

DR. NIKOLA'S EXPERIMENT

GUY NEWELL BOOTHBY



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Dr. Nikola's Experiment

Guy Newell Boothby

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About Boothby:

Guy Newell Boothby was an Australian novelist and writer, born in Adelaide, son of Thomas Wilde Boothby, who for a time was a member of the South Australian Legislative Assembly. Guy Boothby's grandfather was Benjamin Boothby (1803-1868), judge of the supreme court of South Australia from 1853 to 1867. When Boothby was six, he traveled to England with his mother. Around 1890, he took the position of private secretary to the mayor of Adelaide, Australia, but was not content with the work due to little opportunity for advancement. He turned to his writing talents, writing librettos for 2 comic operas and stories about Australian life. Boothby moved back to the United Kingdom in 1894. He wrote over 50 books in the course of a decade, before dying of pneumonia in Bournemouth. Some of Boothby's earlier works were non-fiction, but later he turned to writing novels. He was once well known for his series of five novels about Doctor Nikola, an occultist anti-hero seeking immortality and world domination. In *A Prince of Swindlers* he created the character of Simon Carne, a gentleman thief in the Raffles mold, with an alter ego as the eccentric detective Klimo: Carne first appeared in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1897, predating Raffles by two years

1 TIRED OF LIFE

IT is sad enough at any time for a man to be compelled to confess himself a failure, but I think it will be admitted that it is doubly so at that period of his career when he is still young enough to have some flickering sparks of ambition left, while he is old enough to be able to appreciate at their proper value the overwhelming odds against which he has been battling so long and unsuccessfully.

This was unfortunately my condition. I had entered the medical profession with everything in my favour. My father had built up a considerable reputation for himself, and, what he prized still more, a competency as a country practitioner of the old-fashioned sort in the west of England. I was his only child, and, as he was in the habit of saying, he looked to me to carry the family name up to those dizzy heights at which he had often gazed, but upon which he had never quite been able to set his foot. A surgeon I was to be, willy-nilly, and it may have been a throw-back to the parental instinct alluded to above, that led me at once to picture myself flying at express speed across Europe in obedience to the summons of some potentate whose life and throne depended upon my dexterity and knowledge.

In due course I entered a hospital, and followed the curriculum in the orthodox fashion. It was not, however, until I was approaching the end of my student days that I was burnt with that fire of enthusiasm which was destined in future days to come perilously near consuming me altogether. Among the students of my year was a man by whose side I had often worked—with whom I had occasionally exchanged a few words, but whose intimate I could not in any way have been said to be. In appearance he was a narrow-shouldered, cadaverous, lantern-jawed fellow, with dark, restless eyes, who boasted the name of Kelloran, and was popularly supposed to be an Irishman. As I discovered later, however, he was not an Irishman at all, but hailed from the Black Country—Wolverhampton, if I remember rightly, having the right to claim the honour of his birth. His father had been the senior partner in an exceedingly wealthy firm of hardware manufacturers, and while we had been in the habit of pitying and, in some instances I am afraid, of looking down upon the son on account of his supposed poverty, he was, in all probability, in a position to buy up every other man in the hospital twice over.

The average medical student is a being with whom the *world in general* has by this time been made fairly familiar. His frolics and capacity—or incapacity, as you may choose to term it—for work have been the subject of innumerable jests. If this be a true picture, then Kelloran was certainly different to the usual run of us. In his case the order was reversed: with him, work was play, and play was work; a jest was a thing unknown, and a practical joke a thing for which he allowed it to be seen that he had not the slightest tolerance.

I have already said that my father had amassed a competency. I must now add that up to a certain point he was a generous man, and for this reason my allowance, under different circumstances, would have been ample for my requirements. As ill luck would have it, however, I had got into the wrong set, and before I had been two years in the hospital was over head and ears in such a quagmire of debt and difficulties that it looked as if nothing but an absolute miracle could serve to extricate me. To my father I dared not apply: easy-going as he was on most matters, I had good reason to know that on the subject of debt he was inexorable. And yet to remain in my present condition was impossible. On every side tradesmen threatened me; my landlady's account had not been paid for weeks; while among the men of the hospital not one, but several, held my paper for sums lost at cards, the mere remembrance of which was sufficient to send a cold shiver coursing down my back every time I thought of them. From all this it will be surmised that my position was not only one of considerable difficulty but that it was also one of no little danger. Unless I could find a sum either to free myself, or at least to stave off my creditors, my career, as far as the world of medicine was concerned, might be considered at an end. Even now I can recall the horror of that period as vividly as if it were but yesterday.

It was on a Thursday, I remember, that the thunder-clap came. On returning to my rooms in the evening I discovered a letter awaiting me. With trembling fingers I tore open the envelope and drew out the contents. As I feared, it proved to be a demand from my most implacable creditor, a money-lender to whom I had been introduced by a fellow-student. The sum I had borrowed from him, with the assistance of a friend, was only a trifling one, but helped out by fines and other impositions it had increased to an amount which I was aware it was hopelessly impossible for me to pay. What was I to do? What could I do? Unless I settled the claim (to hope for mercy from the man himself was, to say the least of it, absurd), my friend, who, I happened to know, was himself none too well off at the moment, would be called upon to make it good. After that how should I be able to face him or any one else again? I had not a single acquaintance in the world from whom I could borrow a sum that would be half sufficient to meet it, while I dared not go down to the country and tell my father of my folly and disgrace. In vain I ransacked my brains for a loophole of escape. Then the whistle of a steamer on the river attracted my attention, filling my brain with such thoughts as it had never entertained before, and I pray, by God's mercy, may never know again. Here was a way out of my difficulty, if only I had the pluck to try it. Strangely enough, the effect it had upon me was to brace me like a draught of rare wine. This was succeeded by a coldness so intense that both mind and body were rendered callous by it. How long it lasted I cannot say; it may have been only a few seconds—it may have been an hour before consciousness returned and I found myself still standing beside the table, holding the fatal letter in my hand. Like a drunken man I fumbled my way from the room into the hot night outside. What I was going to do I had no notion. I wanted to be alone, in some place away from the crowded pavements, if possible, where I could have time to think and to determine upon my course of action.

With a tempest of rage, against I knew not what or whom, in my heart, I hurried along, up one street and down another, until I found myself panting, but unappeased, upon the Embankment opposite the Temple Gardens. All round me was the bustle and life of the great city: cabs, containing men and women in evening dress, dashed along; girls and their lovers, talking in hushed voices, went by me arm in arm; even the loafers, leaning against the stone parapet, seemed happy in comparison with my wretched self. I looked down at the dark water gliding so pleasantly along below me, and remembered that all I had to do, as soon as I was alone, was to drop over the side, and be done with my difficulties for ever. Then in a flash the real meaning of what I proposed to do occurred to me.

"You coward," I hissed, with as much vehemence and horror as if I had been addressing a real enemy instead of myself, "to think of taking this way out of your difficulty! If you kill yourself, what will become of the other man? Go to him at once and tell him everything. He has the right to know."

