

THE ABSENT-MINDED COTERIE.

By ROBERT BARR.



ONCE upon a time I had the unique experience of pursuing a man for one crime and getting evidence against him of another. He was innocent of the misdemeanour the proof of which I sought, but was guilty of a serious offence: yet he and his confederates escaped scot free, in circumstances which I now propose to relate.

I well remember that November day, because there was a fog so thick that two or three times I lost my way, and there was not a cab to be had at any price. The few *voitures* then in the street had no drivers on the box; the cabmen were leading their animals slowly along, making for their stables. It was late when I reached my flat, and after dining there, which was an unusual thing for me to do, I put on my slippers, took an easy-chair before the fire, and began to read my evening journal.

I had allowed my paper to slip to the floor, for in very truth the fog was penetrating even into my flat, and it was becoming difficult to read, notwithstanding the electric light. My man came in and announced that Mr. Spenser Hale, of Scotland Yard, wished to see me, and, indeed, on all nights, but especially that one, I am more pleased to converse with a man than to read a newspaper.

"*Mon Dieu*, my dear Monsieur Hale, it is surely an important thing that brought you out on such a night as this. The fog must be very thick in Scotland Yard."

This delicate shaft of fancy completely missed him, and he answered stolidly—

"It's thick all over London—and, indeed, throughout most of England."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, but he did not see that, either.

Still, a moment later he had made a remark which, if it had come from some people I know, might have indicated a glimmer of comprehension.

"You are a very, very clever man, Monsieur Valmont, so all I need say is that the question which brought me here is the same as that on which the American election was fought. Now, to a countryman, I should be compelled to give further explanation, but to you, monsieur, that will not be necessary."

There are times when I dislike that crafty smile and that partial closing of the eyes which always distinguishes Spenser Hale when he places on the table a problem which he expects will baffle me. If I said he never did baffle me, I would be wrong, of course, for sometimes the utter simplicity of the puzzles which trouble him leads me into an intricate involution entirely unnecessary in the circumstances.

I pressed my finger-tips together and gazed for a few moments at the ceiling. Hale had lit his black pipe, and my silent servant had placed at his elbow the whisky-and-soda, and then had tip-toed out of the room. As the door closed, my eyes came from the ceiling to the level of Hale's expansive countenance.

"Have they eluded you?" I asked quietly.

"Who?"

"The coiners."

Hale's pipe dropped from his jaw, but he managed to catch it before it reached the floor. Then he took a gulp from the tumbler.

"That was just a lucky shot," he said.

"*Parfaitement*," I replied carelessly.

"Now, own up, Valmont, wasn't it?"

I shrugged my shoulders. A man cannot contradict a guest in his own house.

"Oh, stow that!" cried Hale impolitely. He is a trifle prone to strong and even slangy expressions when puzzled. "Tell me how you guessed it."

"It is very simple, *mon ami*. The question on which the American election was fought is the price of silver, which is so low that it has ruined Mr. Bryan, and threatens to ruin all the farmers of the West who have silver-mines on their farms. But how does that affect England and Scotland Yard? you may ask. In two ways. Someone has stolen bars of silver, let us say. But that was done three months ago, when the metal was being

unloaded from the German steamer at Southampton, and my dear friend Spenser Hale ran down the thieves very cleverly as they were trying to dissolve the marks off the bars with acid. Now, crimes do not run in series, like the numbers in roulette at Monte Carlo. The thieves are men with brains. They say to themselves: 'What chance have we to steal bars of silver while Mr. Hale is at Scotland Yard?' Eh, my good friend?"

"To tell the truth, Valmont," said Hale, taking another sip, "sometimes you almost persuade me you have reasoning powers."

"Thanks, comrade. Then it is not a theft of silver we have now to deal with. It must be coinage, and there the low price of silver comes in. You have, perhaps, found a more subtle crime going forward than heretofore. They are making your shillings and your half-crowns from real silver instead of from baser metal, and yet there is a large profit, which has not hitherto been possible through the high price of the metal. With the old conditions you were familiar, but this new element sets at naught all the ancient formulæ."

"Well, Valmont, you have hit it. I'll say that for you, you have hit it. There is a gang of expert coiners who are putting out real silver money, and making a clear shilling profit on the half-crown. We have no trace of the coiners, but we know the man who is shoving the stuff."

"That ought to be sufficient," said I.

"Yes, it should, but it hasn't proven so up to date. Now, I came up to-night to see if you would do one of your French tricks for us, right on the quiet."

"What French trick, Monsieur Spenser Hale?" I inquired with some asperity, forgetting for the moment that the man invariably became impolite when he grew excited.

"No offence intended," said this blundering person, who really was a good-natured fellow, but would always put his foot in it, and then apologise. "I want someone to go through a man's house without a search-warrant, spot the evidence, let me know, and then we'll rush the place before he has time to hide his tracks."

"Who is this man, and where does he live?"

"His name is Ralph Summertrees, and he lives in a very natty little bijou residence, as the advertisements call it, situated in no less a fashionable place than Park Lane."

"I see. What has aroused your suspicions against him?"

"Well, you know, that's an expensive district to live in—it takes a bit of money to do the trick. This Summertrees has no ostensible business, yet every Friday he goes to the United Capital Bank in Piccadilly, and deposits a bag of swag, usually all silver coin."

"Yes, and this money——?"

"This money, so far as we can learn, contains a good many of these new pieces which never saw the British Mint."

"It's not all new coinage, then?"

"Oh, no, he's a bit too artful for that. You see, a man can go round London with his pockets filled with new coinage five-shilling pieces, buy this, that and the other, and still come home with his pockets well filled with legitimate coins of the realm; twos, half-crowns, shillings, sixpences, and all that."

"I see. Then why don't you nab him one day when his pockets are full of the illegitimate five-shilling pieces?"

"That could be done, of course, and I've thought of it; but, you see, we want to land the whole gang. Once we arrested him, without knowing where the money came from, the real coiners would take flight."

"How do you know he is not a real coiner himself?"

Now, poor Hale is easy to read as a book. He hesitated before answering this question, and looked confused as a culprit caught in some dishonest act.

"You need not be afraid to tell me," I said soothingly, after a pause. "You have had one of your men in Mr. Summertrees' house, and have learned that he is not the coiner. But your man has not succeeded in getting evidence to incriminate other people."

"You've about hit it, Monsieur Valmont. One of my men has been Summertrees' butler for two weeks, but, as you say, he has found no evidence."

"Is he still butler?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me how far you have got. You know that Summertrees deposits a bag of coin every Friday in the United Capital, and I suppose the people at the bank have allowed you to examine one or two of the bags."

"Yes, sir, they have; but, you know, banks are very difficult to deal with. They don't like detectives bothering about, and whilst they do not stand against the law, still, they never



"The cabmen were leading their animals slowly along."

answer any more questions than they're asked, and Mr. Summertrees has been a good customer at the United Capital for many years."

"Haven't you found out where the money comes from?"

