

SHERLOCK'S RIVAL.

I have read—who hasn't?—the exploits of Sherlock Holmes. I have also been examined by a authority on bumps, who positively declared that Nature had liberally endowed me with those organs whereby man analyzes, compares, deducts. When that information was conveyed to me I did not go off and brag that I and Sherlock had strong points in common. No, I kept the knowledge to myself, brooded over it, and when I packed up my traps and went for my annual to the briny I took it with me and brooded over it there.

One sultry afternoon with my back against a boulder and my feet a few strides from the sea, I was meditating over this very thing when my attention was attracted by a cobbler which was trawling along shore. I watched it with languid interest, and when it was beached and the net hauled to land I went to have a look at the catch.

In the net were fish and something else, and the something else interested me more than the fish. It was a large stone with a piece of rope attached to it. It had torn and tangled the net considerably, consequently the fishermen were pronouncing benedictions on it. When they had exhausted their vocabulary of abuse I asked what it was—its original use. The answer I got was neither civil nor enlightening; therefore I went away, went back to my boulder.

The fishermen left the stone near the water's edge. After a few unamiable reflections on their rudeness my thoughts returned to it, began to play about it. Presently a dog came along and sniffed at it, and at the same time I remembered that it was in almost the ideal spot where a body lay that morning when fetched out of the sea.

I had seen that body brought to land, had noted the look on the face of the man who brought it, had thought at the time the tragic circumstances accounted for the look. But now, in some occult way, that dog's sniffing at the stone conjured up in my brain gruesome images, which, associating themselves with that look, produced in me a thought that made me shudder. I went to have another look at the stone; I examined it very carefully.

It was an oblong block of grey sandstone, with the appearance of having at one time formed part of a wall. One side was covered with a dark blue stain, and where the rope passed round it it was slightly notched to afford the rope a better grip. At its free end the piece of rope was noosed, and embedded in the noose part was a piece of grayish white substance.

Taking a small magnifying-glass from my pocket I examined the grayish-white substance minutely. "Great Scott!" I exclaimed, "this is epidermis—human epidermis—with a portion of the true skin adhering."

I signalled a beech-loafer and requested him to convey the stone to my lodgings, impressing upon him that he was to carry it carefully and in no way to interfere with the arrangement of the rope. He looked at the stone, then at me. But, whatever his scruples might be, the prospect of a tip dispelled them.

When the thing arrived at my "digs" my landlady was depressed; she evidently found it difficult to decide whether I was a lunatic or in liquor. However, on my mentioning that I would compensate her for any extra trouble she cheered up and decided I was a "golygist". Her recovery was so sudden and complete that she even forgot to tell the beech-loafer to wipe his muddy feet.

Alone in my room with the gruesome object from the ocean-bed I felt that a crisis in my life had arrived. I had no doubt—not the slightest doubt whatever—that by following up the clue in my possession I should unravel a terrible crime. A voice seemed to be saying to me: "This way, please, to the Temple of Fame."

Resolved not to lose so excellent a chance of distinguishing myself I set to work on the job without delay, making a start with Mrs. Cummins, my landlady. As she was setting the tea-table I drew her into conversation about the bathing fatality, and being a person with encyclopedic knowledge of other people's affairs she was able to supply me with some important particulars respecting the two men connected with it—their vocations, their relationship to each other, and an important item respecting a young woman, with regard to whom a bit of good-natured rivalry was supposed to have existed between them.

After tea I went out and made further inquiries; and, consequent upon a piece of information received, I hired a boat and went up harbour to examine the frontage of a wharf.

At one time this wharf had been connected with some chemical works, and the stonework along the front was covered with blue stain. This stain was identical with the stain on the stone in my possession. An aperture showed where some stones had been removed.

Proceeding in this way, in the course of a few days I collected many particulars, made numerous memoranda, and used a lot of stationery.

Bringing my mind to bear on this nebulous mass, I said to myself, "It is the function of

intellect to evolve order out of chaos, to trace unity in variety, to get at the root of things—here goes!"

A little sifting, a little digesting, and the nebulous mass became a perfect whole. In other words, I had conclusive proof that the so-called bathing fatality was a deliberate act of murder, the perpetrator of which was no other than the man who had brought the body to land and had received commendation for bravery.

This is how the thing stood—on paper. They were rivals for the love of the same woman. One of them, while assuming to treat the matter lightly and maintaining an appearance of friendship, matures a plan to get rid of his rival. In the ocean-bed, not far from shore, he places his diabolical arrangement—a stone with a noosed rope. Having located in some way its exact position, he lures his victim to join him in a bathe, and proposes the dive from the boat—for it was from a boat well in shore that the were bathing. In the grey-green depths one clutches at the other, and a grim struggle ensues. But the novice is no match for the fiend who grapples with him. With the aid of the sinker he holds him down and, when power of resistance is gone, slips the noose over his foot, subsequently recovering the body and bringing it ashore.

Contemplating these results of my investigations, I allowed myself—but only for a moment—to be carried away by a feeling of exultation. "Sherlock Holmes," I exclaimed, "look to thy laurels; a new star rises in the firmament of fame, and thou must suffer eclipse!"