The argument was irresistible, and I accordingly turned upon my heel and was about to start off in quest of the individual I wanted, when I found myself confronted with no less a person than Kellerman. He was walking quickly, and swung his cane as he did so. On seeing me he stopped.

"Douglas Ingleby!" he said: "well, this is fortunate! You are just the man I wanted."

I murmured something in reply, I forget what, and was about to pass on. I had bargained without my host, however. He had been watching me with his keen dark eyes, and when he made as if he would walk with me I was not altogether surprised.

"You do not object to my accompanying you I hope?" he inquired, by way of introducing what he had to say. "I've been wanting to have a talk with you for some days past."

"I'm afraid I'm in rather a hurry just now," I answered, quickening my pace a little as I did so.

"That makes no difference at all to me," he returned. "As I think you are aware, I am a fast walker. Since you are in a hurry, let us step out."

We did so, and for something like fifty yards proceeded at a brisk pace in perfect silence. His companionship was more than I could stand, and at last I stopped and faced him.

"What is it you want with me?" I asked angrily. "Cannot you see that I am not well to-night, and would rather be alone?"

"I can see you are not quite yourself," he answered quietly, still watching me with his grave

eyes. "That is exactly why I want to walk with you. A little cheerful conversation will do you good. You don't know how clever I am at adapting my manner to other people's requirements. That is the secret of our profession, my dear Ingleby, as you will some day find out."

"I shall never find it out," I replied bitterly. "I have done with medicine. I shall clear out of England, I think—go abroad, try Australia or Canada—anywhere, I don't care where, to get out of this!"

"The very thing!" he returned cheerily, but without a trace of surprise. "You couldn't do better, I'm sure. You are strong, active, full of life and ambition; just the sort of fellow to make a good colonist. It must be a grand life, that hewing and hacking a place for oneself in a new country, watching and fostering the growth of a people that may some day take its place among the powers of the earth. Ah! I like the idea. It is grand! It makes one tingle to think of it."

He threw out his arms and squared his shoulders as if he were preparing for the struggle he had so graphically described. After that we did not walk quite so fast. The man had suddenly developed a strange fascination for me, and, as he talked, I hung upon his words with a feverish interest I can scarcely account for now. By the time we reached my lodgings, I had put my trouble aside for the time being, but when I entered my sitting-room and found the envelope which had contained the fatal letter still lying upon the table, it all rushed back upon me, and with such force that I was well-nigh overwhelmed. Kelloran meanwhile had taken up his position on the hearthrug, whence he watched me with the same expression of contemplative interest upon his face to which I have before alluded.

"Hullo!" he said at last, after he had been some minutes in the house, and had had time to overhaul my meagre library, "what are these? Where did you pick them up?"

He had taken a book from the shelf, and was holding it tenderly in his hand. I recognised it as one of several volumes of a sixteenth-century work on Surgery that I had chanced upon on a bookstall in Holywell Street some months before. Its age and date had interested me, and I had bought it more out of curiosity than for any other reason. Kelloran, however, could scarcely withdraw his eyes from it.

"It's the very thing I've been wanting to make my set complete," he cried, when I had described my discovery of it. "Perhaps you don't know it, but I'm a perfect lunatic on the subject of old books. My own rooms, where, by the by, you have never been, are crammed from floor to ceiling, and still I go on buying. Let me see what else you have."

So saying, he continued his survey of the shelves, humming softly to himself as he did so, and pulling out such books as interested him, and heaping them upon the floor.

"You've the beginning of a by no means bad collection," he was kind enough to say, when he had finished. "Judging from what I see here, you must read a good deal more than most of our men."

"I'm afraid not," I answered. "The majority of these books were sent up to me from the country by my father, who thought they might be of service to me. A mistaken notion, for they take up a lot of room, and I've often wished them at Hanover."

"You have, have you? What a Goth you are!" he continued. "Well, then, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you want to get rid of them, I'll buy the lot, these old beauties included. They are really worth more than I can afford, but if you care about it, I'll make you a sporting offer of a hundred and fifty pounds for such as I've put upon the floor. What do you say?"

I could scarcely believe I heard aright. His offer was so preposterous, that I could have laughed in his face.

"My dear fellow," I cried, thinking for a moment that he must be joking with me, and feeling inclined to resent it, "what nonsense you talk! A hundred and fifty for the lot: why, they're not worth a ten-pound note, all told. The old fellows are certainly curious, but it is only fair that I should tell you that I gave five and sixpence for the set of seven volumes, complete."

"Then you got a bargain such as you'll never find again," he answered quietly. "I wish I could make as good an one every day. However, there's my offer. Take it or leave it as you please. I will give you one hundred and fifty pounds for those books, and take my chance of their value. If you are prepared to accept, I'll get a cab and take them away to-night. I've got my

chequebook in my pocket, and can settle up for them on the spot."

"But, my dear Kelleran, how can you afford to give such—" Here I stopped abruptly. "I beg your pardon—I know I had no right to say such a thing."

"Don't mention it," he answered quietly. "I am not in the least offended, I assure you. I have always felt certain you fellows supposed me to be poor. As a matter of fact, however, I have the good fortune, or the ill, as I sometimes think, since it prevents my working as I should otherwise be forced to do, to be able to indulge myself to the top of my bent without fear of the consequences. But that has nothing to do with the subject at present under discussion. Will you take my price, and let me have the books, or not? I assure you I am all anxiety to get my nose inside one of those old covers before I sleep to-night."

Heaven knows I was eager enough to accept, and if you think for one moment you will see what his offer meant to me. With such a sum I could not only pay off the money-lender, but well-nigh put myself straight with the rest of my creditors. Yet all the time I had the uneasy feeling that the books were by no means worth the amount he had declared to be their value, and that he was only making me the offer out of kindness.

"If you are sure you mean it, I will accept," I said. "I am awfully hard up, and the money will be a godsend to me."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," he replied, "for in that case we shall be doing each other a mutual good turn. Now let's get them tied up. If you wouldn't mind seeing to that part of the business, I'll write the cheque and call the cab."

Ten minutes later he and his new possessions had taken their departure, and I was back once more in my room standing beside the table, just as I had done a few hours before, but with what a difference! Then I had seen no light ahead, nothing but complete darkness and dishonour; now I was a new man, and in a position to meet the majority of calls upon me. The change from the one condition to the other was more than I could bear, and when I remembered that less than sixty minutes before I was standing on that antechamber of death, the Embankment, contemplating suicide, I broke down completely, and sinking into a chair buried my face in my hands and cried like a child.

Next morning, as soon as the bank doors were open, I entered and cashed the cheque Kelleran had given me. Then, calling a cab, I made my way with a light heart, as you may suppose, to the office of the money-lender in question. His surprise at seeing me, and on learning the nature of my errand, may be better imagined than described. Having transacted my business with him, I was preparing to make my way back to the hospital, when an idea entered my head upon which I immediately acted. In something under ten minutes I stood in the bookseller's shop in Holy-well Street where I had purchased the volumes Kelleran had appeared to prize so much.

"Some weeks ago," I said to the man who came forward to serve me, "I purchased from you an old work on medicine entitled 'The Perfect Chi-surgeon, or The Art of Healing as practised in divers Ancient Countries.'"

