

II

"THIS is Mae Allan!" Hobby said by way of introduction, slapping his friend on the shoulder.

Lloyd sat back in a crouching attitude, his head sunk forward in the dimly-lit box. He seemed neither to hear nor to see. After a while, however, he began to speak slowly and deliberately in a very hoarse, husky voice. "I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Allan," he said. "I have gone thoroughly into your scheme. It is a big scheme, and ingenious, and practicable. I will do all I can to help." And he stretched out his hand to Allan—a short, square-shaped hand, soft and moist and flabby, and turned his face towards him.

Allan had been prepared for the experience by Hobby, but even so he had to exert all his self-restraint not to shudder as his eyes met Lloyd's.

Lloyd looked like a peculiarly hideous bull-dog. His lower jaw projected, showing some of the teeth. His nostrils were round holes, and the small, moist, lack-lustre eyes were set like oblique slits in the sunburnt, dried-up, mask-like face. The head was absolutely bald. A loathsome skin affection had gnawed into scalp and face and neck. The spasmodic way in which his face worked was terrible, and it needed strong nerves to gaze on it unmoved. It reminded Allan of some Indian mummies upon which he had come once in Bolivia while engaged in railway work. These mummies were found in a crouching attitude, in big square chests. The teeth stood out between the dried-up lips. White and dark stones had been inserted as eyes, with a gruesomely realistic effect.

Lloyd, who was well aware of his facial peculiarities, enjoyed the evident impression made upon Allan, and continued to study the young man's features.