



***VICTOR  
L. WHITECHURCH***

***THE THORPE  
HAZELL  
MYSTERIES***

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**THE THORPE  
HAZELL  
MYSTERIES**

**Victor L. Whitechurch**

# **The Thorpe Hazell Mysteries**

**Complete 9 Book Collection**

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# Table of Contents

PETER CRANE'S CIGARS

THE TRAGEDY ON THE LONDON AND MID-NORTHERN

THE AFFAIR OF THE CORRIDOR EXPRESS

SIR GILBERT MURRELL'S PICTURE

HOW THE BANK WAS SAVED

THE AFFAIR OF THE GERMAN DISPATCH-BOX

HOW THE BISHOP KEPT HIS APPOINTMENT

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PILOT ENGINE

THE STOLEN NECKLACE

# PETER CRANE'S CIGARS

## [Table of Contents](#)

A slight, delicate-looking man, with pale face and refined features, light red hair, and dreamy blue eyes.

Such is a brief description of Thorpe Hazell, book-collector and railway enthusiast, a gentleman of independent means, whose knowledge of book editions and bindings was only equalled by his grasp of railway details.

At least two railway companies habitually sought his expert advice in the bewildering task of altering their time tables, while from time to time he was consulted in cases where his special railway knowledge proved of immense service, and his private notebook of such "cases" would have provided much interesting copy to publishers.

He had one other peculiarity. He was a strong faddist on food and "physical culture." He carried vegetarianism to an extreme, and was continually practising various "exercises" of the strangest description, much to the bewilderment of those who were not personally acquainted with his eccentricities.

With this brief introduction of the man, it is proposed to set forth, for the first time, a selection of railway "cases" in which he played a more or less prominent part.

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"I tell you I only paid fivepence each for them."

Harry Brett took the cigar from his customer's hand, looked critically at it, smelt it, and then shook his head decidedly.

"Can't be done!" he said, "must be a fake."

"Unroll it—you're welcome."

The young tobacconist broke the cigar in half, rubbed the leaves between his palms, and examined them carefully.

"Ye—es," he admitted, "it's right enough. Same leaf all through."

"What did I tell you?"

Harry Brett turned round, reached for a box on a shelf, took it down, and selected a cigar, which he compared with the fragments lying on his counter.

"Same brand," he said at length. "But I can't make it out at all. Now, I can't afford to sell these under sixpence each, or sevenpence from a broken box, and even then the profit's a mere nothing. You must have got these over the water Mr. Wilson?"

"No, I didn't."

"You couldn't have bought 'em retail at the price."

"I did, though."

"What, at a shop?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In this town."

"In Netherton?"

"Exactly."

"By George! Who was it, Mr. Wilson?"

"Well, at Crane's, if you want to know. There's no secret about it." Harry Brett brought down his fist on the counter with a bang that made the scales rattle. The mention of Crane's name had evidently upset him.

"It's all very well," he said, "but I tell you it can't be done. Either Crane's a bigger fool than I took him for, or he means having you in the end, and is only running this sort of thing to advertise his business. Why, he hardly knows anything about the trade; he's only been in it six months. You're welcome to buy them, Mr. Wilson, of course. I can't do them at the price."

"Well," returned the customer, "I'm a bit of a judge of a weed, and if he begins palming off inferior stuff he won't

impose on me. But till then I'll save my money and deal with him. But, as he makes no reduction in other goods, I'll take a tin of my usual mixture from you."

"Oh, go and get your baccy where you buy your cigars," exclaimed Harry Brett, who had been working himself up into quite a rage. "I don't hold with all this underselling business, nor with those who encourage it. Good morning, sir!"

Mr. Wilson smiled slightly at the young man's outburst of passion, shrugged his shoulders, and walked out of the shop.

Harry Brett leant on the counter with his elbows, gazing angrily at the fragments of the object which had upset him so much. He had been a tobacconist from his boyhood upwards, having begun to work in his father's shop ever since leaving school, and since his father's death, three years previously, he had come into the business. It was not a very large one, but it was well established, and had many old customers. And Harry himself had been calculating for some little time that there was profit enough out of the shop to support two, besides which he had a very distinct notion of the choice of a partner.

But for the last three months certain things had troubled him. His takings had grown distinctly less, and certain customers had become irregular. And it was a curious coincidence that these troubles had begun to date from the time when Peter Crane had opened a rival business in Netherton, with an announcement that during the first week he would give away a "tip-top cigar" with every quarter of a pound of tobacco purchased.