"Seven volumes very much soiled—five and sixpence," returned the man immediately. "I remember the books."

"I'm glad of that," I answered. "Now, I want you to tell me what you would consider the real value of the work."

"If it were wanted to make up a collection it might possibly be worth a sovereign," the man replied promptly. "Otherwise, not more than we asked you for it."

"Then you don't think any one would be likely to offer a hundred pounds for it?" I inquired.

The man laughed outright.

"Not a man in the possession of his wits," he answered. "No, sir, I think I have stated the price very fairly, though of course it might fetch a few shillings more or less, according to circumstances."

"I am very much obliged to you," I said; "I simply wanted to know as a matter of curiosity."

With that I left the shop and made my way to the hospital, where I found Kelleran hard at work. He looked up at me as I entered, and nodded, but it was lunch time before I got an opportunity of speaking to him.

"Kelleran," I said, as we passed out through the great gates, "you deceived me about those books last night. They were not worth anything like the value you put upon them."

He looked me full and fair in the face, and I saw a faint smile flicker round the corners of his mouth.

"My dear Ingleby," he said, "what a funny fellow you are, to be sure! Surely if I choose to give you what I consider the worth of the books I am at perfect liberty to do so. If you are willing to accept it, no more need be said upon the subject. The value of a thing to a man is exactly what he cares to give for it, so I have always been led to believe."

"But I am convinced you did not give it because you wanted the books. You knew I was in straits and you took that form of helping me. It was generous of you indeed, Kelleran, and I'll never forget it as long as I live. You saved me from—but there, I cannot tell you. I dare not think of it myself. There is one thing I must ask of you. I want you to keep the books and to let the amount you gave me for them be a loan, which I will repay as soon as I possibly can."

I was aware that he was a passionate man: for I had once or twice seen him fly into a rage, but never into a greater one than now.

"Let it be what you please," he cried, turning from me. "Only for pity's sake drop the subject: I've had enough of it."

With this explosion he stalked away, leaving me standing looking after him, divided between gratitude and amazement.

I have narrated this incident for two reasons: firstly because it will furnish you with a notion of my own character, which I am prepared to admit exhibits but few good points; and in the second because it will serve to introduce to you a queer individual, now a very great person, whom I shall always regard as the Good Angel of my life, and, indirectly it is true, the bringer about of the one and only real happiness I have ever known.

From the time of the episode I have just described at such length to the present day, I can safely say I have never touched a card nor owed a man a penny-piece that I was not fully prepared to pay at a moment's notice. And with this assertion I must revert to the statement made at the commencement of this chapter—the saddest a man can make. As I said then, there could be no doubt about it that I was a failure. For though I had improved in the particulars just stated, Fate was plainly against me. I worked hard and passed my examinations with comparative ease; yet it seemed to do me no good with those above me. The sacred fire of enthusiasm, which had at first been so conspicuously absent, had now taken complete hold of me; I studied night and day, grudging myself no labour, yet by some mischance everything I touched recoiled upon me, and, like the serpent of the fable, stung the hand that fostered it. Certainly I was not popular, and, since it was due almost directly to Kelleran's influence that I took to my work with such assiduity, it seems strange that I should also have to attribute my non-success to his agency. As a matter of fact, he was not a good leader to follow. From the very first he had shown himself to be a man of strange ideas. He was no follower or stickler for the orthodox; to sum him up in plainer words, he was what might be described as an experimentalist. In return, the authorities of the hospital looked somewhat askance upon him. Finally he passed out into the world, and the same term saw me appointed to the position of House Surgeon. Almost simultaneously my father died; and, to the horror of the family, an examination of his affairs proved that instead of being the wealthy man we had supposed him there was barely sufficient, when his liabilities were paid, to meet the expenses of his funeral. The shock of his death and the knowledge of the poverty to which she had been so suddenly reduced proved too much for my mother, and she followed him a few weeks later. Thus I was left, so far as I knew, without kith or kin in the world, with but few friends, no money, and the poorest possible prospects of ever making any.

To the circumstances under which I lost the position of House Surgeon I will not allude. Let it suffice that I *did* lose it, and that, although the authorities seemed to think otherwise, I am in a position to prove, whenever I desire to do so, that I was not the real culprit. The effect, however, was the same. I was disgraced beyond hope of redemption, and the proud career I had mapped out for myself was now beyond my reach for good and all.

Over the next twelve months it would perhaps be better that I should draw a veil. Even now I

scarcely like to think of them. It is enough for me to say that for upwards of a month I remained in London, searching high and low for employment. This, however, was easier looked for than discovered. Try how I would, I could hear of nothing. Then, wearying of the struggle, I accepted an offer made me, and left England as surgeon on board an outward-bound passenger steamer for Australia.

Ill luck, however, still pursued me, for at the end of my second voyage the Company went into liquidation, and its vessels were sold. I shipped on board another boat in a similar capacity, made two voyages in her to the Cape, where on a friend's advice I bade her goodbye, and started for Ashanti as surgeon to an Inland Trading Company. While there I was wounded in the neck by a spear, was compelled to leave the Company's service, and eventually found myself back once more in London tramping the streets in search of employment. Fortunately, however, I had managed to save a small sum from my pay, so that I was not altogether destitute; but it was not long before this was exhausted, and then things looked blacker than they had ever done before. What to do I knew not. I had long since cast *my* pride to the winds, and was now prepared to take anything, no matter what. Then an idea struck me, and on it I acted.

Leaving my lodgings on the Surrey side of the river, I crossed Blackfriars Bridge, and made my way along the Embankment in a westerly direction. As I went I could not help contrasting my present appearance with that I had shown on the last occasion I had walked that way. Then I had been as spruce and neat as a man could well be; boasted a good coat to my back and a new hat upon my head. Now, however, the coat and hat, instead of speaking for my prosperity, as at one time they might have done, bore unmistakable evidence of the disastrous change which had taken place in my fortunes. Indeed, if the truth must be confessed, I was about as sorry a specimen of the professional man as could be found in the length and breadth of the Metropolis.

Reaching the thoroughfare in which I had heard that Kelloran had taken up his abode, I cast about me for a means of ascertaining his number. Compared with that in which I myself resided, this was a street of palaces, but it seemed to me I could read the characters of the various tenants in the appearance of each house-front. The particular one before which I was standing at the moment was frivolous in the extreme: the front door was artistically painted, an elaborate knocker ornamented the centre panel, while the windows were without exception curtained with dainty expensive stuffs. Everything pointed to the mistress being a lady of fashion; and having put one thing and another together, I felt convinced I should not find my friend there. The next I came to was a residence of more substantial type. Here everything was solid and plain, even to the borders of severity. If I could sum up the owner, he was a successful man, a lawyer for choice, a bachelor, and possibly, and even probably, a bigot on matters of religion. He would have two or three friends—not more—all of whom would be advanced in years, and, like himself, successful men of business. He would be able to appreciate a glass of dry sherry, and would have nothing to do with anything that did not bear the impress of a gilt-edged security. As neither of these houses seemed to suggest that they would be likely to know anything of the man I wanted, I made my way further down the street, looking about me as I proceeded. At last I came to a standstill before one that I was prepared to swear was inhabited by my old friend. His character was stamped unmistakably upon every inch of it: the untidy windows, the pile of books upon a table in the bow, the marks upon the front door where his impatient foot had often pressed while he turned his latchkey: all these spoke of Kelloran, and I was certain my instinct was not misleading me. Ascending the steps, I rang the bell. It was answered by a tall and somewhat austere woman of between forty and fifty years of age, upon whom a coquettish frilled apron and cap sat with incongruous effect. As I afterwards learnt, she had been Kelloran's nurse in bygone years, and since he had become a householder had taken charge of his domestic arrangements, and ruled both himself and his maidservants with a rod of iron.

