Raffles

Further Adventures of the Amateur Cracksman

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Charles Scribner's Sons
New York 1911

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NO SINECURE

I

I AM still uncertain which surprised me more, the telegram calling my attention to the advertisement, or the advertisement itself. The telegram is before me as I write. It would appear to have been handed in at Vere Street at eight o'clock in the morning of May 11, 1897, and received before half-past at Holloway B.O. And in that drab region it duly found me, unwashen but at work before the day grew hot and my attic insupportable.

"See Mr. Maturin's advertisement *Daily Mail* might suit you earnestly beg try will speak if necessary——— ———"

I transcribe the thing as I see it before me, all in one breath that took away mine;

his corns. Nor was all the rest unlike him, upon second thoughts. He had a reputation for charity; he was going to live up to it after all. Either that, or it was the sudden impulse of which the most calculating are capable at times; the morning papers with the early cup of tea, this advertisement seen by chance, and the rest upon the spur of a guilty conscience.

Well, I must see it for myself, and the sooner the better, though work pressed. I was writing a series of articles upon prison life, and had my nib into the whole System; a literary and philanthropical daily was parading my "charges," the graver ones with the more gusto; and the terms, if unhandsome for creative work, were temporary wealth to me. It so happened that my first cheque had just arrived by the eight o'clock post; and my position should be appreciated when I say that I had to cash it to obtain a *Daily Mail*.

Of the advertisement itself, what is to be said? It should speak for itself if I could find it, but I cannot, and only remember that it was a "male nurse and constant at-

tendant" that was "wanted for an elderly gentleman in feeble health." A male nurse! An absurd tag was appended, offering "liberal salary to University or public-school man"; and of a sudden I saw that I should get this thing if I applied for it. What other "University or public-school man" would dream of doing so? Was any other in such straits as I? And then my relenting relative; he not only promised to speak for me, but was the very man to do so. Could any recommendation compete with his in the matter of a male nurse? And need the duties of such be necessarily loathsome and repellent? Certainly the surroundings would be better than those of my common lodging-house and own particular garret; and the food; and every other condition of life that I could think of on my way back to that unsavoury asylum. So I dived into a pawnbroker's shop, where I was a stranger only upon my present errand, and within the hour was airing a decent if antiquated suit, but little corrupted by the pawnbroker's moth, and a new straw hat, on the top of a tram.

The address given in the advertisement was that of a flat at Earl's Court, which cost me a cross-country journey, finishing with the District Railway and a seven minutes' walk. It was now past mid-day, and the tarry wood-pavement was good to smell as I strode up the Earl's Court Road. It was great to walk the civilised world again. Here were men with coats on their backs, and ladies in gloves. My only fear was lest I might run up against one or other whom I had known of old. But it was my lucky day. I felt it in my bones. I was going to get this berth; and sometimes I should be able to smell the wood-pavement on the old boy's errands; perhaps he would insist on skimming over it in his bath-chair, with me behind.

I felt quite nervous when I reached the flats. They were a small pile in a side street, and I pitied the doctor whose plate I saw upon the palings before the ground-floor windows; he must be in a very small way, I thought. I rather pitied myself as well. I had indulged in visions of better flats than these. There were no balconies.

The porter was out of livery. There was no lift, and my invalid on the third floor! I trudged up, wishing I had never lived in Mount Street, and brushed against a dejected individual coming down. A full-blooded young fellow in a frock-coat flung the right door open at my summons.

"Does Mr. Maturin live here?" I inquired.

"That's right," said the full-blooded young man, grinning all over a convivial countenance.

"I—I've come about his advertisement in the *Daily Mail.*"

"You're the thirty-ninth," cried the blood; "that was the thirty-eighth you met upon the stairs, and the day's still young. Excuse my staring at you. Yes, you pass your prelim., and can come inside; you're one of the few. We had most just after breakfast, but now the porter's heading off the worst cases, and that last chap was the first for twenty minutes. Come in here."

And I was ushered into an empty room with a good bay-window, which enabled my

full-blooded friend to inspect me yet more critically in a good light; this he did without the least false delicacy; then his questions began.

"'Varsity man?"

"No."

"Public school?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

I told him, and he sighed relief.

"At last! You're the very first I've not had to argue with as to what is and what is not a public school. Expelled?"

"No," I said, after a moment's hesitation; "no, I was not expelled. And I hope you won't expel me if I ask a question in my turn?"

"Certainly not."

"Are you Mr. Maturin's son?"

"No, my name's Theobald. You may have seen it down below."

"The doctor?" I said.

"His doctor," said Theobald, with a satisfied eye. "Mr. Maturin's doctor. He is having a male nurse and attendant by my advice, and he wants a gentleman if he can

get one. I rather think he'll see you, though he's only seen two or three all day. There are certain questions which he prefers to ask himself, and it's no good going over the same ground twice. So perhaps I had better tell him about you before we get any further."

And he withdrew to a room still nearer the entrance, as I could hear, for it was a very small flat indeed. But now two doors were shut between us, and I had to rest content with murmurs through the wall until the doctor returned to summon me.

"I have persuaded my patient to see you," he whispered, "but I confess I am not sanguine of the result. He is very difficult to please. You must prepare yourself for a querulous invalid, and for no sinecure if you get the billet."

"May I ask what's the matter with him?"

"By all means — when you've got the billet."

Dr. Theobald then led the way, his professional dignity so thoroughly intact that

I could not but smile as I followed his swinging coat-tails to the sick-room. I carried no smile across the threshold of a darkened chamber which reeked of drugs and twinkled with medicine bottles, and in the middle of which a gaunt figure lay abed in the half-light.