"Yes, we have: it is brought to Park Lane night after night by a man who looks like a respectable City clerk, and he puts it into a large safe, of which he holds the key, this safe being on the ground floor in the dining-room."

"Haven't you followed this clerk?"

"Yes. He stops in the Park Lane house every night, and goes up in the morning to an old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road, where he stays all day, returning with this bag of money in the evening."

"Why don't you arrest and question him?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Valmont, there is just the same objection to his arrest as there is to that of Summertrees. We could easily arrest them both, but we have not the slightest evidence against either of them, and then, although we put the go-betweens in clink, the worst criminals of the lot would escape."

"Nothing suspicious about the old curiosity shop?"

"No, it appears to be perfectly regular."

"This game has been going on under your noses for how long?"

"For about six weeks."

"Is Summertrees a married man?"

"No."

"Has he any women servants in the house?"

"No, except three charwomen who come in every morning to do up the rooms."

"Of what is his household comprised?"

"There is the butler, then the valet, and, last, the French cook."

"Ah," cried I, "the French cook! This case interests me. So Summertrees has succeeded in completely disconcerting your man. Has he prevented him from going from top to bottom of the house?"

"Oh, no, he has rather assisted him than otherwise. On one occasion he went to the safe, took out the money, had Podgers—that's my chap's name—help him to count it, and then actually sent Podgers to the bank with the bag of coin."

"And Podgers has been all over the place?"

"Yes."

"Saw no signs of a coining establishment?"

"Oh, no. It is absolutely impossible that any coining can be done there. Besides, as I tell you, that respectable clerk brings the money."

"I suppose you want me to take Podgers' position?"

"Well, Mr. Valmont, to tell you the truth, I should rather you didn't. Podgers has done everything a man can do, but I thought if you got into the house, Podgers assisting, you might go through it, night after night, at your leisure."

"I see. That's just a little dangerous in England. I think I should prefer to assure myself the legitimate standing of being the amiable Podgers' successor. You say that Summertrees has no business."

"Well, sir, not what you might call a business. He is by way of being an author, but I don't count that any business."

"Oh, an author, is he? When does he do his writing?"

"He locks himself up in his study most of the day."

"Does he come out for lunch?"

"No, he lights a little spirit-lamp inside, Podgers tells me, and makes himself a cup of coffee, which he takes with a sandwich or two."

"That's rather frugal fare for Park Lane."

"Yes, Mr. Valmont, it is; but he makes up for it in the evening, when he has a long dinner, with all them foreign kickshaws you people like, done by his French cook."

"Sensible man! Well, Hale, I see I shall have pleasure in making the acquaintance of Mr. Summertrees. Is there any restriction on the going and coming of your man Podgers?"

"None in the least. He can get away either night or day."

"Very good, friend Hale. Bring him here to-morrow, as soon as our author locks himself up in his study—or, rather, I should say, as soon as the respectable clerk leaves for Tottenham Court Road, which I should guess, as you put it, is about half an hour after his master turns the key."

"You are quite right in that guess, Mr. Valmont. How did you come at it?"

"Merely a surmise, Hale. There is a good deal of oddity about that Park Lane house, so it doesn't surprise me in the least that the master gets to work earlier in the morning than the man. I have also a suspicion that Ralph Summertrees knows perfectly well why the estimable Podgers is there."

"What makes you think that?"

"I can give no reason, except that my opinion of the acuteness of Summertrees has been gradually rising all the while you were speaking, and at the same time my estimate of Podgers' craft has been as steadily declining. However, bring the man here to-morrow, that I may ask him a few questions."

Next day, about eleven o'clock, the ponderous Podgers, hat in hand, followed his chief into my room. His broad, impassive, immobile, smooth face gave him rather more the air of a genuine butler than I had expected, and this appearance, of course, was enhanced by his livery. His replies to my questions were those of a well-trained servant who will not say too much unless it has been made worth his while. All in all, Podgers exceeded my expectations, and really my friend Hale had some justification for regarding him, as he evidently did, a triumph in his line.

"Sit down, Mr. Hale, and you, Podgers."

The man disregarded my invitation, standing like a statue until his chief made a motion, then he dropped into a chair. The English are great on discipline.

"Now, Mr. Hale, I must first congratulate you on the make-up of Podgers. It is excellent. You depend less on artificial assistance than we do in France, and in that I think you are right."

"Oh, we know a bit over here, Monsieur Valmont," said Hale, with pardonable pride.

"Now, then, Podgers, I want to ask you about this clerk. What time does he arrive in the evening?"

"At prompt six, sir."

"Does he ring, or let himself in with a latch-key?"

"With a latch-key, sir."

"How does he carry the money?"

"In a little locked leather satchel, sir, flung over his shoulder."

"Does he go direct to the dining-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen him unlock the safe and put in the money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the safe unlock with a word, or a key?"

"With a key, sir. It's one of the old-fashioned kind."

"Then the clerk unlocks his leather money-bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's three keys used within as many minutes. Are they separate, or in a bunch?"

"On a bunch, sir."

"Did you ever see your master with this bunch of keys?"

"No, sir."

"You saw him open the safe once, I am told?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he use a separate key, or one of a bunch?"

Podgers slowly scratched his head, then said—

"I don't just remember, sir."

"Ah, Podgers, you are neglecting the big things in that house. Sure you can't remember?"

"No, sir."

"Once the money is in and the safe locked up, what does the man do?"

"Goes to his room, sir."

"Where is this room?"

"On the third floor, sir."

"Where do you sleep?"

"On the fourth floor, with the rest of the servants, sir."

"Where does the master sleep?"

"On the second floor, adjoining his study."

"The house consists of four storeys and a basement, does it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have somehow arrived at the suspicion that it is a very narrow house. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the clerk ever dine with your master?"

"No, sir. The clerk don't eat in the house at all, sir."

"Does he go away before breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"No one takes breakfast to his room?"

"No, sir."

"What time does he leave the house?"

"At ten o'clock, sir."

"When is breakfast served?"

"At nine o'clock, sir."

"At what hour does your master retire to his study?"

"At half past nine, sir."

"Locks the door on the inside?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never rings for anything during the day?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"What sort of a man is he?"

Here Podgers was on familiar ground, and he rattled off a description minute in every particular.

"What I meant was, Podgers, is he silent, or talkative, or does he get angry? Does he seem furtive, suspicious, anxious, terrorised, calm, excitable, or what?"

"Well, sir, he is by way of being very quiet—never has much to say for himself: never saw him angry or excited."

"Now, Podgers, you've been at Park Lane for a fortnight or more. You are a sharp, alert, observant man. What happens there that strikes you as unusual?"

"Well, I can't exactly say, sir," replied Podgers, looking rather helplessly from his chief to myself, and back again.

"Your professional duties have often called upon you to enact the part of butler before, otherwise you wouldn't do it so well. Isn't that the case?"

Podgers did not answer, but glanced at his chief. This was evidently a question pertaining to the service to which a subordinate was not allowed to reply. However, Hale said at once—

"Certainly, Podgers has been in dozens of places."