"Would you be kind enough to inform me if Mr. Kelloran is at home?" I asked, after we had taken stock of each other.

"He has been abroad for more than three months," the woman answered abruptly. Then,

seeing the disappointment upon my face, she added, "I don't know when we may expect him home. He may be here on Saturday, and it's just possible we may not see him for two or three weeks to come. But perhaps you'll not mind telling me what your business with him may be?"

"It is not very important," I answered humbly, feeling that my position was, to say the least of it, an invidious one. "I am an old friend, and I wanted to see him for a few minutes. Since, however, he is not at home, it does not matter, I assure you. I shall have other opportunities of communicating with him. At the same time, you might be kind enough to tell him I called."

"You'd better let me know your name first," she replied, with a look that suggested as plainly as any words could speak that she did not for an instant believe my assertion that I was a friend of her master's.

"My name is Ingleby," I said. "Mr. Kelleran will be sure to remember me. We were at the same hospital."

She gave a scornful sniff as if such a thing would be very unlikely, and then made as if she would shut the door in my face. I was not, however, to be put off in this fashion. Taking a card from my pocket, one of the last I possessed, I scrawled my name and present address upon it and handed it to her.

"Perhaps if you will show that to Mr. Kelleran he would not mind writing to me when he comes home," I said. "That is where I am living just now."

She glanced at the card, and, noting the locality, sniffed even more scornfully than before. It was evident that this was the only thing wanting to confirm the bad impression I had already created in her mind. For some seconds there was an ominous silence.

"Very well," she answered, at length, "I'll give it to him. But—why, Heaven save us! what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet. Why didn't you say you were feeling ill?"

I had been running it rather close for more than a week past, and the news that Kelleran, my last hope, was absent from England had unnerved me altogether. A sudden giddiness seized me, and I believe I should have fallen to the ground had I not clutched at the railings by my side. It was then that the real nature of the woman became apparent. Like a ministering angel she half led, half supported me into the house, and seated me on a chair in the somewhat sparsely furnished hall.

"Friend of the master, or no friend," I heard her say to herself, "I'll take the risk of it."

I heard no more, for my senses had left me. When they returned I found myself lying upon a sofa in Kelleran's study, the housekeeper standing by my side, and a maidservant casting sympathetic glances at me from the doorway.

"I'm afraid I have put you to a lot of trouble," I said, as soon as I had recovered myself sufficiently to speak. "I cannot think what made me go off like that. I have never done such a thing in my life before."

"You can't think?" queried the woman, with a curious intonation that was not lost upon me. "Then it's very plain you've not much wit about you. I think, young man, I could make a very good guess at the truth if I wanted to. How-somever, let that be as it may, I'll put a bit of it right before you leave this house, or my name's not what it is." Then turning to the maid, who was still watching me, she continued sharply, "Be off about your business, miss, and do as I told you. Are you going to waste all the afternoon standing there staring about you like a baby?"

The girl tossed her head and disappeared, only to return a few minutes later with a tray, upon which was set out a substantial meal of cold meat.

On the old woman's ordering me to do so I sat down to it, and dined as I had not done for months past.

"There," she said, with an air of triumph as I finished, "that will make a new man of you." Then, having done all she could for me, and repenting, perhaps, of the leniency she had shown me, she returned to her former abrupt demeanour, and informed me, in terms there was no mistaking, that her time was valuable, and it behoved me to be off about my business as soon as possible. While she had been speaking, my eyes had travelled round the room until they lighted upon the mantelpiece (it was covered with pipes, books, photographs, and all the innumerable odds and ends that accumulate in a bachelor's apartment), where I discovered

my own portrait with several others. I remembered having given it to Kelleran two years before. It was not a very good one, but with its assistance I proposed to establish my identity and prove to my stern benefactress that I was not altogether the impostor she believed me to be.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for all you have done," I said, as I rose and prepared to take my departure from the house. "At the same time I am very much afraid you do not altogether believe that I am the friend of your master's that I pretend to be."

"Tut, tut!" she answered. "If I were in your place I'd say no more about that. Least said soonest mended, is my motto. I trust, however, I'm a Christian woman, and do my best to help folk in distress. But I've warned ye already that I've eyes in my head and wit enough to tell what's o'clock just as well as my neighbours. Why, bless my soul, you don't think I've been all my years in the world without knowing what's what, or who's who?"

She paused as if for breath; and, embracing the opportunity, I crossed the room and took from the chimneypiece the photograph to which I have just alluded.

"Possibly this may help to reassure you," I said, as I placed it before her. "I do not think I have changed so much, since it was taken, that you should fail to recognise me."

She picked up the photo and looked at it, reading the signature at the bottom with a puzzled face.

"Heaven save us, so it *is!*" she cried, when the meaning of it dawned upon her. "You are Mr. Ingleby, after all? Well, I am a softy, to be sure. I thought you were trying to take me in. So many people come here asking to see him, saying they were at the hospital with him that you've got to be more than careful. If I'd have thought it really was you, I'd have bitten my tongue out before I'd have said what I did. Why, sir, the master talks of you to this day: it's Ingleby this, and Ingleby that, from morning till night. Many's the time he's made inquiries from gentlemen who've been here, in the hopes of finding out what has become of ye."

"God bless him!" I said, my heart warming at the news that he had not forgotten me. "We were the best of friends once."

"But, Mr. Ingleby," continued the old woman after a pause, "if you'll allow me to say so, I don't like to see you like this. You must have seen a lot of trouble, sir, to have got in such a state."

"The world has not treated me very kindly," I answered, with an attempt at a smile, "but I'll tell Kelleran all about it when I see him. You think it is possible he may be home on Saturday?"

"I hope so, sir, I'm sure," she replied. "You may be certain I'll give him your address, and tell him you've called, the moment I see him."

I thanked her again for her trouble, and took my departure, feeling a very different man as I went down the steps and turned my face citywards. In my own heart I felt certain Kelleran would do something to help me. Had I known, however, what that something was destined to be, I wonder whether I should have awaited his coming with such eagerness.