"Take him to the window, take him to the window," a thin voice snapped, "and let's have a look at him. Open the blind a bit. Not as much as that, damn you, not as much as that!"

The doctor took the oath as though it had been a fee. I no longer pitied him. It was now very clear to me that he had one patient who was a little practice in himself. I determined there and then that he should prove a little profession to me, if we could but keep him alive between us. Mr. Maturin, however, had the whitest face that I have ever seen, and his teeth gleamed out through the dusk as though the withered lips no longer met about them; nor did they except in speech; and anything ghastlier than the perpetual grin of his repose I defy you to imagine. It was with

this grin that he lay regarding me while the doctor held the blind.

"So you think you could look after me, do you?"

"I'm certain I could, sir."

"Single-handed, mind! I don't keep another soul. You would have to cook your own grub and my slops. Do you think you could do all that?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Why do you? Have you any experience of the kind?"

"No, sir, none."

"Then why do you pretend you have?"

"I only meant that I would do my best."

"Only meant, only meant! Have you done your best at everything else, then?"

I hung my head. This was a facer. And there was something in my invalid which thrust the unspoken lie down my throat.

"No, sir, I have not," I told him plainly.

"He, he, he!" the old wretch tittered; "and you do well to own it; you do well, sir, very well indeed. If you hadn't owned up, out you would have gone, out neck-and-crop! You've saved your bacon. You may

do more. So you are a public-school boy, and a very good school yours is, but you weren't at either University. Is that correct?"

"Absolutely."

"What did you do when you left school?"

"I came in for money."

"And then?"

"I spent my money."

"And since then?"

I stood like a mule.

"And since then, I say!"

"A relative of mine will tell you if you ask him. He is an eminent man, and he has promised to speak for me. I would rather say no more myself."

"But you shall, sir, but you shall! Do you suppose that I suppose a public-school boy would apply for a berth like this if something or other hadn't happened? What I want is a gentleman of sorts, and I don't much care what sort; but you've got to tell me what did happen, if you don't tell anybody else. Dr. Theobald, sir, you can go to the devil if you won't take a hint. This

man may do or he may not. You have no more to say to it till I send him down to tell you one thing or the other. Clear out, sir, clear out; and if you think you've anything to complain of, you stick it down in the bill!"

In the mild excitement of our interview the thin voice had gathered strength, and the last shrill insult was screamed after the devoted medico, as he retired in such order that I felt certain he was going to take this trying patient at his word. The bedroom door closed, then the outer one, and the doctor's heels went drumming down the common stair. I was alone in the flat with this highly singular and rather terrible old man.

"And a damned good riddance!" croaked the invalid, raising himself on one elbow without delay. "I may not have much body left to boast about, but at least I've got a lost old soul to call my own. That's why I want a gentleman of sorts about me. I've been too dependent on that chap. He won't even let me smoke, and he's been in the flat all day to see I didn't. You'll find the

cigarettes behind the Madonna of the Chair."

It was a steel engraving of the great Raffaelle, and the frame was tilted from the wall; at a touch a packet of cigarettes tumbled down from behind.

"Thanks; and now a light."

I struck the match and held it, while the invalid inhaled with normal lips; and suddenly I sighed. I was irresistibly reminded of my poor dear old Raffles. A smoke-ring worthy of the great A. J. was floating upward from the sick man's lips.

"And now take one yourself. I have smoked more poisonous cigarettes. But even these are not Sullivans!"

I cannot repeat what I said. I have no idea what I did. I only know—I only knew—that it was A. J. Raffles in the flesh!

II

"Yes, Bunny, it was the very devil of a swim; but I defy you to sink in the Mediterranean. That sunset saved me. The sea was on fire. I hardly swam under water at all, but went all I knew for the sun itself; when it set I must have been a mile away; until it did I was the invisible man. I figured on that, and only hope it wasn't set down as a case of suicide. I shall get outed quite soon enough, Bunny, but I'd rather be dropped by the hangman than throw my own wicket away."

"Oh, my dear old chap, to think of having you by the hand again! I feel as though we were both aboard that German liner, and all that's happened since a nightmare. I thought that time was the last!"

"It looked rather like it, Bunny. It was taking all the risks, and hitting at everything. But the game came off, and some day I'll tell you how."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry to hear. It's enough for me to see you lying there. I don't want to know how you came there,

or why, though I fear you must be pretty bad. I must have a good look at you before I let you speak another word!"

I raised one of the blinds, I sat upon the bed, and I had that look. It left me all unable to conjecture his true state of health, but quite certain in my own mind that my dear Raffles was not and never would be the man that he had been. He had aged twenty years; he looked fifty at the very least. His hair was white; there was no trick about that; and his face was another white. The lines about the corners of the eyes and mouth were both many and deep. On the other hand, the eyes themselves were alight and alert as ever; they were still keen and gray and gleaming, like finely tempered steel. Even the mouth, with a cigarette to close it, was the mouth of Raffles and no other: strong and unscrupulous as the man himself. It was only the physical strength which appeared to have departed; but that was quite sufficient to make my heart bleed for the dear rascal who had cost me every tie I valued but the tie between us two.

"Think I look much older?" he asked at length.

"A bit," I admitted. "But it is chiefly your hair."

"Whereby hangs a tale for when we've talked ourselves out, though I have often thought it was that long swim that started it. Still, the Island of Elba is a rummy show, I can assure you. And Naples is a rummier."

"You went there after all?"

"Rather! It's the European paradise for such as our noble selves. But there's no place that's a patch on little London as a non-conductor of heat; it never need get too hot for a fellow here; if it does it's his own fault. It's the kind of wicket you don't get out on, unless you get yourself out. So here I am again, and have been for the last six weeks. And I mean to have another knock."

