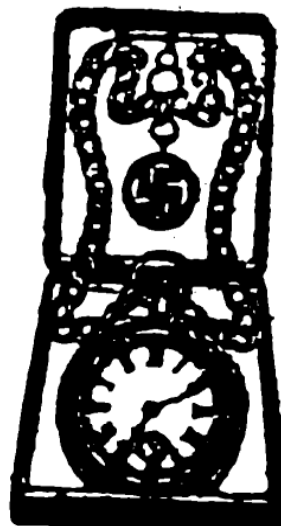
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CHAPTER I.

Back in London—Jimmy Duane of Parts Unknown—To the Rescue.

JAMES FREDERICK ALGERNON MONTGOMERY DE LANCY DUANE, so christened but ordinarily known as plain Jimmy Duane, thought he had breathed in all the exquisite aroma of Home when he had first sniffed the damp breath of England which stole out into the Channel from over the cliffs of Dover.

But it remained for him to jostle his way down Piccadilly to really appreciate the fact that he had come home after long years of exile. Within two months of thirty years of age, he gazed upon the human stream which coursed down the great artery with a radically changed outlook than he had gazed upon it ten years before, when, as a callow youth, he had first attempted to stem the tide.

Attempted to stem the tide of that vast pulsating channel of the greatest metropolis the world has ever known! With the confidence of nineteen the task had by no means seemed insuperable, yet even, as he strolled along on this his first day back in the old town after ten years of wandering, he might have seen grizzled men all about him who had been trying for a score of years to stem that tide, and had failed even to cause a slight ripple upon the face of it.

Such is the colossal appetite of Piccadilly. It lies by day a winding, turgid stream, sweeping into its heart the human chips who are its sport and yet the children of its creators. It is like some vast gash in the face of Nature, cut by man and endowed with mysterious life—a monster which forever and forever clutches out and takes those who made it and make it. That is Piccadilly!

At night, a sullen red slit in the heart of the blazing city—a place of shadows and half-tones—a place of high lights and dim, misty pores, gushing forth the fetid matter which clogs them. That, too, is Piccadilly.

Yet Jimmy Duane harked back not at all to the days gone by when the town had "got him." Ten years is sufficient to dull the memory of even greater things than the folly of youth, and far, far in the background of his mind, was the recollection of the heated course he had then run.

The years which lay in between, spanning the chasm of time like a cantilever built by Time, had held that in them which threw into puny remoteness what had gone before. For during the ten years he had been wander-

ing the face of the earth Jimmy Duane had played the game hard, and had played it crookedly.

Compelled to leave university when the wings of manhood were but sprouting, so to speak—compelled to leave through no fault of his own, but because his father had been ruined by a city sharp, he had hurled himself out of the life he had known and hoped for, into the universe of men, full of a blind hatred and seething with the desire to get back some of his own.

It was not mere chance which had sent him to Canada as a steerage passenger. It was not the turn of a card or the flick of a coin, but a decision to shake the dust of England off his feet and to begin where he was unknown.

But it was chance which revealed that he was what is known as a born manipulator of the cards. Poker he learned his first day out, and where the average acolyte at the feet of the fickle goddess struggles onward through the maze of pair, two pair, and three of a kind with exasperating slowness, Jimmy Duane seemed instinctively to know just what to do and when to do it.

By the end of his second day out he had won nearly fifty pounds, which, added to the modest sum he already possessed, had increased his bank roll to nearly a hundred. On the head of this success, still flushed with the wine of victory, and finding no further game in the steerage for his quiver, he had bought over into the first cabin, and from there until the boat docked at Quebec he had played assiduously.

The same marvellous good fortune pursued him. High play had developed, and, one of five—the other four were a wealthy cattle man from the West, a railway contractor, a Toronto manufacturer, and a timber man from New Brunswick—he had played to the limit, which in this instance was the sky.

In Quebec he had counted his roll, and to his delight found that he had cleaned up nearly a thousand pounds on the journey. Now with a thousand pounds one can do much in the West. It will buy a decent stretch of prairie land, where, in the good black soil, the finest wheat in the world grows. That meant frugal living and hard work before the prize might loom ahead, and in the first flush of his new-found power the prospect did not appeal to Jimmy Duane. He was getting back some of his own, and, to be quite honest, felt no qualms at the way in which he got it.

Therefore, the lad who had left Liverpool only a week before as a steerage passenger and with less than forty pounds in his pocket, bought a ticket back to Liverpool by another steamer. Not that he intended returning to England to settle down. Far from it! He was intending to break into that once select and smooth coterie of gentleman crooks who made a practice of travelling back and forth across the Atlantic for the purpose of skinning the lambs which came to the slaughter.

For six months Jimmy Duane worked the Liverpool-Canadian boats, sometimes with varying success, but always winning in the end. He lived well—too well, in fact; but when the line got too hot for him, and he was warned off, he transferred to the New York-Plymouth boats, with a cash reserve of five thousand. There, on his first trip, he met an old stager known as "The Baron," and after the first day out they had pooled interests, putting five thousand each into the partnership.

Now up till then Jimmy Duane had played straight enough, for luck was with him to a marvellous degree, and it seemed at times that he could scarcely go wrong in any draw he made.

For instance, on one occasion he drew to a pair of tens with four nines, a full house, and three kings against him. He drew the other two tens and a king; boosted the pot again and again—it was a hot game—and raked in over eight hundred on the show down. But, working with "The Baron,"

it was not long before he became initiated into the subtle cheating which poker allows.

By the very manner in which "The Baron" held his cards, Jimmy Duane could tell what his partner held. Two fingers over the top meant a pair, three fingers meant three of a kind, and so on. For two years they worked the New York-Plymouth service, and then thought it wise to seek new fields.

They parted in New York, and before striking out on the trans-Pacific boats, Jimmy Duane took a flier in Wall Street. If he was lucky at poker he was unlucky with shares, for before the Street got through with him he had lost thirty thousand pounds, and hit the trail for 'Frisco with less than five hundred left out of his roll.

So the years went—gambling on every one of the seven seas, bucking the game in the mining camps from Alaska to Chile and from Bendigo to the Rand. Every country and every game he visited, avoiding only England. He even got as close as Paris, and there, in one of the most exclusive gambling clubs in the French capital, he played within a yard of a telephone which would have connected him up with London.

But never did he cross the narrow strip of water which flowed like a grey barrier between him and his youth. He played roulette and baccarat at Monte Carlo, he played in Cairo, he got out of Constantinople with a big roll, he tried each one of the three hundred different games invented by the Chinese, he played stud poker from Coolgardie to Port Darwin, and cruised the South Pacific wherever men were and men played.

A marvellous faculty for languages had made him intimate with men of all countries, and by the time ten years had rolled by he was a pure cosmopolitan—a man of many tongues and deep guile—a man equally at home in New York or Hong Kong—a man with a nodding acquaintance in every country, east and west, north and south.

Nor had he confined himself to gambling. In New York, on one occasion, he had set all his wits to get possession of a certain very famous necklace, which had been written about and spoken of by the Press until every man had dreamed of it. How he did it—what subtle ways he trod in order to realise his dream—is another story, but get it he did, and then only to decorate the pretty throat of a queen of the underworld.

In Chile he had blackmailed a great landowner out of ten thousand head of cattle, and gloried in the deed. In Hong Kong he had held up a fat Chinese merchant for fifty thousand dollars Mex., and when the mandarin had vowed eternal vengeance, Jimmy Duane had tied him hand and foot and thrown him aboard a whaling hooker bound for the Antarctic.

Whether a spell in the cook's galley of the whaler during two years of icy weather would cure him of his desire for vengeance or not, Jimmy Duane neither knew nor cared. On occasion, too, he had dipped into worse things, but, with all the evil of those ten years, there was running through the black sheet one white streak—he had never cheated a woman or a poor man.

It is recorded of him, that once, on the voyage from New York to Cherbourg, when a youngster, travelling to Paris for an American firm, had dropped his expense money at the game, Jimmy Duane had sent him ashore with his roll returned and a stern bit of advice for the future. And as he had held up the mandarin in Hong Kong, so had he given a couple of thousand to a broken-down South Sea skipper in order that the latter might buy a new schooner. He was a queer mixture of good and bad, and had he not been thrown upon the world with his mind full of bitterness, perhaps his course might have been far different.

And so it came that, at the end of ten years, after an experience of the world which was rarely known in men double his age, he had felt the call of the Homeland. So insistent had it become that at last he had gathered together what money he had, and with something like fifty thousand pounds in his pocket had travelled across two oceans and a continent to the land which knew nought of his crooked life.

In England his record had been clear, and as the white cliffs of Dover were sighted Jimmy Duane vowed a vow that all the past should be cast into the limbo of forgotten things—that henceforth he would remain in England, and that he would run straight.

He did not pause to think that ten years in the early part of a man's life will create such tentacles that they cannot be severed by one swift stroke. The outer, the visible, part may be cut, but the roots have gained such hold that always they send forth new shoots. Such was the young man who strolled down Piccadilly on this, his first day back home.

Not a familiar face did he see. His father and mother were both dead, claimed by the ten years which had gone. What relatives he had he did not care about. He was practically alone in the world. Of those he had known in the past he had no record. With his departure from England he had cut all strings, and he had no desire to reconnect the tangled ends.

It was to be for him a new life, with new friends and new hopes. In a mood of keen relish of all the life about him, he reached Hyde Park Corner, and, turning in through the big gate, strolled along beneath the noble trees. There were many persons abroad that morning, and, with the quick eye of the cosmopolitan, Jimmy Duane amused himself by classifying them as they passed.

And it was this more than ordinarily developed faculty of his, that his gaze rested idly on a slim, young, girlish figure, which was tripping along just ahead of him. That the world had dealt hardly with the girl was plain to Jimmy Duane. The simple black dress, while clean and carefully brushed, was, for all the care which had been given it, beginning to show threadbare at the seams.

The shoes—long, narrow shoes of the Continent—were woefully shabby. The small round hat which the girl wore was plain and cheap, though set on the small head at an angle which only the Continental woman can achieve. Her figure, very petite, was graceful in the extreme, and though she carried a brown paper parcel she walked with an odd little dignity which was almost pathetic. Her head, the swing of her limbs, her whole poise, spoke of blood, and the keen eyes of Jimmy Duane noted it.

"French, I should say," he mused to himself. "Or perhaps she is Belgian. Hallo! She doesn't seem to care for the attentions of our dark-skinned friend."

This, as turning into a deserted stretch of the path, a tall flashily-dressed individual, who had been coming towards the girl, turned and began to walk beside her.

"South American!" grunted Jimmy Duane as he frowned at the fellow's attentions to the girl. He watched for a few seconds while he followed, saw the man come up with the girl, saw him speak to her and then reach out and take her arm. The girl drew away, and for a brief moment, Jimmy Duane caught sight of a dainty little profile turned towards the South American with loathing.

She attempted to free herself, but the other only laughed and bent lower towards her. It was enough for Jimmy Duane. He quickened his steps until he was almost upon them, then, out shot his right arm and he caught the South American in a grip which had the feel of steel rings behind it.

"Drop the lady's arm," he said curtly.

In sheer surprise the fellow obeyed, then he turned to Jimmy Duane with a snarl. The girl drew back quivering and looked up at the grey-eyed young man who had come to her rescue. With his free hand Jimmy Duane took off his hat.

"Mademoiselle," he said in faultless French, "is this man annoying you?"

The girl's head lifted, and though her lips quivered, she spoke with quiet dignity.

"Monsieur, I have never seen him before. He has insulted me grossly."

"It shall be no more, mademoiselle," said Jimmy Duane.

Then turning to the man he still held in a strong grip, he said grimly in Spanish:

"Pig, that you are, get out of here as quickly as you can."

With that, he whirled him round and propelled him along with a push which sent the South American staggering almost to his knees. He turned a face of livid fury upon Jimmy Duane and opened his mouth to speak, but something in the steel grey eyes of the young Britisher caused him to change his mind, and with a feeble attempt at a swagger, he made off. Then Jimmy Duane turned to the girl and said:

"Mademoiselle, you may go in peace. No one shall annoy you."

She dropped him a quaint little curtsey and said:

"Monsieur, I give you my thanks, I am not afraid. Le Bon Dieu go with you."

She turned, and still clutching her brown paper parcel, walked on, while Jimmy Duane, still holding his hat, stood gazing after her.

"There is tragedy there," he muttered as he lit a fresh cigarette and strolled on after her. "That little girl has some of the proudest blood of France in her, or I miss my guess. Her face is like some lovely orchid just opening to the sun. Her—here, here, Jimmy Duane, you will be talking romantic nonsense unless you are careful. Anyway, I guess I'll just follow at a distance and see that she gets along all right."

He followed her to the gate which opens on to Oxford Circus, then down Oxford Street and on into Soho. While revelling in the flow of life about him, Jimmy Duane had all the time one eye on the girl, and when she paused before a small dingy-looking pawnshop in Soho, he was not far behind her.

He waited about for some minutes until she emerged again, and when she did, he saw that she still carried the brown paper parcel. Evidently its contents had not interested the keeper of the pawnshop. She walked more wearily now as she went on again, and a throb of pity filled Jimmy Duane as he read the story told by that brown paper parcel.

Probably it contained some last negotiable property which she was endeavouring to trade for the privilege of just existing. Behind it all he knew there lay some tragedy of life, and himself generous to a degree, he felt that he could with pleasure pull the nose of the pawnbroker who had turned her down.

The trail led now to another pawnshop, and from it the girl emerged once more still carrying the brown paper parcel. So it went until she had visited four pawnshops, and always she came out again with the parcel in her arm. Outside the last place, she stood for a little pondering, then wearily she turned, and walking with dragging steps, made her way towards Bloomsbury.

'Bus after 'bus passed her, but she did not even turn her head, plodding on with ever lagging steps until at last, before a dilapidated looking lodging house in a dingy side street, she paused. There, with a supreme effort, she gathered herself together, and running up the steps as though

she had not a care in the world, paused only long enough to insert a key, then disappeared within.