"Well, Podgers, just call to mind some of the other households in which you have been employed, and tell me any particulars in which Mr. Sammertrees' establishment differs from them."

Podgers pondered a long time.

"Well, sir, he do stick to writing pretty closely."

"Ah, that's his profession, you see, Podgers. Hard at it from half past nine till towards seven, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else, Podgers? No matter how trivial."

"Well, sir, he's fond of reading, too: leastways, he's fond of newspapers."

"When does he read?"

"I've never seen him read 'em, sir; indeed, so far as I can tell, I never knew the papers to be opened, but he takes them all in, sir."

"What, all the morning papers?"

"Yes, sir, and all the evening papers, too."

"Where are the morning papers placed?"

"On the table in his study, sir."

"And the evening papers?"

"Well, sir, when the evening papers come, the study is locked. They are put on a side table in the dining-room, and he takes them upstairs with him to his study."

"This has happened every day since you were there?"

"Yes, sir."

"You reported that very striking fact to your chief, of course?"

"No, sir, I don't think I did," said Podgers, confused.

"You should have done so. Mr. Hale would have known how to make the most of a point so vital."

"Oh, come now, Valmont," said Hale, "you're chaffing us. Plenty of people take in all the papers!"

"I think not. Even clubs and hotels subscribe to the leading journals only. You said *all*, I think, Podgers?"

"Well, *nearly* all, sir."

"But which is it? There's a vast difference."

"He takes a good many, sir."

"How many?"

"I don't just know, sir."

"That's easily found out, Valmont," said Hale, "if you think it so important."

"I think it so important that I'm going back with Podgers myself. You can take me into the house with you, I suppose, when you return?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Returning to those newspapers for a moment, Podgers—what is done with them?"

"They are sold to the ragman, sir, once a week."

"Who takes them from the study?"

"I do, sir."

"Do they appear to have been read very carefully?"

"Well, no, sir; leastways, some of them seem never to have been opened, or if they have, to have been folded up very carefully again."

"Have you noticed any clippings being made from any of them?"

"No, sir."

"Does Mr. Summertrees keep a scrap-book?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Oh, the case is perfectly plain," said I, leaning back in my chair, and regarding the puzzled Hale with that cherubic expression of self-satisfaction which I know is so annoying to him.

"What's perfectly plain?" he demanded, more gruffly perhaps than etiquette would have sanctioned.

"Summertrees is no coiner, nor is he linked with any band of coiners."

"What is he, then?"

"Ah, that opens another avenue of inquiry. For all I know to the contrary, he may be the most honest of men. On the surface it would appear that he is a reasonably industrious tradesman in Tottenham Court Road, who is anxious that there should be no visible connection between so plebeian an employment and so aristocratic a residence as that in Park Lane."

At this point Spenser Hale gave expression to one of those rare flashes of reason which are always an astonishment to his friends.

"That is nonsense, Monsieur Valmont," he said. "The man who is ashamed of the connection between his business and his house is one who is trying to get into Society, or else the women of his family are trying it, as is usually the case. Now, Summertrees has no family. He himself goes nowhere, gives no entertainments, and accepts no invitations. He belongs to no club, therefore to say that he is ashamed of his connection with the Tottenham Court Road shop is absurd. He is concealing the connection for some other reason that will bear looking into."

"My dear Hale, the Goddess of Wisdom herself could not have made a more sensible remark. Now, *mon ami*, do you want my assistance, or have you had enough to go on with?"

"Enough to go on with? We have nothing more than we had when I called on you last night."

"Last night, Mr. Hale, you supposed this man was in league with coiners. To-day you know he is not."

"I know you *say* he is not."

I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows, smiling at him.

"It is the same thing, Monsieur Hale."

"Well, of all the conceit——!" and the good Hale could get no further.

"If you wish my assistance, it is yours."

"Well, not to put too fine a point upon it, I do."

"In that case, my dear Podgers, you will

return to the residence of our friend, Summertrees, and I wish you to get together for me in a bundle all of yesterday's morning

place each day's papers in a pile by itself, in case they should be wanted again. There is always one week's supply in the cellar, and we sell the papers of the week before to the ragman."

"Excellent. Well, run the risk of abstracting one day's journals, and have them ready for me. I will call upon you at exactly half past three o'clock, and I want you to take me upstairs to the clerk's bedroom on the third storey, which I suppose is not locked during the daytime?"

"No, sir, it is not."

With this the patient Podgers took his departure. Spenser Hale rose when his assistant left.

"Anything further I can do?" he asked.

"Yes, give me the address of the shop in the Tottenham Court Road. Do you happen to have about you one of those new five-shilling pieces which you believe to be illegally coined?"

He opened his pocket-book and took out the bit of white metal and handed it to me.

"I'm going to pass this off before evening," I said, putting it in my pocket, "and I hope none of your men will arrest me."

"That's all right," laughed Hale, and then he went his way.

At half past three Podgers was waiting for me, and opened the front door as I came up the steps, thus saving me the necessity of ringing. The house was strangely quiet. The French cook was evidently down in the basement, and we had probably all the upper part to ourselves, unless Summertrees were in his study, which I doubted. Podgers led me directly upstairs to the clerk's room on the third floor, walking on tiptoe with an elephantine air of silence and secrecy combined which struck me as unnecessary.

"I will make an examination of this room," I said. "Kindly wait for me down by the door of the study."

The bedroom was of a respectable size when one considers the smallness of the house. The bed was nicely made up, and there were two chairs in the room, but the usual washstand and swing-mirror were not visible. However, seeing a curtain at the further end of the room, I drew it aside, and found, as I expected, a



"The hook, if pressed upwards, allowed the door to swing outwards, over the stairhead."

and evening papers that were delivered to the house. Can you do that, or are they mixed up in a heap in the coal-cellar?"

"I can do it, sir. I have instructions to

fixed lavatory in an alcove of perhaps four feet deep by five in width. As the room was about fifteen feet wide, this left two-thirds of the space unaccounted for. A moment later I opened a door which exhibited a closet filled with clothes hanging on hooks. This absorbed another five feet, leaving a third space of five feet between the clothes-closet and the lavatory. I thought at first that the entrance to the secret stairway must have issued from the lavatory, but examining the boards closely, although they sounded hollow to the knuckles, they were quite evidently plain matchboarding, and not a door. The entrance to the stairway, therefore, must be from the clothes-closet. The right-hand wall proved similar to the matchboarding of the lavatory, so far as the casual eye or touch was concerned, but I saw at once it was a door. The latch was somewhat ingeniously operated by one of the hooks, which held a pair of old trousers. I found that the hook, if pressed upwards, allowed the door to swing outwards, over the stairhead. Descending to the second floor, a similar latch let me into a similar clothes-closet in the room beneath. The two rooms were identical in size, one directly above the other, the only difference being that the lower room door gave into the study, instead of into the hall, as was the case with the upper chamber.

The study was extremely neat, either not much used, or the abode of a very methodical man. There was nothing on the table except a pile of the morning's papers. I walked to the further end, turned the key in the lock, and came out upon the astonished Podgers.

