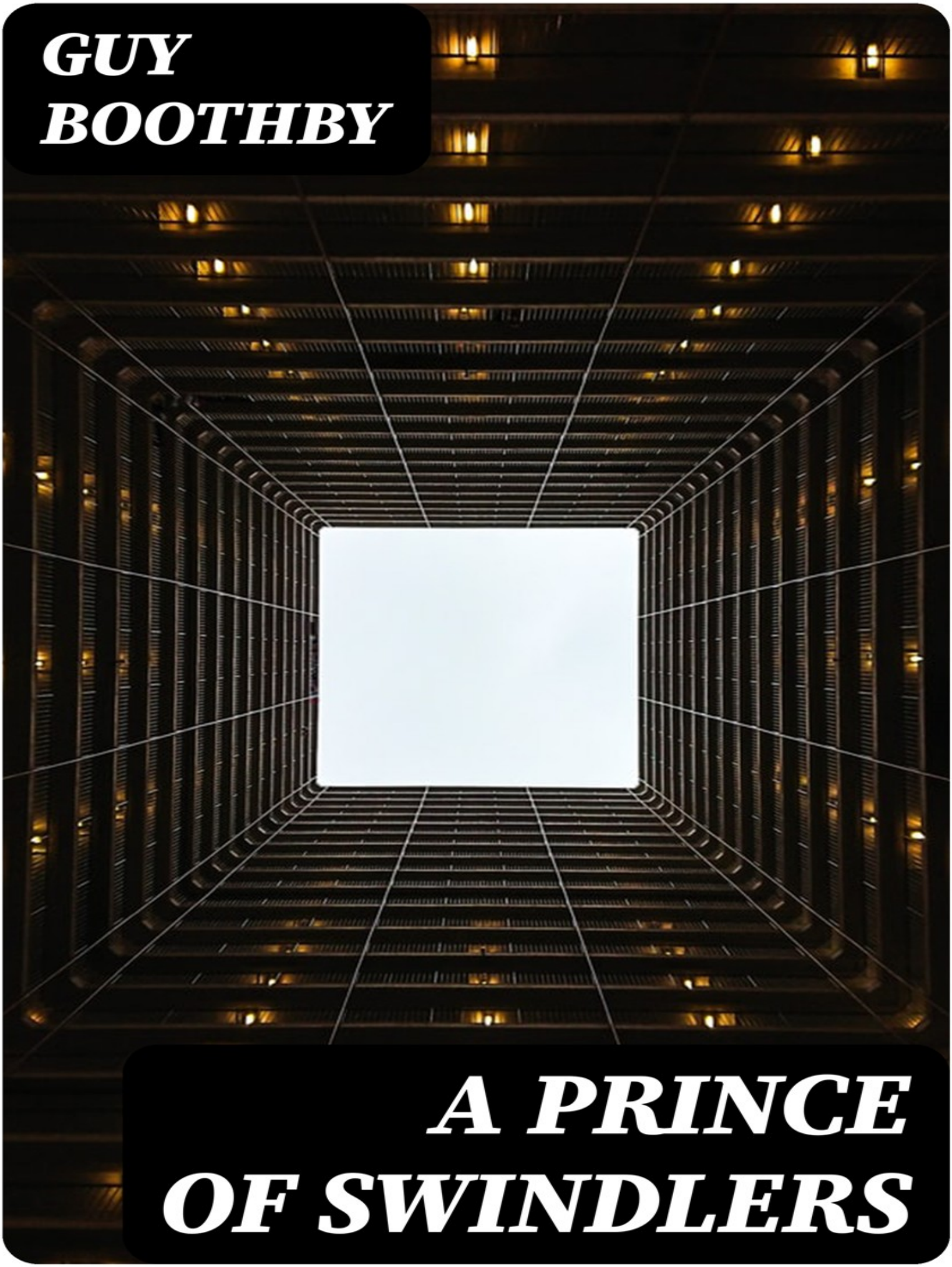