Jimmy Duane strolled along slowly, mechanically noting the number of the house as he passed, and quite as mechanically glancing up at the windows. In only one of them did he see anyone, and that, for only a brief instant. It was an old face he saw—a face aged and tired and worn and surmounted with thin white hair, and yet a face which still held the remnants of the proud expression which had once belonged to it.

Only a glimpse, then the curtain dropped, a small hand was revealed, and Jimmy Duane turned the corner, the chords of memory striving to express themselves. For the face of the elderly woman in the window, seemed strangely familiar to Jimmy Duane.

CHAPTER II.

An Echo of the Past—Oscar Eode—Another Face from Out the Past.

JIMMY DUANE sat in the big lounge bar of the Venetia, sipping a Bronx cocktail and idly studying the ever shifting throng which patronised the classic hotel.

He had returned to the Venetia in a sombre mood, inspired by his experience of the morning. Not that Jimmy Duane was impressionable. His ten years of knocking about had given him a certain callousness in looking upon his fellow man. But behind the shabby costume and the brown paper parcel carried by the young French girl, he had scented real tragedy.

The lagging steps which had proclaimed a weary body and wearier soul—the last attempt to appear cheerful which the girl made as she ran up the steps of the dingy lodging-house in Bloomsbury, the face at the window, and then that small hand which had dropped the curtain, all combined to tell a tale which filled Jimmy Duane with more than idle curiosity.

That it had been the girl's hand which had dropped the curtain he felt positive. That meant that she and the elderly woman of the tired face, were living together, and that they were probably mother and daughter. But for the moment it was not the girl who held his thoughts.

It was the weary, life-weary face of the elder woman who had been gazing forth from the window. Somewhere in the past Jimmy Duane had seen the counterpart of the face. It had been on an occasion when the proud features had impressed themselves upon him to such an extent, that not even the ravages of the years could obliterate it from his memory. But where had it been? And under what circumstances? •

If he could but grasp one idea to give him the association he needed in order to remember—if he could but probe into that heavy freighted past of his and pick out the incident which had been connected with that face. The fact that the girl was French gave him an idea, if but a feeble one, to go upon. If they were mother and daughter, then the mother too must be French, or else had lived in France.

But one part of France was as familiar to Jimmy Duane as another. He had gambled from one end of it to another. The Riviera was as familiar to him as his own south coast. Paris knew him intimately. He had motored east and he had motored west in pursuit of the "game." Then where and under what circumstances had he seen that proud faced old woman now broken by the beating of time?

Suddenly, as his mind sought, it found. From out the past there came to him a picture. Before him there rose a long stretch of peaceful river and meadow country. A little village, nestling among the trees, lay sleeping in

the afternoon sun. The picturesque French peasantry went past upon their several errands.

Under a wide spreading chestnut there was a little inn, behind which, a rioting garden fell in colourful waves to the very edge of the river. And then beyond the river rose terrace after terrace of wonderful orchards. It was Lorient, a sweet forgotten spot in southern France.

In the garden of that inn, Jimmy Duane saw himself sitting. He had come up from Monte Carlo for one of his brief pauses between gambling bouts, and, by sheer accident had found Lorient, where it lay sleeping on the banks of the Rhone.

And now it all came back to him with a rush. On that warm sunny afternoon when he had lounged in the garden back of the inn, Lorient had been split asunder by a tragedy. Up the river and over-looking the wide stretch of meadow country, stood a great chateau occupied by one of the proudest families of France.

Count Phillipe Namon, the present head of the family, lived there with his wife and daughter, and now Jimmy Duane recalled how a bareheaded servant had come racing into the village to cry out that Count Phillipe had killed himself. In company with others, Jimmy Duane had hurried to the chateau. With two gendarmes in the back of his big racing-car, he had made the journey in a very few minutes, and there at the chateau he had seen the grief-stricken countenance for a single moment.

The tragedy in her eyes had haunted him for a long time, though not until he got back to Monte Carlo did he hear the whole story of the affair. Count Phillipe Namon had been only one of the victims of Oscar Bode, the German-Belgian railway financier. Those who recall the scandal which centred round that scoundrel, will remember that Oscar Bode defrauded right and left, causing ruin on all sides.

And to make matters worse, the man had so cleverly protected himself, that he could saunter about the tables at Monte Carlo playing freely and immune from the grip of the law. Count Phillipe Namon had trusted him and had risked his all. When the crash came he had taken the step he considered the only one.

That was five years ago, but during that five years Jimmy Duane had seen Oscar Bode more than once. The last time he had met him was in New York, where Bode was going the pace and apparently making plenty of money. For a year or more he had lost track of the man, but it was not difficult for him to draw the contrast of those years between the life of Bode and the life lived by the two women whom his predacious nature had left floating helplessly about the world.

The descent would be slow but steady. With all the pride of ancient France behind them, the Countess and her daughter would fight hard, but sooner or later the grim foe in wait would get them, and it seemed to Jimmy Duane, that the end had almost come now.

It was with an added sense of personal interest that he thought once more of that pathetic little figure which he had followed through Soho. It was with a savage desire to get hold of Oscar Bode and wring his neck that he sent his mind back over the years.

It was the play of fate that had willed his presence in Lorient at the time of the tragedy. It was another sport of fate that his first day in England should bring up a part of the past. Yet what could he do? He could not offer charity out of the abundance of his own possessions. He knew the proud nature of the Countess Namon too well to make such a mistake as that. Yet he knew as certainly as he knew he was lounging in the Venetian

bar, that the brown paper parcel hawked about Soho by the girl had contained if--not the least, then almost the last material possessions of the two.

He could picture the scene which must be transpiring in that shabby room back in Bloomsbury. He could see two women, their arms round each other, their door locked against the world, facing utter starvation. What was there left for them but to take the same step which the Count took?

It must be prevented in some way.

Jimmy Duane had found an interest to fill his mind, and the more he pondered the more determined he was that he would do something to help them. And at the end of half an hour he had hit on what he thought the only feasible plan. The girl's manner had indicated a familiarity with the pawnshops of Soho.

He would go to the four places where she had called, and interview the pawnbrokers. There he might be able to gain not only her name, proving his surmise to be correct, but he might also persuade the pawnbroker at one of the places for a consideration to get into touch with the girl and offer to buy what he had refused to buy before. Determined to lose no time in putting his plan into execution, Jimmy Duane was on the very point of rising, when suddenly he sank back in his chair and beckoned the waiter to his table.

For that had just happened which had caused him to change his mind. A man had just entered the bar—a big, gross-looking man, who carried himself with an assured manner. For a moment Jimmy Duane could scarcely believe his eyes; then, as the man turned slightly in his direction, Jimmy Duane drew a sharp breath, and dropped his gaze to the floor. He could swear that, although the man had shaved off his moustache since he last saw him, it was none other than Oscar Bode.

Fate had played another card that day!

CHAPTER III.

Oscar Bode Puts Through a Deal—Jimmy Duane on the Track—The Old Game.

MR. OSCAR BODE was a man who could look back upon as eventful and shady a past as could very few men. During an extremely chequered career of nearly thirty years, he had preyed constantly upon his fellow-creatures; and the fact that he did not use the crude methods of the ordinary second-story man did not in the least tend to minimise the results of a predatory nature.

Usually Oscar Bode specialised in fake company-promoting, and once it is a fact that by sheer accident one of his gold-mining promotions became a payer. None of the shareholders was more surprised at this than Oscar Bode himself. So it had gone on through the years until the sum total which a confiding public had trusted to Mr. Oscar Bode reached a very respectable sum.

Yet, even so, he had saved little. A penchant for the rich food and richer wines had kept him always short, though he never for a single moment doubted his ability to make plenty more when he needed it. Yet always he kept within the strict letter of the law. Oscar Bode had the cunning German mind—he was three parts German—coupled with a long training in America—a mixture which, diluted with a natural bent for crookedness, makes a very dangerous combination. And now he was in London on one of the biggest things he had ever tackled. With due respect for the magnitude of the affair, he had planned each step carefully, and had

fate not sent forlorn little Mademoiselle Namon across the path of Jimmy Duane it is safe to say that Bode would have made his point without much danger of discovery.

It was the morning following Jimmy Duane's arrival in London that Oscar Bode left the Venetia and was driven in a taxi to a dingy little antique shop just off Bond Street. While the shop was not very imposing in appearance, any one of the London world of art would have known it to be the headquarters of one Isaac Grinwold, easily in the front rank of his profession.

The inside of the shop was dark and almost dingy, though littered about in terrible confusion there were priceless treasures which would have made the mouth of the collector water. Old cabinets, chairs, tables, pictures, brasses, bibelots of every shape and size, marvellous glasses of old Venice, and quaint creations of the artists of every period, were there.

Through it all old Isaac Grinwold, small and shrunken and yellow, came shuffling to greet the man who had called to see him. Together, as they stood amidst all the priceless confusion about them, they presented a striking contrast—the little antique dealer, with the blood dried up within him, and Oscar Bode, big and gross and exhaling the atmosphere of a life which could have no part in the existence of Isaac Grinwold.

It was only for the very special visitor that Isaac Grinwold threw open the door of his own small, gloomy private room at the back—that room which had seen the settlement of the fate of some of the most priceless treasures that ever came on to the market from the homes of a needy aristocracy.

That Bode was in this category was evident, for after a perfunctory handshake the dealer motioned for him to follow. Down the shop they went, past the single girl clerk whom Grinwold employed, and in through the low doorway to the private room.

It was plainly, almost austere, furnished, and since on no occasion did he ever permit more than one person besides himself in the room, Grinwold had thought fit to supply only two chairs—cheap and modern, and in ugly contrast to the lovely pieces in the shop.

He glanced with distaste at the fat Havana which Oscar Bode smoked, but made no objection, and when he had sat down at the small, plain desk he turned and rasped out the single word:

“Well?”

Bode did not reply at once. He drew an appreciative puff or two at the cigar, then his thick lips parted in a smile of satisfaction.

“It is all right, Grinwold,” he replied, in a voice curiously high for a man of his size. “It is quite all right. My part of the deal is clinched. But how about you?”

“Everything is ready,” said the old man curtly. “Have you the money?”

“I have a draft in my pocket for forty thousand pounds, with full authority to pay it over to you when I am satisfied that the picture is what it is supposed to be.”

Isaac Grinwold snorted.

“I have passed on some of the greatest pictures which have ever come on the market,” he snarled. “The whole world of art takes my word as final. When I wrote to John P. Allis that one of the finest Corots had appeared on the market I told him fact. It is a superb thing, and when he wrote back that he would send over a man with authority to buy it, he would have got it for the price agreed upon had I not discovered that you

were to act as his agent in the matter. You know the correspondence which followed between us."

Suddenly his voice dropped to a whisper.

"I have had the copy made. It was done by a man who is a genius—a man who should be painting stuff which would live. But the drug had got him down. For a few pounds he will prostitute his talent, and turn out copies with the brush of genius. He has outdone himself on this copy of the Corot. His achievement of the colouring is superb.

"Myself I had some difficulty in telling the difference between them, and if it could almost fool me, I shall back it to get past anyone. But I will show them both to you, and let you see. In the old days you used to be a fairly good judge."

With that Isaac Grinwold got up, and, walking to a large safe in the corner, knelt before it. Giving the knob of the combination a few turns, he pulled the door open, then, fumbling about in the interior for a few seconds, he finally rose, clutching two rolled-up bits of canvas. Without a word he handed them to Oscar Bode, who unrolled one of them and bent over it eagerly.

It was a lovely thing—certainly one of the finest subjects which the famous Corot had ever done. The subject was a woodland scene, with the sheen of water beneath the trees in the background. Through the thin screen of trees in the front of the picture the light fell in little splashes and pools, which contrasted sharply with the more sombre colouring of the trees.

In the water was reflected light and shadow, with half-tones and high lights caught together and then flung apart in shimmering beauty. Between the tops of the trees one could just catch here and there a hint of blue sky, with the edge of a fleecy cloud showing. The water was pure colour, as pure as the air above it. Corot, the landscape genius, had conceived a lovely setting indeed.

For a good many minutes Oscar Bode gazed upon it, and, strangely enough, with the beauty of it all flowing in upon him, the coarseness of his features seemed for the moment to pass away, leaving a heavy, but nevertheless distinctly dreamy, appreciation of the artist. At last he looked up, and as though before his face had caught something of the gentle spirit of the picture, now the old, hard, cunning look returned.

"It is a masterpiece, Grinwold," he said. "This is, of course, the original?"

Isaac Grinwold chuckled, but made no reply. Instead, he unrolled the other canvas, and spread it out before Bode. Once again Bode bent over it, and became absorbed. It was the same subject, with the same lovely effect of light and shadow of green and blue and purity of colour, filling one with vague, disturbing sadness, and yet a sadness that had all of sweetness in it.

For the space of ten minutes or so he studied it, then transferred his gaze to the other. First one, then the other he examined, but at last he was compelled to look up and shake his head.

"To save my life, Grinwold, I couldn't tell which was the one done by Corot. You have discovered a true genius."

"And he did it with cocaine singing in his ears each moment," said the dealer. "But I will tell you—the first one you looked at is the genuine Corot. Do you think John P. Allis will be satisfied with his purchase?"

"Corot might have done both of them," said Bode. "As for Allis, he will be satisfied; and I am game to wager that, as long as he lives, he

will never dream that the thing he thinks is a genuine Corot is only a copy which has cost us a few pounds."

"We will do the thing in proper order," remarked Grinwold, as he rolled up the canvasses again. If this thing is ever discovered, it will mean a severe blow to my reputation as an expert; but, as I said in my letter to you, I am prepared to risk that, for—twenty thousand pounds. I will draw up the bill of sale and make out my usual certificate, saying that I have examined the picture, and pass it at what it is invoiced. Then you can pay over to me the draft, and the thing will be finished."

"Not quite; but as soon as we split the forty thousand between us," chuckled Bode, in his high voice. "Grinwold, this will be the making of us."

"I am satisfied," replied the dealer. "If you will produce the draft, I shall get the other papers ready at once, and we can finish the job."

"What will you do with the genuine Corot?" asked Bode, as he thrust his hand into an inner pocket and drew out a thick wallet.

"That is none of your business," responded Grinwold sharply.