"Well, I'm blown!" exclaimed he.

"Quite so," I rejoined; "you've been tiptoeing past an empty room for the last two weeks. Now, if you'll come with me, Podgers, I'll show you how the trick is done."

When he entered the study, I locked the door once more, and led the assumed butler, still tiptoeing through force of habit, up the stair into the top bedroom, and so out again, leaving everything exactly as we found it. We went down the main stair to the front hall, and there Podgers had my parcel of papers all neatly wrapped up. This bundle I carried to my flat, gave one of my assistants some instructions, and left him at work on the papers. Then I took a cab to the foot of Tottenham Court Road, and walked up that street till I came to J. Simpson's old curiosity shop. After gazing at the well-filled windows for some time, I walked

inside, having selected a little iron crucifix, the work of some ancient craftsman.

I knew at once from Podgers' description that I was waited upon by the veritable respectable clerk who brought the bag of money each night to Park Lane, and who I made certain was no other than Ralph Summertrees himself.

There was nothing in his manner differing from that of any other quiet salesman. The price of the crucifix proved to be seven-and-six, and I threw down a sovereign to pay for it.

"Do you mind the change being all in silver, sir?" he asked, and I answered without any eagerness, although the question aroused a suspicion that had begun to be allayed—

"Not in the least."

He gave me half-a-crown, three two-shilling pieces, and four shillings, all the coins being well-worn silver of the realm. This seemed to dispose of the theory that he was palming off illegitimate money. He asked me if I were interested in any particular line of antiquity, and I replied that my curiosity was merely general, and exceedingly amateurish, whereupon he invited me to look around, which I proceeded to do, while he resumed the addressing of some wrapped up pamphlets, which I surmised to be copies of his catalogue, which he stamped for posting. He made no attempt either to watch me or to press his wares upon me. I selected at random a little inkstand, and asked its price. It was two shillings, he said, whereupon I produced my fraudulent five-shilling piece. He took it, gave me the change without comment, and the last doubt about his connection with coiners flickered from my mind.

At this moment a young man came in, who I saw at once was not a customer. He walked briskly to the further end of the shop, and disappeared behind a partition which had one pane of glass in it that gave an outlook towards the front door.

"Excuse me a moment," said the shop-keeper, and he followed the young man into the private office.

As I examined the curious, heterogeneous collection of things for sale, I heard the click of coins being poured out on the lid of a desk or an uncovered table, and the murmur of voices floated out to me. I was now near the entrance of the shop, and by a sleight-of-hand trick, keeping the corner of my eye on the glass pane of the private office, I removed the key of the front door

without a sound, and took an impression of it in wax, returning the key to its place without being observed. At this moment another young man came in and walked straight past me into the private office. I heard him say—

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Simpson. How are you, Rogers?"

"Hello, Macpherson!" saluted Rogers, who then came out, bidding "Good night" to Mr. Simpson, and departed whistling down the street, but not before he had repeated his phrase to another young man entering, to whom he gave the name of Tyrrel.

I noted these three names in my mind. Two others came in together, but I had to content myself with memorising their features, for I did not learn their names. These men were evidently collectors, for I heard the rattle of money in every case; yet here was a small shop, doing apparently very little business, for I had been there for more than half an hour, and remained the only customer. If credit were given, one collector would certainly have been sufficient, yet five had come in, and had poured their contributions into the pile Summertrees was to take home with him that night.

I determined to possess myself of one of the pamphlets which the man had been addressing. They were piled on a shelf behind the counter, and I had no difficulty in reaching across and taking the one on top, which I slipped into my pocket. When the fifth young man went down the street, Summertrees himself emerged, and this time he carried in his hand the well-filled, locked satchel, with the straps dangling. It was now approaching half-past five, and I saw he was eager to close up and get away.

"Anything else you fancy, sir?" he asked me.

"No—or, rather, yes and no. You have a very interesting collection here, but it's getting so dark I can hardly see."

"I close at half-past five, sir."

"Ah," I said, consulting my watch. "I shall have to call some other time."

"Thank you, sir," replied Summertrees quietly, and with that I took my leave.

From the corner of an alley on the other side of the street, I saw him put up the shutters with his own hands; then he emerged, with overcoat on, and the money satchel slung across his shoulder. He locked the door, tested it with his knuckles, then walked down the street, carrying under one arm the pamphlets he had been addressing. I followed him at some distance, and these

pamphlets he put into the box at the first post-office he passed, then walked rapidly to his house in Park Lane.

When I returned to my flat and called in my assistant, he said—

"After putting to one side the regular advertisements of pills, soap, and what not, here is the only one common to all the newspapers, morning and evening alike. The advertisements are not identical, sir, but they have two points of similarity—or, perhaps I should say, three. They all profess to furnish a cure for absent-mindedness; they all ask that the applicant's hobby shall be stated, and they all bear the same address—a Dr. Willoughby, in Tottenham Court Road."

"Thank you," said I, as he placed the scissored advertisements before me.

I read several of the announcements. They were small, and perhaps that is why I had never noticed any of them in the newspapers, for certainly they were odd enough. Some asked for lists of absent-minded men, with the hobbies of each, and for these lists prizes of from one shilling to six were offered. In other clippings, Dr. Willoughby professed to be able to cure absent-mindedness. There were no fees, and no treatment, but a pamphlet would be sent, which, if it did not benefit the receiver, could do no harm. The doctor was unable to see patients personally, nor could he enter into correspondence with them, and the address was the same as that of the old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road. At this juncture I pulled the pamphlet from my pocket, and saw it was entitled: "Christian Science and Absent-Mindedness," by Dr. Stamford Willoughby, and at the end of the article was the statement contained in the advertisement, that Dr. Willoughby would neither see patients nor hold a correspondence with them.

I drew a sheet of paper towards me, wrote to Dr. Willoughby, alleging that I was a very absent-minded man, and would be glad of his pamphlet, adding that my special hobby was the collection of first editions. I then signed myself, "Alport Webster, Imperial Flats, London, W."

I may here explain that it is often necessary for me to see people under some other name than the well-known appellation of Eugène Valmont. There are two doors to my flat, and on one of these is painted, "Eugène Valmont"; on the other is a receptacle into which can be slipped a sliding panel bearing any *nom de guerre* I choose.

The same device is arranged on the ground floor, where the names of the occupants of the building appear on the right-hand wall.

I sealed, addressed, and stamped my letter, and then I told my man to put out the name of "Alport Webster," and if I did not happen to be in when anyone called upon that mythical personage, he was to make an appointment for me.

It was nearly six o'clock next afternoon when the card of Angus Macpherson was brought in to Mr. Alport Webster. I recognised the young man as one of those who had entered the little shop carrying his tribute to Mr. Simpson the day before. He had three volumes under his arm. He spoke in a pleasant, insinuating sort of way, and I knew at once he was an adept in his profession of canvasser.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Macpherson? In what can I serve you?"

"Are you interested at all in first editions, Mr. Webster?"

"It is the one thing I am interested in," I replied, "but unfortunately they often run into a lot of money."

