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\*\*\* START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN \*\*\*

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THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN

BY

E. W. HORNUNG

TO

A. C. D.

THIS FORM OF FLATTERY

THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN

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THE IDES OF MARCH

I

It was half-past twelve when I returned to the Albany as a last

desperate resort. The scene of my disaster was much as I had left it.

The baccarat-counters still strewed the table, with the empty glasses

and the loaded ash-trays. A window had been opened to let the smoke

out, and was letting in the fog instead. Raffles himself had merely

discarded his dining jacket for one of his innumerable blazers. Yet he

arched his eyebrows as though I had dragged him from his bed.

"Forgotten something?" said he, when he saw me on his mat.

"No," said I, pushing past him without ceremony. And I led the way

into his room with an impudence amazing to myself.

"Not come back for your revenge, have you? Because I'm afraid I can't

give it to you single-handed. I was sorry myself that the others--"

We were face to face by his fireside, and I cut him short.

"Raffles," said I, "you may well be surprised at my coming back in this

way and at this hour. I hardly know you. I was never in your rooms

before to-night. But I fagged for you at school, and you said you

remembered me. Of course that's no excuse; but will you listen to

me--for two minutes?"

In my emotion I had at first to struggle for every word; but his face

reassured me as I went on, and I was not mistaken in its expression.

"Certainly, my dear man," said he; "as many minutes as you like. Have

a Sullivan and sit down." And he handed me his silver cigarette-case.

"No," said I, finding a full voice as I shook my head; "no, I won't

smoke, and I won't sit down, thank you. Nor will you ask me to do

either when you've heard what I have to say."

"Really?" said he, lighting his own cigarette with one clear blue eye

upon me. "How do you know?"

"Because you'll probably show me the door," I cried bitterly; "and you

will be justified in doing it! But it's no use beating about the bush.

You know I dropped over two hundred just now?"

He nodded.

"I hadn't the money in my pocket."

"I remember."

"But I had my check-book, and I wrote each of you a check at that desk."

"Well?"

"Not one of them was worth the paper it was written on, Raffles. I am

overdrawn already at my bank!"

"Surely only for the moment?"

"No. I have spent everything."

"But somebody told me you were so well off. I heard you had come in for

money?"

"So I did. Three years ago. It has been my curse; now it's all

gone--every penny! Yes, I've been a fool; there never was nor will be

such a fool as I've been.... Isn't this enough for you? Why don't you

turn me out?" He was walking up and down with a very long face instead.

"Couldn't your people do anything?" he asked at length.

"Thank God," I cried, "I have no people! I was an only child. I came

in for everything there was. My one comfort is that they're gone, and

will never know."

I cast myself into a chair and hid my face. Raffles continued to pace

the rich carpet that was of a piece with everything else in his rooms.

There was no variation in his soft and even footfalls.

"You used to be a literary little cuss," he said at length; "didn't you

edit the mag. before you left? Anyway I recollect fagging you to do my

verses; and literature of all sorts is the very thing nowadays; any

fool can make a living at it."

I shook my head. "Any fool couldn't write off my debts," said I.

"Then you have a flat somewhere?" he went on.

"Yes, in Mount Street."

"Well, what about the furniture?"

I laughed aloud in my misery. "There's been a bill of sale on every

stick for months!"

And at that Raffles stood still, with raised eyebrows and stern eyes

that I could meet the better now that he knew the worst; then, with a

shrug, he resumed his walk, and for some minutes neither of us spoke.

But in his handsome, unmoved face I read my fate and death-warrant; and

with every breath I cursed my folly and my cowardice in coming to him

at all. Because he had been kind to me at school, when he was captain

of the eleven, and I his fag, I had dared to look for kindness from him

now; because I was ruined, and he rich enough to play cricket all the

summer, and do nothing for the rest of the year, I had fatuously

counted on his mercy, his sympathy, his help! Yes, I had relied on him

in my heart, for all my outward diffidence and humility; and I was

rightly served. There was as little of mercy as of sympathy in that

curling nostril, that rigid jaw, that cold blue eye which never glanced

my way. I caught up my hat. I blundered to my feet. I would have

gone without a word; but Raffles stood between me and the door.

"Where are you going?" said he.

"That's my business," I replied. "I won't trouble YOU any more."

"Then how am I to help you?"

"I didn't ask your help."

"Then why come to me?"

"Why, indeed!" I echoed. "Will you let me pass?"

"Not until you tell me where you are going and what you mean to do."

"Can't you guess?" I cried. And for many seconds we stood staring in

each other's eyes.

"Have you got the pluck?" said he, breaking the spell in a tone so

cynical that it brought my last drop of blood to the boil.

"You shall see," said I, as I stepped back and whipped the pistol from

my overcoat pocket. "Now, will you let me pass or shall I do it here?"

The barrel touched my temple, and my thumb the trigger. Mad with

excitement as I was, ruined, dishonored, and now finally determined to

make an end of my misspent life, my only surprise to this day is that I

did not do so then and there. The despicable satisfaction of involving

another in one's destruction added its miserable appeal to my baser

egoism; and had fear or horror flown to my companion's face, I shudder

to think I might have died diabolically happy with that look for my

last impious consolation. It was the look that came instead which held

my hand. Neither fear nor horror were in it; only wonder, admiration,

and such a measure of pleased expectancy as caused me after all to

pocket my revolver with an oath.

"You devil!" I said. "I believe you wanted me to do it!"

"Not quite," was the reply, made with a little start, and a change of

color that came too late. "To tell you the truth, though, I half

thought you meant it, and I was never more fascinated in my life. I

never dreamt you had such stuff in you, Bunny! No, I'm hanged if I let

you go now. And you'd better not try that game again, for you won't

catch me stand and look on a second time. We must think of some way

out of the mess. I had no idea you were a chap of that sort! There,

let me have the gun."

One of his hands fell kindly on my shoulder, while the other slipped

into my overcoat pocket, and I suffered him to deprive me of my weapon

without a murmur. Nor was this simply because Raffles had the subtle

power of making himself irresistible at will. He was beyond comparison

the most masterful man whom I have ever known; yet my acquiescence was

due to more than the mere subjection of the weaker nature to the

stronger. The forlorn hope which had brought me to the Albany was

turned as by magic into an almost staggering sense of safety. Raffles

would help me after all! A. J. Raffles would be my friend! It was as

though all the world had come round suddenly to my side; so far

therefore from resisting his action, I caught and clasped his hand with

a fervor as uncontrollable as the frenzy which had preceded it.

"God bless you!" I cried. "Forgive me for everything. I will tell you

the truth. I DID think you might help me in my extremity, though I

well knew that I had no claim upon you. Still--for the old school's

sake--the sake of old times--I thought you might give me another

chance. If you wouldn't I meant to blow out my brains--and will still

if you change your mind!"

In truth I feared that it was changing, with his expression, even as I

spoke, and in spite of his kindly tone and kindlier use of my old

school nickname. His next words showed me my mistake.

"What a boy it is for jumping to conclusions! I have my vices, Bunny,

but backing and filling is not one of them. Sit down, my good fellow,

and have a cigarette to soothe your nerves. I insist. Whiskey? The

worst thing for you; here's some coffee that I was brewing when you

came in. Now listen to me. You speak of 'another chance.' What do

you mean? Another chance at baccarat? Not if I know it! You think

the luck must turn; suppose it didn't? We should only have made bad

worse. No, my dear chap, you've plunged enough. Do you put yourself in

my hands or do you not? Very well, then you plunge no more, and I

undertake not to present my check. Unfortunately there are the other

men; and still more unfortunately, Bunny, I'm as hard up at this moment

as you are yourself!"