I really felt sorry for Sherlock, but it couldn't be helped, it was purely a case of the survival of the fittest.

It now became a very pressing question with me as to how I was going to act. If at this juncture I put the case into the hands of the police there was just a possibility that I might be laughed at for my pains; or, if not laughed at, elbowed out of the case, and somebody else get all the credit.

An idea struck me and decided me to keep the police out till the great coup had been made. I remembered that there were many recorded instances of criminals who, being suddenly confronted with some instrument or evidence of their crime, had, in the uncontrollable terror of the moment, betrayed their guilt.

I reflected a little—drew up a plan. I arranged with Mrs. Cummins to have a little "social" in my room that evening, and invited three fellow-lodgers—an insurance man and two grocers' assistants—to be my guests. Then I went down to the quay side, where I knew I could lay hands on a man I wanted.

I found him among the fish barrels—a tall gaunt figure, with large hands and hair on the back of them. He was a fish-packer.

It being a slack time, I found no difficulty in getting into conversation with him. Assuming the role of an admirer of heroism, I gave him to understand that a few appreciators had clubbed together to make him a little present, and if he would come up to my place in the evening we should be glad to do honor to whom honor was due.

He took the bait splendidly and said he would come.

On my way back I bethought me of a revolver. I had no definite idea as to what I would do with it, but I thought it best to be prepared for emergencies. I selected a natty little affair. The man I bought it of said it would shoot.

I did not doubt his word, but just to test it I went into the back yard and put a porter bottle on the pump. Mrs. Cummins was at the slop-stone at the time, and Mrs. Cummins's cat was snoozing on the wash-house roof. I let drive, and the bottle—well, the bottle remained intact, but the cat woke up suddenly and went away in a hurry.

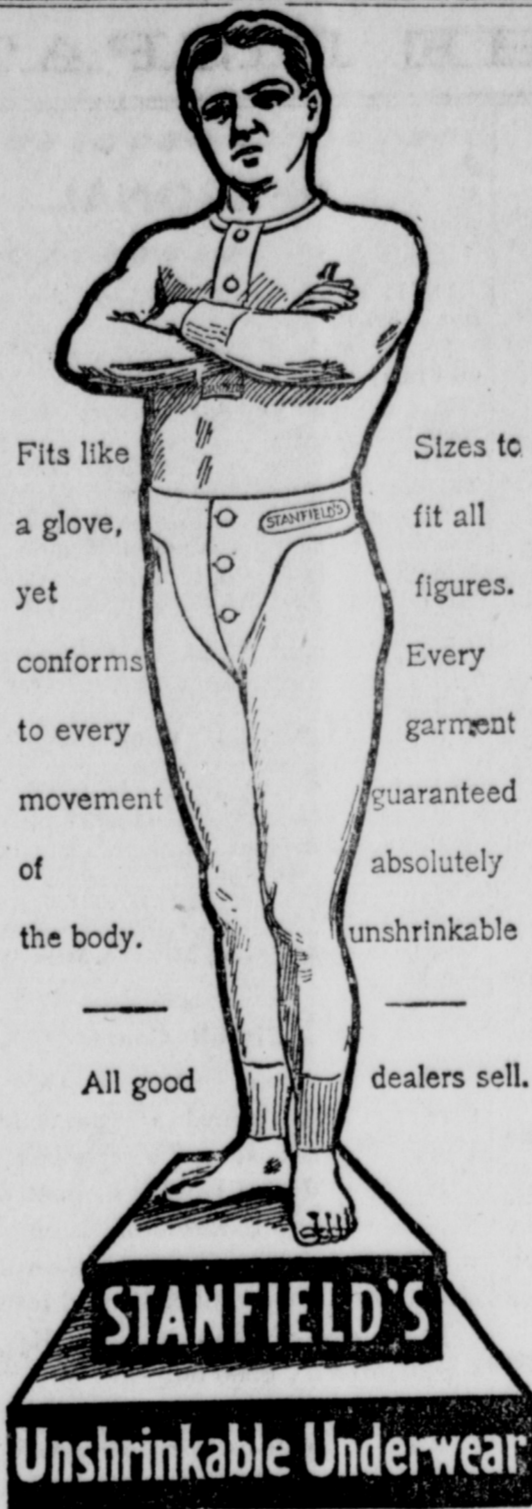
It was perhaps just as well that Mrs. Cummins did not see the cat's exit, or she might have attributed its prolonged absence to my shooting. As it was, she merely expressed the hope that I had not taken leave of my senses. I assured her I had not, and to effectually remove all doubts on the matter I put up the revolver and postponed the shooting.

At somewhere about eight o'clock that evening I was playing host to an insurance man, two grocers' assistants, and one fish packer. The grocers' assistants smoked a good many of my cigars, and insurance man did not stint himself in the matter of whisky. As for the packer, he ate and drank and smoked as if he were doing it for a wager. Mrs. Cummins had a few sips for "sociability's sake."