"But surely, old fellow, you're not awfully fit, are you?"

"Fit? My dear Bunny, I'm dead—I'm at the bottom of the sea—and don't you forget it for a minute."

"But are you all right, or are you not?"

"No, I'm half-poisoned by Theobald's prescriptions and putrid cigarettes, and as weak as a cat from lying in bed."

"Then why on earth lie in bed, Raffles?"

"Because it's better than lying in gaol, as I am afraid *you* know, my poor dear fellow. I tell you I am dead; and my one terror is of coming to life again by accident. Can't you see? I simply dare not show my nose out of doors—by day. You have no idea of the number of perfectly innocent things a dead man daren't do. I can't even smoke Sullivans, because no one man was ever so partial to them as I was in my lifetime, and you never know when you may start a clue."

"What brought you to these mansions?"

"I fancied a flat, and a man recommended these on the boat; such a good chap, Bunny; he was my reference when it came to signing the lease. You see I landed on a stretcher—most pathetic case—old Australian without a friend in old country—ordered Engadine as last chance—no go—not an earthly—sentimental wish

to die in London—that's the history of Mr. Maturin. If it doesn't hit you hard, Bunny, you're the first. But it hit friend Theobald hardest of all. I'm an income to him. I believe he's going to marry on me."

"Does he guess there's nothing wrong?"

"Knows, bless you! But he doesn't know I know he knows, and there isn't a disease in the dictionary that he hasn't treated me for since he's had me in hand. To do him justice, I believe he thinks me a hypochondriac of the first water; but that young man will go far if he keeps on the wicket. He has spent half his nights up here, at guineas apiece."

"Guineas must be plentiful, old chap!"

"They have been, Bunny. I can't say more. But I don't see why they shouldn't be again."

I was not going to inquire where the guineas came from. As if I cared! But I did ask old Raffles how in the world he had got upon my tracks; and thereby drew the sort of smile with which old gentlemen rub their hands, and old ladies nod their

noses. Raffles merely produced a perfect oval of blue smoke before replying.

"I was waiting for you to ask that, Bunny; it's a long time since I did anything upon which I plume myself more. Of course, in the first place, I spotted you at once by these prison articles; they were not signed, but the fist was the fist of my sitting rabbit!"

"But who gave you my address?"

"I wheedled it out of your excellent editor; called on him at dead of night, when I occasionally go afield like other ghosts, and wept it out of him in five minutes. I was your only relative; your name was not your own name; if he insisted I would give him mine. He didn't insist, Bunny, and I danced down his stairs with your address in my pocket."

"Last night?"

"No, last week."

"And so the advertisement was yours, as well as the telegram!"

I had, of course, forgotten both in the high excitement of the hour, or I should scarcely have announced my belated discov-

ery with such an air. As it was I made Raffles look at me as I had known him look before, and the droop of his eyelids began to sting.

"Why all this subtlety?" I petulantly exclaimed. "Why couldn't you come straight away to me in a cab?"

He did not inform me that I was hopeless as ever. He did not address me as his good rabbit. He was silent for a time, and then spoke in a tone which made me ashamed of mine.

"You see, there are two or three of me now, Bunny: one's at the bottom of the Mediterranean, and one's an old Australian desirous of dying in the old country, but in no immediate danger of dying anywhere. The old Australian doesn't know a soul in town; he's got to be consistent, or he's done. This sitter Theobald is his only friend, and has seen rather too much of him; ordinary dust won't do for his eyes. Begin to see? To pick you out of a crowd, that was the game; to let old Theobald help to pick you, better still! To start with he was dead against my having anybody at all;

wanted me all to himself, naturally; but anything rather than kill the goose! So he is to have a fiver a week while he keeps me alive, and he's going to be married next month. That's a pity in some ways, but a good thing in others; he will want more money than he foresees, and he may always be of use to us at a pinch. Meanwhile he eats out of my hand."

I complimented Raffles on the mere composition of his telegram, with half the characteristics of my distinguished kinsman squeezed into a dozen odd words; and let him know how the old ruffian had really treated me. Raffles was not surprised; we had dined together at my relative's in the old days, and filed for reference a professional valuation of his household gods. I now learnt that the telegram had been posted, with the hour marked for its despatch, at the pillar nearest Vere Street, on the night before the advertisement was due to appear in the *Daily Mail*. This also had been carefully prearranged; and Raffles's only fear had been lest it might be held over despite his explicit instructions, and so

drive me to the doctor for an explanation of his telegram. But the adverse chances had been weeded out and weeded out to the irreducible minimum of risk.

His greatest risk, according to Raffles, lay nearest home: bedridden invalid that he was supposed to be, his nightly terror was of running into Theobald's arms in the immediate neighbourhood of the flat. But Raffles had characteristic methods of minimising even that danger, of which something anon; meanwhile he recounted more than one of his nocturnal adventures, all, however, of a singularly innocent type; and one thing I noticed while he talked. His room was the first as you entered the flat. The long inner wall divided the room not merely from the passage but from the outer landing as well. Thus every step upon the bare stone stairs could be heard by Raffles where he lay; and he would never speak while one was ascending, until it had passed his door. The afternoon brought more than one applicant for the post which it was my duty to tell them that I had already obtained. Between three and four, however,

Raffles, suddenly looking at his watch, packed me off in a hurry to the other end of London for my things.

"I'm afraid you must be famishing, Bunny. It's a fact that I eat very little, and that at odd hours, but I ought not to have forgotten you. Get yourself a snack outside, but not a square meal if you can resist one. We've got to celebrate this day this night!"