"It appears to me you will be doing pretty well out of this deal," went on Bode imperturbably. "You get twenty thousand out of a copy that cost only a few pounds, and probably forty more out of the genuine, which you didn't pay much for, I'll wager."

"What I paid for the genuine is none of your affair," rejoined the dealer. "But the copy cost exactly thirty pounds, and when we split the forty thousand I shall deduct fifteen pounds as your share of that cost."

"Scott, Grinwold, if I only had your Jewish nature, I should have been a millionaire by now."

The dealer grinned sourly, but made no reply. Bending over his desk, he took up a pen, and began to make out the bill of sale of:

"One Corot, as per negotiation, £40,000."

The invoice was made to Oscar Bode, authorised agent for Mr. John P. Allis, of New York, and at the foot of it Grinwold wrote:

"Received payment by draft on Morton's Bank, London, and signed it.—Isaac Grinwold."

Then, taking up a smaller bit of paper, he wrote the date, adding:

"I, Isaac Grinwold, hereby certify that the Corot sold to Mr. Oscar Bode, authorised agent for Mr. John P. Allis, is, according to the best of my belief, an original, and quite untouched in any way, and that, therefore, it is worth the price which has been paid for it.—(Signed) Isaac Grinwold."

Which certificate, signed by Isaac Grinwold, was all any man could ask, coming as it did from the doyen of art experts. No man would suspect that Isaac Grinwold would sell his soul for money, yet he had done so, and with the signing of his name in black ink he stepped over the barrier once and for always.

It took only a few minutes longer to settle the rest of the details. Oscar Bode passed over the draft for forty thousand, and, after scrutinising it carefully, Isaac Grinwold took out his cheque-book and wrote a cheque to bearer for nineteen thousand nine hundred and eighty-five pounds, which he blotted and handed across to Bode. Then with fingers which trembled just a little, he rolled up the copy of the Corot and passed it over. Bode took it and, rising, held out his hand.

"I shall see you again before I leave," he said; "but I shall get back to New York now as soon as possible."

"I do not think it would be wise for you to come here again," said Grinwold curtly. "The deal is finished. It will be safe to have no further communication."

"Oh, very well," laughed Bode. A few more words, and he started for the door. Grinwold followed him, and Bode led the way through the shop to the front door. But only Grinwold noticed the figure of a man standing in a shadowy part of the shop, apparently absorbed in an old Jacobean table. Taking leave of Bode at the street door, Grinwold hastened back to where the man stood, but found him talking easily with the girl who looked after customers in the absence of the dealer.

Isaac Grinwold shot a suspicious glance at him, but it needed more than that to cause Jimmy Duane's features to reveal anything of his thoughts. He had not become the finished poker player, which he was, without the necessary coolness and nerve to put across a big bluff. And on this occasion he retired from the shop with his purchase, leaving Isaac Grinwold quite unsuspecting that his last customer had any personal interest in himself or Oscar Bode.

But once outside the shop, Jimmy Duane walked on briskly until he came into Bond Street. There, against the kerb, a taxi was waiting, and, jumping in, he ordered briefly:

"The Venetia."

A second later the taxi had wheeled, and was going up Bond Street at a rapid pace.

Jimmy Duane arrived back at the Venetia just in time to see Oscar Bode walking across the lobby towards the lift. Beneath his arm was a thin roll of something, and as he stood by the desk watching him, Jimmy Duane murmured to himself:

"I had hoped that the past was done with for good and all, but I think—I am sure—I shall have to turn crook again—just for this once."

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It was night again.

Up in his bedroom at the Venetia, Mr. Oscar Bode was about to retire for the night. More than satisfied with the result of the day's work, he had dined well, and had gone on afterwards to one of the new revues. Supper in the big supper-room at the Venetia had followed, and now, with his fat jowls and thick lips spreading with a yawn, he moved clumsily about his room, preparing to disrobe.

The room was a large one, solidly and tastefully furnished, as were all the rooms at the Venetia. The floor was covered with a heavy carpet, which deadened the sound of Oscar Bode's movements, permitting only a faint "slush-slush" to break the stillness of the room.

The walls were of a sombre dignity, and over the wide, deeply-recessed window-place there had been drawn heavy curtains. Rather partial to subdued tones, Mr. Oscar Bode had turned on the single large electric table-lamp which stood on a beautiful centre table, and outside the penumbra of the light the room was wrapped in soft shadows, which were restful to the eyes.

Just past the window recess, and in the corner nearest the bed, was a half-open door, through which one could just catch a glimpse of white tiles and polished nickel. It was the bathroom.

Bode, now almost ready for bed, glanced at the electric clock which had been set in the wall over the mantelpiece, then, yawning again, he took up a heavy cigarette-case which lay on the table. Lighting a cigarette, he went round the table, and started shuffling along towards the door of the bathroom.

He paused once to glance at a little silver travelling-clock, apparently to see if it agreed with the larger timepiece overhead, then he continued on his way.

He had just reached the heavy curtains which covered the window embrasure, and was in the very act of yawning again, when suddenly, and without a sound, a hand, covered with a grey suede glove, was thrust out from between the curtains. Oscar Bode's shoulder was less than twelve inches from that hand as it protruded.

One more step he took, his jaws opening wider and wider with the yawn, then in the gloved hand something flashed, and the next instant something long and sharp was plunged into the thick flesh of Oscar Bode's right shoulder.

He did not even finish his yawn. With gross jaws still agape, with heavy jowls hanging flabbily, and with eyes that saw not, Oscar Bode went down without emitting a sound, thudding softly upon the thick carpet.

Silence, heavy, oppressive silence, followed. The gloved hand was withdrawn behind the curtains; not a movement took place behind them—just that heavy, almost sickening silence hanging over the room, with the huddled-up, gaping thing on the floor, sprawled out, with one arm bent under him, and his mouth drooling over the low-hanging fringe of a deep easy chair.

And through it all the little silver clock ticked merrily on.

CHAPTER IV.

Nelson Lee Accepts a Case Unwillingly—First Steps.

"I AM sorry, Varden, but if this man Oscar Bode is the man whom I think he is, I honestly do not care about taking the case."

Nelson Lee leaned back in his chair and puffed slowly at his cigarette, smiling slightly at the worried look on the face of Varden, the manager of the Venetia.

"It is impossible for a man of my profession to prevent mixing in undesirable cases at times, but it would be just a little incongruous for me to take up a case in the interests of a man like Oscar Bode."

"But what is the matter with him, Lee?" asked Varden quickly. "Of course, we cannot profess to know the records of all those who come to stay here at the Venetia, and naturally a big hotel of this sort must get a certain number of persons whose lives are—er—somewhat shady. At the same time, I, as manager of the hotel, am responsible to a certain extent for the welfare of those staying here, and also for any property they may have with them. I do not ask you to take the case for Oscar Bode, though he is willing to pay the costs of the affair, but I do ask you to take the case for the hotel company."

Lee nodded slowly.

"I quite see your point, Varden," he said. "And considering all things, I feel inclined to consent. You have always granted me every facility in your power, and myself I have a keen affection for the Venetia. But tell me in detail what you know of the matter, and then I shall decide."

"There is very little to tell you, Lee," responded Varden. "I will tell you all that Oscar Bode has told me, then, if you feel that you would care to take up the case, we can go up to his room to see him."

"It seems that he has come over to England as agent for John P. Allis, the New York millionaire. Allis is one of the newest of the new crop of millionaires, and, like a good many of them, he has decided to spend some of his wealth in art treasures. At any rate, he has sent Bode over here, as I told you. It seems that a famous old Corot has just come on the market,

and John P. Allis thought it would be a gem for his collection. The picture was secured by Isaac Grinwold, whom, of course, you know."

"I know him well," said Lee. "He is one of the real connoisseurs. But proceed, please, Varden."

"Allis found out that Grinwold had this Corot, and got in touch with him. Then he appointed Oscar Bode to come over and examine the picture. If he, Bode, approved it, and if Grinwold was willing to guarantee it as a genuine Corot, Allis was prepared to pay Grinwold's price, which, Bode tells me, was forty thousand pounds. Yesterday, Oscar Bode went to Grinwold's place off Bond Street, and saw the picture. It was all that it had been represented to be, and while he was there he settled the business, giving Grinwold the draft for forty thousand pounds, and receiving the picture as well as any documents in the matter. The picture was rolled up by Grinwold, and Bode brought it away with him. If he had then done what he should have done, things would have been all right."

"You mean?"

"I mean that with a picture in his possession worth forty thousand pounds, he should have put it in the hotel safe. But he didn't. He thought no one knew about it, and that it would be quite safe locked up in his trunk. So he took it to his room. That was early in the day. Last evening he dined here, and went on to the theatre. Afterwards he had supper here, and retired to his room about half-past twelve. Then the picture was quite all right, for he opened his trunk to see.

"He began to get ready for bed, and when he was about half-undressed he started for the bathroom, which adjoins the bedroom. He can remember getting about half-way to the door, but that is all. The next he remembers is some time during the early hours of this morning.

"He came to and found himself lying on the floor between the window and the centre table. His first thought was that he had been seized by some sort of fainting-fit, but then when he had collected himself somewhat he saw that his trunk was wide open.

"It was only a very short step from that to the discovery that the Corot had been stolen. He rang his bell, and when the night porter answered it he came to me, telling that one of the guests was in a state of great agitation. I went to him, heard his story, and then rang you up at once.

"For myself, I trust the matter may be kept from the papers, for such a thing would hurt the hotel severely did it become public. That, Lee, is as much as I know."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"I am prepared to look into the matter, Varden," he said, "not for Oscar Bode, but for you, though if we are able to get the picture back, then Oscar Bode must pay my charges, and because he is Oscar Bode I shall see that he pays well."

"What do you know about him, Lee?" asked Varden.

Lee shrugged.

"It could do no good to tell you," he replied. "If you do not know of the man, then let it pass; but if he is the Oscar Bode I mean, then—well, as I said, I have no interest in helping him recover his property, and if I do he shall pay well for it.

"But come, Varden, let us go up to his room and see what he has to say."

They moved out into the corridor leading from Varden's private room to the lobby, and made their way to the lift. When Varden knocked on a door half-way down the corridor on the first floor, a feeble, high treble bade them enter, and Varden opened the door, to reveal Oscar Bode in

bed. It was still very early in the morning—scarcely seven o'clock—and the heavy curtains were drawn over the window recess as they had been the night before. The electric lamp still burned on the centre table, and in his first swift scrutiny of the room Nelson Lee could see little wrong. Varden made to draw the curtains to let in the early morning light, but Lee made a gesture for him to desist.

"Leave everything as it is for the present," he said curtly. "Let us first talk with Mr. Bode."

They approached the bed, and in a few words Varden introduced Nelson Lee to Bode. It was significant that Lee merely bowed, not offering to shake hands. Bode was a woeful-looking sight. Gross enough at any time, he now looked as though some terribly-powerful drug had scorched his interior, leaving the outer shell purple and mottle—as, indeed, was the case, though he did not know it then.

"Mr. Lee," he began, in his high voice, "I have sent for you to help me. One of the most valuable pictures extant has been stolen from me. I——"

Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"Hold on, Mr. Bode," he said, breaking in sharply. "I have heard the outline of the story from Mr. Varden. I have told him that on certain considerations I am prepared to accept this case, but before we go any further in the matter, it will be best if you hear my conditions."

Bode nodded and waited.

"Firstly," went on Lee, "I must have an entirely free hand. I always work in my own fashion and at my own speed. Secondly, if I do succeed in finding the picture which you say has been stolen from you, then I shall expect you to pay me as a fee five per cent of the value of the picture plus all my expenses. If those terms are agreeable to you, then I should like to ask you some questions. If not, well"—and Lee finished with a shrug.

"Five per cent. of the value of the Corot would be two thousand pounds," remarked Bode. "Very well, Mr. Lee, I am prepared to meet your terms."

Lee bowed slightly and went on:

"Very well. Now, please, answer the questions I shall put to you as clearly and concisely as possible. How long have you been in London, Mr. Bode?"

"A little over a day and a half."

"You came here only in order to purchase the Corot?"

"Yes."

"I understand from Mr. Varden that you came as the agent of John P. Allis, of New York?"

"That is right."

"Will you tell me on what terms?"

"Certainly. I came over here with a draft for forty thousand pounds. If on examination the Corot proved what it was represented to be, then I was to pay over the draft to the dealer here and collect the picture. You know of Grinwold, the dealer, of course?"

Lee nodded.

"Yes, one of the cleverest men in the trade."

"And his word about a picture is accepted all over the world," put in Bode. "But as I told you, I saw the picture and it was all right. Yesterday I took delivery of it and paid over the money. When I got back to New York I was to receive a commission of five per cent. on the deal plus my expenses—exactly what you yourself are demanding to find it, Mr. Lee. I should have insured the picture to-day, but I did not think it was necessary before I sailed, and of course, we can collect nothing on the loss."

"In that case, if we fail to find it, Mr. John P. Allis will stand to lose over forty thousand pounds?"

"Exactly."

"He will, I suppose, be angry with you?"

Bode raised his hands.

"Good heavens! If the picture is not found I shall never dare to face him again," he cried.

"I heard that an old Corot had come to light," went on Lee. "Which one was it?"

"It was a woodland subject, painted near Mortefontaine," replied Bode.

"Ah! Then it was worth the price you mentioned," murmured Lee. "That was the Corot of which I heard. So it was to go to New York, was it, Mr. Bode? The Americans seem to be getting hold of some of the finest gems for their collections. I do not wonder that you are upset about it. Now, let us go on."

"You say that yesterday you took delivery of the picture and brought it here to the hotel with you?"

"Yes."

"To your knowledge, did anyone in London know why you had come over from New York?"

"Not a soul but Grinwold, the dealer, and he is a man who would never breathe it."

"I quite agree with you. You are sure that you yourself have not talked even a little?"

"I have not said a word about it."

"So, as far as you know, only yourself and John Grinwold in London knew why you were here?"

"Yes."

"At what time did you go to see Grinwold yesterday?"

"Before noon."

"Was there anyone else there?"

"I did not see anyone except a girl whom Grinwold employs."

"You do not think anyone shadowed you?"

"That I cannot tell."