As it transpired, it was on the Friday following my call at his house that, on returning to my lodgings after another day's fruitless search for employment, I found the following letter awaiting me. The handwriting was as familiar to me as my own, and it may be imagined with what eagerness I tore open the envelope and scanned the contents. It ran:

"MY DEAR INGLEBY,

"It was a pleasant welcome home to find that you are in England once more. I am sorry, however, to learn from my housekeeper that affairs have not been prospering with you. This must be remedied, and at once. I flatter myself I am just the man to do it. It is possible you may consider me unfeeling when I say that there never was such luck as your being in want of employment at this particular moment. I've a billet standing ready and waiting for you; one of the very sort you are fitted for, and one that you will enjoy, unless you have lost your former tastes and inclinations. You have never met Dr. Nikola, but you must do so without delay. I tell you, Ingleby, he is the most wonderful man with whom I have ever been brought in contact. We chanced upon each other in St. Petersburg three months ago, and since then he's fascinated me as no other man has ever done. I have spoken of you to him, and in consequence he dines with me to-night in the hope of meeting you. Whatever else you do,

therefore, do not fail to put in an appearance. You cannot guess the magnitude of the experiment upon which he is at work. At first glance, and in any other man, it would seem incredible, impossible, I might almost say absurd. When, however, you have seen him, I venture to think you will not doubt that he will carry it through. Let me count upon you to-night, then, at seven.

"Always your friend,
"Andrew Fairfax Kelleran."

I read the letter again. What did it mean? At any rate, it contained a ray of hope. It would have to be a very curious billet, I told myself, under present circumstances, that I would refuse. But who was this extraordinary individual, Dr Nikola, who seemed to have exercised such a fascination over my enthusiastic friend? Well, that I had to find out for myself.

Chapter 2

2 A NEW IMPETUS

THE clocks in the neighbourhood had scarcely ceased striking as I ascended the steps of Kelleran's house and rang the bell. Even had he not been so impressive in his invitation there was small likelihood of my forgetting the appointment I had been waiting for it, hour by hour, with an impatience that can only be understood when I say that each one was bringing me nearer the only satisfying meal I had had since I last visited his abode.

The door was opened to me by the same faithful housekeeper who had proved herself such a ministering angel on the previous occasion. She greeted me as an old friend, but with a greater respect than she had shown when we had last talked together. This did not prevent her, however, from casting a scrutinising eye over me, as much as to say, "You look a bit more respectable, my lad, but your coat is very faded at the seams, your collar is frayed at the edge, and you sniff the smell of dinner as if you have not had a decent meal for longer than you care to think about"; all of which, had she put it into so many words, would have been perfectly true.

"Step inside," she said; "Mr. Kelleran's waiting for you in the study, I know." Then sinking her voice to a whisper she added: "There's duck and green peas for dinner, and as soon as the other gentleman arrives I shall tell cook to dish. He'll not be long now."

What answer I should have returned I cannot say, but as she finished speaking a door farther down the passage opened, and my old friend made his appearance, with the same impetuosity that always characterised him.

"Ingleby, my dear fellow," he cried, as he ran with outstretched hand to greet me, "I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you again. It seems years since I last set eyes on you. Come in here; I want to have a good look at you. We've hundreds of things to say to each other, and heaps of questions to ask, haven't we? And, by Jove, we must look sharp about it too, for in a few minutes Nikola will be here. I asked him to come at a quarter past seven, in order that we might have a little time alone together first."

So saying, he led me into his study, the same in which I had returned to my senses after my fainting fit a few days before, and when he had done so he bade me seat myself in an easy chair.

"You can't think how good it is to see you again, Kelleran," I said, as soon as I could get in a word. "I had begun to think myself forgotten by all my friends."

"Bosh!" was his uncompromising reply. "Talk about your friends—why, you never know who they are till you're in trouble! At least, that's what I think. And, by the way, let me tell you that you *do* look a bit pulled down. I wonder what idiocy you've been up to since I saw you last. Tell me about it. You won't smoke a cigarette before dinner? Very good! now fire away!"

Thus encouraged, I told him in a few words all that had befallen me since we had last met. While I was talking he stood before me, his face lit up with interest, and to all intents and purposes as absorbed in my story as if it had been his own.

"Well, well, thank goodness it is all over now," he said, when I had brought my tale to a conclusion. "I think I've found you a billet that will suit you admirably, and if you play your cards well there's no saying to what it may not lead. Nikola is the most marvellous man in the world, as you will admit when you have seen him. I, for one, have never met anybody like him; and as for this new scheme of his, why, if he brings it off, I give you my word it will revolutionise Science."

I was too well acquainted with my friend's enthusiastic way of talking to be surprised at it; at the same time I was thoroughly conversant with his cleverness, and for this reason I was prepared to believe that, if he thought well of any scheme, there must be something out of the common in it.

"But what is this wonderful idea?" I asked, scarcely able to contain my longing, as the fumes of dinner penetrated to us from the regions below. "And how am I affected by it?"

"That I must leave for Dr. Nikola to tell you himself," Kelleran replied. "Let it suffice for the moment that I envy you your opportunity. I believe if I had been able to avail myself of the chance he offered me of going into it with him, I should have been compelled to sacrifice you. But there, you will hear all about it in good time, for if I am not mistaken that is his cab drawing up outside now. It is one of his peculiarities to be always punctual to the moment. What do you make the right time by your watch?"

I was obliged to confess that I possessed no watch. It had been turned into the necessaries of existence long since. Kelleran must have realised what was passing in my mind, though he pretended not to have noticed it; at any rate he said, "I make it a quarter past seven to the minute, and I am prepared to wager that's our man."

A bell rang, and almost before the sound of it had died away the study door opened, and the housekeeper, with a look of awe upon her face which had not been there when she addressed me, announced "Dr. Nikola."

Looking back on it now, I find that, in spite of all that has happened since, my impressions of that moment are as fresh and clear as if it were but yesterday. I can see the tall, lithe figure of this extraordinary man, his sallow face, and his piercing black eyes steadfastly regarding me, as if he were trying to determine whether or not I was capable of assisting him in the work upon which he was so exhaustively engaged. Never before had I seen such eyes; they seemed to look me through and through, and to read my inmost thoughts.

"This gentleman, my dear Kelleran," he began, after they had shaken hands, and without waiting for me to be introduced to him, "should be your friend Ingleby, of whom you have so often spoken to me. How do you do, Mr. Ingleby? I don't think there is much doubt but that we shall work admirably together. You have lately been in Ashanti, I perceive."

I admitted that I had, and went on to inquire how he had become aware of it; for as Kelleran had not known it until a few minutes before, I did not see how he could be acquainted with the fact.

"It is not a very difficult thing to tell," he answered, with a smile at my astonishment, "seeing that you carry about with you the mark of a Gwato spear. If it were necessary I could tell you some more things that would surprise you: for instance, I could tell you that the man who cut the said spear out for you was an amateur at his work, that he was left-handed, that he was short-sighted, and that he was recovering from malaria at the time. All this is plain to the eye; but I see our friend Kelleran fancies his dinner is getting cold, so we had better postpone our investigations for a more convenient opportunity."

We accordingly left the study and proceeded to the dining-room. All day long I had been looking forward to that moment with the eagerness of a starving man, yet when it arrived I scarcely touched anything. If the truth must be confessed, there was something about this man that made me forget such mundane matters as mere eating and drinking. And I noticed that Nikola himself was even more abstemious. For this reason, save for the fact that he himself enjoyed it, the bountiful spread Kelleran had arranged for us was completely wasted.