"That is true," said Mr. Macpherson sympathetically, "and I have here three books, one of which is an exemplification of what you say. This costs a hundred pounds. The last copy that was sold by auction in London brought a hundred and twenty-three pounds. This next one is forty pounds, and the third ten pounds. At these prices I am certain you could not duplicate three such treasures in any bookshop in Britain."

I examined them critically, and saw that what he said was true. He was still standing on the opposite side of the table.

"Please take a chair, Mr. Macpherson. Do you mean to say you go round London with a hundred and fifty pounds' worth of goods in this careless sort of way?"

"I run very little risk, Mr. Webster. I don't suppose anyone I meet imagines for a moment there is more under my arm than perhaps a trio of volumes I have picked up in the fourpenny box, to take home with me."

I lingered over the volume for which he asked a hundred pounds, then said, looking across at him—

"How came you to be possessed of this book, for instance?"

He had a fine, open countenance, and answered me without hesitation, in the frankest possible manner.

"I am not in actual possession of it, Mr. Webster. I am by way of being a connoisseur in rare and valuable books myself, although,

of course, I have little money with which to indulge in the collection of them. I am acquainted, however, with lovers of desirable books in different quarters of London. These three volumes, for instance, are from the library of a private gentleman in the West End. I have sold many books to him, and he knows I am trustworthy. He wishes to dispose of them at something under their real value, and has kindly allowed me the loan of them until to-morrow. I make it my business to find out those who are interested in rare books, and by trading I add considerably to my income."

"How, for instance, did you learn that I was a bibliophile?"

Mr. Macpherson laughed genially.

"Well, Mr. Webster, to tell you the truth, I chanced it. I do that very often. I enter a flat like this, and send in my card to the name on the door. If I am invited in, I ask the occupant the question I asked you just now: 'Are you interested in rare editions?' If he says 'No,' I simply beg pardon and retire. If he says 'Yes,' then I show my wares."

"I see," said I, nodding. What a glib young liar he was, with that innocent face of his! and yet my next question brought forth the truth.

"As this is the first time you have called upon me, Mr. Macpherson, you have no objection to my making some further inquiry, I suppose? Would you mind telling me the name of the owner of these books in the West End?"

"His name is Mr. Ralph Summertrees, of Park Lane."

"Of Park Lane? Ah, indeed!"

"I shall be glad to leave the books with you, Mr. Webster, and if you care to make an appointment with Mr. Summertrees, I am sure he will be kind enough to say a word in my favour."

"Oh, I do not in the least doubt it, and should not think of troubling the gentleman."

"I was going to tell you," went on the young man, "that I have a friend, a capitalist, who, in a way, is my supporter, for, as I said, I have little money of my own. I find it is often inconvenient for people to pay down any considerable sum. When, however, I strike a bargain, my capitalist buys the books, and I make an arrangement with my customer to pay a certain amount each week, and so even a large purchase is not felt, as I make the instalments small enough to suit my client."

"You are employed during the day, I take it?"

"Yes, I am a clerk in the City."

Again we were in the blissful realms of fiction.

"Suppose I take this book at ten pounds, what instalment should I be expected to pay each week?"

"Oh, what you like, sir. Would five shillings be too much?"

"I think not."

"Very well, sir. If you pay me five shillings now, I will leave the book with you, and shall have pleasure in calling this day week for the next instalment."

I put my hand into my pocket and drew out two half-crowns, which I passed over to him.

"Do I need to sign any form or undertaking to pay the rest?"

The young man laughed cordially.

"Oh, no, sir, there is no formality necessary. You see, sir, this is largely a labour of love with me, although I don't deny I have my eye on the future. I am getting together what I hope will be a very valuable connection with gentlemen like yourself who are fond of books."

And then, after making a note in a little book he

took from his pocket, he bade me a most graceful "Good-bye" and departed, leaving me cogitating over what it all meant.

Next morning two things were handed to me: the first was a pamphlet on Christian Science and Absent-Mindedness, exactly similar to the one I had taken away from the old curiosity shop; the second was a small key made from my wax impression, that would fit the front door of the same shop—a key fashioned by an excellent

Anarchist friend of mine in an obscure street near Holborn.

That night, at ten o'clock, I was inside the old curiosity shop with a small storage battery in my pocket, and a little electric glow-lamp at my button-hole—a most useful instrument for either burglar or detective.

I had expected to find the books of the establishment in a safe, which, if it were similar to the one in Park Lane, I was

prepared to open either with the false keys in my possession, or, at worst, take an impression of the keyhole and trust to my Anarchist friend for the rest. But, to my amazement, I discovered all the papers pertaining to the concern in a desk which was not even locked. The books, three in number, were the ordinary day-book, journal, and ledger referring to the shop—book-keeping of the older fashion; but in a portfolio lay half-a-dozen foolscap sheets, headed "Mr. Roger's List," "Mr. Macpherson's," "Mr. Tyrrel's," the names I had already learned, and three others. These lists contained in the first column, names; in the second column, addresses; in the



"I was inside the old curiosity shop."

third, sums of money, and then in the small square places following were amounts ranging from two-and-sixpence to a pound. At the bottom of Mr. Macpherson's list was the name "Alport Webster, Imperial Flats, £10," then in the adjoining small square space, "five shillings." These six sheets, each headed by a collector's name, were evidently the record of current collections, and the innocence of the whole thing was so apparent that if it were not for my fixed rule

never to believe that I am at the bottom of any case until I have come on something suspicious, I should have gone out empty-handed as I came in.

The six sheets were loose in a thin portfolio, but standing on a shelf above the desk were a number of fat volumes, one of which I took down, and saw that it contained similar lists running back several years. I noticed on Mr. Macpherson's current catalogue the name of Lord Semptam, an eccentric old nobleman whom I knew slightly. Then turning to the list immediately before the current one, the name was still there; so it went on back through list after list until I found the first entry, which was no less than three years previous, and there Lord Semptam was down for a piece of furniture costing fifty pounds, and on that account he had paid a pound a week for more than three years, totalling to a hundred and seventy at the least; and instantly the glorious simplicity of the scheme dawned upon me, and I became so interested in the swindle that I lit the gas, fearing my little lamp would be exhausted before my investigation ended, for it promised to be a long one.

In several instances the intended victim proved shrewder than old Simpson had counted upon, and the word "Settled" had been written on the line carrying the name when the exact number of instalments had been paid. But as these shrewd persons dropped out, others took their places, and Simpson's dependence on their absent-mindedness seemed to be justified in nine cases out of ten. His collectors were collecting long after the debt had been paid. In Lord Semptam's case the payment had evidently become chronic, and the old man was giving away his pound a week to the suave Macpherson two years after his debt had been liquidated.