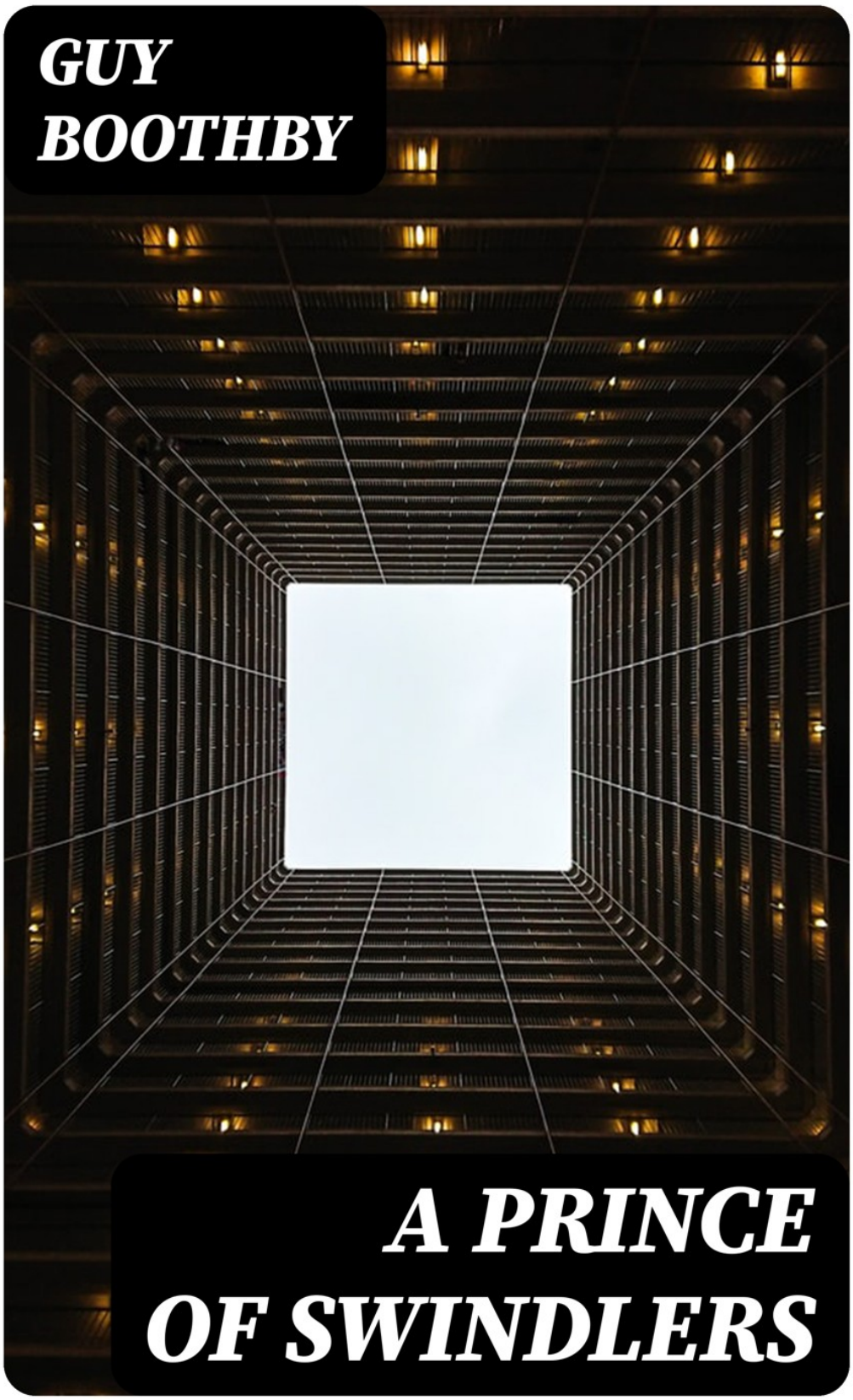
GUY BOOTHBY