During the progress of the meal no mention was made of the great experiment upon which our host had informed me Nikola was engaged. Our conversation was mainly devoted to travel. Nikola, I soon discovered, had been everywhere, and had seen everything. There appeared to be no place on the face of the habitable globe with which he was not acquainted, and of which he could not speak with the authority of an old resident. China, India, Australia, South America, North, South, East, and West Africa, were as familiar to him as Piccadilly, and it was in connection with one of the last-named Continents that a curious incident occurred.

We had been discussing various cases of catalepsy; and to illustrate an argument he was adducing, Kelleran narrated a curious instance of lethargy with which he had become acquainted in Southern Russia. While he was speaking I noticed that Nikola's face wore an expression that was partly one of derision and partly of amusement.

"I think I can furnish you with an instance that is even more extraordinary," I said, when our host had finished; and as I did so, Nikola leaned a little towards me. "In fairness to your argument, however, Kelleran, I must admit that while it comes under the same category, the malady in question confines itself almost exclusively to the black races on the West Coast of

Africa."

"You refer to the Sleeping Sickness, I presume?" said Nikola, whose eyes were fixed upon me, and who was paying the greatest attention to all I said.

"Exactly—the Sleeping Sickness," I answered. "I was fortunate enough to see several instances of it when I was on the West Coast, though the one to which I am referring did not come before me personally, but was described to me by a man, a rather curious character, who happened to be in the district at the time. The negro in question, a fine healthy fellow of about twenty years of age, was servant to a Portuguese trader at Cape Coast Castle. He had been up country on some trading expedition or other, and during the whole time had enjoyed the very best of health. For the first few days after his return to the coast, however, he was unusually depressed. Slight swelling of the cervical glands set in, accompanied by a tendency to fall asleep at any time. This somnolency gradually increased; cutaneous stimulation was tried, at first with comparative success; the symptoms, however, soon recurred, the periods of sleep became longer and more frequent, until at last the patient could scarcely have been said to be ever awake. The case, so my informant said, was an extremely interesting one."

"But what was the result?" inquired Kelloran, a little impatiently. "You have not told us to what all this is leading."

"Well, the result was that in due course the patient became extremely emaciated—a perfect skeleton, in fact. He would take no food, answered no questions, and did not open his eyes from morning till night. To make a long story short, just as my informant was beginning to think that the end was approaching, there appeared in Cape Coast Castle a mysterious stranger who put forward claims to a knowledge of medicine. He forgathered with my man, and after a while obtained permission to try his hand upon the negro."

"And killed him at once, of course?"

"Nothing of the sort. The result was one that you will scarcely credit. The whole business was most irregular, I believe, but my friend was not likely to worry himself much about that. This new man had his own pharmacopoeia—a collection of essences in small bottles, more like what they used in the Middle Ages than anything else, I should imagine. Having obtained possession of the patient, he carried him away to a hut outside the town and took him in hand there and then.

"The man who told me about it, and who, I should have said, had had a good experience of the disease, assured me that he was as certain as any one possibly could be that the chap could not live out the week; and yet when the new-comer, ten days later, invited him to visit the hut, there was the man acting as his servant, waiting at table, if you please, and to all intents and purposes, though very thin, as well as ever he had been in his life."

"But, my dear fellow," protested Kelloran, "Guerin says that out of the 148 cases that came under his notice 148 died."

"I can't help what Guerin says," I answered, a little warmly I am afraid. "I am only telling you what my friend told me. He gave me his word of honour that the result was as he described. The strangest part of the whole business, however, has yet to be told. It appears that the man had not only cured the fellow, but that he had the power of returning him to the condition in which he found him, at will. It wasn't hypnotism, but what it was is more that I can say. My informant described it to me as being about the uncanniest performance he had ever witnessed."

"In what way?" asked Kelloran. "Furnish us with a more detailed account. There was a time when you were a famous hand at a diagnosis."

"I would willingly do so," I answered; "unfortunately, however, I can't remember it all. It appears that he was always saying the most mysterious things and putting the strangest questions. On one occasion he asked my friend, as they were standing by the negro's bedside, if there was any one whose image he would care to see? Merton at first thought he was making fun of him, but seeing that he was in earnest he considered for a moment, and eventually answered that he would very much like to see the portrait of an old shipmate who had perished at sea some six or seven years prior to his arrival on the West Coast. As soon as he had said this the man stooped over the bed and opened the sleeping nigger's eyes.

'Examine the retina, he said, and I think you will see what you want.' My friend looked."

"With what result?" inquired Kelleran. Nikola said nothing, but smiled, as I thought, a trifle sceptically.

"It seems an absurd thing to say, I know," I continued, "but he swore to me that he had before him the exact picture of the man he had referred to; and what is more, standing on the deck of the steamer just as he had last seen him. It was as clear and distinct as if it had been a photograph."

"And all the time the negro was asleep?"

"Fast asleep!" I answered.

"I should very much like to meet your friend," said Kelleran emphatically. "A man with an imagination like that must be an exceedingly interesting companion. But seriously, my dear Ingleby, you don't mean to say you wish us to believe that all this really happened?"

"I am telling you what he told me," I answered. "I cannot swear to the truth of it, of course, but I will go so far as to say that I do not think he was intentionally deceiving me."

Kelleran shrugged his shoulders incredulously, and for some moments an uncomfortable silence ensued. This was broken by Nikola.

"My dear Kelleran," he said, "I don't think you are altogether fair to our friend Ingleby. As he admits, he was only speaking on hearsay, and under these circumstances he might very easily have been deceived. Fortunately, however, for the sake of his reputation I am in a position to corroborate all he has said."

"The deuce you are!" cried Kelleran; while I was too much astonished to speak, and could only stare at him in complete surprise. "What on earth do you mean? Pray explain."

"I can only do so by saying that I was the man who did this apparently wonderful thing."

Kelleran and I continued to stare at him in amazement. It was too absurd. Could he be laughing at us? And yet his face was serious enough.

"You do not seem to credit my assertion," said Nikola, quietly. "And yet I assure you it is correct. I was the mysterious individual who appeared in Cape Coast Castle, who brought with him his own pharmacopoeia, and who wrought the miracle which your friend appears to have considered so wonderful."

"The coincidence is too extraordinary," I answered, as if in protest.

"Coincidences are necessarily extraordinary," Nikola replied. "I do not see that this one is more so than usual."

"And the miracle?"

"Was in reality no miracle at all," he answered; "it was merely the logical outcome of a perfectly natural process. Pray do not look so incredulous. I am aware that my statement is difficult to believe, but I assure you, my dear Ingleby, that it is quite true. However, proof is always better than mere assertion, so, since you are still sceptical, let me make my position right with you. For reasons that will be self-evident I cannot produce the effect in a negro's eye, but I can do so in a way that will strike you as being scarcely less extraordinary. If you will draw up your chairs I will endeavour to explain."

Needless to remark, we did as he desired; and when we were seated on either side of him waited for the manifestation he had promised us.

