

was another one in the stuff that might be useful. He opened the door, snapped on the light and stood transfixed with amazement at the havoc he saw in front of him.

The first thing that claimed his attention was the safe with the wide-open door. He went across to it, putting his feet at every step amongst the litter from the drawers, which lay in heaps all over the room. One glance revealed that his cash-box as well as his most important papers were gone. He entered the other rooms and was confronted with the same terrible confusion and muddle: his wife's jewel-case had disappeared as well as many valuable heirlooms, this he could see at a glance—doubtless a careful scrutiny would reveal a total loss of thousands of pounds.

He strode towards the bell for the purpose of calling the butler up, but on second thoughts he decided to wait and consider which was the best course to follow. At all costs his wife must not know without due preparation; the shock—considering her present state of health—would have most disastrous effects. No, he would wait a little before making the affair known, an hour or two would make little difference and in the meantime his wife would be home from the opera with the other ladies, and he could tell her quietly, thus saving a nervous shock.

Closing the doors again he descended the stairs, and before going out, told the butler that in case Mrs Basset happened to come home before he returned, she was to be kept in either the drawing-room or the dining-room until he arrived, and he would explain. Also no one was to go upstairs.

He jumped into his carriage and drove back to Lady Ransome's to await his wife's homecoming and incidentally to tell his friends what had happened.

The two cracksmen—weighted with their haul—had but a very short distance to go. Some hundred yards away from the mansion which had received their attentions, were a number of fairly large houses whose backs almost adjoined the end of Greville Basset's garden; and to the back-door of one of these the two men directed their steps after climbing a couple of low walls.

A few minutes afterwards they were seated in a well lighted and comfortable room, and immediately began to examine their plunder.

It was undoubtedly a big night for them, as the long array of valuables, which the tall man was placing on the table, testified; to say nothing of what the cash box would reveal when the cunning fingers of the other had solved the trick of the lock.

Carefully and patiently he worked away, now throwing aside the wire key he was using and selecting another. Meantime the face of the man designated by his companion as "Gent" was screwed into a perplexed frown as he handled the various costly trinkets and ornaments. The expression was one in which the keen glance of the connoisseur was blended with a certain troubled look of recognition as if the things he held were partially familiar to him; and once, when he held up a curious gold-mounted agate scent-bottle, he seemed powerless to remove his eyes from it, but gazed with an earnest, far-away expression for so long a time, that the other man looked up from his task curiously.

"Why, Gent, what's the matter, what's come over you? Something wrong?" said he.

"I'll swear I've seen this somewhere," replied the other slowly. "I believe the matter"—he pulled up suddenly realising that he was about to go farther in the matter of confidence than he intended.

A look of keen interest sparkled in the keen, ferret eyes of the other, as if he expected the "Gent" to draw aside at last the veil that hung over his past.

Croppy Owen—king of skeleton-keys and expert safe-breaker was fully aware that his companion came of a good family and had had a university education; indeed it was the origin of the prefix "Gent," which Croppy had himself bestowed upon him when they first met. The name had stuck to him and "Gent Smith" he had remained ever since.

Among other qualities, Croppy possessed great inquisitiveness and would have given a lot to have known the true story of his companion. Of course he had his theory—that he was a waster or ner-do-well from some important family, who was banished from home—his to a title perhaps. However no questions were ever asked or even hinted at,

the great qualities which bound Croppy to him with the admiration and affection of a dog to his master, were the bold scheming and wonderful knowledge he showed. Another factor was the extraordinary unbroken luck which seemed to follow him about.

A somewhat awkward silence fell between them for a moment, and then Croppy bent his head over his task again.

A minute later a sharp click announced the fact that the lock had given way to the masterly attentions of the expert.

Yes, there was money there—a goodly sprinkling of sovereigns in one compartment, and a bunchy sheaf of crisp notes in another.

The Gent's eyes immediately sought the box as the lid was lifted, but it was not at the hard money that he looked. A bundle of papers claimed his attention and these he took up with hands that trembled slightly—a most unusual thing with him. He twisted off the elastic band which held them, and the trembling became more pronounced as he drew a long fat envelope from them and read, in writing he knew very well—"The last will and testament of Greville Basset."