A PRINCE OF SWINDLERS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Guy Boothby

A Prince of Swindlers

EAN 8596547038672

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I.

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A CRIMINAL IN DISGUISE.

After no small amount of deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that it is only fit and proper I should set myself right with the world in the matter of the now famous 18--swindles. For, though I have never been openly accused of complicity in those miserable affairs, yet I cannot rid myself of the remembrance that it was I who introduced the man who perpetrated them to London society, and that in more than one instance I acted, innocently enough, Heaven knows, as his *Deus ex machinâ*, in bringing about the very results he was so anxious to achieve. I will first allude, in a few words, to the year in which the crimes took place, and then proceed to describe the events that led to my receiving the confession which has so strangely and unexpectedly come into my hands.

Whatever else may be said on the subject, one thing at least is certain--it will be many years before London forgets that season of festivity. The joyous occasion which made half the sovereigns of Europe our guests for weeks on end, kept foreign princes among us until their faces became as familiar to us as those of our own aristocracy, rendered the houses in our fashionable quarters unobtainable for love or money, filled our hotels to repletion, and produced daily pageants the like of which few of us have ever seen or imagined, can hardly fail to go down to posterity as one of

the most notable in English history. Small wonder, therefore, that the wealth, then located in our great metropolis, should have attracted swindlers from all parts of the globe.

That it should have fallen to the lot of one who has always prided himself on steering clear of undesirable acquaintances, to introduce to his friends one of the most notorious adventurers our capital has ever seen, seems like the irony of fate. Perhaps, however, if I begin by showing how cleverly our meeting was contrived, those who would otherwise feel inclined to censure me, will pause before passing judgment, and will ask themselves whether they would not have walked into the snare as unsuspectedly as I did.

It was during the last year of my term of office as Viceroy, and while I was paying a visit to the Governor of Bombay, that I decided upon making a tour of the Northern Provinces, beginning with Peshawur, and winding up with the Maharajah of Malar-Kadir. As the latter potentate is so well known, I need not describe him. His forcible personality, his enlightened rule, and the progress his state has made within the last ten years, are well known to every student of the history of our magnificent Indian Empire.

My stay with him was a pleasant finish to an otherwise monotonous business, for his hospitality has a world-wide reputation. When I arrived he placed his palace, his servants, and his stables at my disposal to use just as I pleased. My time was practically my own. I could be as solitary as a hermit if I so desired; on the other hand, I had but to give the order, and five hundred men would cater for my amusement. It seems therefore the more unfortunate

that to this pleasant arrangement I should have to attribute the calamities which it is the purpose of this series of stories to narrate.

On the third morning of my stay I woke early. When I had examined my watch I discovered that it wanted an hour of daylight, and, not feeling inclined to go to sleep again, I wondered how I should employ my time until my servant should bring me my *chota hazri*, or early breakfast. On proceeding to my window I found a perfect morning, the stars still shining, though in the east they were paling before the approach of dawn. It was difficult to realize that in a few hours the earth which now looked so cool and wholesome would be lying, burnt up and quivering, beneath the blazing Indian sun.

I stood and watched the picture presented to me for some minutes, until an overwhelming desire came over me to order a horse and go for a long ride before the sun should make his appearance above the jungle trees. The temptation was more than I could resist, so I crossed the room and, opening the door, woke my servant, who was sleeping in the ante-chamber. Having bidden him find a groom and have a horse saddled for me, without rousing the household, I returned and commenced my toilet. Then, descending by a private staircase to the great courtyard, I mounted the animal I found awaiting me there, and set off.

Leaving the city behind me I made my way over the new bridge with which His Highness has spanned the river, and, crossing the plain, headed towards the jungle, that rises like a green wall upon the other side. My horse was a *waler* of exceptional excellence, as every one who knows the

Maharajah's stable will readily understand, and I was just in the humor for a ride. But the coolness was not destined to last long, for by the time I had left the second village behind me, the stars had given place to the faint grey light of dawn. A soft, breeze stirred the palms and rustled the long grass, but its freshness was deceptive; the sun would be up almost before I could look round, and then nothing could save us from a scorching day.

After I had been riding for nearly an hour it struck me that, if I wished to be back in time for breakfast, I had better think of returning. At the time I was standing in the center of a small plain, surrounded by jungle. Behind me was the path I had followed to reach the place; in front, and to the right and left, others leading whither I could not tell. Having no desire to return by the road I had come, I touched up my horse and cantered off in an easterly direction, feeling certain that even if I had to make a divergence, I should reach the city without very much trouble.