Taking a small silver box, but little larger than a card-case, from his pocket, he opened it and tipped what might have been a teaspoonful of black powder into the centre of a dessert plate. I watched it closely, in the hope of being able to discover of what it was composed. My efforts, however, were unavailing. It was black, as I have already said, and from a distance resembled powdered charcoal. This, however, it could not have been, by reason of its strange liquidity, which was as great as that of quicksilver, and which only came into operation when it had been exposed to the air for some minutes. Hither and thither the stuff ran about the dish, and I noticed that as it did so it gradually lost its original sombre hue and took to itself a variety of colours that were as brilliant as the component tints of the spectrum. These scintillated and quivered till the eyes were almost blinded by their radiance, and yet they riveted the attention in such a manner that it was well-nigh, if not quite, impossible to look away or to think of anything else. In vain I tried to calm myself, in order that I might be a cool and collected

observer of what was taking place. Whether there was any perfume thrown off by the stuff upon the plate I cannot say, but as I watched it my head began to swim and my eyelids felt as heavy as lead. That this was not fancy upon my part is borne out by the fact that Kelleran afterwards confessed to me that he experienced exactly the same sensations. Nikola, however, was still manipulating the dish, turning it this way and that, as if he were anxious to produce as many varieties of colour as possible in a given time. It must have been upwards of five minutes before he spoke. As he did so he gave the plate an extra tilt, so that the mixture ran down to one side. It was now a deep purple in colour.

"I think if you will look into the centre of the fluid you will see something that will go a long way towards convincing you of the truth of the assertion I made just now," he said quietly, but without turning his head to look at me.

I looked as he desired, but at first could see nothing save the mixture itself, which was fast turning from purple to blue. This blue grew gradually paler; and as I watched, to my astonishment, a picture formed itself before my eyes. I saw a long wooden house, surrounded on all sides by a deep verandah. The latter was covered with a beautiful flowering creeper. On either side of the dwelling was a grove of palms, and to the right, showing like a pool of dazzling quicksilver between the trees, was the sea. And pervading everything was the sensation of intense heat. At first glance I could not recall the house, but it was not long before I recognised the residence of the man who had told me the story which had occasioned this. I looked at it again, and could even see the window of the room in which I had recovered from my first severe attack of fever, and from which I never thought to have emerged alive. With the sight of it the recollection of that miserable time came back to me, and Kelleran and even his friend Nikola were, for the moment, forgotten.

"From the expression upon your face I gather that you know the place," said Nikola, after I had been watching it for a few moments. "Now look into the verandah, and tell me if you recognise the two men you see seated there."

I looked again, and saw that one was myself, while the other, the man who was leaning against the verandah rail smoking a cigar, was the owner of the house itself. There could be no mistake about it. The whole scene was as plain before my eyes as if it had been a photograph taken on the spot.

"There," said Nikola, with a little note of triumph in his voice, "I hope that will convince you that when I say I can do a thing, I mean it"

So saying he tilted the saucer, and the picture vanished in a whirl of colour. I tried to protest, but before I had time to say anything the liquid had in some strange fashion resolved itself once more into a powder, Nikola had tipped it back into the silver box, and Kelleran and I were left to put the best explanation we could upon it. We looked at each other, and, feeling that I could not make head or tail of what I had seen, I waited for him to speak.

"I never saw such a thing in my life," he cried, when he had found sufficient voice. "If any one had told me that such a thing was possible I would not have believed him. I can scarcely credit the evidence of my senses now."

"In fact, you feel towards the little exhibition I have just given you very much as you did to Ingleby's story a quarter of an hour ago," said Nikola. "What a doubting world it is, to be sure! The same world which ridiculed the notion that there could be anything in vaccination, in the steam engine, in chloroform, the telegraph, the telephone, or the phonograph. For how many years has it scoffed at the power of hypnotism! How many of our cleverest scientists fifty years ago could have foretold the discovery of argon, or the possibility of being able to telegraph without the aid of wires? And because the little world of to-day knows these things and has survived the wonder of them, it is convinced it has attained the end of wisdom. The folly of it! To-night I have shown you something for which less than a hundred years ago I should have been stoned as a wizard. At my death the secret will be given to the world, and the world, when it has recovered from its astonishment, will say, 'How very simple! why did no one discover it before?' I tell you, gentlemen," Nikola continued, rising and standing before the fireplace, "that we three, to-night, are standing on the threshold of a discovery which will shake the world to its foundations."

When he had moved, Kelleran and I had also pushed back our chairs from the table, and were now watching him as if turned to stone. The sacred fire of enthusiasm, which I thought had left me for ever, was once more kindling in my breast, and I hung upon his words as if I were afraid I might lose even a breath that escaped his lips. As for Nikola himself, his usually pallid face was aglow with excitement.

"The story is as old as the hills," he began. "Ever since the days when our first parents trod the earth there have been men who have aimed at discovering a means of lengthening the span of life. From the very infancy of science, the wisest and cleverest have devoted their lives to the study of the human body, in the hope of mastering its secret. Assisting in the search for that particular something which was to revolutionise the world, we find Zosimus the Theban, the Jewess Maria, the Arabian Geber, Hermes Trismegistus, Linnaeus, Berzelius, Cuvier, Raymond Lully, Paracelsus, Roger Bacon, De Lisle, Albertus Magnus, and even Dr. Price. Each in his turn quarried in the mountain of Wisdom, and died having failed to discover the hidden treasure for which he sought. And why? Because, egotistical as it may seem on my part to say so, they did not seek in the right place. They commenced at the wrong point, and worked from it in the wrong direction. But if they failed to find what they wanted, they at least rendered good service to those who were to follow after, for from every failure something new was learned. For my part I have studied the subject in every form, in every detail. For more years than I can tell you, I have lived for it, dreamed of it, fought for it, and overcome obstacles of the very existence of which no man could dream. The work of my predecessors is known to me; I have studied their writings, and tested their experiments to the last particular. All the knowledge that modern science has accumulated I have acquired. The magic of the East I have explored and tested to the uttermost. Three years ago I visited Thibet under extraordinary circumstances. There, in a certain place, inaccessible to the ordinary man, and at the risk of my own life and that of the brave man who accompanied me, I obtained the information which was destined to prove the coping-stone of the great discovery I have since made. Only two things were wanting then to . . . complete the whole and to enable me to get to work. One of these I had just found in St. Petersburg when I first met you, Kelleran; the other I discovered three weeks ago. It has been a long and tedious search, but such labour only makes success the sweeter. The machinery is now prepared; all that remains is to fit the various parts together. In six months' time, if all goes well, I will have a man walking upon this earth who, under certain conditions, shall live a thousand years."

I could scarcely believe that I heard aright. Was the man deliberately asking us to believe that he had really found the way to prolong human life indefinitely? It sounded very much like it, and yet this was the Nineteenth Century and ... But at this point I ceased my speculations. Had I not, only that evening, witnessed an exhibition of his marvellous powers? If he had penetrated so far into the Unknowable—at least what we considered the unknowable—as to be able to work such a miracle, why should we doubt that he could carry out what he was now professing to be able to do?