"And you came directly back to the Venetia?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Varden says that when you made to retire last night you found that the picture was still safe—is that so?"

"Yes. I had supper downstairs and came up here about half an hour after midnight. My first act was to open the trunk and look inside. Then the picture was safe enough."

"Did you relock the trunk?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with the keys?"

"I put them back in the pocket of my trousers."

"Then what happened?"

"I had removed my coat, waistcoat, tie, and evening-shirt, and was going into the bathroom to wash, when I must have dropped to the floor. It was the strangest thing that ever happened to me in my life. I remember distinctly starting for the bathroom. I remember passing along between the window and the table, and then everything is a blank until I woke up in the early hours of this morning. I found myself lying in a very cramped position just between the window and the table."

"How did you feel?"

"My head ached atrociously and I felt a strong nausea."

"You do not look very well this morning either. Have you any theory of your own? Do you think you were attacked? Do you think there was anyone in the room?"

"I do not see how there could have been, and I didn't feel anything, so I couldn't have been attacked. All I can imagine is that in some way I must have been drugged during the evening, and the drug did not take effect till I had reached my room. As soon as my wits had returned to me my first thought was of the picture. I crawled over to the trunk. It was still locked, all right, and I found the keys in the pocket of my trousers where I had placed them."

"But to make sure I opened the trunk and found the picture gone. I could scarcely believe my eyes; but I searched the trunk thoroughly and there was no doubt about what had happened. While I lay unconscious on the floor someone had taken the keys from my pocket, had opened the trunk, taken out the picture, and replaced the keys in my pocket. That is absolutely all I know about the matter."

Nelson Lee rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

When Varden had telephoned to Gray's Inn Road and had asked him to come on to the Venetia at once, Lee had naturally lost no time in doing so. He knew that a message of that sort would not come from Varden unless there were something of importance behind it. But when he had reached the Venetia to discover that the man who wished him to take the case was not Varden, but one Oscar Bode, he had demurred.

Not that Lee had ever met Oscar Bode personally. He had not, but he had heard a good deal about the promoter and remembered the spectacular smash in Belgium when one of Bode's railway promotions went to pieces.

Lee, like the police of a good many cities, knew that Oscar Bode was a crook, but also that he had been clever enough to keep within the strict letter of the law. That is the unfortunate part of the complicated system of laws as they stand at present. If a man is cunning enough—if he knows just how far he may go with impunity, he still may prey upon his fellows and go scot free, though morally he may be as guilty as the clumsy performer whom one may see in the dock any day.

Therefore, Lee had no desire to have anything to do with Bode, except to tackle a case wherein there might be a chance of pinning Bode down to a definite breach of the law. But then, when he discovered that it was the famous Corot which had been stolen, the professional instinct gripped him, and he decided to go after it. How a man like Bode had managed to get the confidence of a man like John P. Allis, Lee could not fathom.

But got it he had, and to the tune of forty thousand pounds. Also, Lee felt certain in his own mind that in some way Bode's cunning nature had seen a bigger profit in the deal than the 5 per cent. commission which he was to have collected from Allis.

Little did he dream how Bode had schemed, nor did he guess for a single moment that the case, which on the face of it was to assist Bode, was in reality to give him the very opening he desired. But now, as he turned from the bed and walked towards the centre of the room, John P. Allis, Oscar Bode and Isaac Grinwold, all passed from his mind.

He was concentrating on just one thing, and that was the Corot. He was the highly trained human bloodhound on the scent, and for the time being was oblivious to everything else. He paused just by the table and, turning, said to Bode:

"Where were you when you started for the bathroom?"

Bode lifted his arm and indicated a spot on the carpet.

"I had been standing just there," he replied. Lee moved across to the

spot and stood facing the door of the bathroom. To his right was the window recess still covered by the heavy curtains. On his left was the centre table with the electric lamp alight.

A little farther on was the deep armchair against which Bode had been lying when he came to. Then straight on was the half open door of the bathroom. To the left and a little behind him was the bed, beyond which, was the door leading out into the main corridor. On the other side of the table and facing the foot of the bed was the fire-place. Lee spoke again.

"I am going to walk on slowly," he said. "I want you to call out to me when I have reached the spot where you fell. Try to mark it as exactly as possible."

With that he began to walk slowly ahead. He passed the table and most of the first curtain which hung over the window recess. He was just at the point where it joined the second and opposite the armchair, when Bode called out.

"It was just there," he said in his peculiar treble, "a little nearer the window curtains. That is the spot."

Lee stood still and turned his head slowly. He squinted at the table, then the armchair, and finally brought his gaze to rest on the window curtains. Still keeping his heels on the same spot, he pivoted slightly and thrust his hand between the heavy curtains. As he lifted one of them, the deep recess behind became revealed, and after a cursory examination of it, Lee dropped the curtain.

Suddenly he took hold of the curtains again, drew them apart sharply, and then snapped out the light on the table. Immediately the whole appearance of the room was changed. Daylight streamed in through the window, finding its way into every nook and cranny in the room. Bode, who had looked not so bad under the artificial light, now showed up badly, his whole face covered with purple blotches. Still moving briskly, Lee walked over to the bed and bent over him.

"I want you to remove the jacket of your pyjamas and turn over on your left side, Mr. Bode," he said curtly.

Varden hastened to assist, and a few seconds later Bode's fat shoulder lay exposed. Lee turned him over a little more, then taking out his powerful pocket-glass, he bent still closer. Up and down and across the shoulder he worked with the glass, until at last he came to a pause just over the tiniest of tiny marks. It would have been almost impossible to distinguish it with the naked eye, but under the magnifying power of the glass it showed up as a tiny purplish stain. Lee gazed at it for a few seconds, then he straightened up.

"You were stabbed with a very, very fine hypodermic, Mr. Bode," he said. "The man who did it was here in the room when you came up to retire. It may have been his intention to wait until you had got into bed. It was possibly your passing so closely to the curtains that inspired him to stab you when he did."

"Whatever his intentions, however, he managed to do it neatly, for he stood just there where the curtains join, and the drug he used was pampasine. Your whole appearance indicates pampasine poisoning. The drug, while not fatal, causes instant and complete coma for several hours, and nothing works more swiftly."

"So rapidly it is diffused throughout the system, that the nerve centres are completely paralysed. That is why you did not feel anything when the needle entered your body."

There came a knock at the door at this moment, and Varden opened it to admit a small, bespectacled man, carrying the regulation doctor's bag.

It was Creighton, the doctor engaged by the Venetia for its guests, and, warning Oscar Bode to do nothing or say nothing about the robbery until he saw him again, Lee signed for Varden to follow him from the room.

In Varden's office once more, Lee asked to see the hotel register of guests. A clerk brought it from the office, and with extreme care Lee studied the list of arrivals and departures for several days past. It yielded little. In fact, Lee hardly expected that it would.

A hotel register is not much of a guide at best, for the simple reason that if a crook bears a name well known to the police he changes it to one of his numerous aliases. He saw Bode's name there, and among the others was the name of "James Duane," which told Lee nothing. He closed the book, and, handing it back to Varden, said:

"I hardly know what to make of this affair yet, Varden. I think somehow it was an inside job. The man who stood behind those curtains and jabbed Bode with a hypodermic needle, must have been staying here at the time. One reason why I deduce this is the fact that he knew so well where Bode's room was situated. Had he come in from the outside he would hardly have been able to pick his time as he did. But as a guest in the hotel he could keep track of Bode's every move.

"He could watch him by day and evening as well. Then, when he saw him safely ensconced in the supper room last night, it would not be a very difficult matter for him to go up in the lift to his own room and down by the stairs to Bode's room. Moreover, the man who did the job knew also why Bode was in London. Bode swears that, beyond himself and Isaac Grinwold, not a soul knew why he was here. On that basis, it would seem that Isaac Grinwold was the only one whom we could suspect.

"But I don't agree with Bode. A treasure like the long-lost Corot is not the sort of thing to escape the attention of some of the cleverest art thieves in the country. It was bound to leak out that John P. Allis intended buying it, and from that it would not be a very difficult step to the discovery that Oscar Bode had been chosen to come to Europe and take delivery of it.

"Why Allis should pick a man like Bode is a mystery to me. I fancy the fellow is an art expert all right, but Allis must have been in ignorance of his past record. There is another hypothesis which I shall follow up."

"What is that?" asked Varden.

"I will tell you, but you must not breathe a word of it, Varden?" responded Lee. "I speak of the possibility of Oscar Bode being himself concerned in the theft of the Corot. Myself, I think the whole thing a little crude, though, for that. If he were going to double-cross Allis, then I think he would have done it differently.

"However, the next step is to go on and see Isaac Grinwold. I may pick up one or two ideas there. But first I shall ask you to telephone to Nipper, and ask him to come on to the Venetia at once. I shall wait for him in the lobby."

Varden nodded, and turned to the desk telephone, while Lee lit a cigarette and strolled out to the lounge. Seating himself at a corner table he ordered a drink, and, smoking idly, watched the hurry and scurry of people about him. The Venetia was about full up at the time, and the lobby was packed. There were all nationalities, and in the throngs about him Nelson Lee recognised more than one diplomat, more than one wealthy captain of industry, more than one well-known actress, and even more than one crook.

Yet of these latter whom he recognised, he knew that it was practically impossible that they could have had any hand in the attack on Bode and

the robbery of the Corot. Their "work" was of a different nature, and it is rarely indeed that a crook branches off into a different line than the one in which he has specialised. That way leads to disaster, and the average crook knows it.

They were but minor possibilities at best, and, while Lee would keep an eye on them, he would direct his chief energies elsewhere. A page had just come to tell him that Varden had put his message through to Nipper, when Lee suddenly sat up and shot a keen glance in the direction of two men who had just passed through the lobby in the direction of the bar.

One of them was a tall, leanly-built young man, with the tan of the seven seas upon his face and the easy manner of the cosmopolitan. He was dressed in the latest Bond Street cut, and carried himself as though he hadn't a care in the world. His companion, however, was of an entirely different type. Even the most casual observer would have known him to hail from the United States.

His clothes were of the ready-made, much-advertised, weirdly-fashioned sort, which a certain class of Americans favour. They were of a loud check in pattern, and on his feet he wore brown shoes, with high, bulging toes—of all footgear the most atrocious parody ever conceived. His hat was a small, round, grey felt pulled down in the front.

Even at quite a little distance Nelson Lee could see the glitter of a large diamond in his shirt-front, and the gleam of another on his hand. And, moreover, Nelson Lee knew the man. He recognised him at first glance as "Diamond Charlie," a New York crook of the first water, and one of the slickest men who ever baffled the police of five cities. Lee lit a cigar, and, chewing the end of it, reflected.

"Diamond Charlie," he muttered. "It might be just possible that he planned this Bode job. It is in his line all right. But I didn't see his name on the register. I'll just beckon the waiter and find out if he is staying here."

Suiting the action to the word, he beckoned to the man who had served him, and, before "Diamond Charlie" had disappeared into the bar, called the waiter's attention to him.

"See that man, George?" he asked casually.

The waiter nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Lee."

"Do you know him?"

"No, sir, I don't; but I do know he is staying here."

"You might find out his name for me, George, and, by the way, do it quietly."

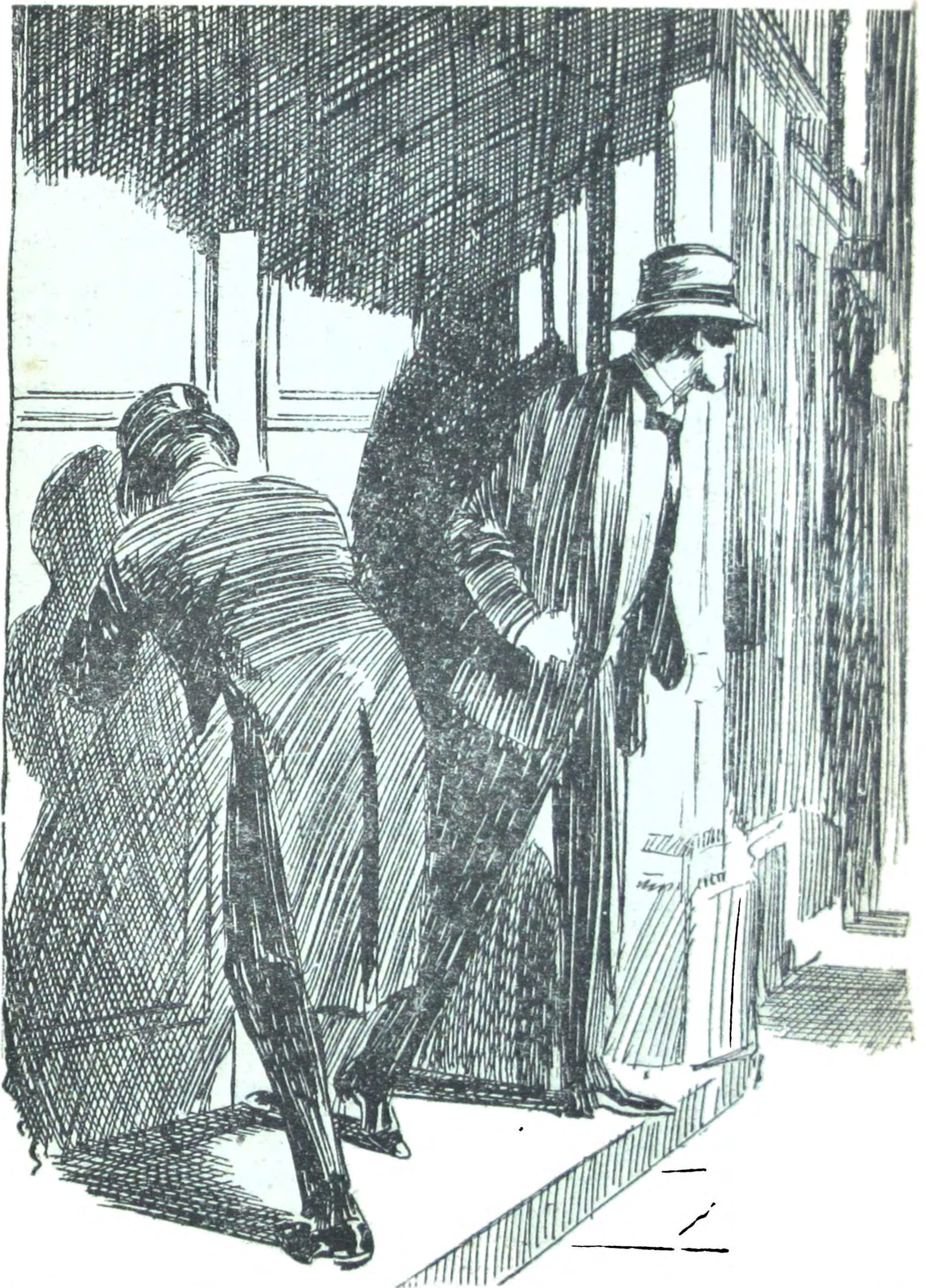
"Certainly, Mr. Lee. I'll be back in two minutes."