It was my turn to stare at Raffles. "You?" I vociferated. "You hard

up? How am I to sit here and believe that?"

"Did I refuse to believe it of you?" he returned, smiling. "And, with

your own experience, do you think that because a fellow has rooms in

this place, and belongs to a club or two, and plays a little cricket,

he must necessarily have a balance at the bank? I tell you, my dear

man, that at this moment I'm as hard up as you ever were. I have

nothing but my wits to live on--absolutely nothing else. It was as

necessary for me to win some money this evening as it was for you.

We're in the same boat, Bunny; we'd better pull together."

"Together!" I jumped at it. "I'll do anything in this world for you,

Raffles," I said, "if you really mean that you won't give me away.

Think of anything you like, and I'll do it! I was a desperate man when

I came here, and I'm just as desperate now. I don't mind what I do if

only I can get out of this without a scandal."

Again I see him, leaning back in one of the luxurious chairs with which

his room was furnished. I see his indolent, athletic figure; his pale,

sharp, clean-shaven features; his curly black hair; his strong,

unscrupulous mouth. And again I feel the clear beam of his wonderful

eye, cold and luminous as a star, shining into my brain--sifting the

very secrets of my heart.

"I wonder if you mean all that!" he said at length. "You do in your

present mood; but who can back his mood to last? Still, there's hope

when a chap takes that tone. Now I think of it, too, you were a plucky

little devil at school; you once did me rather a good turn, I

recollect. Remember it, Bunny? Well, wait a bit, and perhaps I'll be

able to do you a better one. Give me time to think."

He got up, lit a fresh cigarette, and fell to pacing the room once

more, but with a slower and more thoughtful step, and for a much longer

period than before. Twice he stopped at my chair as though on the

point of speaking, but each time he checked himself and resumed his

stride in silence. Once he threw up the window, which he had shut some

time since, and stood for some moments leaning out into the fog which

filled the Albany courtyard. Meanwhile a clock on the chimney-piece

struck one, and one again for the half-hour, without a word between us.

Yet I not only kept my chair with patience, but I acquired an

incongruous equanimity in that half-hour. Insensibly I had shifted my

burden to the broad shoulders of this splendid friend, and my thoughts

wandered with my eyes as the minutes passed. The room was the

good-sized, square one, with the folding doors, the marble

mantel-piece, and the gloomy, old-fashioned distinction peculiar to the

Albany. It was charmingly furnished and arranged, with the right

amount of negligence and the right amount of taste. What struck me

most, however, was the absence of the usual insignia of a cricketer's

den. Instead of the conventional rack of war-worn bats, a carved oak

bookcase, with every shelf in a litter, filled the better part of one

wall; and where I looked for cricketing groups, I found reproductions

of such works as "Love and Death" and "The Blessed Damozel," in dusty

frames and different parallels. The man might have been a minor poet

instead of an athlete of the first water. But there had always been a

fine streak of aestheticism in his complex composition; some of these

very pictures I had myself dusted in his study at school; and they set

me thinking of yet another of his many sides--and of the little

incident to which he had just referred.

Everybody knows how largely the tone of a public school depends on that

of the eleven, and on the character of the captain of cricket in

particular; and I have never heard it denied that in A. J. Raffles's

time our tone was good, or that such influence as he troubled to exert

was on the side of the angels. Yet it was whispered in the school that

he was in the habit of parading the town at night in loud checks and a

false beard. It was whispered, and disbelieved. I alone knew it for a

fact; for night after night had I pulled the rope up after him when the

rest of the dormitory were asleep, and kept awake by the hour to let it

down again on a given signal. Well, one night he was over-bold, and

within an ace of ignominious expulsion in the hey-day of his fame.

Consummate daring and extraordinary nerve on his part, aided,

doubtless, by some little presence of mind on mine, averted the

untoward result; and no more need be said of a discreditable incident.

But I cannot pretend to have forgotten it in throwing myself on this

man's mercy in my desperation. And I was wondering how much of his

leniency was owing to the fact that Raffles had not forgotten it

either, when he stopped and stood over my chair once more.

"I've been thinking of that night we had the narrow squeak," he began.

"Why do you start?"

"I was thinking of it too."

He smiled, as though he had read my thoughts.

"Well, you were the right sort of little beggar then, Bunny; you didn't

talk and you didn't flinch. You asked no questions and you told no

tales. I wonder if you're like that now?"

"I don't know," said I, slightly puzzled by his tone. "I've made such

a mess of my own affairs that I trust myself about as little as I'm

likely to be trusted by anybody else. Yet I never in my life went back

on a friend. I will say that, otherwise perhaps I mightn't be in such

a hole to-night."

"Exactly," said Raffles, nodding to himself, as though in assent to

some hidden train of thought; "exactly what I remember of you, and I'll

bet it's as true now as it was ten years ago. We don't alter, Bunny.

We only develop. I suppose neither you nor I are really altered since

you used to let down that rope and I used to come up it hand over hand.

You would stick at nothing for a pal--what?"

"At nothing in this world," I was pleased to cry.

"Not even at a crime?" said Raffles, smiling.

I stopped to think, for his tone had changed, and I felt sure he was

chaffing me. Yet his eye seemed as much in earnest as ever, and for my

part I was in no mood for reservations.

"No, not even at that," I declared; "name your crime, and I'm your man."

He looked at me one moment in wonder, and another moment in doubt; then

turned the matter off with a shake of his head, and the little cynical

laugh that was all his own.

"You're a nice chap, Bunny! A real desperate character--what? Suicide

one moment, and any crime I like the next! What you want is a drag, my

boy, and you did well to come to a decent law-abiding citizen with a

reputation to lose. None the less we must have that money to-night--by

hook or crook."

"To-night, Raffles?"

"The sooner the better. Every hour after ten o'clock to-morrow morning

is an hour of risk. Let one of those checks get round to your own

bank, and you and it are dishonored together. No, we must raise the

wind to-night and re-open your account first thing to-morrow. And I

rather think I know where the wind can be raised."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes."

"But how--but where--at such an hour?"

"From a friend of mine here in Bond Street."

"He must be a very intimate friend!"

"Intimate's not the word. I have the run of his place and a latch-key

all to myself."

"You would knock him up at this hour of the night?"

"If he's in bed."

"And it's essential that I should go in with you?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I must; but I'm bound to say I don't like the idea, Raffles."

"Do you prefer the alternative?" asked my companion, with a sneer.

"No, hang it, that's unfair!" he cried apologetically in the same

breath. "I quite understand. It's a beastly ordeal. But it would

never do for you to stay outside. I tell you what, you shall have a

peg before we start--just one. There's the whiskey, here's a syphon,

and I'll be putting on an overcoat while you help yourself."

Well, I daresay I did so with some freedom, for this plan of his was

not the less distasteful to me from its apparent inevitability. I must

own, however, that it possessed fewer terrors before my glass was

empty. Meanwhile Raffles rejoined me, with a covert coat over his

blazer, and a soft felt hat set carelessly on the curly head he shook

with a smile as I passed him the decanter.

"When we come back," said he. "Work first, play afterward. Do you see

what day it is?" he added, tearing a leaflet from a Shakespearian

calendar, as I drained my glass. "March 15th. 'The Ides of March, the

Ides of March, remember.' Eh, Bunny, my boy? You won't forget them,

will you?"

And, with a laugh, he threw some coals on the fire before turning down

the gas like a careful householder. So we went out together as the

clock on the chimney-piece was striking two.