"And when shall we be permitted to hear the result of your labours?" asked Kelleran with a humility that was surprising in a man usually so self-assertive.

"Who can say?" asked Nikola. "These things are more or less dependent on Time. It may be only a short period before I am ready; on the other hand a lifetime may elapse. The process is above all a gradual one, and to hurry it might be to spoil everything. And now, my dear Kelleran, with your permission I will bid you good-night. I leave for the North at daybreak, and I have much to do before I go. If I am not taking you away too soon, Ingleby, perhaps you would not mind walking a short distance with me. I have a good deal to say to you."

"I shall be very pleased," I answered; and the look that Kelleran gave me showed me that he considered my decision a wise one.

"In that case come along," said Nikola. "Good-night, Kelleran, and many thanks for the introduction you have given me. I feel quite sure Ingleby and I will get on admirably together."

He shook hands with Kelleran, and passed into the hall, leaving me alone with the man who had proved my benefactor for the second time in my life.

"Good-night, old fellow," I said, as I shook him by the hand. "I cannot thank you sufficiently

for your goodness in putting me in the way of this billet. It has given me another chance, and I shan't forget your kindness as long as I live."

"Don't be absurd," Kelleran answered. "You take things too seriously. I feel sure the advantage is as much Nikola's as yours. He's a wonderful man, and you're the very fellow he requires: between you, you ought to be able to bring about something that will upset the calculations of certain pompous old fossils of our acquaintance. Good-night, and good luck to you!"

So saying, he let us out by the front door, and stood upon the doorstep watching us as we walked down the street. It was an exquisite night. The moon was almost at the full, and her mellow rays made the street almost as light as day. My companion and I walked for some distance in silence. He did not speak, and I already entertained too much respect for him to interrupt his reverie. More than once I glanced at his tall, graceful figure, and the admirably shaped head, which seemed such a fitting case for the extraordinary brain within.

"As I said just now," he began at length, as if he were continuing a conversation which had been suddenly interrupted, "I leave at daybreak for the North of England. For the purposes of the experiment I am about to make, it is vitally necessary that I should possess a residence far removed from other people, where I should not run any risk of being disturbed. For this reason I have purchased Allerdeyne Castle, in Northumberland, a fine old place overlooking the North Sea. It is by no means an easy spot to get at, and should suit my purposes admirably. I shall not see you before I go, so that whatever I have to say had better be said at once. To begin with, I presume you have made up your mind to assist me in the work I am about to undertake?"

"If you consider me competent," I answered, "I shall be only too glad to do so."

"Kelleran has assured me that I could not have a better assistant," he replied, "and I am willing to take you upon his recommendation. If you have no objection to bring forward, we may as well consider the matter settled. Have you any idea as to the remuneration you will require?"

I answered that I had not, and that I would leave it to him to give me whatever he considered fair. In reply he named a sum that almost took my breath away. I remarked that I should be satisfied with half the amount, whereupon he laughed good-humouredly.

"I'm afraid we're neither of us good business men," he said. "By all the laws of trade, on finding that I offered you more than you expected, you should have stood out for twice as much. Still, I like you all the better for your modesty. Now my road turns off here, and I will bid you good-night. In an hour I will send my servant to you with a letter containing full instructions. I need scarcely say that I am sure you will carry them out to the letter."

"I will do so, come what may," I answered seriously.

"Then good-night," he said, and held out his hand to me. "All being well, we shall meet again in two or three days."

"Good-night," I replied.

Then, with a wave of his hand to me, he sprang into a hansom which he had called up to the pavement, gave the direction to the driver, and a moment later was round the corner and out of sight. After he had gone, I continued my homeward journey.

I had not been in the house an hour before I was informed that some one was at the door desiring to see me. I accordingly hurried downstairs, to find myself face to face with the most extraordinary individual I have ever seen in my life. At first glance I scarcely knew what to make of him, but when the light from the hall lamp fell upon his face, I saw that he was a Chinaman, and the ugliest I have ever seen in all my experience of the Mongolian race. His eyes squinted terribly, and a portion of his nose was missing. It was the sort of face one sees in a nightmare, and, accustomed as I was by my profession to horrible sights, I must admit my gorge rose at him. At first it did not occur to me to connect him with Nikola.

"Do you want to see me?" I inquired, in some astonishment.

He nodded his head, but did not speak. "What is it about?" I continued. He uttered a peculiar grunt, and produced a letter and a small box from his pocket, both of which he handed to me. I understood immediately from whom he came. Signing to him to remain where he was until I

could tell him whether there was an answer, I turned into the house and opened the letter. Having read it, I returned to the front door.

"You can tell Dr. Nikola that I will be sure to attend to it," I said. "You savee?"

He nodded his head, and next moment was on his way down the street. When he was out of sight I returned to my bedroom, and, lighting the gas, once more perused the communication I had received. As I did so a piece of paper fell from between the leaves. I picked it up, to discover that it was a cheque for one hundred pounds payable to myself. The letter ran:

"My Dear Ingleby,

"According to the promise I made you this evening, I am sending you herewith by my Chinese servant, your instructions, as clearly worked out as I can make them. To begin with, I want you to remain in town until Monday next. On the morning of that day, if all goes well, you will be advised by the agent of the Company in London of the arrival in the river of the steamship *Dona Mercedes*, bound from Cadiz to Newcastle. On receipt of that information you will be good enough to board her and to inquire for Don Miguel de Moreno and his great-granddaughter, who are passengers by the boat to England. I have already arranged with the Company for your passage, so you need have no anxiety upon that score.

"You will find the Don a very old man, and I beg that you will take the greatest possible care of him. For this reason I have sent you the accompanying drugs, each of which is labelled with the fullest instructions. They should not be made use of unless occasion absolutely requires." (Here followed a list of the various symptoms for which I was to watch, and an exhaustive *resume* of the treatment I was to employ in the event of certain contingencies arising.)

"On the arrival of the vessel in Newcastle"—the letter continued—"I will communicate with you again. In the meantime I send you what I think will serve to pay your expenses until we meet.

"Believe me,

"Your sincere friend,

"Nikola."

"P.S.—One last word of warning. Should you by any chance be brought into contact with a certain Mongolian of very sinister appearance, with half an ear missing, have nothing whatsoever to do with him. Keep out of his way, and above all let him know nothing of your connection with myself. This, I beg you to believe, is no idle warning, for all our lives depend upon it."

Having thoroughly mastered the contents of this curious epistle, I turned my attention to the parcel which accompanied it. This I discovered was made up of a number of small packets evidently containing powders, and two-ounce phials of some tasteless and scentless liquid, to which I was quite unable to assign a name.

Once more I glanced at the letter, in order to make sure of the name of the man whose guardian I was destined for the future to be. De Moreno was the name, and it was his granddaughter who was accompanying him. In an idle, dreamy way, I wondered what the latter would prove to be like. For some reason or another I found myself thinking a good deal of her, and when I fell asleep that night it was to dream that she was standing before me with outstretched hands, imploring me to save her not only from a certain one-eared Chinaman, but also from Nikola himself.



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