The waiter was true to his word, for almost to the moment he returned, and, bending down as though to wipe the top of Lee's table, he whispered:

"His name is Chester, Mr. Lee, and he comes from New York."

"Thanks," nodded Lee. "I had an idea I knew him. So 'Diamond Charlie' is running under the name of Chester," he murmured, as the waiter moved away. "Now I wonder if he has had any hand in this Bode matter? And the other fellow with him. His face seemed strangely familiar to me. I wonder where I have seen him?"

Slowly and methodically Lee probed back into the past, groping for the idea which would give him the association he sought. Something about the young man spoke of the sea, the wind, and the wide spaces. Where and how had Lee met him? Not even when he finally rose and sauntered towards the bar had he been able to recall the young fellow's name, and it was the other's attitude at the bar itself which gave Lee the idea he sought.



Nelson Lee Turns Burglar.—(See p. 30.)

The two men in whom he was so interested were standing at the bar in the act of drinking. "Diamond Charlie" was passed over for the moment, and Lee's keen gaze took in his companion. Then suddenly, as he saw the little finger of the hand which held the glass stick out, as he noticed how long and supple it was, and as he observed the extraordinary length of the finger-nail, he got the clue he sought.

"A gambler," he murmured to himself as he sat down at a table. "A gambler! Now where was it? Ah! I have you placed now, my friend. You are Duane—Duane, who used to work the trans-Atlantic with 'The Baron.' And, if I remember rightly, I also saw you in the East."

"Duane—anyway, you are apparently passing under your own name, for now I remember that there was a 'James Duane' in the hotel register. 'Diamond Charlie,' crook, and Duane, gambler, both staying here, and apparently friendly. I wonder what it means? I wonder if they did have a hand in that matter. At any rate, it will do no harm to keep an eye on them. Ah, there is Nipper! He is just the one for the job."

He rose then as he saw the lad pass the entrance to the bar, and a few moments later Nipper had been posted off to his new work.

CHAPTER V.

Nipper Does Some Good Work—The Mystery of the Miniatures.

WHILE Nelson Lee went off to see Isaac Grinwold, Nipper kept the trail of Jimmy Duane and "Diamond Charlie." Ten minutes after Lee had departed, Nipper was placed in a quandary, for "Diamond Charlie" ensconced himself at a small table in the bar, as though preparing to remain for some time, while Jimmy Duane took his leave.

Nipper only hesitated for a moment, then, deciding that it would be the wiser course to follow the one who was leaving, he passed out to the street just in time to see Jimmy Duane climb into a taxi. In five seconds he had discovered from the commissionaire what address had been given by Duane to his driver, and in ten he was spinning off after the other taxi.

The chase was not a long one, and certainly the leading taxi did not act as though it were trying to escape detection. Down Piccadilly they went, then across the Circus and into Shaftesbury Avenue. From there the leading taxi turned into Soho, and Nipper's eyes flickered with interest when he saw it draw up in front of a pawnbroker's.

Jimmy Duane descended and entered, leaving his taxi at the kerb. From a point of vantage further down the street Nipper kept watch. Ten minutes passed, fifteen, before Jimmy Duane appeared. When he did so he was walking jauntily, and smoking a cigar.

"He looks as though he had succeeded in what he went there for," muttered Nipper, as he watched him.

Then, leaning forward, he signalled his own driver to follow the other taxi again. A child of six could have followed that trail, for it led from Soho back to Shaftesbury Avenue and thence to the Venetia, where Jimmy Duane descended and paid off his man. Nipper followed him into the bar, where he saw "Diamond Charlie" still sitting. Jimmy Duane joined the other, and, almost at the same moment, Nelson Lee appeared once more. From outside the bar he signalled for Nipper to join him in the lobby. When the lad had done so, Lee shot out the single word:

"Well?"

Briefly Nipper related what he had seen and done, and when he had finished Lee knit his brows in puzzlement.

"It doesn't seem likely that a man occupying a suite at the Venetia would find it necessary to visit a pawnshop in order to raise a loan—unless, of course, he were four-flushing," he muttered. "It would seem much more likely that he might be trying to dispose of some crook stuff; but, on the other hand, you say he went to Sternberg's. That lets the last theory out, for Sternberg, while cute enough, is not the man to fool with shady stuff."

"I must confess I am in a quandary, my lad. I think the best thing we can do is to pay a visit to Sternberg's ourselves. If he refuses to talk—well, there is one little thing in which Sternberg dabbled, and of which I know, that may loosen his tongue. Let us go now, for I think we shall have a fairly busy evening. Then we can come back here to lunch, and incidentally keep our eyes on the wary birds we are interested in."

A little later Sternberg, the little Jew pawnbroker, looked up with a frown to find Nelson Lee and Nipper facing him across the counter.

"Well, Mr. Sternberg," said Lee pleasantly, "and how do you find business?"

The pawnbroker spread out his hands.

"Pizness—pizness," he said, in a sing-song tone, "there is no such thing. You are a customer, Mr. Lee? If you are, you are the first one to-day."

"I thought you and I knew one another well enough to do away with all this sort of bluff," said Lee, as he lit a cigarette. "Anyway, Sternberg, I have not come as a customer. I neither wish to buy nor sell. But you are going to give me something, and since it is only information, it will not give you the pain it might should I ask for something of a more material nature."

"Information, Mr. Lee," cried the Jew. "What information can poor old Sternberg give you?"

"I don't know yet," said Lee slowly. "But I will tell you what it has to do with. It has to do with a young man who entered here less than three-quarters of an hour ago. I speak of a tall young man with a very tanned face, well dressed, and with the manners of a cosmopolitan. He remained here about a quarter of an hour, Sternberg. Now, would you mind telling me what he wanted?"

"I know nothing of the young man of whom you speak," cried the pawnbroker—"I know nothing. There was no young man in here to-day."

"That is a lie," said Lee quietly. "I am asking you once more, Sternberg. Will you tell me what he wanted?"

"How can I tell you what I don't know?" said the Jew surlily. "I know nothing."

With scarcely a twist of the body, Lee's arm shot out, and his long, powerful fingers gripped the Jew's wrist like steel. He pulled the Jew towards him, then he bent closer.

"See here, Sternberg, drop this bluffing. The young man of whom I spoke was in here to-day, for my assistant, Nipper, followed him here. Now, you had better unloosen what you know or else—well, you remember the little lot of Chinese jade which you had some time ago!"

As Lee spoke of the matter which gave him a hold over the Jew, as he brought up the time when Sternburg tried to bring off a crooked deal and failed, the pawnbroker lifted trembling lips and said hoarsely:

"Not that, Mr. Lee. Let go of my wrist and I will tell you all you want to know."

Lee at once released his grip and went on coolly puffing his cigarette.

"Very well, then, hurry up," he said. "And if you will take my advice you will not try to palm off any fairy tale on us. What did he want?"

Sternberg drew back out of reach of Lee's arm and said shakily:

"I never saw the young man before, I swear. He came in here and asked for the address of a young lady who has been coming to me for some time. I have taken most of the things she has brought, and I have given her far, far more than their worth."

"That is likely," put in Lee. "However, go on. What about her?"

"Only what I have told you. Yesterday she came to me with a private collection of miniatures. They were very nice—very nice indeed, but not of well-known persons, and not of interest for a private collector. I could not offer her the sum she wanted for them, and she went away, taking them with her."

"This young man appeared here to-day and asked for her name. He also wished to know what she was trying to dispose of. I told him, and before he left he persuaded me to write to the young lady and make her a cash offer for the miniatures. He left the money with me, so I did as he wished."

"Did you offer as much as she asked for them?" demanded Lee.

"I did. I offered about double as much."

"That doesn't seem like you, Sternberg," remarked Lee. "Where does your profit come in?"

The other looked as though he would like to refrain from answering, but one look at Lee's eyes inspired him to go on.

"I—I he has given me a lump sum to put the deal through," he said hesitatingly.

"How much?" snapped Lee.

"Twenty-five pounds."

"Scott! He must have wanted those miniatures pretty badly," he muttered with a whistle. "How much is he offering for them?"

"A hundred pounds."

"How much are they really worth?"

"It all depends. At the present time they might fetch forty pounds—certainly not more. Their value would be about sixty or seventy."

"And yet he offers a hundred. When did you send the letter containing the offer?"

"A little while ago. I sent it by special messenger, and I expect an answer at any moment."

As though in order to prove Sternberg a teller of the truth and not a liar, the front door of the shop opened at that moment to admit a messenger boy, accompanied by a girl. The boy carried a small parcel under his arm; but, on seeing that the pawnbroker was occupied, he stopped near the door, the girl waiting with him.

Nelson Lee shot a swift meaning glance at Sternberg, and the latter nodded ever so slightly. Then aloud the Jew said:

"Very well, sir, I shall think it over. In the meantime you might wait in my private office."

With a glance in the direction of the messenger boy and the girl, he led the way to the back of the shop and opened a door which revealed a small, littered room. Into this he ushered Lee and Nipper, leaving the door slightly ajar as he went out. From this point of vantage they could see and hear all that went on in the shop, and a few seconds later they heard a clear young voice, with just the trace of a French accent, say:

"When your letter came, Mr. Sternberg, I could not understand it, so I came on myself. I cannot understand why you should offer such a large sum

for the miniatures when only yesterday you refused less than half of that amount."

"My dear young lady," said Sternberg, in most oily tones, "to-day is not yesterday. Yesterday I had no market for such things, but to-day a customer comes in and demands miniatures. I am a thoughtful man, my dear young lady, and I at once thought of you. I said I know where there are miniatures, beautiful miniatures, but the price may be high. The gentleman assured me that he would trust to my judgment and pay what I thought right. So I told him they might be bought for a hundred pounds, and that he agreed to. Therefore the letter, my dear young lady."

"But—but," faltered the girl, "it doesn't seem right. You yourself said even in a good market they would not bring more than a few pounds. I wish to sell them, but I do not wish more than they are worth."

And Nelson Lee, gazing out through the crack in the door, saw her draw herself up proudly. He saw, too, that Sternberg was smiling at her.

"It is not to worry about that," he said. "Let us say that because I could not buy them from you I perhaps did not look at them carefully enough. If the gentleman will pay the price I should strongly advise taking it. If you have brought the miniatures with you, then I can give you the money at once."

The girl hesitated for a little; then, no doubt because she thought of the lonely old woman back in Bloomsbury, she yielded.

"I have brought them," she said, in a low tone, and beckoned to the messenger boy.

Lee saw Sternberg unwrap the parcel and take out six miniatures of varying sizes. The pawnbroker examined them, each one closely, then nodded with satisfaction and thrust his hand into his pocket.

He counted out a hundred pounds in notes, which he handed over to the girl, asking her then to fill in a receipt for the money. She did so with a trembling hand; then, placing the money in a shabby little reticule, she turned to go. No sooner had the door closed after her than Lee turned to Nipper and hissed:

"After her, my lad. Don't wait to get the address from Sternberg. Find out all you can about her circumstances."

Nipper slipped from the private room and flashed along the shop after the girl. Lee made his way out more leisurely to find Sternberg bending over the miniatures.

"It is a mystery to me," he said, as Lee approached. "They are certainly not worth a hundred pounds."

Lee took up one of them and gazed at it. It was the portrait of a young and very beautiful woman. She was dressed in the gorgeous costume of the French court of the pleasure-mad Louis, and, while the miniature was well done, it was by no means a masterpiece.

Worth perhaps ten or twelve pounds at most, thought Lee, as he handed it back and took up another. One by one he examined them, finding in each case that Sternberg was right. They were not of great value. Then why should Jimmy Duane, whom Lee knew as a gambler of the seven seas, pay not only a hundred pounds for them, but a commission of twenty-five pounds to Sternberg as well?

There could be only one explanation of it. He must have some very strong personal interest in the girl.

"Who was she?"

Swiftly he turned and asked the question. For answer, the pawnbroker took a notebook from his pocket and thumbed over the pages until he came to one with a single address written on it.

"Her name is Namon," he said—"Mademoiselle Rosalie Namon, and she lives at 22, Smith Street, Bloomsbury. She is French, I think."

"Without a doubt," said Lee. "Namon—Namon," he repeated over and over. "Somehow I seem to have heard that name before. Do you know anything about her, Sternberg? Come, man, tell the truth if you do."

The pawnbroker shook his head and earnestly denied that he knew aught of the girl. And something in his manner told Lee that he was telling the truth.

"Look here, Sternberg," he said, "for certain reasons I want you to keep this to yourself. I may come to see you again, or I may not, but in any event I do not want you to talk. If you do as I ask, then you have nothing to fear. By the way, what name did the young man give?"

"Duane—James Duane," replied the pawnbroker promptly.

"He seems to make no effort to conceal his identity," thought Lee. Then aloud: "Did he ask you to keep his name from the knowledge of the girl?" Sternberg nodded.

"Yes, he did; and, moreover, he said if I failed to do so the deal was off."

"All right," said Lee, as he prepared to depart. "Just remember what I have said, Sternberg, and if he turns up make no reference to my visit."

After leaving the pawnshop, Lee secured a taxi and posted off to the Venetia, where he had a short interview with Varden and where afterwards he lunched. Then, leaving a message with Varden for Nipper to come on at once to Gray's Inn Road to report, in case he should turn up at the Venetia, Lee drove to his own house. And all the time he was repeating to himself that name:

"'Namon.' If it has ever been very prominently before me, then the 'Case Index' will surely show it," he muttered, as he entered the consulting-room.