With a sharp intake of the breath, he sank into his chair, but a moment afterwards recovering his balance, he inserted a pencil under the flap of the envelope and carefully working it round contrived to unfasten it without tearing, while all the time the beadlike eyes of his companion followed his movements with feverish excitement.

For a couple of minutes a dead silence reigned in the room, and then with a quick movement Gent Smith folded up the paper and proceeded to place it carefully back into its envelope.

"Croppy," said he earnestly, when he had effected his purpose, "we have done a few jobs together, you and I, haven't we?—jobs which have not only brought us a decent sum at our bank, but have made us known as the kings of our profession."

"Very right, Gent," replied Croppy, "perfectly correct, and we'll do many more of the same kind you may bet your last penny on that."

"We may do," said Gent Smith slowly, "it's possible, but—"

"May do and 'possible,'" said Croppy looking up with startled eyes,—"may do? why you don't surely mean that you think of chucking the business, now of all times when we know the ropes so well?"

"We'll leave that phase of the subject for the present if you don't mind," replied the other, "the fact is that something has happened—something very important and I want you to do me a favour—a very great favour Croppy; mind I'll see that you are no loser by the deal. You may have noticed that I was rather worried all the time I was looking at the things; you see I felt sure I had seen some of them before, they brought back memories: now after a look into that paper I find that these people are very great friends of mine, they are—well I'll show the faith and trust I put in you and tell you what I have hitherto kept a profound secret from everyone—the fact is, Croppy, I have to-night robbed my own father and mother. They must have moved into this house recently, although it is strange I have not heard anything about it for I try to keep myself acquainted as far as possible with their doings. So you see, Croppy, that this mustn't go on, I'm not wonderfully particular as you know but I draw the line at this, and so," continued he lowering his voice and speaking deliberately, "I want you to do a hard thing—nothing short of packing up these things and taking them back, or the shock will about kill my old mother."

"Whew," whistled Croppy Owen, "that is about the tallest order I've ever heard of. Put 'em back? why it's unnatural; who ever heard of—well, gunvor, that wins it."

"I told you I'd see you were no loser, didn't I? Understand that I read enough in that paper to show me that the old—my father had relented and forgiven me. He has made me his heir again so that I get his fortune when he dies, and it also shows me that I have only to go back to him to be received and reinstated into my former position, when I will make this right with you. Come now, quick, let us get to work, I know you're not going to fail me."

Croppy Owen hesitated as if uncertain what to do, but his look of perplexity gradually gave way and he sighed gloomily.

"Well, Gent, you were right when you said it was a 'ard thing," murmured he, "it is 'ard—'ereol 'ard. Why, there's a

thousand pounds worth of stuff, we get it away, clean an' clever, an' now, when we 'ave our 'ands round it we've got to put it back. Well if you say so, I'll do it, you're Gent by name an' I know you'll act a gent when the time comes, so here goes."

"Croppy, you're a pal," said the other putting his hand on his shoulder, "and you'll never regret it."

Quickly they set to work; the things were soon packed into the bag again and the second journey commenced.

On reaching the garden they found everything as quiet as when they had left half an hour before.

Again the thick stair carpet held the secret of their footsteps and a moment afterwards they fell to their extraordinary task. It was as Croppy said "unnatural" but nevertheless they performed it with as much dexterity as they had displayed on the previous occasion. The cash-box slid into its place in the safe, and in a very short time the lock yielded to the pressure of the keys of the expert, and the door was locked. Meanwhile, Gent Smith had been replacing the various ornaments with unerring accuracy. Each drawer received its scattered contents and took its proper place in the bureau. Chairs were replaced in position, folds smoothed out of the carpet and with a smile of satisfaction he glanced round the room. "One," said he.

The other two rooms were visited and after ten minutes silent but speedy work, no trace of the recent disorder appeared to their critical eyes.

"It's the rummiest job I've ever undertaken in my life," said Croppy, "and I'll see that it doesn't occur again, but I must admit that we've done it all right."