By the time I had put three miles or so behind me the heat had become stifling, the path being completely shut in on either side by the densest jungle I have ever known. For all I could see to the contrary, I might have been a hundred miles from any habitation.

Imagine my astonishment, therefore, when, on turning a corner of the track, I suddenly left the jungle behind me, and found myself standing on the top of a stupendous cliff, looking down upon a lake of blue water. In the center of this lake was an island, and on the island a house. At the distance I was from it the latter appeared to be built of white marble, as indeed I afterward found to be the case.

Anything, however, more lovely than the effect produced by the blue water, the white building, and the jungle-clad hills upon the other side, can scarcely be imagined. I stood and gazed at it in delighted amazement. Of all the beautiful places I had hitherto seen in India this, I could honestly say, was entitled to rank first. But how it was to benefit me in my present situation I could not for the life of me understand.

Ten minutes later I had discovered a guide, and also a path down the cliff to the shore, where, I was assured, a boat and a man could be obtained to transport me to the palace. I therefore bade my informant precede me, and after some minutes' anxious scrambling my horse and I reached the water's edge.

Once there, the boatman was soon brought to light, and, when I had resigned my horse to the care of my guide, I was rowed across to the mysterious residence in question.

On reaching it we drew up at some steps leading to a broad stone esplanade, which, I could see, encircled the entire place. Out of a grove of trees rose the building itself, a confused jumble of Eastern architecture crowned with many towers. With the exception of the vegetation and the blue sky, everything was of a dazzling white, against which the dark green of palms contrasted with admirable effect.

Springing from the boat I made my way up the steps, imbued with much the same feeling of curiosity as the happy Prince, so familiar to us in our nursery days, must have experienced when he found the enchanted castle in the forest. As I reached the top, to my unqualified astonishment, an English man-servant appeared through a gate-way and bowed before me.

"Breakfast is served," he said, "and my master bids me say that he waits to receive your lordship."

Though I thought he must be making a mistake, I said nothing, but followed him along a terrace, through a magnificent gateway, on the top of which a peacock was preening himself in the sunlight, through court after court, all built of the same white marble, through a garden in which a fountain was playing to the rustling accompaniment of pipal and pomegranate leaves, to finally enter the veranda of the main building itself.

Drawing aside the curtain which covered the finely-carved doorway, the servant invited me to enter, and as I did so announced "His Excellency the Viceroy."

The change from the vivid whiteness of the marble outside to the cool semi-European room in which I now found myself was almost disconcerting in its abruptness. Indeed, I had scarcely time to recover my presence of mind before I became aware that my host was standing before me. Another surprise was in store for me. I had expected to find a native, instead of which he proved to be an Englishman.

"I am more indebted than I can say to your Excellency for the honor of this visit," he began, as he extended his hand. "I can only wish I were better prepared for it."

"You must not say that," I answered. "It is I who should apologize. I fear I am an intruder. But to tell you the truth I had lost my way, and it is only by chance that I am here at all. I was foolish to venture out without a guide, and have none to blame for what has occurred but myself."

"In this case I must thank the Fates for their kindness to me," returned my host. "But don't let me keep you standing. You must be both tired and hungry after your long ride, and breakfast, as you see, is upon the table. Shall we show ourselves sufficiently blind to the conventionalities to sit down to it without further preliminaries?"

Upon my assenting he struck a small gong at his side, and servants, acting under the instructions of the white man who had conducted me to his master's presence, instantly appeared in answer to it. We took our places at the table, and the meal immediately commenced.

While it was in progress I was permitted an excellent opportunity of studying my host, who sat opposite me, with such light as penetrated the *jhilmills* falling directly upon his face. I doubt, however, vividly as my memory recalls the scene, whether I can give you an adequate description of the man who has since come to be a sort of nightmare to me.

In height he could not have been more than five feet two. His shoulders were broad, and would have been evidence of considerable strength but for one malformation, which completely spoilt his whole appearance. The poor fellow suffered from curvature of the spine of the worst sort, and the large hump between his shoulders produced a most extraordinary effect. But it is when I endeavor to describe his face that I find myself confronted with the most serious difficulty.

How to make you realize it I hardly know.