"To-night?" I cried.

"To-night at eleven, and Kellner's the place. You may well open your eyes, but we didn't go there much, if you remember, and the staff seems changed. Anyway we'll risk it for once. I was in last night, talking like a stage American, and supper's ordered for eleven sharp."

"You made as sure of me as all that!"

"There was no harm in ordering supper. We shall have it in a private room, but you may as well dress if you've got the duds."

"They're at my only forgiving relative's."

"How much will get them out, and square you up, and bring you back bag and baggage in good time?"

I had to calculate.

"A tenner, easily."

"I had one ready for you. Here it is, and I wouldn't lose any time if I were you. On the way you might look up Theobald, tell him you've got it and how long you'll be gone, and that I can't be left alone all the time. And, by Jove, yes! You get me a stall for the Lyceum at the nearest agent's; there are two or three in High Street; and say it was given you when you come in. That young man shall be out of the way to-night."

I found our doctor in a minute consulting-room and his shirt-sleeves, a tall tumbler at his elbow; at least I caught sight of the tumbler on entering; thereafter he stood in front of it, with a futility which had my sympathy.

"So you've got the billet," said Dr. Theobald. "Well, as I told you before, and as you have since probably discovered for yourself, you won't find it exactly a sinecure. My own part of the business is by no means that; indeed, there are those who would throw up the case, after the

kind of treatment that you have seen for yourself. But professional considerations are not the only ones, and one cannot make too many allowances in such a case."

"But what is the case?" I asked him. "You said you would tell me if I was successful."

Dr. Theobald's shrug was worthy of the profession he seemed destined to adorn; it was not incompatible with any construction which one chose to put upon it. Next moment he had stiffened. I suppose I still spoke more or less like a gentleman. Yet, after all, I was only the male nurse. He seemed to remember this suddenly, and he took occasion to remind me of the fact.

"Ah," said he, "that was before I knew you were altogether without experience; and I must say that I was surprised even at Mr. Maturin's engaging you after that; but it will depend upon yourself how long I allow him to persist in so curious an experiment. As for what is the matter with him, my good fellow, it is no use my giving you an answer which would be double Dutch to you; moreover, I have still to test

your discretionary powers. I may say, however, that that poor gentleman presents at once the most complex and most troublesome case, which is responsibility enough without certain features which make it all but insupportable. Beyond this I must refuse to discuss my patient for the present; but I shall certainly go up if I can find time."

He went up within five minutes. I found him there on my return at dusk. But he did not refuse my stall for the Lyceum, which Raffles would not allow me to use myself, and presented to him off-hand without my leave.

"And don't you bother any more about me till to-morrow," snapped the high thin voice as he was off. "I can send for you now when I want you, and I'm hoping to have a decent night for once."

III

It was half-past ten when we left the flat, in an interval of silence on the noisy stairs. The silence was unbroken by our wary feet. Yet for me a surprise was in store upon the very landing. Instead of going downstairs, Raffles led me up two flights, and so out upon a perfectly flat roof.

"There are two entrances to these mansions," he explained between stars and chimney-stacks: "one to our staircase, and another round the corner. But there's only one porter, and he lives on the basement underneath us, and affects the door nearest home. We miss him by using the wrong stairs, and we run less risk of old Theobald. I got the tip from the postmen, who come up one way and down the other. Now, follow me, and look out!"

There was indeed some necessity for caution, for each half of the building had its L-shaped well dropping sheer to the base, the parapets so low that one might easily have tripped over them into eternity. However, we were soon upon the second stair-

case, which opened on the roof like the first. And twenty minutes of the next twenty-five we spent in an admirable hansom, skimming east.

"Not much change in the old hole, Bunny. More of these magic-lantern advertisements . . . and absolutely the worst bit of taste in town, though it's saying something, in that equestrian statue with the gilt stirrups and fixings; why don't they black the buffer's boots and his horse's hoofs while they are about it? . . . More bicyclists, of course. That was just beginning, if you remember. It might have been useful to us. . . . And there's the old club, getting put into a crate for the Jubilee; by Jove, Bunny, we ought to be there. I wouldn't lean forward in Piccadilly, old chap. If you're seen I'm thought of, and we shall have to be jolly careful at Kellner's. . . . Ah, there it is! Did I tell you I was a low-down stage Yankee at Kellner's? You'd better be another, while the waiter's in the room."

We had the little room upstairs; and on the very threshold I, even I, who knew my

Raffles of old, was taken horribly aback. The table was laid for three. I called his attention to it in a whisper.

"Why, yep!" came through his nose. "Say, boy, the lady, she's not comin', but you leave that tackle where 'tis. If I'm liable to pay, I guess I'll have all there is to it."

I have never been in America, and the American public is the last on earth that I desire to insult; but idiom and intonation alike would have imposed upon my inexperience. I had to look at Raffles to make sure that it was he who spoke, and I had my own reasons for looking hard.

"Who on earth was the lady?" I inquired aghast at the first opportunity.

"She isn't on earth. They don't like wasting this room on two, that's all. Bunny —my Bunny—here's to us both!"