II

Piccadilly was a trench of raw white fog, rimmed with blurred

street-lamps, and lined with a thin coating of adhesive mud. We met no

other wayfarers on the deserted flagstones, and were ourselves favored

with a very hard stare from the constable of the beat, who, however,

touched his helmet on recognizing my companion.

"You see, I'm known to the police," laughed Raffles as we passed on.

"Poor devils, they've got to keep their weather eye open on a night

like this! A fog may be a bore to you and me, Bunny, but it's a

perfect godsend to the criminal classes, especially so late in their

season. Here we are, though--and I'm hanged if the beggar isn't in bed

and asleep after all!"

We had turned into Bond Street, and had halted on the curb a few yards

down on the right. Raffles was gazing up at some windows across the

road, windows barely discernible through the mist, and without the

glimmer of a light to throw them out. They were over a jeweller's shop,

as I could see by the peep-hole in the shop door, and the bright light

burning within. But the entire "upper part," with the private

street-door next the shop, was black and blank as the sky itself.

"Better give it up for to-night," I urged. "Surely the morning will be

time enough!"

"Not a bit of it," said Raffles. "I have his key. We'll surprise him.

Come along."

And seizing my right arm, he hurried me across the road, opened the

door with his latch-key, and in another moment had shut it swiftly but

softly behind us. We stood together in the dark. Outside, a measured

step was approaching; we had heard it through the fog as we crossed the

street; now, as it drew nearer, my companion's fingers tightened on my

arm.

"It may be the chap himself," he whispered. "He's the devil of a

night-bird. Not a sound, Bunny! We'll startle the life out of him.

Ah!"

The measured step had passed without a pause. Raffles drew a deep

breath, and his singular grip of me slowly relaxed.

"But still, not a sound," he continued in the same whisper; "we'll take

a rise out of him, wherever he is! Slip off your shoes and follow me."

Well, you may wonder at my doing so; but you can never have met A. J.

Raffles. Half his power lay in a conciliating trick of sinking the

commander in the leader. And it was impossible not to follow one who

led with such a zest. You might question, but you followed first. So

now, when I heard him kick off his own shoes, I did the same, and was

on the stairs at his heels before I realized what an extraordinary way

was this of approaching a stranger for money in the dead of night. But

obviously Raffles and he were on exceptional terms of intimacy, and I

could not but infer that they were in the habit of playing practical

jokes upon each other.

We groped our way so slowly upstairs that I had time to make more than

one note before we reached the top. The stair was uncarpeted. The

spread fingers of my right hand encountered nothing on the damp wall;

those of my left trailed through a dust that could be felt on the

banisters. An eerie sensation had been upon me since we entered the

house. It increased with every step we climbed. What hermit were we

going to startle in his cell?

We came to a landing. The banisters led us to the left, and to the

left again. Four steps more, and we were on another and a longer

landing, and suddenly a match blazed from the black. I never heard it

struck. Its flash was blinding. When my eyes became accustomed to the

light, there was Raffles holding up the match with one hand, and

shading it with the other, between bare boards, stripped walls, and the

open doors of empty rooms.

"Where have you brought me?" I cried. "The house is unoccupied!"

"Hush! Wait!" he whispered, and he led the way into one of the empty

rooms. His match went out as we crossed the threshold, and he struck

another without the slightest noise. Then he stood with his back to

me, fumbling with something that I could not see. But, when he threw

the second match away, there was some other light in its stead, and a

slight smell of oil. I stepped forward to look over his shoulder, but

before I could do so he had turned and flashed a tiny lantern in my

face.

"What's this?" I gasped. "What rotten trick are you going to play?"

"It's played," he answered, with his quiet laugh.

"On me?"

"I am afraid so, Bunny."

"Is there no one in the house, then?"

"No one but ourselves."

"So it was mere chaff about your friend in Bond Street, who could let

us have that money?"

"Not altogether. It's quite true that Danby is a friend of mine."

"Danby?"

"The jeweller underneath."

"What do you mean?" I whispered, trembling like a leaf as his meaning

dawned upon me. "Are we to get the money from the jeweller?"

"Well, not exactly."

"What, then?"

"The equivalent--from his shop."

There was no need for another question. I understood everything but my

own density. He had given me a dozen hints, and I had taken none. And

there I stood staring at him, in that empty room; and there he stood

with his dark lantern, laughing at me.

"A burglar!" I gasped. "You--you!"

"I told you I lived by my wits."

"Why couldn't you tell me what you were going to do? Why couldn't you

trust me? Why must you lie?" I demanded, piqued to the quick for all

my horror.

"I wanted to tell you," said he. "I was on the point of telling you

more than once. You may remember how I sounded you about crime, though

you have probably forgotten what you said yourself. I didn't think you

meant it at the time, but I thought I'd put you to the test. Now I see

you didn't, and I don't blame you. I only am to blame. Get out of it,

my dear boy, as quick as you can; leave it to me. You won't give me

away, whatever else you do!"

Oh, his cleverness! His fiendish cleverness! Had he fallen back on

threats, coercion, sneers, all might have been different even yet. But

he set me free to leave him in the lurch. He would not blame me. He

did not even bind me to secrecy; he trusted me. He knew my weakness

and my strength, and was playing on both with his master's touch.

"Not so fast," said I. "Did I put this into your head, or were you

going to do it in any case?"

"Not in any case," said Raffles. "It's true I've had the key for days,

but when I won to-night I thought of chucking it; for, as a matter of

fact, it's not a one-man job."

"That settles it. I'm your man."

"You mean it?"

"Yes--for to-night."

"Good old Bunny," he murmured, holding the lantern for one moment to my

face; the next he was explaining his plans, and I was nodding, as

though we had been fellow-cracksmen all our days.

"I know the shop," he whispered, "because I've got a few things there.

I know this upper part too; it's been to let for a month, and I got an

order to view, and took a cast of the key before using it. The one

thing I don't know is how to make a connection between the two; at

present there's none. We may make it up here, though I rather fancy the

basement myself. If you wait a minute I'll tell you."

He set his lantern on the floor, crept to a back window, and opened it

with scarcely a sound: only to return, shaking his head, after shutting

the window with the same care.

"That was our one chance," said he; "a back window above a back window;

but it's too dark to see anything, and we daren't show an outside

light. Come down after me to the basement; and remember, though there's

not a soul on the premises, you can't make too little noise.

There--there--listen to that!"

It was the measured tread that we had heard before on the flagstones

outside. Raffles darkened his lantern, and again we stood motionless

till it had passed.

"Either a policeman," he muttered, "or a watchman that all these

jewellers run between them. The watchman's the man for us to watch;

he's simply paid to spot this kind of thing."

We crept very gingerly down the stairs, which creaked a bit in spite of

us, and we picked up our shoes in the passage; then down some narrow

stone steps, at the foot of which Raffles showed his light, and put on

his shoes once more, bidding me do the same in a rather louder tone

than he had permitted himself to employ overhead. We were now

considerably below the level of the street, in a small space with as

many doors as it had sides. Three were ajar, and we saw through them

into empty cellars; but in the fourth a key was turned and a bolt

drawn; and this one presently let us out into the bottom of a deep,

square well of fog. A similar door faced it across this area, and

Raffles had the lantern close against it, and was hiding the light with

his body, when a short and sudden crash made my heart stand still.

Next moment I saw the door wide open, and Raffles standing within and

beckoning me with a jimmy.