To begin with, I do not think I should be overstepping the mark were I to say that it was one of the most beautiful

countenances I have ever seen in my fellow-men. Its contour was as perfect as that of the bust of the Greek god Hermes, to whom, all things considered, it is only fit and proper he should bear some resemblance. The forehead was broad, and surmounted with a wealth of dark hair, in color almost black. His eyes were large and dreamy, the brows almost pencilled in their delicacy; the nose, the most prominent feature of his face, reminded me more of that of the great Napoleon than any other I can recall.

His mouth was small but firm, his ears as tiny as those of an English beauty, and set in closer to his head than is usual with those organs. But it was his chin that fascinated me most. It was plainly that of a man accustomed to command; that of a man of iron will whom no amount of opposition would deter from his purpose. His hands were small and delicate, and his fingers taper, plainly those of the artist, either a painter or a musician. Altogether he presented a unique appearance, and one that once seen would not be easily forgotten.

During the meal I congratulated him upon the possession of such a beautiful residence, the like of which I had never seen before.

"Unfortunately," he answered, "the place does not belong to me, but is the property of our mutual host, the Maharajah. His Highness, knowing that I am a scholar and a recluse, is kind enough to permit me the use of this portion of the palace; and the value of such a privilege I must leave you to imagine."

"You are a student, then?" I said, as I began to understand matters a little more clearly.

"In a perfunctory sort of way," he replied. "That is to say, I have acquired sufficient knowledge to be aware of my own ignorance."

I ventured to inquire the subject in which he took most interest. It proved to be china and the native art of India, and on these two topics we conversed for upwards of half-an-hour. It was evident that he was a consummate master of his subject. This I could the more readily understand when, our meal being finished, he led me into an adjoining room, in which stood the cabinets containing his treasures. Such a collection I had never seen before. Its size and completeness amazed me.

"But surely you have not brought all these specimens together yourself?" I asked in astonishment.

"With a few exceptions," he answered. "You see it has been the hobby of my life. And it is to the fact that I am now engaged upon a book upon the subject, which I hope to have published in England next year, that you may attribute my playing the hermit here."

"You intend, then, to visit England?"

"If my book is finished in time," he answered, "I shall be in London at the end of April or the commencement of May. Who would not wish to be in the chief city of Her Majesty's dominions upon such a joyous and auspicious occasion?"

As he said this he took down a small vase from a shelf, and, as if to change the subject, described its history and its beauties to me. A stranger picture than he presented at that moment it would be difficult to imagine. His long fingers held his treasure as carefully as if it were an invaluable jewel, his eyes glistened with the fire of the true collector,

who is born but never made, and when he came to that part of his narrative which described the long hunt for, and the eventual purchase of, the ornament in question, his voice fairly shook with excitement. I was more interested than at any other time I should have thought possible, and it was then that I committed the most foolish action of my life. Quite carried away by his charm I said:

"I hope when you *do* come to London, you will permit me to be of any service I can to you."

"I thank you," he answered gravely, "our lordship is very kind, and if the occasion arises, as I hope it will, I shall most certainly avail myself of your offer."

"We shall be very pleased to see you," I replied; "and now, if you will not consider me inquisitive, may I ask if you live in this great place alone?"

"With the exception of my servants I have no companions."

"Really! You must surely find it very lonely?"

"I do, and it is that very solitude which endears it to me. When His Highness so kindly offered me the place for a residence, I inquired if I should have much company. He replied that I might remain here twenty years and never see a soul unless I chose to do so. On hearing that I accepted his offer with alacrity."

"Then you prefer the life of a hermit to mixing with your fellow-men?"

"I do. But next year I shall put off my monastic habits for a few months, and mix with my fellow-men, as you call them, in London."

"You will find hearty welcome, I am sure."

"It is very kind of you to say so; I hope I shall. But I am forgetting the rules of hospitality. You are a great smoker, I have heard. Let me offer you a cigar."

As he spoke he took a small silver whistle from his pocket, and blew a peculiar note upon it. A moment later the same English servant who had conducted me to his presence, entered, carrying a number of cigar boxes upon a tray. I chose one, and as I did so glanced at the man. In outward appearance he was exactly what a body servant should be, of medium height, scrupulously neat, clean shaven, and with a face as devoid of expression as a blank wall. When he had left the room again my host immediately turned to me.