And we clinked glasses swimming with the liquid gold of Steinberg, 1868; but of the rare delights of that supper I can scarcely trust myself to write. It was no mere meal, it was no coarse orgy, but a little feast for the fastidious gods, not un-

worthy of Lucullus at his worst. And I who had bolted my skilly at Wormwood Scrubbs, and tightened my belt in a Holloway attic, it was I who sat down to this ineffable repast! Where the courses were few, but each a triumph of its kind, it would be invidious to single out any one dish; but the Jambon de Westphalie au Champagne tempts me sorely. And then the champagne that we drank, not the quantity but the quality! Well, it was Pol Roger, '84, and quite good enough for me; but even so it was not more dry, nor did it sparkle more, than the merry rascal who had dragged me thus far to the devil, but should lead me dancing the rest of the way. I was beginning to tell him so. I had done my honest best since my reappearance in the world; but the world had done its worst by me. A further antithesis and my final intention were both upon my tongue when the waiter with the Château Margaux cut me short; for he was the bearer of more than that great wine; bringing also a card upon a silver tray.

"Show him up," said Raffles, laconically.

"And who is this?" I cried when the man was gone. Raffles reached across the table and gripped my arm in his vice. His eyes were steel points fixed on mine.

"Bunny, stand by me," said he in the old irresistible voice, a voice both stern and winning. "Stand by me, Bunny—if there's a row!"

And there was time for nothing more, the door flying open, and a dapper person entering with a bow; a frock-coat on his back, gold pince-nez on his nose; a shiny hat in one hand, and a black bag in the other.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," said he, at home and smiling.

"Sit down," drawled Raffles in casual response. "Say, let me introduce you to Mr. Ezra B. Martin, of Shicawgo. Mr. Martin is my future brother-in-law. This is Mr. Robinson, Ezra, manager to Sparks & Company, the cellerbrated joolers on Regent Street."

I pricked up my ears, but contented myself with a nod. I altogether distrusted my ability to live up to my new name and address.

"I figured on Miss Martin bein' right here, too," continued Raffles, "but I regret to say she's not feelin' so good. We light out for Parrus on the 9 A.M. train to-morrer mornin', and she guessed she'd be too dead. Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Robinson; but you'll see I'm advertisin' your wares."

Raffles held his right hand under the electric light, and a diamond ring flashed upon his little finger. I could have sworn it was not there five minutes before.

The tradesman had a disappointed face, but for a moment it brightened as he expatiated on the value of that ring and on the price his people had accepted for it. I was invited to guess the figure, but I shook a discreet head. I have seldom been more taciturn in my life.

"Forty-five pounds," cried the jeweller; "and it would be cheap at fifty guineas."

"That's right," assented Raffles. "That'd be dead cheap, I allow. But then, my boy, you gotten ready cash, and don't you forget it."

I do not dwell upon my own mystification in all this. I merely pause to state that I

was keenly enjoying that very element. Nothing could have been more typical of Raffles and the past. It was only my own attitude that was changed.

It appeared that the mythical lady, my sister, had just become engaged to Raffles, who seemed all anxiety to pin her down with gifts of price. I could not quite gather whose gift to whom was the diamond ring; but it had evidently been paid for; and I voyaged to the moon, wondering when and how. I was recalled to this planet by a deluge of gems from the jeweller's bag. They lay alight in their cases like the electric lamps above. We all three put our heads together over them, myself without the slightest clue as to what was coming, but not unprepared for violent crime. One does not do eighteen months for nothing.

"Right away," Raffles was saying. "We'll choose for her, and you'll change anything she don't like. Is that the idea?"

"That was my suggestion, sir."

"Then come on, Ezra. I guess you know Sadie's taste. You help me choose."

And we chose—lord! What did we not

choose? There was her ring, a diamond half-hoop. It cost £95, and there was no attempt to get it for £90. Then there was a diamond necklet—two hundred guineas but pounds accepted. That was to be the gift of the bridegroom. The wedding was evidently imminent. It behoved me to play a brotherly part. I therefore rose to the occasion; calculated she would like a diamond star (£116), but reckoned it was more than I could afford; and sustained a vicious kick under the table for either verb. I was afraid to open my mouth on finally obtaining the star for the round hundred. And then the fat fell in the fire; for pay we could not; though a remittance (said Raffles) was "overdo from Noo York."

"But I don't know you, gentlemen," the jeweller exclaimed. "I haven't even the name of your hotel!"

"I told you we was stoppin' with friends," said Raffles, who was not angry, though thwarted and crushed. "But that's right, sir! Oh, that's dead right, and I'm the last man to ask you to take Quixotic

risks. I'm tryin' to figure a way out. Yes, *sir*, that's what I'm tryin' to do."

"I wish you could, sir," the jeweller said, with feeling. "It isn't as if we hadn't seen the colour of your money. But certain rules I am sworn to observe; it isn't as if I was in business for myself; and—you say you start for Paris in the morning!"

"On the 9 A.M. train," mused Raffles; "and I've heard no-end yarns about the joolers' stores in Parrus. But that ain't fair; don't you take no notice o' that. I'm tryin' to figure a way out. Yes, *sir!*"

He was smoking cigarettes out of a twenty-five box; the tradesman and I had cigars. Raffles sat frowning with a pregnant eye, and it was only too clear to me that his plans had miscarried. I could not help thinking, however, that they deserved to do so, if he had counted upon buying credit for all but £400 by a single payment of some ten per cent. That again seemed unworthy of Raffles, and I, for my part, still sat prepared to spring any moment at our visitor's throat.

"We could mail you the money from

Parrus," drawled Raffles at length. "But how should we know you'd hold up your end of the string, and mail us the same articles we've selected to-night?"

The visitor stiffened in his chair. The name of his firm should be sufficient guarantee for that.

"I guess I'm no better acquainted with their name than they are with mine," remarked Raffles, laughing. "See here, though! I got a scheme. You pack 'em in this!"

He turned the cigarettes out of the tin box, while the jeweller and I joined wondering eyes.