"Door number one," he whispered. "Deuce knows how many more there'll

be, but I know of two at least. We won't have to make much noise over

them, either; down here there's less risk."

We were now at the bottom of the exact fellow to the narrow stone stair

which we had just descended: the yard, or well, being the one part

common to both the private and the business premises. But this flight

led to no open passage; instead, a singularly solid mahogany door

confronted us at the top.

"I thought so," muttered Raffles, handing me the lantern, and pocketing

a bunch of skeleton keys, after tampering for a few minutes with the

lock. "It'll be an hour's work to get through that!"

"Can't you pick it?"

"No: I know these locks. It's no use trying. We must cut it out, and

it'll take us an hour."

It took us forty-seven minutes by my watch; or, rather, it took

Raffles; and never in my life have I seen anything more deliberately

done. My part was simply to stand by with the dark lantern in one

hand, and a small bottle of rock-oil in the other.

Raffles had produced a pretty embroidered case, intended obviously for

his razors, but filled instead with the tools of his secret trade,

including the rock-oil. From this case he selected a "bit," capable of

drilling a hole an inch in diameter, and fitted it to a small but very

strong steel "brace." Then he took off his covert-coat and his blazer,

spread them neatly on the top step--knelt on them--turned up his shirt

cuffs--and went to work with brace-and-bit near the key-hole. But

first he oiled the bit to minimize the noise, and this he did

invariably before beginning a fresh hole, and often in the middle of

one. It took thirty-two separate borings to cut around that lock.

I noticed that through the first circular orifice Raffles thrust a

forefinger; then, as the circle became an ever-lengthening oval, he got

his hand through up to the thumb; and I heard him swear softly to

himself.

"I was afraid so!"

"What is it?"

"An iron gate on the other side!"

"How on earth are we to get through that?" I asked in dismay.

"Pick the lock. But there may be two. In that case they'll be top and

bottom, and we shall have two fresh holes to make, as the door opens

inwards. It won't open two inches as it is."

I confess I did not feel sanguine about the lock-picking, seeing that

one lock had baffled us already; and my disappointment and impatience

must have been a revelation to me had I stopped to think. The truth is

that I was entering into our nefarious undertaking with an involuntary

zeal of which I was myself quite unconscious at the time. The romance

and the peril of the whole proceeding held me spellbound and entranced.

My moral sense and my sense of fear were stricken by a common

paralysis. And there I stood, shining my light and holding my phial

with a keener interest than I had ever brought to any honest avocation.

And there knelt A. J. Raffles, with his black hair tumbled, and the

same watchful, quiet, determined half-smile with which I have seen him

send down over after over in a county match!

At last the chain of holes was complete, the lock wrenched out bodily,

and a splendid bare arm plunged up to the shoulder through the

aperture, and through the bars of the iron gate beyond.

"Now," whispered Raffles, "if there's only one lock it'll be in the

middle. Joy! Here it is! Only let me pick it, and we're through at

last."

He withdrew his arm, a skeleton key was selected from the bunch, and

then back went his arm to the shoulder. It was a breathless moment. I

heard the heart throbbing in my body, the very watch ticking in my

pocket, and ever and anon the tinkle-tinkle of the skeleton key.

Then--at last--there came a single unmistakable click. In another

minute the mahogany door and the iron gate yawned behind us; and

Raffles was sitting on an office table, wiping his face, with the

lantern throwing a steady beam by his side.

We were now in a bare and roomy lobby behind the shop, but separated

therefrom by an iron curtain, the very sight of which filled me with

despair. Raffles, however, did not appear in the least depressed, but

hung up his coat and hat on some pegs in the lobby before examining

this curtain with his lantern.

"That's nothing," said he, after a minute's inspection; "we'll be

through that in no time, but there's a door on the other side which may

give us trouble."

"Another door!" I groaned. "And how do you mean to tackle this thing?"

"Prise it up with the jointed jimmy. The weak point of these iron

curtains is the leverage you can get from below. But it makes a noise,

and this is where you're coming in, Bunny; this is where I couldn't do

without you. I must have you overhead to knock through when the

street's clear. I'll come with you and show a light."

Well, you may imagine how little I liked the prospect of this lonely

vigil; and yet there was something very stimulating in the vital

responsibility which it involved. Hitherto I had been a mere

spectator. Now I was to take part in the game. And the fresh

excitement made me more than ever insensible to those considerations of

conscience and of safety which were already as dead nerves in my breast.

So I took my post without a murmur in the front room above the shop.

The fixtures had been left for the refusal of the incoming tenant, and

fortunately for us they included Venetian blinds which were already

down. It was the simplest matter in the world to stand peeping through

the laths into the street, to beat twice with my foot when anybody was

approaching, and once when all was clear again. The noises that even I

could hear below, with the exception of one metallic crash at the

beginning, were indeed incredibly slight; but they ceased altogether at

each double rap from my toe; and a policeman passed quite half a dozen

times beneath my eyes, and the man whom I took to be the jeweller's

watchman oftener still, during the better part of an hour that I spent

at the window. Once, indeed, my heart was in my mouth, but only once.

It was when the watchman stopped and peered through the peep-hole into

the lighted shop. I waited for his whistle--I waited for the gallows

or the gaol! But my signals had been studiously obeyed, and the man

passed on in undisturbed serenity.

In the end I had a signal in my turn, and retraced my steps with

lighted matches, down the broad stairs, down the narrow ones, across

the area, and up into the lobby where Raffles awaited me with an

outstretched hand.

"Well done, my boy!" said he. "You're the same good man in a pinch,

and you shall have your reward. I've got a thousand pounds' worth if

I've got a penn'oth. It's all in my pockets. And here's something

else I found in this locker; very decent port and some cigars, meant

for poor dear Danby's business friends. Take a pull, and you shall

light up presently. I've found a lavatory, too, and we must have a

wash-and-brush-up before we go, for I'm as black as your boot."

The iron curtain was down, but he insisted on raising it until I could

peep through the glass door on the other side and see his handiwork in

the shop beyond. Here two electric lights were left burning all night

long, and in their cold white rays I could at first see nothing amiss.

I looked along an orderly lane, an empty glass counter on my left,

glass cupboards of untouched silver on my right, and facing me the

filmy black eye of the peep-hole that shone like a stage moon on the

street. The counter had not been emptied by Raffles; its contents were

in the Chubb's safe, which he had given up at a glance; nor had he

looked at the silver, except to choose a cigarette case for me. He had

confined himself entirely to the shop window. This was in three

compartments, each secured for the night by removable panels with

separate locks. Raffles had removed them a few hours before their time,

and the electric light shone on a corrugated shutter bare as the ribs

of an empty carcase. Every article of value was gone from the one

place which was invisible from the little window in the door; elsewhere

all was as it had been left overnight. And but for a train of mangled

doors behind the iron curtain, a bottle of wine and a cigar-box with

which liberties had been taken, a rather black towel in the lavatory, a

burnt match here and there, and our finger-marks on the dusty

banisters, not a trace of our visit did we leave.

"Had it in my head for long?" said Raffles, as we strolled through the

streets towards dawn, for all the world as though we were returning

from a dance. "No, Bunny, I never thought of it till I saw that upper

part empty about a month ago, and bought a few things in the shop to

get the lie of the land. That reminds me that I never paid for them;

but, by Jove, I will to-morrow, and if that isn't poetic justice, what

is? One visit showed me the possibilities of the place, but a second

convinced me of its impossibilities without a pal. So I had

practically given up the idea, when you came along on the very night

and in the very plight for it! But here we are at the Albany, and I

hope there's some fire left; for I don't know how you feel, Bunny, but

for my part I'm as cold as Keats's owl."