He went first to the big bookcase in the corner, and ran his hand along the shelf until he came to a red volume marked "From M-R." This he took down, and, opening it, turned the leaves until he came to "N"—"Na," and there he ran his eyes down column after column until suddenly there seemed to leap at him from the page the name he sought—"Namon, Count Phillipe of France." And the following particulars followed:

"Count Phillipe Namon of France, a member of one of the oldest families of the French nobility, committed suicide on the 10th day of June, 19—, owing to great financial losses. The cause of his financial ruin was due to heavy investments in the companies promoted by Oscar Bode, the German-Belgian promoter and financier.

"Count Phillipe Namon possessed a large chateau and estate in the South of France, not far from the Rhone, and it was here, while in residence, that he committed suicide. He left a wife and one child, a girl. The estate was taken by the creditors, and rumour has it that the wife and child were forced to go out into the world almost penniless.

"Note.—This is the third time that the man, Oscar Bode, has come before the public in a disreputable manner. Follow up this man's career."

That was all, but it was sufficient to give Nelson Lee cause to think. Replacing the book in the bookcase he went across to the desk, and, taking up a piece of paper, began to write. He was busy for some minutes, and when he had finished his notes read something as follows:

"Called to the Venetia by Varden in order to clear up mystery of robbery

which took place there last night. Discovered that victim of robbery was one Oscar Bode, whose own record is far from good.

"It seems evident that someone, the thief, concealed himself behind the curtains which hung over the window recess in Bode's bedroom, and, when Bode passed there, he reached out with a hypodermic of some description and stabbed Bode in the shoulder with it, causing a quantity of the powerful drug known as pampasine to enter his blood.

"He then took Bode's keys from his pocket, and, opening the trunk, removed a picture which Bode claims was a very valuable Corot, for which he had paid forty thousand pounds to Isaac Grinwold—Bode acting as agent for John P. Allis, the New York millionaire.

"Note.—This Corot certainly has come to light recently.

"Query.—Was Bode really the accredited agent of John P. Allis, and, if so, how did it come that a man like Allis trusted him on such an important mission where he had carte blanche with such a large amount of money?

"Note.—Cable New York agent to look into this.

"The next phase of the case brings in two men whose characters are not any better than Bode's. One, 'Diamond Charlie,' the New York crook, is quite capable of stealing the Corot. He might have heard in New York that Bode was coming over to London to buy the Corot for Allis, and may have followed him in order to steal it.

"The other man, James Duane, is somewhat of a mystery, and there enters the most mysterious phase of the whole affair. It seems that Duane has just returned to London. For some reason he goes to a pawnshop and there persuades the pawnbroker to make an offer of a hundred pounds for some miniatures that are not worth more than sixty. He also pays the pawnbroker twenty-five pounds in order to be sure it is carried out.

"It develops that the persons from whom he buys the miniatures are called 'Namon,' and it was Count Phillipe Namon who committed suicide some years ago after being utterly ruined by the same Oscar Bode who is staying at the Venetia. That is certainly a very curious thing.

"The girl who called at the pawnshop was French—likewise a lady. It is very possible that she is the daughter whom Count Phillipe left behind him. If that is so, then where does this fellow Duane come in? He is at the hotel where Bode is staying; he inspired me with the thought that he might have had a hand in the robbery.

"Then I discover that he appears to be trying to financially help the Namons without being known in the affair. The Namons may prove to be the widow and daughter of Count Phillipe Namon, and, if that be true, then once more does it bring up the name of Oscar Bode. I wonder if there is something deeper afoot than the robbery of this Corot?

"I wonder if it is only mere coincidence that Duane should be staying at the same hotel with Bode, and that he should be helping the Namons? It strikes me as a little too much for mere coincidence to answer for. And, that being so, then where does that man, 'Diamond Charlie,' come in?

"Is it possible that Oscar Bode, Duane, and 'Diamond Charlie' are playing some game together? Might the robbery of the picture from Bode be but a well-planned affair? If it is, then it was done crudely. Yet forty thousand pounds is a sum to tempt a good many men, and the picture could easily be disposed of. At the same time, there is another point to consider.

"When I went to see Isaac Grinwold this morning I was not at all satisfied with the way in which he rose to the fly.

"Note.—Devote further attention to Isaac Grinwold, then endeavour to bring the threads together at the Venetia."

As Lee finished reading over what he had written, the door of the consulting-room burst open and Nipper came in.

"They told me at the Venetia to come on here, guv'nor," he said, as he threw his cap down.

"Well, my lad, what did you discover?" asked Lee quickly.

"Not much, I am afraid," replied the lad. "I had no difficulty in following the girl to the house in Bloomsbury. She went by 'bus most of the way, and I sat just behind her. She went to 22, Smith Street, and I managed to get into touch with one of the maids. I slipped her half-a-crown, and she told me all she knew."

"And what was that?"

"There are two of them, sir—mother and daughter. They are French, and they have been living at that house in Bloomsbury for about a year. They are very poor, but they have always paid regularly, though it is generally known in the house that they have continually sold things to keep going."

"The gossip about the place also says that they are of noble birth, though they go under the names of madame and mademoiselle. And the last name is Namon. I fancy they are pretty well up against it, for this last week is the first week they have missed paying their bill there. That is all I could discover, sir, and I wouldn't have found out that if it hadn't been for the constable on the beat who is a friend of the maid's to whom I spoke. He was at hand when she came out to post a letter, and told her to tell me all she knew."

Lee nodded absently.

"All right, Nipper. By the way, did you see either Duane or 'Diamond Charlie' at the Venetia when you stopped there?"

"I saw the American crook, sir, but I didn't catch a glimpse of Duane. I asked Mr. Varden if he knew what had become of him, and he said he thought he had gone out."

"Well, my lad, there is nothing more to do until evening. I have discovered a few things myself, and I think it is just possible we may be able to ferret out this matter. But this evening we shall be very busy, I think. First, there are some arrangements to make with Varden; then, my lad, you and I are going to do a little burgling on our side."

"Burgling, sir?" exclaimed Nipper. "What do you mean?"

"We are going to have a shot at burgling the safe of Isaac Grinwold, the art dealer, my lad. And let me tell you now, come prepared for trouble, for Grinwold sleeps on the premises."

And, so saying, Nelson Lee returned to his notes.

CHAPTER VI.

The Burglary at Isaac Grinwold's—Caught.

NIPPER was in utter ignorance as to why Lee should wish to burgle the premises of Isaac Grinwold, the antique dealer. His master, as was his custom, had told the lad the germane facts of the case, but had not elaborated to Nipper any definite line of theory.

Nipper knew that Oscar Bode had been—or, at least, professed to have been—robbed of a very valuable Corot. He also knew from what Lee had said that Bode himself was an undesirable character. Still, it was not a case of thief rob thief, for, as far as could be discovered, Bode had, in this

instance at least, acted in a legitimate manner as the authorised agent of John P. Allis, the New York millionaire.

Furthermore, Nipper knew that for some reason or other Lee suspected Jimmy Duane of having had a hand in the affair, and, of course, he was also aware that 'Diamond Charlie' must be kept under surveillance. But Lee had not told him the result of his interview with Isaac Grinwold earlier in the day.

That it had been unsatisfactory Nipper knew, but that was all. And now he had been ordered to prepare to burglarise the premises of the dealer. More than once during his long career Lee, in order to get hold of real evidence which ordinary methods would not disclose, had been forced to adopt the ways of the criminals themselves in order to catch them.

Strictly speaking, it was not within the letter of the law; but at the same time, were he caught, while he was quite safe so far as the police were concerned, still, the British law as it now stands does not countenance the getting of evidence in that way. To do so would be to put a premium on abuse of the rights of the private citizen, and if Nelson Lee chose that method to achieve his ends it was only because he knew a slower method would fail to get results.

They left Gray's Inn Road after a light evening meal, and taxied to Bond Street. There they descended, and Lee proceeded to make his dispositions for the robbery. During the day he had scouted about the premises which he intended breaking into, and now his plans were all laid. To understand exactly how he proposed getting into the place a brief description of the spot will be necessary.

To begin with, the shop was situated just off Bond Street—three doors from the corner of that thoroughfare. The first door was a side entrance to the place on the corner. The next was a tobacconists, then came that of Isaac Grinwold. The building itself was a two storey affair, the ground floor given over to the shop and the upper floor occupied as living premises by Grinwold.

Lee knew that besides Grinwood there was no one else sleeping on the premises. The girl who waited on customers came in each morning and left at night, while the living rooms were looked after by a woman who left early in the evening.

The shop closed at six, Grinwold had a meagre supper at seven, and by eight he was in bed. These facts Lee had easily ascertained, for Grinwold had occupied the same premises for many years, and his austere habits were well known. As to the means by which he would enter the shop, Lee had decided on bold measures, deeming a simple method the best.

To that end he himself wore his evening clothes, with an opera hat on his head, while Nipper had on his dinner-jacket. Therefore, as they turned the corner and walked leisurely towards the shop they attracted no particular attention.

As they passed the tobacconist's Lee shot a look inside, noting that there were no customers in the place and that only a woman was behind the counter. Back in Bond Street they had passed a constable walking slowly towards Oxford Street, so it was a pretty good chance that none would appear for a little time at least. In the shadowy doorway of the antique shop Lee drew up, and, while Nipper stood on guard, Lee drew out a curious little instrument made of steel and wire, with little supple steel-wire appendages, much like the legs of a spider.

Collecting the points to one central focus, he inserted them into the lock and began to manipulate the instrument with extreme care. As each slot of the lock was reached the supple wire bent accordingly, until, when they

had been inserted for about two-thirds of their length, they came to a stop. Now Lee left the instrument there, and, turning, sent a swift look up and down the street. Footsteps could be heard some distance away, and someone was passing along Bond Street, but so far no notice seemed to have been attracted to them. Once more he turned to the lock, and, catching hold of the "body" of the "spider" began to twist slowly and carefully.

For perhaps thirty seconds he was so employed, when suddenly there came a click and the bolt shot back. The next moment he had hissed softly to Nipper, and they disappeared within the shop. Once inside, Lee closed the door softly and locked it in order to guard against any test of a passing constable. Then, in the shadow of an old bureau, Lee caught Nipper by the arm and whispered:

"Keep tight hold of me and follow as quietly as possible. The office is at the far end, and Grinwold's bedroom is just over it."

Nipper squeezed Lee's arm to show he understood, and a second later, after listening for the slightest sound, Lee began to thread his way between ghostly pieces of furniture towards the low door at the far end. With the exception of a close shave in passing a row of chairs, they made the journey with scarcely a sound.

The office door was closed, but not locked, and once within the room they breathed easier. The first leg of the adventure was passed. Lee knew that the single window of the office looked out upon a small courtyard at the back, and knew that a light from the office would be somewhat of a danger on account of the reflection.

There was an old dusty-looking blind fitted to the window, but so long did it appear to have been unused that he was nervous of pulling it down for fear it might make a noise. But for that very difficulty he had come prepared. From an inner pocket he took a folded piece of dark red material, very light and thin, but practically impervious to the rays of light. With the assistance of half a dozen drawing-pins he stuck this over the window; then, turning on his pocket electric torch, he cast the circle of light towards the big safe in the corner. The safe was his objective.

"Is it all right, guv'nor?" whispered Nipper.

Lee nodded.

"Yes, my lad," he whispered back. "I have a fancy to inspect the books which I imagine are kept there. I want to read the exact record of the deal on the Corot. In that way I hope to discover just what did occur between Oscar Bodo and Grinwold.

"But to work, my lad. I want you to hold the light on the combination, and I shall see if I have lost any of the old cunning. It is an American combination, and with the aid of the microphone I think we should be able to solve it—that is, if we are left undisturbed."

They knelt down before the safe, and, placing the small microphone which he had brought against the door, just under the combination, Lee went to work. Catching hold of the nickelled knob, he gave a turn to the right, then to the left, and back again to the right, listening, listening all the time for any click of the tumblers inside.

About the tenth turn he suddenly paused and gazed intently at the scale of numbers round the knob. By the microphone he had heard one tiny click, and, keeping in mind the number at which it had occurred, he went to work again. Another six or eight minutes passed before the microphone indicated a second click, and this number he memorised, too.

Then came the third test and finally the fourth. It was close in the little office, and when at the end of half an hour Lee had the combination worked

out, the perspiration was dropping from his forehead. But he had found what he set out to find, and now, taking the microphone away, he started once more on the combination.

One long turn to the right until he came to the first number he had discovered, back again to the left until the marker stood over the second number, then round again to the right to the third number, and finally to the left until the little line was exactly over the number sixty-five. And at that instant there issued forth a sound from the combination which needed no listening device to catch it.

The tumblers had fallen back. Lee grasped the handle and turned, pulling the door as he did so, and the next moment the interior of Isaac Grinwold's safe lay at his mercy. It was a large safe, and the inside had been divided into several compartments. In the bottom centre there were half a dozen high, narrow places for account books.

To right and left of these there were still wider compartments which contained a miscellany of articles—packets of papers, small art treasures, and one or two long rolls which Lee knew to be canvases.

Then above there were several drawers which were locked. These had little immediate interest for Lee. His main objective were the account-books, for he wished to know exactly what sort of a transaction had taken place in connection with the Corot. Yet before tackling that part of the job he turned his attention to the rolled-up canvases.

There were four of them—two in each side compartment and of varying sizes. Taking out one, Lee unrolled it, discovering it to be a small, but valuable example of the early Dutch school. He laid it on the floor beside him and took out the second.

This proved to be a very fine Hals, which on a more auspicious occasion Leo would have admired greatly. But now time was precious, so, placing it back in the compartment, he turned to the other side. Of the two canvases there he took out first the larger, and, unrolling it, glanced at it casually.

But the next moment he had bent over it swiftly, emitting a low whistle of surprise, for unless he were indeed very much mistaken he was gazing at nothing more nor less than the famous Corot which Oscar Bode claimed had been stolen from his room at the Venetia.