"Pack 'em in this," repeated Raffles, "the three things we want, and never mind the boxes; you can pack 'em in cotton-wool. Then we'll ring for string and sealing wax, seal up the lot right here, and you can take 'em away in your grip. Within three days we'll have our remittance, and mail you the money, and you'll mail us this darned box with my seal unbroken! It's no use you lookin' so sick, Mr. Jooler; you won't trust us any, and yet we're goin' to trust you

some. Ring the bell, Ezra, and we'll see if they've gotten any sealing-wax and string."

They had; and the thing was done. The tradesman did not like it; the precaution was absolutely unnecessary; but since he was taking all his goods away with him, the sold with the unsold, his sentimental objections soon fell to the ground. He packed necklet, ring, and star, with his own hands, in cotton-wool; and the cigarette-box held them so easily that at the last moment, when the box was closed, and the string ready, Raffles very nearly added a diamond bee-brooch at £51 10s. This temptation, however, he ultimately overcame, to the other's chagrin. The cigarette-box was tied up, and the string sealed, oddly enough, with the diamond of the ring that had been bought and paid for.

"I'll chance you having another ring in the store the dead spit of mine," laughed Raffles, as he relinquished the box, and it disappeared into the tradesman's bag. "And now, Mr. Robinson, I hope you'll appreciate my true hospitality in not offering you any-

thing to drink while business was in progress. That's Château Margaux, sir, and I should judge it's what you'd call an eighteen-carat article."

In the cab which we took to the vicinity of the flat, I was instantly snubbed for asking questions which the driver might easily overhear, and I took the repulse just a little to heart. I could make neither head nor tail of Raffles's dealings with the man from Regent Street, and was naturally inquisitive as to the meaning of it all. But I held my tongue until we had regained the flat in the cautious manner of our exit, and even there until Raffles rallied me with a hand on either shoulder and an old smile upon his face.

"You rabbit!" said he. "Why couldn't you wait till we got home?"

"Why couldn't you tell me what you were going to do?" I retorted as of yore.

"Because your dear old phiz is still worth its weight in innocence, and because you never could act for nuts! You looked as puzzled as the other poor devil; but you wouldn't if you had known what my game really was."

"And pray what was it?"

"That," said Raffles, and he smacked the cigarette-box down upon the mantelpiece. It was not tied. It was not sealed. It flew open from the force of the impact. And the diamond ring that cost £95, the necklet for £200, and my flaming star at another £100, all three lay safe and snug in the jeweller's own cotton-wool!

"Duplicate boxes!" I cried.

"Duplicate boxes, my brainy Bunny. One was already packed, and weighted, and in my pocket. I don't know whether you noticed me weighing the three things together in my hand? I know that neither of you saw me change the boxes, for I did it when I was nearest buying the bee-brooch at the end, and you were too puzzled, and the other Johnny too keen. It was the cheapest shot in the game; the dear ones were sending old Theobald to Southampton on a fool's errand yesterday afternoon, and showing one's own nose down Regent Street in broad daylight while he was gone; but some things are worth paying for, and certain risks one must always

take. Nice boxes, aren't they? I only wished they contained a better cigarette; but a notorious brand was essential; a box of Sullivans would have brought me to life to-morrow."

"But they oughtn't to open it to-morrow."

"Nor will they, as a matter of fact. Meanwhile, Bunny, I may call upon you to dispose of the boodle."

"I'm on for any mortal thing!"

My voice rang true, I swear, but it was the way of Raffles to take the evidence of as many senses as possible. I felt the cold steel of his eye through mine and through my brain. But what he saw seemed to satisfy him no less than what he heard, for his hand found my hand, and pressed it with a fervour foreign to the man.

"I know you are, and I knew you would be. Only remember, Bunny, it's my turn next to pay the shot!"

You shall hear how he paid it when the time came.

A JUBILEE PRESENT

THE Room of Gold, in the British Museum, is probably well enough known to the inquiring alien and the travelled American. A true Londoner, however, I myself had never heard of it until Raffles casually proposed a raid.

"The older I grow, Bunny, the less I think of your so-called precious stones. When did they ever bring in half their market value in £. s. d.? There was the first little crib we ever cracked together —you with your innocent eyes shut. A thousand pounds that stuff was worth; but how many hundreds did it actually fetch? The Ardagh emeralds weren't much better; old Lady Melrose's necklace was far worse; but that little lot the other night has about finished me. A cool hundred for goods priced well over four; and £35 to come off for bait, since we only got a tenner for the

ring I bought and paid for like an ass. I'll be shot if I ever touch a diamond again! Not if it was the Koh-i-noor; those few whacking stones are too well known, and to cut them up is to decrease their value by arithmetical retrogression. Besides, that brings you up against the Fence once more, and I'm done with the beggars for good and all. You talk about your editors and publishers, you literary swine. Barabbas was neither a robber nor a publisher, but a six-barred, barbed, wired, spike-topped Fence. What we really want is an Incorporated Society of Thieves, with some public-spirited old forger to run it for us on business lines."

Raffles uttered these blasphemies under his breath, not, I am afraid, out of any respect for my one redeeming profession, but because we were taking a midnight airing on the roof, after a whole day of June in the little flat below. The stars shone overhead, the lights of London underneath, and between the lips of Raffles a cigarette of the old and only brand. I had sent in secret for a box of the best; the boon had

arrived that night; and the foregoing speech was the first result. I could afford to ignore the insolent asides, however, where the apparent contention was so manifestly unsound.

"And how are you going to get rid of your gold?" said I, pertinently.

"Nothing easier, my dear rabbit."

"Is your Room of Gold a roomful of sovereigns?"

Raffles laughed softly at my scorn.