"Now," he said, "as you have seen my collection, will you like to explore the palace?"

To this proposition I gladly assented, and we set off together. An hour later, satiated with the beauty of what I had seen, and feeling as if I had known the man beside me all my life, I bade him good-bye upon the steps and prepared to return to the spot where my horse was waiting for me.

"One of my servants will accompany you," he said, "and will conduct you to the city."

"I am greatly indebted to you," I answered. "Should I not see you before, I hope you will not forget your promise to call upon me either in Calcutta, before we leave, or in London next year." He smiled in a peculiar way.

"You must not think me so blind to my own interests as to forget your kind offer," he replied. "It is just possible, however, that I may be in Calcutta before you leave."

"I shall hope to see you then," I said, and having shaken him by the hand, stepped into the boat which was waiting to convey me across.

Within an hour I was back once more to the palace, much to the satisfaction of the Maharajah and my staff, to whom my absence had been the cause of considerable anxiety.

It was not until the evening that I found a convenient opportunity, and was able to question His Highness about his strange *protégé*. He quickly told me all there was to know about him. His name, it appeared, was Simon Carne. He was an Englishman and had been a great traveller. On a certain memorable occasion he had saved His Highness' life at the risk of his own, and ever since that time a close intimacy had existed between them. For upwards of three years the man in question had occupied a wing of the island palace, going away for months at a time presumably in search of specimens for his collection, and returning when he became tired of the world. To the best of His Highness' belief he was exceedingly wealthy, but on this subject little was known. Such was all I could learn about the mysterious individual I had met earlier in the day.

Much as I wanted to do so, I was unable to pay another visit to the palace on the lake. Owing to pressing business, I was compelled to return to Calcutta as quickly as possible. For this reason it was nearly eight months before I saw or heard anything of Simon Carne again. When I *did* meet him we were in the midst of our preparations for returning to England. I had been for a ride, I remember, and was in the act of dismounting from my horse, when an individual came down the steps and strolled towards me. I recognized him

instantly as the man in whom I had been so much interested in Malar-Kadir. He was now dressed in fashionable European attire, but there was no mistaking his face. I held out my hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Carne?" I cried. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Pray how long have you been in Calcutta?"

"I arrived last night," he answered, "and leave to-morrow morning for Burma. You see, I have taken your Excellency at your word."

"I am very pleased to see you," I replied. "I have the liveliest recollection of your kindness to me the day that I lost my way in the jungle. As you are leaving so soon, I fear we shall not have the pleasure of seeing much of you, but possibly you can dine with us this evening?"

"I shall be very glad to do so," he answered simply, watching me with his wonderful eyes, which somehow always reminded me of those of a collie.

"Her ladyship is devoted to Indian pottery and brass work," I said, "and she would never forgive me if I did not give her an opportunity of consulting you upon her collection."

"I shall be very proud to assist in any way I can," he answered.

"Very well, then, we shall meet at eight. Good-bye."

That evening we had the pleasure of his society at dinner, and I am prepared to state that a more interesting guest has never sat at a vice-regal table. My wife and daughters fell under his spell as quickly as I had done. Indeed, the former told me afterwards that she considered

him the most uncommon man she had met during her residence in the East, an admission scarcely complimentary to the numerous important members of my council who all prided themselves upon their originality. When he said good-bye we had extorted his promise to call upon us in London, and I gathered later that my wife was prepared to make a lion of him when he should put in an appearance.

How he *did* arrive in London during the first week of the following May; how it became known that he had taken Porchester House, which, as every one knows, stands at the corner of Belverton Street and Park Lane, for the season, at an enormous rental; how he furnished it superbly, brought an army of Indian servants to wait upon him, and was prepared to astonish the town with his entertainments, are matters of history. I welcomed him to England, and he dined with us on the night following his arrival, and thus it was that we became, in a manner of speaking, his sponsors in Society. When one looks back on that time, and remembers how vigorously, even in the midst of all that season's gaiety, our social world took him up, the fuss that was made of him, the manner in which his doings were chronicled by the Press, it is indeed hard to realize how egregiously we were all being deceived.