He could think of Keats on his way from a felony! He could hanker for

his fireside like another! Floodgates were loosed within me, and the

plain English of our adventure rushed over me as cold as ice. Raffles

was a burglar. I had helped him to commit one burglary, therefore I

was a burglar, too. Yet I could stand and warm myself by his fire, and

watch him empty his pockets, as though we had done nothing wonderful or

wicked!

My blood froze. My heart sickened. My brain whirled. How I had liked

this villain! How I had admired him! Now my liking and admiration

must turn to loathing and disgust. I waited for the change. I longed

to feel it in my heart. But--I longed and I waited in vain!

I saw that he was emptying his pockets; the table sparkled with their

hoard. Rings by the dozen, diamonds by the score; bracelets, pendants,

aigrettes, necklaces, pearls, rubies, amethysts, sapphires; and

diamonds always, diamonds in everything, flashing bayonets of light,

dazzling me--blinding me--making me disbelieve because I could no

longer forget. Last of all came no gem, indeed, but my own revolver

from an inner pocket. And that struck a chord. I suppose I said

something--my hand flew out. I can see Raffles now, as he looked at me

once more with a high arch over each clear eye. I can see him pick out

the cartridges with his quiet, cynical smile, before he would give me

my pistol back again.

"You mayn't believe it, Bunny," said he, "but I never carried a loaded

one before. On the whole I think it gives one confidence. Yet it

would be very awkward if anything went wrong; one might use it, and

that's not the game at all, though I have often thought that the

murderer who has just done the trick must have great sensations before

things get too hot for him. Don't look so distressed, my dear chap.

I've never had those sensations, and I don't suppose I ever shall."

"But this much you have done before?" said I hoarsely.

"Before? My dear Bunny, you offend me! Did it look like a first

attempt? Of course I have done it before."

"Often?"

"Well--no! Not often enough to destroy the charm, at all events;

never, as a matter of fact, unless I'm cursedly hard up. Did you hear

about the Thimbleby diamonds? Well, that was the last time--and a poor

lot of paste they were. Then there was the little business of the

Dormer house-boat at Henley last year. That was mine also--such as it

was. I've never brought off a really big coup yet; when I do I shall

chuck it up."

Yes, I remembered both cases very well. To think that he was their

author! It was incredible, outrageous, inconceivable. Then my eyes

would fall upon the table, twinkling and glittering in a hundred

places, and incredulity was at an end.

"How came you to begin?" I asked, as curiosity overcame mere wonder,

and a fascination for his career gradually wove itself into my

fascination for the man.

"Ah! that's a long story," said Raffles. "It was in the Colonies, when

I was out there playing cricket. It's too long a story to tell you

now, but I was in much the same fix that you were in to-night, and it

was my only way out. I never meant it for anything more; but I'd

tasted blood, and it was all over with me. Why should I work when I

could steal? Why settle down to some humdrum uncongenial billet, when

excitement, romance, danger and a decent living were all going begging

together? Of course it's very wrong, but we can't all be moralists,

and the distribution of wealth is very wrong to begin with. Besides,

you're not at it all the time. I'm sick of quoting Gilbert's lines to

myself, but they're profoundly true. I only wonder if you'll like the

life as much as I do!"

"Like it?" I cried out. "Not I! It's no life for me. Once is enough!"

"You wouldn't give me a hand another time?"

"Don't ask me, Raffles. Don't ask me, for God's sake!"

"Yet you said you would do anything for me! You asked me to name my

crime! But I knew at the time you didn't mean it; you didn't go back

on me to-night, and that ought to satisfy me, goodness knows! I

suppose I'm ungrateful, and unreasonable, and all that. I ought to let

it end at this. But you're the very man for me, Bunny, the--very--man!

Just think how we got through to-night. Not a scratch--not a hitch!

There's nothing very terrible in it, you see; there never would be,

while we worked together."

He was standing in front of me with a hand on either shoulder; he was

smiling as he knew so well how to smile. I turned on my heel, planted

my elbows on the chimney-piece, and my burning head between my hands.

Next instant a still heartier hand had fallen on my back.

"All right, my boy! You are quite right and I'm worse than wrong.

I'll never ask it again. Go, if you want to, and come again about

mid-day for the cash. There was no bargain; but, of course, I'll get

you out of your scrape--especially after the way you've stood by me

to-night."

I was round again with my blood on fire.

"I'll do it again," I said, through my teeth.

He shook his head. "Not you," he said, smiling quite good-humoredly on

my insane enthusiasm.

"I will," I cried with an oath. "I'll lend you a hand as often as you

like! What does it matter now? I've been in it once. I'll be in it

again. I've gone to the devil anyhow. I can't go back, and wouldn't

if I could. Nothing matters another rap! When you want me, I'm your

man!"

And that is how Raffles and I joined felonious forces on the Ides of

March.

A COSTUME PIECE

London was just then talking of one whose name is already a name and

nothing more. Reuben Rosenthall had made his millions on the diamond

fields of South Africa, and had come home to enjoy them according to

his lights; how he went to work will scarcely be forgotten by any

reader of the halfpenny evening papers, which revelled in endless

anecdotes of his original indigence and present prodigality, varied

with interesting particulars of the extraordinary establishment which

the millionaire set up in St. John's Wood. Here he kept a retinue of

Kaffirs, who were literally his slaves; and hence he would sally, with

enormous diamonds in his shirt and on his finger, in the convoy of a

prize-fighter of heinous repute, who was not, however, by any means the

worst element in the Rosenthall melange. So said common gossip; but

the fact was sufficiently established by the interference of the police

on at least one occasion, followed by certain magisterial proceedings

which were reported with justifiable gusto and huge headlines in the

newspapers aforesaid.

And this was all one knew of Reuben Rosenthall up to the time when the

Old Bohemian Club, having fallen on evil days, found it worth its while

to organize a great dinner in honor of so wealthy an exponent of the

club's principles. I was not at the banquet myself, but a member took

Raffles, who told me all about it that very night.

"Most extraordinary show I ever went to in my life," said he. "As for

the man himself--well, I was prepared for something grotesque, but the

fellow fairly took my breath away. To begin with, he's the most

astounding brute to look at, well over six feet, with a chest like a

barrel, and a great hook-nose, and the reddest hair and whiskers you

ever saw. Drank like a fire-engine, but only got drunk enough to make

us a speech that I wouldn't have missed for ten pounds. I'm only sorry

you weren't there, too, Bunny, old chap."

I began to be sorry myself, for Raffles was anything but an excitable

person, and never had I seen him so excited before. Had he been

following Rosenthall's example? His coming to my rooms at midnight,

merely to tell me about his dinner, was in itself enough to excuse a

suspicion which was certainly at variance with my knowledge of A. J.

Raffles.

"What did he say?" I inquired mechanically, divining some subtler

explanation of this visit, and wondering what on earth it could be.

"Say?" cried Raffles. "What did he not say! He boasted of his rise,

he bragged of his riches, and he blackguarded society for taking him up

for his money and dropping him out of sheer pique and jealousy because

he had so much. He mentioned names, too, with the most charming

freedom, and swore he was as good a man as the Old Country had to

show--PACE the Old Bohemians. To prove it he pointed to a great diamond

in the middle of his shirt-front with a little finger loaded with

another just like it: which of our bloated princes could show a pair

like that? As a matter of fact, they seemed quite wonderful stones,

with a curious purple gleam to them that must mean a pot of money. But

old Rosenthall swore he wouldn't take fifty thousand pounds for the

two, and wanted to know where the other man was who went about with

twenty-five thousand in his shirt-front and another twenty-five on his

little finger. He didn't exist. If he did, he wouldn't have the pluck

to wear them. But he had--he'd tell us why. And before you could say

Jack Robinson he had whipped out a whacking great revolver!"