"No, Bunny, it's principally in the shape of archaic ornaments, whose value, I admit, is largely extrinsic. But gold is gold, from Phœnicia to Klondike, and if we cleared the room we should eventually do very well."

"How?"

"I should melt it down into a nugget, and bring it home from the U.S.A. to-morrow."

"And then?"

"Make them pay up in hard cash across the counter of the Bank of England. And you *can* make them."

That I knew, and so said nothing for a

time, remaining a hostile though a silent critic, while we paced the cool black leads with our bare feet, softly as cats.

"And how do you propose to get enough away," at length I asked, "to make it worth while?"

"Ah, there you have it," said Raffles. "I only propose to reconnoitre the ground, to see what we can see. We might find some hiding-place for a night; that, I am afraid, would be our only chance."

"Have you ever been there before?"

"Not since they got the one good, portable piece which I believe that they exhibit now. It's a long time since I read of it—I can't remember where—but I know they have got a gold cup of sorts worth several thousands. A number of the immorally rich clubbed together and presented it to the nation; and two of the richly immoral intend to snaffle it for themselves. At any rate we might go and have a look at it, Bunny, don't you think?"

Think! I seized his arm.

"When? When? When?" I asked, like a quick-firing gun.

"The sooner the better, while old Theobald's away on his honeymoon."

Our medico had married the week before, nor was any fellow-practitioner taking his work—at least not that considerable branch of it which consisted of Raffles—during his brief absence from town. There were reasons, delightfully obvious to us, why such a plan would have been highly unwise in Dr. Theobald. I, however, was sending him daily screeds, and both matutinal and nocturnal telegrams, the composition of which afforded Raffles not a little enjoyment.

"Well, then, when—when?" I began to repeat.

"To-morrow, if you like."

"Only to look?"

The limitation was my one regret.

"We must do so, Bunny, before we leap."

"Very well," I sighed. "But to-morrow it is!"

And the morrow it really was.

I saw the porter that night, and, I still think, bought his absolute allegiance for the second coin of the realm. My story, how-

ever, invented by Raffles, was sufficiently specious in itself. That sick gentleman, Mr. Maturin (as I had to remember to call him), was really, or apparently, sickening for fresh air. Dr. Theobald would allow him none; he was pestering me for just one day in the country while the glorious weather lasted. I was myself convinced that no possible harm could come of the experiment. Would the porter help me in so innocent and meritorious an intrigue? The man hesitated. I produced my half-sovereign. The man was lost. And at half-past eight next morning—before the heat of the day—Raffles and I drove to Kew Gardens in a hired landau which was to call for us at mid-day and wait until we came. The porter had assisted me to carry my invalid downstairs, in a carrying-chair hired (like the landau) from Harrod's Stores for the occasion.

It was little after nine when we crawled together into the gardens; by half-past my invalid had had enough, and out he tottered on my arm; a cab, a message to our coachman, a timely train to Baker Street, another

cab, and we were at the British Museum—brisk pedestrians now—not very many minutes after the opening hour of 10 A.M.

It was one of those glowing days which will not be forgotten by many who were in town at the time. The Diamond Jubilee was upon us, and Queen's weather had already set in. Raffles, indeed, declared it was as hot as Italy and Australia put together; and certainly the short summer nights gave the channels of wood and asphalt and the continents of brick and mortar but little time to cool. At the British Museum the pigeons were crooning among the shadows of the grimy colonnade, and the stalwart janitors looked less stalwart than usual, as though their medals were too heavy for them. I recognised some habitual Readers going to their labour underneath the dome; of mere visitors we seemed among the first.

"That's the room," said Raffles, who had bought the two-penny guide, as we studied it openly on the nearest bench; "number 43, upstairs and sharp round to the right. Come on, Bunny!"

And he led the way in silence, but with a long methodical stride which I could not understand until we came to the corridor leading to the Room of Gold, when he turned to me for a moment.

"A hundred and thirty-nine yards from this to the open street," said Raffles, "not counting the stairs. I suppose we *could* do it in twenty seconds, but if we did we should have to jump the gates. No, you must remember to loaf out at slow march, Bunny, whether you like it or not."

"But you talked about a hiding-place for a night?"

"Quite so—for all night. We should have to get back, go on lying low, and saunter out with the crowd next day—after doing the whole show thoroughly."

"What! With gold in our pockets——"

"And gold in our boots, and gold up the sleeves and legs of our suits! You leave that to me, Bunny, and wait till you've tried two pairs of trousers sewn together at the foot! This is only a preliminary reconnoitre. And here we are."

It is none of my business to describe the

so-called Room of Gold, with which I, for one, was not a little disappointed. The glass cases, which both fill and line it, may contain unique examples of the goldsmith's art in times and places of which one heard quite enough in the course of one's classical education; but, from a professional point of view, I would as lief have the ransacking of a single window in the West End as the pick of all those spoils of Etruria and of ancient Greece. The gold may not be so soft as it appears, but it certainly looks as though you could bite off the business ends of the spoons, and stop your own teeth in doing so. Nor should I care to be seen wearing one of the rings; but the greatest fraud of all (from the aforesaid standpoint) is assuredly that very cup of which Raffles had spoken. Moreover, he felt this himself.

"Why, it's as thin as paper," said he, "and enamelled like a middle-aged lady of quality! But, by Jove, it's one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life, Bunny. I should like to have it for its own sake, by all my gods!"

The thing had a little square case of plate-glass all to itself at one end of the room. It may have been the thing of beauty that Raffles affected to consider it, but I for my part was in no mood to look at it in that light. Underneath were the names of the plutocrats who had subscribed for this national gewgaw, and I fell to wondering where their £8,000 came in, while Raffles devoured his two-penny guide-book as greedily as a school-girl with a zeal for culture.