When the Corot first came to light there was more than one article on it in the various monthly journals, some of which contained illustrations of the picture.

Leo had read these, and knew perfectly not only the subject of the picture but also the probable value of it. He was distinctly puzzled, and rightly so, yet he was not fated to probe the mystery just then, for, even as he brought the canvas round more under the light, the door of the office was thrown open and a harsh voice called:

“Hands up!”

Lee and Nipper turned simultaneously to find themselves confronted by a weird figure. It was Isaac Grinwold, his night attire concealed partially by a dressing-gown. His thin hair was all awry, and his eyes were blazing with anger. In one hand he carried a candle, while in the other, and pointing straight at them, was a revolver of a heavy calibre.

For perhaps ten seconds they faced the irate dealer, the while he glared at them. Lee's mind was working like lightning. He had come there only to examine the account-book, which might give a record of the deal relating to the Corot. Unexpectedly he had stumbled upon a fresh mystery, and now, before he had had a chance to make anything of it, he had been caught red-handed.

So far, both he and Nipper had obeyed the order to put their hands up. It would have been foolish to disobey. The man who would have done so in the face of that revolver would have been an imbecile, for, remember, as far as the strict letter of the law went Isaac Grinwold had right on his side.

Yet, if he could prevent it, Lee had no intention of allowing Grinwold to deal the hand. Grinwold had already recognised him, he could see. That meant that the dealer would be shrewd enough to suspect why Lee was there, and if he had had any hand in a crooked deal, then he would push his advantage as far as possible in order to cover his tracks.

Once he got Lee out of the place, and his hands on the Corot, then it was a safe bet that he would plant the canvas away so that the closest search would not reveal it. In that event, Lee could do nothing but surmise, and for any theory he might advance the dealer would have a ready denial.

It would be Lee's word against Grinwold's, and, so far, Grinwold had managed to keep his own reputation good enough. The final and inevitable result would be nil, so far as Lee was concerned.

Therefore, until he knew the truth of the whole affair Lee was determined not to let the Corot pass out of his possession. Gone was his original idea to examine the books—remained but the determination to hold to what he had found.

Yet it was Nipper who solved the immediate problem before them, and brought to a crisis the unenviable position in which they found themselves. It had been the lad who held the electric pocket torch, and at the order "Hands up!" his arms had gone aloft with the torch still clutched in his right hand.

Unfortunately for himself, Grinwold paid far less attention to Nipper than he did to Lee. In the latter he saw his chief danger, and now that he had them, as he thought, at his mercy, he was in a quandary what step to take next. Nipper gave him no time to decide, for, bringing his hand back just a little, he suddenly shot it forward again and across the room the electric torch hurtled straight for Isaac Grinwold's head.

The dealer saw it coming, and in sheer funk pulled the trigger. The revolver crashed out, splitting the silence of the night; and the bullet plumped heavily against the steel safe, ricochetting off into the wall. If he hadn't ducked to avoid the torch he would have stood a good show of hitting Lee, but the move spoilt his aim and cost him his victory, for the next instant, as the torch caught him under the ear and sent him reeling, both Lee and Nipper sprang forward.

Grinwold fired once more, but the bullet went wide, and in a fever of funk he hurled the weapon full into Lee's face. Lee caught it on his arm, allowed it to drop to the floor, then Grinwold turned in a panic and rushed for the door, shouting:

"Police—police! Murder! Help!"

Lee was upon him, with Nipper clinging about his legs. Grinwold came down heavily, his cries stopped by Lee's grip on his throat, and though he struggled hard for a few moments he was as a child to Lee and Nipper.

When he lay supine at last, with only his eyes glaring murder, Lee held him while Nipper searched about for cord. He found some in a wall cupboard, and under Nipper's experienced hands Isaac Grinwold was soon securely bound. Next the lad arranged a sure but comfortable gag, and when their victim finally lay helpless on the floor Lee rose.

Crossing to the safe, he replaced all but the Corot, which he rolled up and handed to Nipper. Then he closed the door and turned the combination. The candle, which had fallen to the floor and become extinguished, he relit and placed on the desk. That done, he turned to Grinwold and said:

"I may be back here to release you again to-night. If not, I shall come early in the morning. Until then you will have to remain as you are, and after that—well, it all depends on what this night shows."

Then he turned to Nipper and said:

"Come, my lad; unless I am very much mistaken there is work for us at the Venetia!"

CHAPTER VII.

Jimmy Duane Plays a Strong Bluff—It Should Have Worked, But—

SCAR BODE had had a bad day of it. Still weak from the effects of the pampasine which had been injected into him, he was forced to remain in bed. That precluded the possibility of his being able to do anything personally about solving the mystery of the disappearance of the forged Corot.

He was compelled to depend on the cunning of Nelson Lee to get it back, and, furthermore, to trust that the same cunning would not be deep enough to discover that the Corot about which he was making such a howl was only a forgery worth perhaps thirty or forty pounds at most.

And worst of all was the gnawing anxiety to know who could have robbed him. It proved that someone knew he had come to England in order to buy the Corot, and by now they must know the canvas which had been taken was not the genuine one. If that fact ever leaked out, and John P. Allis got hold of it—well, Bode's name would be mud so far as that gentleman was concerned.

Varden, the manager, had been in twice during the day to see him and to report that while Lee was working hard on the case there was no news yet. The doctor had also been to see him again, and had promised that he should get up the following day.

But the evening had dragged by without anything to break the monotony. Bode had dozed most of the time, but about eleven o'clock he woke up to the realisation that someone was knocking softly on the door. Thinking it must be Varden he called, "Enter!" and the next moment a long, lean shadow slipped into the room, closing the door after him.

The electric table lamp had been moved to the side of the bed, and, while Bode was within the penumbra, the man who had come in was still in deep shadow. Bode glanced at him nervously as he approached the bed, and when he could finally make out the other's features a frown of puzzlement gathered on his brow.

He did not recognise the man. As for the visitor, he stood just by the foot of the bed, and a smile, which Bode thought sinister, appeared on his face.

"What do you want?" asked the sick man, half rising in bed.

"Permit me to introduce myself," replied the other suavely. "My name is Duane—James Duane—and while I know you by sight quite well, Mr. Bode, I am afraid you do not know me. We are fellow guests here, and I have come to you this evening to have a quiet little talk with you."

Bode detected something threatening behind the other's suave words, and reached out for the bell. He had a strong desire for the company of Varden just then, but an imperative gesture on the part of Jimmy Duane stopped him.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you," said Duane. "It would be very unwise. I have come to talk to you, Mr. Bode, and I am going to do so."

Firstly, however, I may come direct to the point of my visit, then I shall explain the why and the wherefore. That point is a demand from you for ten thousand pounds in cash!

"You look surprised. I don't wonder, but you will understand it all in a few moments. No, pray do not say anything just yet. Listen, Oscar Bode.

"Do you remember the suicide of one Count Phillipe Namon some years ago? Ah, I see you do! And you will also recall that he killed himself because he had been financially ruined by a certain promoter of fake companies. That promoter was you, Bode. Curious, isn't it, how the past looms upon us when we least expect it?

"Here I landed in London only a day ago, and was hoping that all my own past was done with. Yet, curiously enough, I had been here less than twenty-four hours when something occurred which took me back several years to a warm, sunny afternoon on the banks of the Rhone over in Southern France.

"I was sitting in the garden of a little inn there when word was passed along that there had been a tragedy out at the big chateau near the village. That tragedy was the suicide of Count Phillipe Namon, Bode. Idle curiosity took me out to the place, and, while there, I caught a single glimpse of the wife and daughter whom the count had left behind.

"It meant nothing to me, Bode—no, don't move and don't speak! As I was saying, it meant nothing to me at the time. I returned to Monte Carlo, and forgot all about it in play. The years passed, and I came back to London after ten years abroad. In walking through the Park yesterday morning I was fortunate enough to protect a little French lady from the attentions of a South American cad.

"Just to make sure that she was safe I followed her. Do you know where she went, Bode? She called at four different pawnshops, and on each occasion she came out again carrying the paper parcel which she had with her. Whatever it was she had been trying to raise money on she had failed. She walked to Bloomsbury for the simple reason that she could not afford to ride, and there I discovered the truth.

"That girl, reduced to such abject poverty, Bode, is the daughter of the man you ruined. She is the daughter of Count Phillipe Namon, and her mother, the Countess Namon, lives there in that dingy boarding-house in Bloomsbury in squalid misery. That is what you brought them to.

"Then, Bode, Fate turned another trick from the past. She showed me that you were staying here, and forthwith I planned to make you pay for what you had done. I thought I had done with the past—my own past; an unsavoury past, but just this once I decided to play the old game. I found out why you had come to England.

"I was in the shop of Isaac Grinwold when you came out of his private room carrying a parcel which could be only one thing—a rolled-up canvas. I watched you all day and all evening, and while you were at supper I slipped into this room and secreted myself behind the window curtains.

"I intended waiting until you were in bed, but when you passed so close to me my opportunity came. I jabbed the point of a hypodermic into your shoulder and got you. Then it was easy work.

"I took your keys from your pocket, opened your trunk, and found the rolled-up canvas. I am willing to admit that I felt a good deal of surprise to discover it to be a Corot, and the Corot of all.

"I had read of that picture, Bode, and knew its value must be enormous. I thought I had you then, and this morning I took the picture to a man whom I knew would tell me exactly how I stood. He did so, and told me

it was a forgery! Then I got busy, and, while it has cost me some money for cables, I have discovered that you came over here to buy the Corot for John P. Allis, of New York.

"I don't know exactly what game you are playing, but that you are double-crossing Allis is certain. Now, Allis is nothing to me, but I have determined that you shall come across with enough money to keep the Namons in comfort. That is the bargain I am here to strike with you.

"Under my coat I have the faked Corot. When you hand me over ten thousand pounds you get it back, and as far as I am concerned you can play out your game with Allis. If you do not do so, then I shall take the picture and send it to Allis with a full description as to how it fell into my hands, and a complete record of your past history.

"I guess you know about how much weight you would have with Allis after that. You can call it blackmail if you will—that doesn't worry me. At any rate, you can't afford to call in the police, and you know it. Come, what do you say?

During the time Jimmy Duane had been speaking, Oscar Bode had made one or two attempts to join in, but Duane had forbidden it with a sharp gesture. Now, however, he raised himself on one elbow, and though his voice was still weak, he had full control of himself.

"You are playing a strong bluff," he said. "You think you can call my hand, but you can't, and I will tell you why. In theory your little game looks all right, but let me enlighten you on one or two things, Mr. James Duane. In the first place, the picture you stole from me was never intended to be anything else but a copy.

"When I bought the genuine Corot for Mr. John P. Allis I had two canvases handed over to me. The genuine one I at once sent by registered post to New York, and the copy I kept in my trunk for the very reason that if I was robbed I didn't want to lose the genuine picture. That was planned by myself and Mr. Allis. So you can see that your bluff is all wrong.

"But I will tell you what I will do. If you will return the copy to me I am prepared to pay you five hundred pounds and say nothing more about it. That is the best I can do."

Jimmy Duane laughed softly, and drew the rolled-up canvas from beneath his coat.

"I asked what it would cost to get a copy like this made," he said, "and was told that thirty or forty pounds would do it. Yet you offer me five hundred for it, and say that you are playing on the level with Allis. Nothing doing, mon ami!

You will get it for five hundred. je pense que non! Ten thousand pounds, friend Bode, and not a penny less. And, moreover, you have just one minute in which to make up your mind. After that the price goes up exactly one hundred pounds per minute."

As he finished speaking Jimmy Duane drew out his watch and glanced at it.

"The second hand is now at fifty-five," he said. "I shall throw in the extra five seconds. You had better make the most of it."

He leaned against the edge of the bed and gazed coolly at Bode. The latter now dropped all effort to remain collected and cool, and shook a frenzied hand at Duane.

"If I only had a gun in my hand!" he cried savagely.

Duane laughed.

"That wouldn't do you any good, Bode," he jeered. "I could drop you before you could lift it. But better hurry up, man, and do your thinking."

for time is going. Keep your threats until time isn't so valuable to you. Fifteen seconds gone, Bode."

So he called them out, each five seconds, until the second hand had worked round to fifty-five again. Then it was that Oscar Bode threw up his hands in surrender.

"All right," he said; "I yield. Ten thousand for the copy of the Corot."

Jimmy Duane replaced his watch in his pocket and nodded.

"That suits," he said briefly. "And, on my part, I promise not to interfere with your game with Allis, whatever it may be."

"I am sorry, gentlemen, but I cannot agree to the arrangement," came a cool voice from the door, and Jimmy Duane swung round with a smothered oath to find himself gazing into the barrel of an extremely businesslike-looking automatic.

"Who the devil are you?" he snapped, reaching for his pocket.

"No, don't do that, Mr. Duane," said Lee imperturbably. "As you told Mr. Bode a few minutes ago, I can drop you before you could lift your gun. Just stand where you are, please. Good-evening, Mr. Bode! You will be pleased to learn that I have discovered the whereabouts of the Corot—the genuine Corot, Mr. Bode—and, strangely enough, you are mistaken when you say you sent it to Mr. John P. Allis by registered post, for it turned out to be still in London."

"You heard what we said?" gasped Bode.

"Nearly all," said Nelson Lee, with a smile, "and, while I have always known you to be a thoroughly experienced scoundrel, Bode, I didn't quite realise before how crooked you are. Come in, Varden! Close the door, Nipper! We have a few things to talk over with these two gentlemen."

Nelson Lee stepped into the room, still keeping Duane covered, and Varden followed, while Nipper closed the door. Lee walked across to a low easy-chair, and, dropping into it, lit a cigarette.

"Sit down, Mr. Duane," he said pleasantly. "We have one or two things to say to each other, I think."

Jimmy Duane was too good a gambler to show his chagrin. He met Lee with a coolness equalling his own, and, sitting down, followed suit in lighting a cigarette.

"I am trying to decide whether you are just a plain, ordinary thief, Mr. Duane, or whether you are playing the knight errant," drawled Lee. "Perhaps you will enlighten me."

Jimmy Duane smiled suddenly.