From the big volume I detached the loose leaf dated 1893, which recorded Lord Semptam's purchase of a carved table for fifty pounds, and on which he had been paying a pound a week from that time to the date of which I am writing, which was November, 1896. This single document taken from the files of three years previous was not likely to be missed, as would have been the case if I had taken a current sheet. I, nevertheless, made a copy of the names and addresses of Macpherson's present clients; then, carefully placing everything exactly as I had found it, I extinguished the gas and went out of the shop, locking the door behind

me. With the 1893 sheet in my pocket, I resolved to prepare a pleasant little surprise for my suave friend Macpherson when he called to get his next instalment of five shillings.

Late as the hour was when I reached Trafalgar Square, I could not deprive myself of the felicity of calling on Mr. Spenser Hale, who, I knew, was then on duty. He was never at his best during office hours, because officialism stiffened his stalwart frame; mentally he was impressed with the importance of his position, and added to this he was not then allowed to smoke his big, black pipe and terrible tobacco. He received me with the curtness I had been taught to expect when I inflicted myself upon him at his office. He greeted me with—

"I say, Valmont, how long do you expect to be on this job?"

"What job?" I asked mildly.

"Oh, you know what I mean — the Summertrees affair."

"Oh, *that*!" I exclaimed with surprise.

"The Summertrees case is already completed, of course. If I had known you were in a hurry, I should have finished everything yesterday; but as you and Podgers, and I don't know how many more, have been at it sixteen or seventeen days, if not longer, I thought I might venture to take as many hours, as I am working entirely alone. You said nothing about haste, you know."

"Oh, come now, Valmont, that's a bit thick. Do you mean to say you have already got evidence against the man?"

"Evidence absolute and complete."

"Then who are the coiners?"

"My most estimable friend, how often have I told you not to jump at conclusions? I informed you when you first spoke to me about the matter, that Summertrees was neither a coiner nor a confederate of coiners. I have convicted him of quite another offence, which is probably unique in the annals of crime. I have penetrated the mystery of the shop, and the reason for all those suspicious actions which quite properly set you on his trail. Now, I wish you to come to my flat next Wednesday night at a quarter to six, prepared to make an arrest."

"I must know who I am to arrest, and on what counts."

"Quite so, *mon ami* Hale. I did not say you were to make an arrest, but merely warned you to be prepared. If you have time now to listen to the disclosures, I am quite at your service. I promise you there

are some original features in the case. If, however, the present moment is inopportune, drop in on me at your convenience, previously telephoning, so that you may know whether I am there or not, and thus your valuable time will not be expended purposelessly."

With this I presented to him my most courteous bow, and although his mystified expression hinted a suspicion that I was chaffing him, as he would call it, official dignity dissolved somewhat, and he expressed his desire to hear all about it then and there. I had succeeded in arousing my friend Hale's curiosity. He listened to the evidence with perplexed brow, and at last ejaculated he would be blessed.

"This young man," I said in conclusion, "will call upon me at six o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, to receive his second five shillings. I propose that you, in your uniform, shall be seated there with me to receive him, and I am anxious to study Mr. Macpherson's countenance when he realises he has walked in to confront a policeman. If you will allow me to cross-examine him for a few moments—not after the manner of Scotland Yard, with a warning lest he incriminate himself, but in the free-and-easy fashion we adopt in Paris—I shall then turn the case over to you, to be dealt with at your discretion."

"You have a wonderful flow of language, Mr. Valmont," was the officer's tribute to me. "I shall be on hand at a quarter to six on Wednesday."

"Meanwhile," said I, "kindly say nothing of this to anyone. We must arrange a complete surprise for Macpherson. That is essential. Please make no move in the matter at all until Wednesday night."

Spenser Hale, much impressed, nodded acquiescence, and I took a polite leave of him.

The question of lighting is an important one in a room such as mine, and electricity offers a good deal of scope to the ingenious. Of this fact I have taken full advantage. I can manipulate the lighting of my room so that any particular spot is bathed in brilliancy, while the rest of the space remains in comparative gloom, and I arranged the lamps so that their full force impinged against the door that Wednesday evening, while I sat on one side in semi-darkness, and Hale sat on the other, with a light beating down on him from above, which gave him the odd, sculptured look of a living statue of Justice, stern and triumphant. Anyone entering the room would first be dazzled by the light, and next would see the

gigantic form of Hale in the full uniform of his order.

When Angus Macpherson was shown into this room, he was quite visibly taken aback, and paused abruptly on the threshold, his gaze riveted on the huge policeman. I think his first purpose was to turn and run, but the door closed behind him, and he doubtless heard, as we all did, the sound of the bolt being thrust in its place, thus locking him in.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I expected to meet Mr. Webster."

As he said this, I pressed the button under my table, and was instantly enshrouded with light. A sickly smile overspread the countenance of Mr. Macpherson as he caught sight of me, and he made a very creditable attempt to carry off the situation with nonchalance.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Webster! I did not notice you at first."

It was a tense moment. I spoke slowly and impressively—

"Sir, perhaps you are not unacquainted with the name of Eugène Valmont."

He replied brazenly—

"I am sorry to say, sir, I never heard of the gentleman before."

At this moment came a most inopportune "Haw haw!" from that blockhead Spenser Hale, completely spoiling the dramatic situation I had elaborated with such thought and care. It is little wonder the English have no drama, for they show scant appreciation of the sensational moments in life.

"Haw haw!" brayed Spenser Hale, and at once reduced the emotional atmosphere to a fog of commonplace. However, what is a man to do? He must handle the tools with which it pleases Providence to provide him. I ignored Hale's untimely laughter.

"Sit down, sir," I said to Macpherson, and he obeyed.

"You have called on Lord Semptram this week," I asked sternly.

"Yes, sir."

"And collected a pound from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"In October, 1893, you sold him a carved antique table for fifty pounds?"

"Quite right, sir."

"When you were here last week, you gave me Ralph Summertrees as the name of a gentleman living in Park Lane. You knew at the time that this man was your employer?"

Macpherson was now looking fixedly at me, and on this occasion made no reply.

"You also knew that Summertrees, of Park Lane, was identical with Simpson, of Tottenham Court Road?"

"Well, sir," said Macpherson, "I don't exactly see what you're driving at, but it's quite usual for a man to carry on a business under an assumed name. There is nothing illegal about that."

"We will come to the illegality in a moment, Mr. Macpherson. You and Rogers, and Tyrrel, and three others, are confederates in the employ of this man Simpson?"

"We are in his employ? Yes, sir; but no more confederates than clerks usually are."

"I think, Mr. Macpherson, I have said enough to show you that the game is—what you call it—up. You are now in the presence of Mr. Spenser Hale, from Scotland Yard, who is waiting to hear your confession."

Here the stupid Hale broke in with his—

"And remember, sir, that anything you say will be——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Hale," I interrupted hastily. "I shall turn over the case to you in a very few moments, but I ask you to remember our compact, and to leave this investigation for the present entirely in my hands. Now, Mr. Macpherson, I want your confession, and I want it at once."

"Confession? Confederates?" protested Macpherson, with admirably stimulated surprise. "I must say you use extraordinary terms, Mr.—Mr.—what did you say the name was?"

"Haw haw!" roared Hale. "His name is Monsieur Valmont."