"Not at the table?"

"At the table! In the middle of his speech! But it was nothing to

what he wanted to do. He actually wanted us to let him write his name

in bullets on the opposite wall, to show us why he wasn't afraid to go

about in all his diamonds! That brute Purvis, the prize-fighter, who

is his paid bully, had to bully his master before he could be persuaded

out of it. There was quite a panic for the moment; one fellow was

saying his prayers under the table, and the waiters bolted to a man."

"What a grotesque scene!"

"Grotesque enough, but I rather wish they had let him go the whole hog

and blaze away. He was as keen as knives to show us how he could take

care of his purple diamonds; and, do you know, Bunny, \_I\_ was as keen

as knives to see."

And Raffles leaned towards me with a sly, slow smile that made the

hidden meaning of his visit only too plain to me at last.

"So you think of having a try for his diamonds yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is horribly obvious, I admit. But--yes, I have set my heart upon

them! To be quite frank, I have had them on my conscience for some

time; one couldn't hear so much of the man, and his prize-fighter, and

his diamonds, without feeling it a kind of duty to have a go for them;

but when it comes to brandishing a revolver and practically challenging

the world, the thing becomes inevitable. It is simply thrust upon one.

I was fated to hear that challenge, Bunny, and I, for one, must take it

up. I was only sorry I couldn't get on my hind legs and say so then

and there."

"Well," I said, "I don't see the necessity as things are with us; but,

of course, I'm your man."

My tone may have been half-hearted. I did my best to make it

otherwise. But it was barely a month since our Bond Street exploit,

and we certainly could have afforded to behave ourselves for some time

to come. We had been getting along so nicely: by his advice I had

scribbled a thing or two; inspired by Raffles, I had even done an

article on our own jewel robbery; and for the moment I was quite

satisfied with this sort of adventure. I thought we ought to know when

we were well off, and could see no point in our running fresh risks

before we were obliged. On the other hand, I was anxious not to show

the least disposition to break the pledge that I had given a month ago.

But it was not on my manifest disinclination that Raffles fastened.

"Necessity, my dear Bunny? Does the writer only write when the wolf is

at the door? Does the painter paint for bread alone? Must you and I

be DRIVEN to crime like Tom of Bow and Dick of Whitechapel? You pain

me, my dear chap; you needn't laugh, because you do. Art for art's

sake is a vile catchword, but I confess it appeals to me. In this case

my motives are absolutely pure, for I doubt if we shall ever be able to

dispose of such peculiar stones. But if I don't have a try for

them--after to-night--I shall never be able to hold up my head again."

His eye twinkled, but it glittered, too.

"We shall have our work cut out," was all I said.

"And do you suppose I should be keen on it if we hadn't?" cried

Raffles. "My dear fellow, I would rob St. Paul's Cathedral if I could,

but I could no more scoop a till when the shopwalker wasn't looking

than I could bag the apples out of an old woman's basket. Even that

little business last month was a sordid affair, but it was necessary,

and I think its strategy redeemed it to some extent. Now there's some

credit, and more sport, in going where they boast they're on their

guard against you. The Bank of England, for example, is the ideal

crib; but that would need half a dozen of us with years to give to the

job; and meanwhile Reuben Rosenthall is high enough game for you and

me. We know he's armed. We know how Billy Purvis can fight. It'll be

no soft thing, I grant you. But what of that, my good Bunny--what of

that? A man's reach must exceed his grasp, dear boy, or what the

dickens is a heaven for?"

"I would rather we didn't exceed ours just yet," I answered laughing,

for his spirit was irresistible, and the plan was growing upon me,

despite my qualms.

"Trust me for that," was his reply; "I'll see you through. After all I

expect to find that the difficulties are nearly all on the surface.

These fellows both drink like the devil, and that should simplify

matters considerably. But we shall see, and we must take our time.

There will probably turn out to be a dozen different ways in which the

thing might be done, and we shall have to choose between them. It will

mean watching the house for at least a week in any case; it may mean

lots of other things that will take much longer; but give me a week and

I will tell you more. That's to say, if you're really on?"

"Of course I am," I replied indignantly. "But why should I give you a

week? Why shouldn't we watch the house together?"

"Because two eyes are as good as four and take up less room. Never

hunt in couples unless you're obliged. But don't you look offended,

Bunny; there'll be plenty for you to do when the time comes, that I

promise you. You shall have your share of the fun, never fear, and a

purple diamond all to yourself--if we're lucky."

On the whole, however, this conversation left me less than lukewarm,

and I still remember the depression which came upon me when Raffles was

gone. I saw the folly of the enterprise to which I had committed

myself--the sheer, gratuitous, unnecessary folly of it. And the

paradoxes in which Raffles revelled, and the frivolous casuistry which

was nevertheless half sincere, and which his mere personality rendered

wholly plausible at the moment of utterance, appealed very little to me

when recalled in cold blood. I admired the spirit of pure mischief in

which he seemed prepared to risk his liberty and his life, but I did

not find it an infectious spirit on calm reflection. Yet the thought

of withdrawal was not to be entertained for a moment. On the contrary,

I was impatient of the delay ordained by Raffles; and, perhaps, no

small part of my secret disaffection came of his galling determination

to do without me until the last moment.

It made it no better that this was characteristic of the man and of his

attitude towards me. For a month we had been, I suppose, the thickest

thieves in all London, and yet our intimacy was curiously incomplete.

With all his charming frankness, there was in Raffles a vein of

capricious reserve which was perceptible enough to be very irritating.

He had the instinctive secretiveness of the inveterate criminal. He

would make mysteries of matters of common concern; for example, I never

knew how or where he disposed of the Bond Street jewels, on the

proceeds of which we were both still leading the outward lives of

hundreds of other young fellows about town. He was consistently

mysterious about that and other details, of which it seemed to me that

I had already earned the right to know everything. I could not but

remember how he had led me into my first felony, by means of a trick,

while yet uncertain whether he could trust me or not.

That I could no longer afford to resent, but I did resent his want of

confidence in me now. I said nothing about it, but it rankled every

day, and never more than in the week that succeeded the Rosenthall

dinner. When I met Raffles at the club he would tell me nothing; when

I went to his rooms he was out, or pretended to be.

One day he told me he was getting on well, but slowly; it was a more

ticklish game than he had thought; but when I began to ask questions he

would say no more. Then and there, in my annoyance, I took my own

decision. Since he would tell me nothing of the result of his vigils,

I determined to keep one on my own account, and that very evening found

my way to the millionaire's front gates.

The house he was occupying is, I believe, quite the largest in the St.

John's Wood district. It stands in the angle formed by two broad

thoroughfares, neither of which, as it happens, is a 'bus route, and I

doubt if many quieter spots exist within the four-mile radius. Quiet

also was the great square house, in its garden of grass-plots and

shrubs; the lights were low, the millionaire and his friends obviously

spending their evening elsewhere. The garden walls were only a few

feet high. In one there was a side door opening into a glass passage;

in the other two five-barred, grained-and-varnished gates, one at

either end of the little semi-circular drive, and both wide open. So

still was the place that I had a great mind to walk boldly in and learn

something of the premises; in fact, I was on the point of doing so,

when I heard a quick, shuffling step on the pavement behind me. I

turned round and faced the dark scowl and the dirty clenched fists of a

dilapidated tramp.