It was galling, inasmuch as this Peter Crane had nothing to recommend him. Netherton knew him as a ne'er-do-well, turning up every now and again at his widowed mother's, who kept a small confectionery shop in the town. He had cleared one window of this shop of its contents, and substituted the fragrant weed in its various forms, and, as

often as not, his mother dispensed these goods, for there were intervals during which Peter Crane himself seemed to abandon his new trade.

"Well, Brett," said a quiet voice, suddenly, "you seem wrapped in thought. What is puzzling you? Half a minute, please, before you answer. It is time for my mid-day exercise."

Brett looked up at Thorpe Hazell, who had entered without noise, and now stood before him twirling his arms rapidly round his head and then suddenly thrusting them out in front. Hazell lived at Netherton, but had a little bachelor flat in town, where he spent a good deal of his time. He was a regular customer of Brett, who knew his little eccentricity.

When he had finished Brett told him about the cigar and his suspicions. Hazell leant on the counter and listened attentively.

"I know this young Crane," he remarked, "and I'm afraid he doesn't bear the best of characters. Of course, this affects your trade?"

"It does, sir, to a certain extent."

"Do you suspect anything?"

"Well, sir, I hardly like to say. This particular brand of cigar can be picked up very cheaply in Holland or Belgium, and if they could be got over without the duty I could understand it."

"You think it's a question for the Revenue officials?"

"Oh, *I'm* not going to put them on his track," said Brett scornfully. "There's honour in trade as in other things. Besides which, if there were nothing in it I should pose as a spiteful sort of chap, and it would be all the worse for me."

"I see. You've excited my curiosity, Brett. Well, I want some cigarettes of the usual brand—thank you. If you hear anything about Crane's movements you might let me know. And, by the way, don't talk about the thing. Good morning."



On his way home he called in at Crane's shop. Here he made a trifling purchase. Mrs. Crane served him.

"H'm," he muttered to himself as he regained the street. "That collarette of hers was genuine Brussels lace. I wonder whether Brett's suspicions are correct. It may be a case worth investigating."

Netherton was about twenty-five miles from London, on the Mid-Southern and Eastern Railway, and Thorpe Hazell constantly ran up to town. On this particular evening he was due at a meeting at Kensington.

He had scarcely taken his seat in the train when a young man came in and sat opposite. Hazell glanced at him over his paper, and recognised him as Peter Crane. He remembered Brett's little difficulty for a moment, but dismissed the subject as he resumed his paper.

Now, when the train drew up at the London terminus of the Mid-Southern and Eastern Railway, Hazell did not hurry himself in the least. He was not due at Kensington just yet, so he determined to wait till the departure of the Continental train. There were many things to interest him. The type of engine running, the number of coaches—dozens of details that are only apparent to the enthusiast of railway matters.

He was standing on the platform, taking in these various things, when he suddenly caught sight of Crane going into the Continental booking-office. An impulse seized him, and a moment or two later he was standing close behind the tobacconist, overhearing him ask for a return ticket to Gantes. He began to be interested.

"Now," he reasoned to himself as he went out of the station and took a hansom, "there's evidently a bit of clever smuggling going on here. Let's think. A return ticket. How does he get the cigars through? *How* does he bring them back? Seems to me there's a chance of a railway mystery here. Of course, it may be on the boat, but I shouldn't think so. I'll have a look into this. There's any amount of frontier

smuggling on Continental railways, I know. I once saw half a hundredweight of tobacco fixed under a passenger coach on the St. Gothard, and beautifully run through Chiasso. This may be well worth investigating."

Once having made up his mind, Hazell lost no time in making further inquiries as soon as he returned to Netherton, the result being that he ascertained that Crane had a regular date in the month for absenting himself from home.

And so it happened that the next time the latter took a return ticket to Gantes, Thorpe Hazell, disguised in a black wig, and looking very much like a commercial traveller, was already seated in the Continental train, booked through to the same destination. He had his eyes wide open, and had already taken in the fact that Crane's luggage consisted of a fair-sized brown Gladstone, and a very large black kit bag.

Hazell kept well out of Crane's way all the journey, for he knew very well that it was the return trip only that demanded careful scrutiny. So he snatched what sleep he could. They reached Gantes in the small hours of the morning, and Hazell noticed that Crane put the kit bag in the cloak-room, after which he proceeded to an adjacent hotel, a porter carrying his Gladstone.

Hazell, whose luggage was quite small, looked about him, noticed a hotel just opposite, rang up the sleepy night-porter, and took a front room, so that he could command the entrance of Crane's hotel. Instead of undressing, he opened his bag, changed into a tourist's knickerbocker suit, and then lay down on his bed with a determination not to sleep more than a couple of hours.

At daybreak he was at his window, keeping careful watch. An hour or two passed, and then his patience was rewarded. Crane came out of the hotel, smoking a cigar and suspecting nothing.