"I implore you, Mr. Hale, to leave this man to me for a very few moments. Now, Mr. Macpherson, what have you to say in your defence?"

"Where nothing criminal has been alleged, Mr. Valmont, I see no necessity for defence. If you wish me to admit that somehow you have acquired a number of details regarding our business, I am perfectly willing to do so, and to subscribe to their accuracy. If you will be good enough to let me know of what you complain, I shall endeavour to make the point clear to you if I can. There has evidently been some misapprehension, but, for the life of me, without further explanation I am as much in a fog as I was on my way coming here, for it is getting a little thick outside."

Macpherson certainly was conducting himself with great discretion, and presented, quite unconsciously, a much more diplomatic figure than my friend Spenser Hale, sitting

stiffly opposite me. His tone was one of mild expostulation, mitigated by the intimation that all misunderstanding speedily would be cleared away. To outward view he offered a perfect picture of innocence, neither protesting too much nor too little. I had, however, another surprise in store for him—a trump card, as it were—and I played it down on the table.

"There!" I cried with vim, "have you ever seen that sheet before?"

He glanced at it without offering to take it in his hand.

"Oh, yes," he said, "that has been abstracted from our file. It is what I call my visiting-list."

"Come, come, sir!" I cried sternly; "you refuse to confess, but I warn you we know all about it. You never heard of Doctor Willoughby, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is the author of the silly pamphlet on Christian Science."

"You are quite right, Mr. Macpherson; on Christian Science and Absent-Mindedness."

"Possibly. I haven't read it for a long time."

"Did you ever meet this learned doctor, Mr. Macpherson?"

"Oh, yes. Dr. Willoughby is the pen-name of Mr. Summertrees. He believes in Christian Science and that sort of thing, and writes about it."

"Ah, really! We are getting your confession bit by bit, Mr. Macpherson. I think it would be better to be quite frank with us."

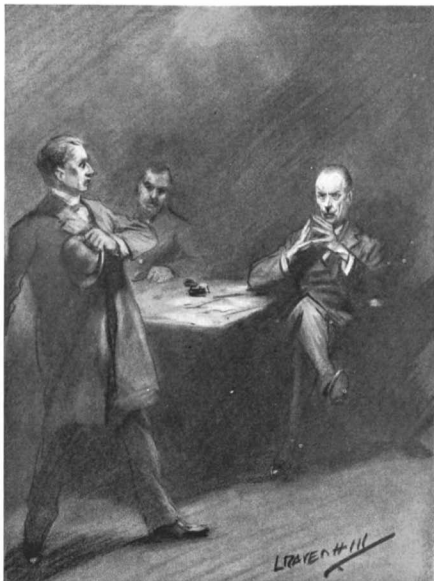
"I was just going to make the same suggestion to you, Mr. Valmont. If you will tell me in a few words exactly what your charge is against either Mr. Summertrees or myself, I will then know what to say."

"We charge you, sir, with obtaining money under false pretences, which is a crime that has landed more than one distinguished financier in prison."

Spenser Hale shook his fat forefinger at me and said—

"Tut, tut, Mr. Valmont: we mustn't threaten, we mustn't threaten, you know." But I went on without heeding him.

"Take, for instance, Lord Sempnam. You sold him a table for fifty pounds on the instalment plan. He was to pay a pound a week, and in less than a year the debt was liquidated. But he is an absent-minded man, as all your clients are. That is why you came to me. I had answered the bogus Willoughby's advertisement. And so you kept on collecting and collecting for more



"Perhaps you are not unacquainted with the name of Eugene Valmont?"

than three years. Now do you understand the charge?"

Mr. Macpherson's head during this accusation was held slightly inclined to one side. At first his face was clouded by the most clever imitation of anxious concentration of mind I had ever seen, and this was gradually

cleared away by the dawn of awakening perception. When I had finished, an ingratiating smile hovered about his lips.

"Really, you know," he said, "that is rather a capital scheme. The absent-minded league, as one might call them. Most ingenious. Summertrees, if he had any sense

of humour, which he hasn't, would be rather taken by the idea that this innocent fad for Christian Science had led him to be suspected of obtaining money under false pretences. But really there are no pretensions about the matter at all. As I understand it, I simply call and receive the money through the forgetfulness of the persons on my list; but where I think you would have both Summertrees and myself, if there were anything in your audacious theory, would be an indictment for conspiracy. Still, I see where the mistake arises. You have jumped at the conclusion that we sold nothing to Lord Semptam except that carved table three years ago. I have pleasure in pointing out to you that his lordship is a frequent customer of ours, and has had many things from us at one time or another. Sometimes he is in our debt; sometimes we are in his. We enjoy a sort of running contract with him by which he pays us a pound a week. He and several other customers are on the same plan, and in return for an income that we can count upon, they get the first offer of anything in which they are supposed to be interested. As I have told you, we call these sheets in the office our visiting-lists, but to make the visiting-lists complete you need what we term our encyclopædia. We give it that name because it is in so many volumes; a volume for each year, running back I don't know how long. You will notice little figures from time to time above certain amounts stated on this visiting-list. These figures refer to the page of the encyclopædia for the current year, and on that page is noted the new sale and the amount of it, as it might be set down, say, in a ledger."

"That is a very entertaining explanation, Mr. Macpherson. I suppose this encyclopædia, as you call it, is in the shop at Tottenham Court Road?"

"Oh, no, sir. Each volume of the encyclopædia is self-locking. These books contain the real secret of our business, and they are kept in the safe at Mr. Summertrees' house in Park Lane. Take Lord Semptam's account, for instance. You will find in faint figures under certain dates, 102. If you turn to page 102 of the encyclopædia for that year, you will then see a list of what Lord Semptam has bought, and the prices he was charged for them. It is really a very simple matter. If you will allow me to use your telephone for a moment, I will ask Mr. Summertrees, who has not yet begun dinner, to bring with him here the volume for 1893, and within a quarter of an hour you will be

perfectly satisfied that everything is quite legitimate."

I confess that the young man's naturalness and confidence staggered me—the more so as I saw by the sarcastic smile on Hale's lips that he did not believe a single word spoken. There was a portable telephone on the table, and as Macpherson finished his explanation, he reached over and drew it towards him. Then Spenser Hale interfered.

"Excuse me," he said, "I'll do the telephoning. What is the call number of Mr. Summertrees?"

"140 Hyde Park."

Hale at once called up Central, and presently was answered from Park Lane. We heard him say—

"Is this the residence of Mr. Summertrees? Oh, is that you, Podgers? Is Mr. Summertrees in? Very well. This is Hale. I am in Mr. Valmont's flat—Imperial Flats, you know. Yes, where you were with me the other day. Very well. Go to Mr. Summertrees, and say to him that Mr. Macpherson wants the encyclopædia for 1903. Do you get that? Yes, encyclopædia. Oh, he'll understand what it is. Mr. Macpherson. No, don't mention my name at all. Just say Mr. Macpherson wants the encyclopædia for the year 1893, and that you are to bring it. Yes, you may tell him that Mr. Macpherson is at Imperial Flats, but don't mention my name at all. Exactly. As soon as he gives you the book, get a cab and come here as quickly as possible with it. If Summertrees doesn't want to let the book go, then tell him to come with you. If he won't do that, place him under arrest, and bring both him and the book here. All right. Be as quick as you can—we're waiting."