They did not hang about long as you may guess; at any moment they might be surprised, in fact just as they reached the passage at the bottom of the stairs, they heard a ring at the bell which was immediately followed by a stir in the neighbourhood of the kitchen. They were outside in a flash and gained the laurel bushes unobserved. "Just in time, thank God," said Gent Smith, which I think you will admit was rather a pious and significant remark to fall from the lips of the prince of burglars.

When Greville Basset got back to Lady Maurice Ransome's, he found the men in the billiard room and in a few moments had related what had occurred.

"Have you informed the police?" asked Colonel Thurston.

"No," said Basset, "you see I did not want to cause any alarm if it could be avoided, and although the matter must of course come out, I thought perhaps we could soften it down before my wife got to know."

"But how about the servants?" said Sir Maurice, "they know I suppose?"

"Not a word. When I found what had occurred I just came out, closed the doors, and left word with Yorke the butler, that nobody was to go upstairs until I came home."

"Well, what do you say if we come along home with you," said Barclay, "we can pick up a policeman as we go, and can then do a great deal towards getting the place straight before your wife comes home. Then you can tell her at your leisure."

This suggestion found favour at once and in a few minutes the party of four set out.

They arrived without encountering a policeman however, and before going to fetch one, decided to have a look at the rooms.

It was their ring which had been heard by Gent Smith and Croppy Owen as they closed the back door after their second visit.

"I'm afraid it's an awful muddle," said Basset as he lead the way upstairs, "and you had better wait until I switch on the light or you'll bark your shins over a heap of rubbish on the floor."

They reached the landing and Basset opened the door of the study.

"I think you'll admit," said he, "that it's properly cleaned out," and then—snapping on the light—"what do you think of that?"

He stood aside with almost a flourish and looked into their faces. A moment after his gaze followed theirs, and he stood as if suddenly frozen stiff. His face was a study; his jaw fell and his mouth opened as wide as his eyes. He had clearly forgotten his friends who stood around him with curious faces. "Whatever is the meaning?" he began and then stopped as if powerless to form another word.

The others remained looking at him as a witness, their gazes fixed on his expression of wonderment.

"This is the most inexplicable occurrence I have ever heard of," said Basset deliberately at last, "Why not an hour ago the room was a dust heap, and the floors almost knee-deep with papers and things. And the safe—here he strode across and tugged violently at the handle—"well this beats all," said he.

"Try the other rooms," said Colonel Thurston.

They opened them: everything was in order, the jewel-case stood in its appointed place in the bedroom and not a hair-pin littered the floor.

Greville Basset grew more and more mystified as each familiar object met his gaze. His brows drew down over his eyes in a heavy frown and when he got back to the study he stood for a couple of minutes in front of the safe completely lost in thought, his worried expression giving an inkling of the state of his mind.

The others, after looking at him began to exchange glances with each other, their lips twitched and something next door to a wink agitated the eye of Colonel Thurston.

Young Barclay was the first to speak and the next moment he wished he hadn't done so.

"You couldn't possibly have imagined it," said he.

"Imagined it be—be-hanged," said Basset violently. "I tell you I came into this room less than an hour ago and it was ransacked: the safe was open, my cash-box gone, not a chair in its place and I buried my feet in the things from my drawers and the cloth from that table lay there." He stamped his foot fiercely on the floor at the indicated spot. "And as for the other rooms, they were like a rag shop, everything turned upside down and my wife's jewels gone. De you think I'm mad, man," he finished with almost a wail.

"My dear fellow, we all have our delusions at times," said Barclay, "it stands to reason—"

"I tell you I saw it and went through all the rooms: now is it likely I should make it up!"

MONKEY BRAND

Wont wash clothes

but

will

clean

metal

and

woodwork

well



GREY HAIR IS OFTEN PREMATURE IN ITS APPEARANCE—the result of neglect or bad health. It may be stained to the natural colour by means of "Bland's Vegetable Hair Dye," which acts in a perfectly natural way, giving beautiful and satisfactory results. Free from all metallic ingredients. 2/6 bottle, post free.—Miss Clough, Ladies' Depot, 44, George-st., Dunedin.