The next minute Hazell was in the street, following his prey to the station. He lounged into the booking-office in

time to hear Crane take a return ticket to Antburg.

Then he inquired of the booking-clerk casually whether one could take a return to Antburg and come back the next day.

"No, monsieur, tickets are only available for one day."

He shrugged his shoulders lazily, for he never believed in taking too much trouble over anything. It was clear that Crane would be back in Gantes that day. The only thing was to find out whether he took his black bag with him. He did.

"Now," said Hazell to himself, as he went back to his hotel, "that young man is precious shrewd. It's pretty clear he's gone over to Antburg to get his goods—there isn't a better place in Northern Europe for getting them—probable out of bond, too. But why does he take this route? It's a roundabout way to get to Antburg. I know. He works the trick on the Mid-Southern and Eastern, and the other line won't do. It's well worth finding out, but I can't do anything yet."

He had his breakfast, strolled round the town, and finally came back to his room. He had jotted down the times of trains returning from Antburg.

Then he settled himself to perform a "nerve-strengthening" exercise, which consisted of lying down on the flat of his back and holding a tumbler of water, filled to the brim, over his head for ten minutes at a time, the object being not to spill a drop of it. He entirely abstracted himself from the object in hand, except at such times as Antburg trains were due, when he got up and carefully watched the street leading from the station.

In the afternoon Crane appeared once more and entered his hotel. Then Hazell paid his bill, went to the station, and waited for the train back to England. He was keen and alert now. If that black bag, which he surmised was in the cloak-room, contained cigars, he was particularly anxious to see how the Customs were evaded.

Exactly in accordance with his surmises, Peter Crane came down to the station in time for the afternoon boat train.

And this is what he did. He took the black bag out of the cloak room and registered it through to London. That meant that until the bag reached London he could not possibly get at it, and then he would have to open it in the presence of the Customs' officials, through registered luggage being examined there, and not at Dovehaven. The brown bag, which appeared to be heavy, he took in the train with him.

Thorpe Hazell began to be mystified. Assuming the bag to be filled with cigars, he could see no way in which they could be brought through free of duty. He watched the luggage being taken on the boat at Ozende, but Crane was absolutely regardless, and had thrown himself on a saloon berth, and was sleeping almost immediately, his brown bag beside him.

At Dovehaven the examination of hand luggage took place, and Hazell had squeezed himself close beside Crane in order that he might see what was in the brown bag. There was nothing suspicious. It contained quite a pile of books and articles of clothing, a pink shirt being rather conspicuous.

As soon as the examination was over Crane turned to the porter who was carrying the bag.

"Put that in the van," he said. "Label it for London. I shan't want it in the carriage with me."

Hazell, still wondering, now went up to the guard's van and watched the luggage being put in, both of Crane's bags being among them. The guard himself was busily engaged helping the porters, as the boat was rather late, and he was anxious to get off.

"Now then, sir, are you going on? Take your seat, please. Right away!"

A shrill whistle, a wave of the green lamp, and the train was off, the next stop being the London terminus.

"Curious," said Hazell to himself as he took a packet of plasmon chocolate, and a flask of milk out of his bag and proceeded to "dine." "Perhaps I'm wrong, after all. Ah!"—as a thought struck him—"well, we'll wait till we get to town."

A couple of hours later that night the train drew up at the London terminus, having, of course, run through Netherton without a stop. Behind the long barrier stood a number of Custom House officials waiting to examine the registered luggage before it was passed through. Hazell watched by the guard's van until Crane's two bags were deposited on the platform. Crane took charge of the brown one himself, and a porter followed him with the black one to the examination counter. Hazell stood a little behind, eagerly awaiting the result.

"Anything to declare, sir? Tobacco, scent, cigars?"

"No—nothing."

"Open your bag, please."

"Certainly."

He unlocked the large black bag and threw it open. Hazell bent forward. And he caught a glimpse of a pink shirt—and books.

The black bag contained the identical articles that he had seen in the brown bag at Dovehaven.

A solution struck him. Glancing round he saw a platform inspector whom he knew. Rushing up to him he exclaimed, in a whisper: "Jarvis—I'm Mr. Hazell—look here."

"Lor', sir, I shouldn't have known you. I—"

"Hush. Don't let on, man. Quick; you see that fellow in the light overcoat doing up his bag. Get one of those officers to examine the brown bag by his side. Sharp!"

The next moment Jarvis was behind the counter and had spoken a word to the official. Crane had just strapped up his bag and was moving off. Hazell had darted away.

"Sir—one moment."

"What is it?"

"That other bag. I want to see it."