On a small table in a corner of the room there was a bulky article covered with a cloth. While the packer was exchanging a few words with Mrs. Cummins, I leaned towards the others and, pointing to the table, said: "Gentlemen, prepare yourselves; you are about to participate in an event which will be recorded in the annals of history."

The insurance man winked at the whisky bottle, and said he hadn't the slightest doubt about it. The grocers' assistant said "Hear! hear!"

Then the packer joined us and the curtain went up for the last act.



Grasping his hand, I led him to the table and delivered a trim little speech, in which eulogy was blended with moral reflections. At the close I threw aside the wrapping, disclosing the stone.

The effect was almost exactly what I expected. He stood stock still, staring at the stone. His veins stood out, his limbs trembled, his eyes flashed.

"Now for it," I thought. "It's coming; he's going to make a clean breast of it!"

Then it came—not the confession—his fist. It was so sudden, so unexpected, so painful, that I hardly knew whether to get up or remain on the floor.

I got up.

Mrs. Cummins and the insurance man were discoursing energetically. The latter, evidently under the impression that I had been playing a joke on the packer, was trying to pacify that individual. I mopped my nose and said, authoritatively, "Leave him to me!"

That brought him up to me quick. "Well," he said, glancing appreciatingly at my ensanguined proboscis, "where's the point of the joke now?"

In unequivocal terms I pointed out that it was no joking matter, and insisted that all Neptune's ocean couldn't wash his hands white again.

He said if I didn't stop jawing he'd knock the billy goat face off me.

Not relishing his manner, and thinking to intimidate him—certainly not intending to use it—I snatched out my revolver.

"Stand back!" I said.

He stood back.

I fetched up all my reserves of rhetoric, and was drenching him with it when somebody—I think it was the insurance man—knocked up my arm. The result was that the revolver went off and pugged a hole through a counterfeit presentment of the daughter of Pharaoh, done in wools by Mrs. Cummins's own hand. Fortunately nobody else was hurt.

The next thing I remembered was that I lay on the floor, the revolver taken from me, and the combined weight of one insurance man, two grocers' assistants, and a fish packer resting on my frail body.

They proceeded to truss me up, and some neighbours came in to see what the matter was. In an aggrieved tone the packer explained that a blooming lunatic, under pretence of presenting him with a testimonial, had tried to palm upon him an old lobtrotter sinker, and not content with that had popped at him with a shooter.

His explanation jarred on me terribly, particularly the reference to lobster-pots. It melted my vision of fame into thin air; it exploded my crime theory like a bomb-shell.

My position was embarrassing—poignantly embarrassing. But that superfluity of brain energy which had evolved an intricate crime from a "blooming old sinker" was equal to the occasion. I played my card.

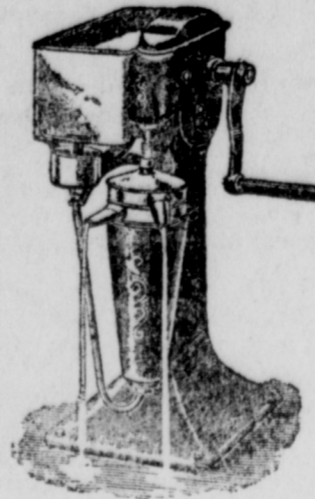
"Gentlemen," I said, "I am afraid whisky is a breeder of bad jokes; so if you will be so good as to take your carcasses off my epigastrium and unloose these bonds I will, without more foolery, proceed with the real presentation."

My words made some impression. After a brief consultation in an undertone I was untrussed and allowed to get up.

Thereupon producing my purse I took therefrom some gold pieces and smiling benignly—grimly benignly—handed them to the packer. He thanked me, apologized for failing to appreciate my little joke, and discreetly refrained from any allusion to the revolver.

Thus harmony was restored and the more serious consequences of my folly evaded. But when I reflect on the worry and out-of-pocket expenses of that miserable business, I—well, I decide to let Sherlock Holmes wear his laurels.

Turns Easy? You bet it does.



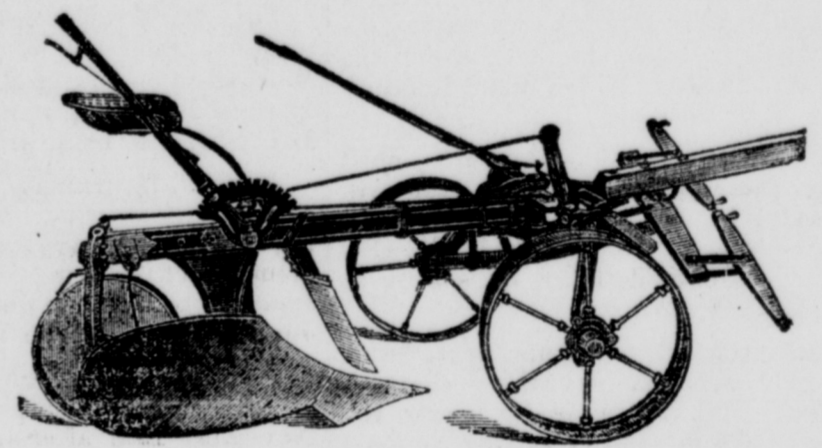
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