"You fool!" said he. "You utter idiot!"

"Raffles!"

"That's it," he whispered savagely; "tell all the neighborhood--give me

away at the top of your voice!"

With that he turned his back upon me, and shambled down the road,

shrugging his shoulders and muttering to himself as though I had

refused him alms. A few moments I stood astounded, indignant, at a

loss; then I followed him. His feet trailed, his knees gave, his back

was bowed, his head kept nodding; it was the gait of a man eighty years

of age. Presently he waited for me midway between two lamp-posts. As

I came up he was lighting rank tobacco, in a cutty pipe, with an

evil-smelling match, and the flame showed me the suspicion of a smile.

"You must forgive my heat, Bunny, but it really was very foolish of

you. Here am I trying every dodge--begging at the door one

night--hiding in the shrubs the next--doing every mortal thing but

stand and stare at the house as you went and did. It's a costume piece,

and in you rush in your ordinary clothes. I tell you they're on the

lookout for us night and day. It's the toughest nut I ever tackled!"

"Well," said I, "if you had told me so before I shouldn't have come.

You told me nothing."

He looked hard at me from under the broken brim of a battered billycock.

"You're right," he said at length. "I've been too close. It's become

second nature with me when I've anything on. But here's an end of it,

Bunny, so far as you're concerned. I'm going home now, and I want you

to follow me; but for heaven's sake keep your distance, and don't speak

to me again till I speak to you. There--give me a start." And he was

off again, a decrepit vagabond, with his hands in his pockets, his

elbows squared, and frayed coat-tails swinging raggedly from side to

side.

I followed him to the Finchley Road. There he took an Atlas omnibus,

and I sat some rows behind him on the top, but not far enough to escape

the pest of his vile tobacco. That he could carry his character-sketch

to such a pitch--he who would only smoke one brand of cigarette! It

was the last, least touch of the insatiable artist, and it charmed away

what mortification there still remained in me. Once more I felt the

fascination of a comrade who was forever dazzling one with a fresh and

unsuspected facet of his character.

As we neared Piccadilly I wondered what he would do. Surely he was not

going into the Albany like that? No, he took another omnibus to Sloane

Street, I sitting behind him as before. At Sloane Street we changed

again, and were presently in the long lean artery of the King's Road.

I was now all agog to know our destination, nor was I kept many more

minutes in doubt. Raffles got down. I followed. He crossed the road

and disappeared up a dark turning. I pressed after him, and was in

time to see his coat-tails as he plunged into a still darker flagged

alley to the right. He was holding himself up and stepping out like a

young man once more; also, in some subtle way, he already looked less

disreputable. But I alone was there to see him, the alley was

absolutely deserted, and desperately dark. At the further end he

opened a door with a latch-key, and it was darker yet within.

Instinctively I drew back and heard him chuckle. We could no longer see

each other.

"All right, Bunny! There's no hanky-panky this time. These are

studios, my friend, and I'm one of the lawful tenants."

Indeed, in another minute we were in a lofty room with skylight,

easels, dressing-cupboard, platform, and every other adjunct save the

signs of actual labor. The first thing I saw, as Raffles lit the gas,

was its reflection in his silk hat on the pegs beside the rest of his

normal garments.

"Looking for the works of art?" continued Raffles, lighting a cigarette

and beginning to divest himself of his rags. "I'm afraid you won't

find any, but there's the canvas I'm always going to make a start upon.

I tell them I'm looking high and low for my ideal model. I have the

stove lit on principle twice a week, and look in and leave a newspaper

and a smell of Sullivans--how good they are after shag! Meanwhile I

pay my rent and am a good tenant in every way; and it's a very useful

little pied-a-terre--there's no saying how useful it might be at a

pinch. As it is, the billy-cock comes in and the topper goes out, and

nobody takes the slightest notice of either; at this time of night the

chances are that there's not a soul in the building except ourselves."

"You never told me you went in for disguises," said I, watching him as

he cleansed the grime from his face and hands.

"No, Bunny, I've treated you very shabbily all round. There was really

no reason why I shouldn't have shown you this place a month ago, and

yet there was no point in my doing so, and circumstances are just

conceivable in which it would have suited us both for you to be in

genuine ignorance of my whereabouts. I have something to sleep on, as

you perceive, in case of need, and, of course, my name is not Raffles

in the King's Road. So you will see that one might bolt further and

fare worse."

"Meanwhile you use the place as a dressing-room?"

"It is my private pavilion," said Raffles. "Disguises? In some cases

they're half the battle, and it's always pleasant to feel that, if the

worst comes to the worst, you needn't necessarily be convicted under

your own name. Then they're indispensable in dealing with the fences.

I drive all my bargains in the tongue and raiment of Shoreditch. If I

didn't there'd be the very devil to pay in blackmail. Now, this

cupboard's full of all sorts of toggery. I tell the woman who cleans

the room that it's for my models when I find 'em. By the way, I only

hope I've got something that'll fit you, for you'll want a rig for

to-morrow night."

"To-morrow night!" I exclaimed. "Why, what do you mean to do?"

"The trick," said Raffles. "I intended writing to you as soon as I got

back to my rooms, to ask you to look me up to-morrow afternoon; then I

was going to unfold my plan of campaign, and take you straight into

action then and there. There's nothing like putting the nervous

players in first; it's the sitting with their pads on that upsets their

applecart; that was another of my reasons for being so confoundedly

close. You must try to forgive me. I couldn't help remembering how

well you played up last trip, without any time to weaken on it

beforehand. All I want is for you to be as cool and smart to-morrow

night as you were then; though, by Jove, there's no comparison between

the two cases!"

"I thought you would find it so."

"You were right. I have. Mind you, I don't say this will be the

tougher job all round; we shall probably get in without any difficulty

at all; it's the getting out again that may flummox us. That's the

worst of an irregular household!" cried Raffles, with quite a burst of

virtuous indignation. "I assure you, Bunny, I spent the whole of

Monday night in the shrubbery of the garden next door, looking over the

wall, and, if you'll believe me, somebody was about all night long! I

don't mean the Kaffirs. I don't believe they ever get to bed at

all--poor devils! No, I mean Rosenthall himself, and that pasty-faced

beast Purvis. They were up and drinking from midnight, when they came

in, to broad daylight, when I cleared out. Even then I left them sober

enough to slang each other. By the way, they very nearly came to blows

in the garden, within a few yards of me, and I heard something that

might come in useful and make Rosenthall shoot crooked at a critical

moment. You know what an I. D. B. is?"

"Illicit Diamond Buyer?"

"Exactly. Well, it seems that Rosenthall was one. He must have let it

out to Purvis in his cups. Anyhow, I heard Purvis taunting him with it,

and threatening him with the breakwater at Capetown; and I begin to

think our friends are friend and foe. But about to-morrow night:

there's nothing subtle in my plan. It's simply to get in while these

fellows are out on the loose, and to lie low till they come back, and

longer. If possible, we must doctor the whiskey. That would simplify

the whole thing, though it's not a very sporting game to play; still,

we must remember Rosenthall's revolver; we don't want him to sign his

name on US. With all those Kaffirs about, however, it's ten to one on

the whiskey, and a hundred to one against us if we go looking for it.

A brush with the heathen would spoil everything, if it did no more.

Besides, there are the ladies--"

"The deuce there are!"