"I was running a strong bluff, but you sat in with a full house, so I guess I will tell you exactly where I stand," he responded.

"I think that would be the best plan," said Lee. "I have seen you twice before abroad, Mr. Duane—once was on board a liner between New York and Liverpool, when you were with a man known as 'The Baron,' and the other time at Hong Kong. As on both occasions you were operating

HAVE YOU HAD YOUR COPY OF

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under rather suspicious circumstances, you will forgive me if I incline to think you are perhaps more in the first-class I mentioned than in the second.

"However, I am open to conviction. Through the agency of Mr. Varden I was able to hear most of the conversation between you and Mr. Bode, so I should suggest that you keep nothing back. As for Mr. Bode, I shall settle with him later."

Jimmy Duane looked admiringly at Lee.

"You are a cool one," he said. "However, I shall tell you my end of it."

He began then, and related in detail what had happened since he came to London—how he had seen Mademoiselle Namon in the Park, how he had come to her rescue, and how he had discovered her circumstances. Then he spoke of the face at the window, and how he suddenly recalled where he had seen it before. From that on his story was almost identical with Lee's theory, and when he had finished Lee nodded slowly.

"Somehow I think you are telling the truth," he said. "While your motive was a very worthy one, your methods were—er—just a little rigorous. Still, I myself have done something of the same sort this very night, and before I speak to Mr. Bode I shall relate what I have done. I have played burglar."

"I have broken into the antique shop belonging to Isaac Grinwold. Fortunately, I was able to work the combination of his safe, and there I discovered the Corot which Mr. Bode says he sent to New York. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Grinwold appeared on the scene and grew peevish. My assistant and I were compelled to bind and gag him, and at this moment he is lying on the floor of his private office. Look at this!"

As he spoke, Lee drew out the Corot—the genuine Corot.

"Now, Mr. Bode, when I agreed to take your case it was with the keenest reluctance. It was only because Mr. Varden persuaded me to do so that I agreed. I knew of you and I was far more anxious to have a case against you than a case for you. I trust you follow my meaning."

"However, I took the case on the understanding that if I found the Corot you would pay my fee amounting to two thousand pounds. You told me the genuine Corot had been stolen from you, and the genuine Corot I have found. Here it is. Therefore, you owe me two thousand pounds. Yet, strangely enough, the genuine Corot was all the time in Isaac Grinwold's safe."

"The copy which was stolen from your trunk was taken by Mr. Duane, and I have just heard you offer to pay him ten thousand pounds for its return, for the return of a picture worth not more than thirty or forty pounds, which proves to me, Mr. Bode, that you are playing some deep game—that you are double-crossing Mr. John P. Allis."

"Now, while it would give me extreme pleasure to follow up this matter and put you where you belong, I have not the heart to spoil such a pretty game as Mr. Duane has started. I

happen to know about the Namons, and I know of no more worthy object of your money than the mother and daughter of the man you ruined.

"Therefore, while I have decided to hold my hand regarding you, I do propose to give judgment on the whole case, and I think it would be wiser for you to agree to it. That judgment is as follows:



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"You will pay me my fee of two thousand pounds which I can justly claim. You will pay to Mr. Duane the sum of ten thousand pounds which you agreed to pay him for the copy of the Corot. For those sums I shall hand over to you the genuine Corot as well as the copy, and shall at the same time send a long cable to John P. Allis, in New York, which will, I think, cause you to refrain from double-crossing him as you intended doing.

"Mr. Duane shall take the ten thousand you hand him, as well as the two thousand which I shall pass over to him, and give the whole sum to the Namons. Myself, I could not use any money which came from you, Mr. Bode. On that consideration I shall let you go free this time, but the next time—well, I hope for your sake there will be no next time, Mr. Bode. Mr. Duane, how does that suggestion appeal to you?"

Jimmy Duane made one stride across to where Lee was sitting.

"Mr. Lee," he said earnestly, "you are a real white man."

Lee shook hands and turned to Bode.

"Well," he said, "what is your answer?"

Bode was in a corner, and he knew it—in a far deeper corner than when Jimmy Duane had held him up, for with Lee the shadow of the law was looming over him. He was lucky, and he knew it, to get off so easily, and after a short struggle he caved in.

"Then let us lose no time in settling up the matter," said Lee, as he rose. "Besides, I wish to return to Bond Street and release Isaac Grinwold, although I fancy this evening will have a good effect on his soul."

Once he came up to scratch Bode was as anxious to get things finished as were the others, and when, an hour later, Nelson Lee, Varden, Jimmy Duane, and Nipper left the room, Jimmy Duane carried with him twelve thousand pounds in drafts and Bode retained the two pictures.

It was late, but nothing would do Jimmy Duane but that he go through that very night to Bloomsbury to take to those two lonely, saddened women the money which would make up a little for what they had been deprived of.

And as Nelson Lee watched him into the cab he saw a dreamy expression on Jimmy Duane's face—the expression of a man who looks into the future and sees the form of a girl—the one girl in all the world for him.

THE END.

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ALEC MACKAY, the hero of our story, with CLIVE LOWTHER, an old chum, and BEN GROVE, a hearty old "sea dog," are comrades in an expedition to the South Seas in search of a supposed treasure island.

They meet with many adventures, but their original quest appears hopeless. Until 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!

The chums determine to follow the tracks made by the animals, for by so doing Alec thinks they may find their way back to the camp. But the apes turn round upon the chums, and a fierce fight ensues in which Alec is injured. Rescue comes in the shape of a huge serpent, upon seeing which the animals turn tail and flee. The snake, however, is also an enemy, and in self defence Clive shoots it.

(Now read on.)

The Slave Hunters and Their Victims.

ALEC stared about still in rather a dazed way at first, and did not seem surprised to find himself in the boat.

"Why—I—thought——" he began; and then he caught sight of the serpent still lashing about on the strand. The sound of its struggling and of the blows and thuds of its powerful tail as it pounded on the sand one moment and dashed against the rocks the next, had attracted his gaze to it.

He stared at it in bewilderment, fascinated by the extraordinary spectacle it presented. Then, turning his glance upon his friend, wanted to know what in the world it all meant.

"What is that great snake doing there—and how did I get here? And where are all those horrible apes?"

Question followed question in quick succession faster than Clive could reply to them.

However, he got a chance at last, and then explained briefly all that had taken place, and Alec began to understand.

"And so," he said slowly at last, "you first fought the apes and then that awful monster of a serpent, and finally carried me away and brought me into safety—all alone and unaided while I lay helpless. Instead of running off and saving yourself—as many would have done—you stayed and stuck to me and fought on till you got the chance to carry me out of it!"

"Why, as to that," said Clive with a laugh, "it was the snake's hissing that frightened me away—so I had no hand in that. And as to the snake itself—well, of course, I did my best to kill it—and I certainly was not going to leave you there for him to eat."

Alec seized his friend's hand. "Heaven bless you, Clive!" he exclaimed, and tears were in his eyes. "You must be as brave as a lion. Braver than I should have been, I'm afraid," he added rather dolefully. "I'm sure I shouldn't have done as you did. I couldn't. I should have bolted from sheer fright."

"Not you, Alec," Clive declared cheerily. "I'm sure you wouldn't. If that's what you really believe then I know you better than you know yourself. I'm quite sure you would have done the same had the positions been reversed—so let us say no more about it."

Alec shook his head but said no more on the subject just then. They were indeed both interested in watching the big serpent, which was evidently now in its death throes.

"Shall we send another bullet or two into it?" said Alec. "Just to end its struggles?"

"No need to," Clive advised. "Besides, it would help to spoil the skin. The doctor will like to have the skin, you know, for a trophy."

"H'm! Yes; if we come back to receive it," Alec remarked rather gloomily. "But we've yet to find a way of getting out of that rotten hole."

"I hope we shall be able to manage it," Clive rejoined more cheerfully. He saw that Alec had not yet quite recovered from the effects of their recent adventure and was a bit low spirited, so he adopted a more confident tone than he really felt himself in order to cheer him up a little.

Just then something came with a crash against the bottom of the boat, or rather under the side of it, pushing it over so much as almost to upset it.

"Hallo!" Alec cried, as she righted again. "What on earth was that?"

A large mass like a huge creature with a dark shiny skin showed just above the surface close at hand for a moment and then disappeared again before they had time to make out what it was.

"Another big creature of some sort—but I'm sugared if I could see what kind!" muttered Clive.

"Well, it very nearly upset us," Alec declared with a shiver. "I'm getting fed up with this sort of thing. Shall we ever get out of the place alive? That's another reminder that it isn't safe to attempt to return through the tunnel. What the dickens are we to do?"

"Get out the way we started to find before—up those rocks," said Clive, nodding his head in the direction of the big snake. "I think that beast is about done for and can't harm us now. And the sooner we start the better. Let's see how many matches we can stump up between us. And we shall want some tarred rope—there's plenty in the boat—but we must pick out the driest—something that will burn."

"What! You're going to risk another fight with those horrible apes?" cried Alec aghast.

"There won't be any fighting," Clive answered quickly. "It will be all right this time, you'll see. Let's row to the shore and make a start."

Alec was evidently unconvinced and was almost inclined to protest against the plan. But it was a choice of evils, and as he could not make up his mind to face the tunnel, there seemed nothing else to be done. And as the snake was now lying quite motionless on the shore, there was nothing more to wait for.

The boat was accordingly rowed to the shore and pulled up once more on the strand. Then, having taken out what they thought necessary, including the tarred rope, the two sidled warily past the body of the reptile and gained the rocks.

"Look!" exclaimed Alec, drawing back. "I can see two or three of the brutes peeping over the top. They have seen us and are watching us."

"Hush! I can see 'em," returned Clive in a whisper. "Don't talk—don't say anything above a whisper if you can help it. And don't shoot unless it becomes absolutely necessary. And if we have to do so shoot only so as to frighten them at first—not to kill or wound 'em. See, let me go first and you follow. Imitate my movements as much as you can. Crawl along like you'll see me do, as if—well as if—we were a couple of snakes. See?"

Alec didn't see—at any rate he did not understand what his chum's idea could be. He followed his directions, however, as well as he could, though not without some misgivings.

Slowly, almost noiselessly, the two began climbing, Clive going first and Alec following, revolver in hand, and fully expecting another ugly rush on the part of the savage brutes.

He could still see the hideous faces and cunning red eyes of two or three of them peering over the ledge above, but so far they had made no move. Then he paused in alarm as he saw two or three more added to those already there. But remembering Clive's advice he refrained from saying anything. The further they proceeded, however, the less he liked the look of things, and he was wondering at his chum's cool confidence, when he was suddenly startled by hearing a loud hissing sound.

He stared about on all sides but could see nothing to account for it. Glancing upwards again he saw that the apes, who were watching them, had also heard the sound, as it had evidently perturbed them.

Again the hissing was heard, and this time it had such a fierce venomous sort of expression that Alec stopped climbing, thinking there must be a serpent somewhere just above.

Then from the ledge above came the sound of excited jabbering, followed by the scuffling and pattering of many soft feet; and mingled with this there were smothered screams of rage and fear. But instead of growing louder they gradually died away in the distance, and Alec watching the ledge saw that every villainous face had disappeared from the top.

Here was an unexpected mystery; instead of rushing to attack them again as Alec had feared they would, it seemed pretty certain that the brutes had fled in fear.

Just then some half smothered sounds of a different character caught his ears and puzzled him not a little, till he happened to catch Clive's eyes looking back at him with a twinkle in them. He was laughing heartily—so heartily, in fact, that he seemed in some danger of letting go his hold and slipping down.

"What scared them?" Alec queried.

"Why, my imitation of a snake. Didn't you hear me hissing?"

"I certainly heard the hissing. It was you then all the time. I really thought it was some actual crawling beast among these rocks."

(Continued overleaf.)



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"That's me—I'm the crawling beast," laughed Clive. "I felt pretty certain that would do the trick—and scare those brutes."

"Why, yes; it seems to have done that!" Alec returned in surprise. "How in the world did you come to think of it?"

Clive pointed to the dead snake below them; and now that the apes had disappeared he no longer troubled to speak in whispers. "It was our late lamented friend there who taught me the trick," he declared with another hearty laugh. "You were not able to see what went on, you know, you were unconscious; but it was astonishing to see how scared the fiercest of 'em became directly they heard that beast's first hiss as it came crawling out of its den. They scampered off like a lot of frightened rabbits, and you should have seen the expression on some of their phizogs. I could have roared with laughter if only the snake had not been there glaring at me. Afterwards, when it all came back to me, I determined to try 'em with my own particular imitation of the real thing."

"It seems to have answered splendidly," Alec commented admiringly. "It was a grand idea! Do you think we can trust to its serving us as well again if we should have more trouble with them?"

"I don't see why it shouldn't. But, of course, we must be wary. And if the need arises again, remember that the thing is not to talk or let them hear our voices, but to lie down and crawl towards them hissing all the time like the very deuce. You can join in next time, you know."

Greatly relieved by the flight of their dangerous foes, the two climbed on in better spirits, and quickly reached the ledge whence the creatures had peered down at them.

It was a broad level terrace of rock with three caverns beyond, which looked as though they might be the entrances to passages.

Looking round they found to their great satisfaction that there was not an ape in sight. But there was nothing apparently to show by which of these caverns they had made their escape.

"H'm! Strikes me we're done now!" muttered Alec irritably. "I don't see any sign as to which way the beasts went."

"We'll pick up their tracks somehow," Clive declared; and he struck a match and set light to one of the pieces of tarred rope they had brought.

"Oh! A torch!" cried Alec. "That's a good idea."

"Why, of course. What else do you suppose I wanted this rope for—to tie up the apes with as we caught 'em? Something like putting salt on bird's tails, that."

"Why no—not quite that," Alec returned laughingly. "But I—well, I thought perhaps you might have had some profound scheme in your mind for smoking 'em out."

"Jupiter! That sounds as hopeful as the salt business. However, here we are; this will give us a good enough light for a while, and then we've got the other pieces to follow."

They entered first one cavern and then the next to it and looked about, but could see nothing to indicate that the apes had made use of either of them as a passage way. And after examining the floor carefully in each cave, Clive shook his head and they left the two and turned into the other.

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