During the months of June and July he was to be met at every house of distinction. Even royalty permitted itself to become on friendly terms with him, while it was rumored that no fewer than three of the proudest beauties in England were prepared at any moment to accept his offer of marriage. To have been a social lion during such a brilliant season, to have been able to afford one of the most perfect

residences in our great city, and to have written a book which the foremost authorities upon the subject declare a masterpiece, are things of which any man might be proud. And yet this was exactly what Simon Carne was and did.

And now, having described his advent among us, I must refer to the greatest excitement of all that year. Unique as was the occasion which prompted the gaiety of London, constant as were the arrivals and departures of illustrious folk, marvelous as were the social functions, and enormous the amount of money expended, it is strange that the things which attracted the most attention should be neither royal, social, nor political.

As may be imagined, I am referring to the enormous robberies and swindles which will forever be associated with that memorable year. Day after day, for weeks at a time, the Press chronicled a series of crimes, the like of which the oldest Englishman could not remember. It soon became evident that they were the work of one person, and that that person was a master hand was as certain as his success.

At first the police were positive that the depredations were conducted by a foreign gang, located somewhere in North London, and that they would soon be able to put their fingers on the culprits. But they were speedily undeceived. In spite of their efforts the burglaries continued with painful regularity. Hardly a prominent person escaped. My friend Lord Orpington was despoiled of his priceless gold and silver plate; my cousin, the Duchess of Wiltshire, lost her world-famous diamonds; the Earl of Calingforth his race-horse "Vulcanite;" and others of my friends were despoiled of their choicest possessions. How it was that I escaped I can

understand now, but I must confess that it passed my comprehension at the time.

Throughout the season Simon Carne and I scarcely spent a day apart. His society was like chloral; the more I took of it the more I wanted. And I am now told that others were affected in the same way. I used to flatter myself that it was to my endeavors he owed his social success, and I can only, in justice, say that he tried to prove himself grateful. I have his portrait hanging in my library now, painted by a famous Academician, with this inscription upon the lozenge at the base of the frame:

"*To my kind friend, the Earl of Amberley, in remembrance of a happy and prosperous visit to London, from Simon Carne.*"

The portrait represents him standing before a book-case in a half-dark room. His extraordinary face, with its dark penetrating eyes, is instinct with life, while his lips seem as if opening to speak. To my thinking it would have been a better picture had he not been standing in such a way that the light accentuated his deformity; but it appears that this was the sitter's own desire, thus confirming what, on many occasions, I had felt compelled to believe, namely, that he was, for some peculiar reason, proud of his misfortune.

It was at the end of the Cowes week that we parted company. He had been racing his yacht the *Unknown Quantity*, and, as if not satisfied with having won the Derby, must needs appropriate the Queen's Cup. It was on the day following that now famous race that half the leaders of London Society bade him farewell on the deck of the steam yacht that was to carry him back to India.

A month later, and quite by chance, the dreadful truth came out. Then it was discovered that the man of whom we had all been making so much fuss, the man whom royalty had condescended to treat almost as a friend, was neither more nor less than a Prince of Swindlers, who had been utilizing his splendid opportunities to the very best advantage.

Every one will remember the excitement which followed the first disclosure of this dreadful secret and the others which followed it. As fresh discoveries came to light, the popular interest became more and more intense, while the public's wonderment at the man's almost superhuman cleverness waxed every day greater than before. My position, as you may suppose was not an enviable one. I saw how cleverly I had been duped, and when my friends, who had most of them, suffered from his talents, congratulated me on my immunity, I could only console myself with the reflection that I was responsible for more than half the acquaintances the wretch had made. But, deeply as I was drinking of the cup of sorrow, I had not come to the bottom of it yet.

One Saturday evening--the 7th of November, if I recollect aright--I was sitting in my library, writing letters after dinner, when I heard the postman come round the square and finally ascend the steps of my house. A few moments later a footman entered bearing some letters, and a large packet, upon a salver. Having read the former, I cut the string which bound the parcel, and opened it.

To my surprise, it contained a bundle of manuscript and a letter. The former I put aside, while I broke open the