"Those are scenes from the martyrdom of St. Agnes," said he . . . "'translucent on relief . . . one of the finest specimens of its kind.' I should think it was! Bunny, you Philistine, why can't you admire the thing for its own sake? It would be worth having only to live up to! There never was such rich enamelling on such thin gold; and what a good scheme to hang the lid up over it, so that you can see how thin it is. I wonder if we could lift it, Bunny, by hook or crook?"

"You'd better try, sir," said a dry voice at his elbow.

The madman seemed to think we had the room to ourselves. I knew better, but, like another madman, had let him ramble on unchecked. And here was a stolid constable confronting us, in the short tunic that they wear in summer, his whistle on its chain, but no truncheon at his side. Heavens! how I see him now: a man of medium size, with a broad, good-humoured, perspiring face, and a limp moustache. He looked sternly at Raffles, and Raffles looked merrily at him.

"Going to run me in, officer?" said he. "That *would* be a joke—my hat!"

"I didn't say as I was, sir," replied the policeman. "But that's queer talk for a gentleman like you, sir, in the British Museum!" And he wagged his helmet at my invalid, who had taken his airing in frock-coat and top-hat, the more readily to assume his present part.

"What!" cried Raffles, "simply saying to my friend that I'd like to lift the gold cup? Why, so I should, officer, so I should! I don't mind who hears me say so. It's one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in all my life."

The constable's face had already relaxed, and now a grin peeped under the limp moustache. "I daresay there's many as feels like that, sir," said he.

"Exactly; and I say what I feel, that's all," said Raffles airily. "But seriously, officer, is a valuable thing like this quite safe in a case like that?"

"Safe enough as long as I'm here," replied the other, between grim jest and stout earnest. Raffles studied his face; he was still watching Raffles; and I kept an eye on them both without putting in my word.

"You appear to be single-handed," observed Raffles. "Is that wise?"

The note of anxiety was capitally caught; it was at once personal and public-spirited, that of the enthusiastic savant, afraid for a national treasure which few appreciated as he did himself. And, to be sure, the three of us now had this treasury to ourselves; one or two others had been there when we entered; but now they were gone.

"I'm not single-handed," said the officer, comfortably. "See that seat by the door? One of the attendants sits there all day long."

"Then where is he now?"

"Talking to another attendant just outside. If you listen you'll hear them for yourself."

We listened, and we did hear them, but not just outside. In my own mind I even questioned whether they were in the corridor through which we had come; to me it sounded as though they were just outside the corridor.

"You mean the fellow with the billiard-cue who was here when we came in?" pursued Raffles.

"That wasn't a billiard-cue! It was a pointer," the intelligent officer explained.

"It ought to be a javelin," said Raffles, nervously. "It ought to be a poleaxe! The public treasure ought to be better guarded than this. I shall write to the *Times* about it—you see if I don't!"

All at once, yet somehow not so suddenly as to excite suspicion, Raffles had become the elderly busybody with nerves; why, I could not for the life of me imagine; and the policeman seemed equally at sea.

"Lor' bless you, sir," said he, "I'm all

right; don't you bother your head about *me.*"

"But you haven't even got a truncheon!"

"Not likely to want one either. You see, sir, it's early as yet; in a few minutes these here rooms will fill up; and there's safety in numbers, as they say."

"Oh, it will fill up soon, will it?"

"Any minute now, sir."

"Ah!"

"It isn't often empty as long as this, sir. It's the Jubilee, I suppose."

"Meanwhile, what if my friend and I had been professional thieves? Why, we could have overpowered you in an instant, my good fellow!"

"That you couldn't; leastways, not without bringing the whole place about your ears."

"Well, I shall write to the *Times* all the same. I'm a connoisseur in all this sort of thing, and I won't have unnecessary risks run with the nation's property. You said there was an attendant just outside, but he sounds to me as though he were at the other end of the corridor. I shall write to-day!"

For an instant we all three listened; and Raffles was right. Then I saw two things in one glance. Raffles had stepped a few inches backward, and stood poised upon the ball of each foot, his arms half raised, a light in his eyes. And another kind of light was breaking over the crass features of our friend the constable.

"Then shall I tell you what *I'll* do?" he cried, with a sudden clutch at the whistle-chain on his chest. The whistle flew out, but it never reached his lips. There were a couple of sharp smacks, like double barrels discharged all but simultaneously, and the man reeled against me so that I could not help catching him as he fell.

"Well done, Bunny! I've knocked him out—I've knocked him out! Run you to the door and see if the attendants have heard anything, and take them on if they have."

Mechanically I did as I was told. There was no time for thought, still less for remonstrance or reproach, though my surprise must have been even more complete than that of the constable before Raffles knocked

the sense out of him. Even in my utter bewilderment, however, the instinctive caution of the real criminal did not desert me. I ran to the door, but I sauntered through it, to plant myself before a Pompeiian fresco in the corridor; and there were the two attendants still gossiping outside the further door; nor did they hear the dull crash which I heard even as I watched them out of the corner of each eye.

It was hot weather, as I have said, but the perspiration on my body seemed already to have turned into a skin of ice. Then I caught the faint reflection of my own face in the casing of the fresco, and it frightened me into some semblance of myself as Raffles joined me with his hands in his pockets. But my fear and indignation were redoubled at the sight of him, when a single glance convinced me that his pockets were as empty as his hands, and his mad outrage the most wanton and reckless of his whole career.

"Ah, very interesting, very interesting, but nothing to what they have in the museum at Naples or in Pompeii itself. You