Macpherson had made no protest against Hale's use of the telephone: he merely sat back in his chair with a resigned expression on his face which, if painted on canvas, might have been entitled "The Falsely Accused." When Hale rang off, Macpherson said—

"Of course, you know your own business best, but if your man arrests Summertrees, he will make you the laughing-stock of London. There is such a thing as unjustifiable arrest, as well as getting money under false pretences, and Mr. Summertrees is not the man to forgive an insult like that. And then, if you will allow me to say so, the more I think over your absent-minded theory, the more absolutely grotesque it seems; and if the case ever gets into the papers, I am sure, Mr. Hale, you'll have an uncomfortable half-hour with your chiefs at Scotland Yard."

"I'll take the risk of that, thank you," said Hale stubbornly.

"Am I to consider myself under arrest?" inquired the young man.

"No, sir."

"Then, if you will pardon me, I shall withdraw. Mr. Summertrees will show you everything you wish to see in his books, and can explain his business much more capably than I, because he knows more about it; therefore, gentlemen, I bid you good night."

"No, you don't. Not just yet awhile," exclaimed Hale, rising to his feet in unison with the young man.

"Then I *am* under arrest," protested Macpherson.

"You're not going to leave this room until Podgers brings that book."

"Oh, very well," and he sat down again.

And now, as talking is dry work, I set out something to drink, a box of cigars, and packets of cigarettes. Hale mixed his favourite brew, but Macpherson, shunning the wine of his country, contented himself with a glass of plain mineral water, and lit a cigarette. Then he awoke his high regard by saying presently—

"As nothing is happening, while we are waiting, Mr. Valmont, may I remind you that you owe me five shillings?"

I laughed, took the coin from my pocket, and paid him, whereupon he thanked me.

"Have you any connection with Scotland Yard, Mr. Valmont?" asked Macpherson, with the air of a man trying to make conversation to bridge over a tedious interval; and before I could reply, Hale blurted out: "Not likely."

"You have no official standing as a detective, then, Mr. Valmont?"

"None whatever," I replied quickly, thus getting my oar in ahead of Hale.

"That is a loss to our country," pursued this admirable young man, with evident sincerity.

I began to see I could make a good deal of this young fellow if he came under my tuition.

"The blunders of our police," he went on, "are something deplorable. If they would but take lessons in stratagem, say, from France, their unpleasant duties would be so much more acceptably performed, with much less discomfort to their victims."

"France!" snorted Hale in derision. "Why, they call a man guilty there until he's proven innocent."

"Yes, Mr. Hale, and the same seems to be the case in Imperial Flats. You have

quite made up your mind that Mr. Summertrees is guilty, and will not be content until he proves his innocence. I venture to predict that you will hear from him before long in a manner that will astonish you."

Hale grunted and looked at his watch. The minutes passed very slowly as we sat there smoking, and at last even I began to get uneasy. Macpherson, seeing our anxiety, said that when he came in, the fog was almost as thick as it had been the week before, and that there might be some difficulty in getting a cab. Just as he was speaking, the door was unlocked from outside, and Podgers entered, bearing a thick volume in his hand. This he gave to his superior, who turned over its pages in amazement, and then looked at the back, crying—

"'Encyclopædia of Sport, 1893!' What sort of a joke is this, Mr. Macpherson?"

There was a pained look on Mr. Macpherson's face as he reached forward and took the book. He said with a sigh—

"If you had allowed me to telephone, Mr. Hale, I would have made it perfectly plain to Summertrees what was wanted. I might have known this mistake would have occurred. There is nothing for it but to send this man back to Park Lane, to tell Mr. Summertrees that what we want is the locked volume of accounts for 1893, which we call the encyclopædia. Here, I shall write an order that will bring it. Oh, I'll show you what I have written before your man takes it," he said, as Hale stood ready to look over his shoulder.

On my notepaper he dashed off a request such as he had outlined, and handed it to Hale, who read it and gave it to Podgers.

"Take that to Summertrees, and get back as quickly as possible. Have you a cab at the door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it foggy outside?"

"Not so much, sir, as it was an hour ago. No difficulty about the traffic now, sir."

"Very well; get back as soon as you can."

Podgers saluted, and left with the book under his arm. Again the door was locked, and again we sat smoking in silence until the stillness was broken by the tinkle of the telephone. Hale put the receiver to his ear.

"Yes, this is the Imperial Flats. Yes, Mr. Valmont. Oh, yes, Macpherson is here. What? Out of what? Can't hear you. Out of print. What! the encyclopædia's out of print? Who is that speaking? Dr. Willoughby?"

Macpherson rose as if he would go to the

telephone, but instead (and he acted so quietly that I did not notice what he was doing until the thing was done), he picked up his sheet which he called his visiting-list, and, walking quite without haste, held it in the glowing coals of the fireplace until it disappeared in a flash of flame up the chimney. I sprang to my feet indignant, but too late to make even a motion towards the saving of the sheet. Macpherson regarded us both with that self-depreciatory smile which had several times lighted his face.

"How dare you burn that sheet?" I demanded.

"Because, Mr. Valmont, it did not belong to you; because you do not belong to Scotland Yard; because you stole it; because you had no right to it; and because you have no official standing in this country. If it had been in Mr. Hale's possession, I should not have dared, as you put it, to destroy the sheet; but the sheet was abstracted from my master's premises by you, an entirely unauthorised person, whom he would have been justified in shooting dead if he had found you housebreaking, and you had resisted him on his discovery. I have always held that these sheets should not have been kept, for, as has been the case, if they fell under the scrutiny of so intelligent a person as Mr. Valmont, improper inferences might have been drawn. Mr. Sammertrees, however,

persisted in keeping them, but made this concession, that if ever I telegraphed him or telephoned him the word "encyclopædia," he would at once burn these records, and he on his part was to telegraph to me: "The encyclopædia is out of print," whereupon I would know that he had succeeded. Now, gentlemen, open this door, which will save me the trouble of forcing it. Either put me formally under arrest or cease to restrict my liberty. I am very much obliged to Mr. Hale for telephoning, and I have made no protest to so gallant a host as Mr. Valmont seems to be, because of the locked door. However, the farce is now terminated. The proceedings I have sat through have been entirely illegal, and, if you will pardon me, Mr. Hale, they have been a little too French to go down here in Old England, or to make a report in the newspapers that would be quite satisfactory to your chiefs. I demand either my formal arrest or the unlocking of that door."

In silence I pressed a button, and my man threw open the door. Macpherson walked to the threshold, paused, and looked at Spenser Hale, who sat there silent as the Sphinx.

"Good evening, Mr. Hale."

There was no reply; then, turning to me with the same ingratiating smile—

"Good evening, Mr. Valmont," he said. "I shall call next Wednesday at six for my five shillings."