"Ladies with an \_I\_, and the very voices for raising Cain. I fear, I

fear the clamor! It would be fatal to us. Au contraire, if we can

manage to stow ourselves away unbeknownst, half the battle will be won.

If Rosenthall turns in drunk, it's a purple diamond apiece. If he sits

up sober, it may be a bullet instead. We will hope not, Bunny; and all

the firing wouldn't be on one side; but it's on the knees of the gods."

And so we left it when we shook hands in Picadilly--not by any means as

much later as I could have wished. Raffles would not ask me to his

rooms that night. He said he made it a rule to have a long night

before playing cricket and--other games. His final word to me was

framed on the same principle.

"Mind, only one drink to-night, Bunny. Two at the outside--as you

value your life--and mine!"

I remember my abject obedience; and the endless, sleepless night it

gave me; and the roofs of the houses opposite standing out at last

against the blue-gray London dawn. I wondered whether I should ever

see another, and was very hard on myself for that little expedition

which I had made on my own wilful account.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening when we took up

our position in the garden adjoining that of Reuben Rosenthall; the

house itself was shut up, thanks to the outrageous libertine next door,

who, by driving away the neighbors, had gone far towards delivering

himself into our hands. Practically secure from surprise on that side,

we could watch our house under cover of a wall just high enough to see

over, while a fair margin of shrubs in either garden afforded us

additional protection. Thus entrenched, we had stood an hour, watching

a pair of lighted bow-windows with vague shadows flitting continually

across the blinds, and listening to the drawing of corks, the clink of

glasses, and a gradual crescendo of coarse voices within. Our luck

seemed to have deserted us: the owner of the purple diamonds was dining

at home and dining at undue length. I thought it was a dinner-party.

Raffles differed; in the end he proved right. Wheels grated in the

drive, a carriage and pair stood at the steps; there was a stampede

from the dining-room, and the loud voices died away, to burst forth

presently from the porch.

Let me make our position perfectly clear. We were over the wall, at

the side of the house, but a few feet from the dining-room windows. On

our right, one angle of the building cut the back lawn in two

diagonally; on our left, another angle just permitted us to see the

jutting steps and the waiting carriage. We saw Rosenthall come

out--saw the glimmer of his diamonds before anything. Then came the

pugilist; then a lady with a head of hair like a bath sponge; then

another, and the party was complete.

Raffles ducked and pulled me down in great excitement.

"The ladies are going with them," he whispered. "This is great!"

"That's better still."

"The Gardenia!" the millionaire had bawled.

"And that's best of all," said Raffles, standing upright as hoofs and

wheels crunched through the gates and rattled off at a fine speed.

"Now what?" I whispered, trembling with excitement.

"They'll be clearing away. Yes, here come their shadows. The

drawing-room windows open on the lawn. Bunny, it's the psychological

moment. Where's that mask?"

I produced it with a hand whose trembling I tried in vain to still, and

could have died for Raffles when he made no comment on what he could

not fail to notice. His own hands were firm and cool as he adjusted my

mask for me, and then his own.

"By Jove, old boy," he whispered cheerily, "you look about the greatest

ruffian I ever saw! These masks alone will down a nigger, if we meet

one. But I'm glad I remembered to tell you not to shave. You'll pass

for Whitechapel if the worst comes to the worst and you don't forget to

talk the lingo. Better sulk like a mule if you're not sure of it, and

leave the dialogue to me; but, please our stars, there will be no need.

Now, are you ready?"

"Quite."

"Got your gag?"

"Yes."

"Shooter?"

"Yes."

"Then follow me."

In an instant we were over the wall, in another on the lawn behind the

house. There was no moon. The very stars in their courses had veiled

themselves for our benefit. I crept at my leader's heels to some

French windows opening upon a shallow veranda. He pushed. They

yielded.

"Luck again," he whispered; "nothing BUT luck! Now for a light."

And the light came!

A good score of electric burners glowed red for the fraction of a

second, then rained merciless white beams into our blinded eyes. When

we found our sight four revolvers covered us, and between two of them

the colossal frame of Reuben Rosenthall shook with a wheezy laughter

from head to foot.

"Good-evening, boys," he hiccoughed. "Glad to see ye at last. Shift

foot or finger, you on the left, though, and you're a dead boy. I mean

you, you greaser!" he roared out at Raffles. "I know you. I've been

waitin' for you. I've been WATCHIN' you all this week! Plucky smart

you thought yerself, didn't you? One day beggin', next time shammin'

tight, and next one o' them old pals from Kimberley what never come

when I'm in. But you left the same tracks every day, you buggins, an'

the same tracks every night, all round the blessed premises."

"All right, guv'nor," drawled Raffles; "don't excite. It's a fair cop.

We don't sweat to know 'ow you brung it orf. On'y don't you go for to

shoot, 'cos we 'int awmed, s'help me Gord!"

"Ah, you're a knowin' one," said Rosenthall, fingering his triggers.

"But you've struck a knowin'er."

"Ho, yuss, we know all abaht thet! Set a thief to ketch a thief--ho,

yuss."

My eyes had torn themselves from the round black muzzles, from the

accursed diamonds that had been our snare, the pasty pig-face of the

over-fed pugilist, and the flaming cheeks and hook nose of Rosenthall

himself. I was looking beyond them at the doorway filled with

quivering silk and plush, black faces, white eyeballs, woolly pates.

But a sudden silence recalled my attention to the millionaire. And

only his nose retained its color.

"What d'ye mean?" he whispered with a hoarse oath. "Spit it out, or,

by Christmas, I'll drill you!"

"Whort price thet brikewater?" drawled Raffles coolly.

"Eh?"

Rosenthall's revolvers were describing widening orbits.

"Whort price thet brikewater--old \_I.D.B.\_?"

"Where in hell did you get hold o' that?" asked Rosenthall, with a

rattle in his thick neck, meant for mirth.

"You may well arst," says Raffles. "It's all over the plice w'ere \_I\_

come from."

"Who can have spread such rot?"

"I dunno," says Raffles; "arst the gen'leman on yer left; p'r'aps 'E

knows."

The gentleman on his left had turned livid with emotion. Guilty

conscience never declared itself in plainer terms. For a moment his

small eyes bulged like currants in the suet of his face; the next, he

had pocketed his pistols on a professional instinct, and was upon us

with his fists.

"Out o' the light--out o' the light!" yelled Rosenthall in a frenzy.

He was too late. No sooner had the burly pugilist obstructed his fire

than Raffles was through the window at a bound; while I, for standing

still and saying nothing, was scientifically felled to the floor.

I cannot have been many moments without my senses. When I recovered

them there was a great to-do in the garden, but I had the drawing-room

to myself. I sat up. Rosenthall and Purvis were rushing about

outside, cursing the Kaffirs and nagging at each other.

"Over THAT wall, I tell yer!"

"I tell you it was this one. Can't you whistle for the police?"

"Police be damned! I've had enough of the blessed police."

"Then we'd better get back and make sure of the other rotter."

"Oh, make sure o' yer skin. That's what you'd better do. Jala, you

black hog, if I catch YOU skulkin'...."

I never heard the threat. I was creeping from the drawing-room on my

hands and knees, my own revolver swinging by its steel ring from my

teeth.

For an instant I thought that the hall also was deserted. I was wrong,

and I crept upon a Kaffir on all fours. Poor devil, I could not bring

myself to deal him a base blow, but I threatened him most hideously

with my revolver, and left the white teeth chattering in his black head

as I took the stairs three at a time. Why I went upstairs in that

decisive fashion, as though it were my only course, I cannot explain.

But garden and ground floor seemed alive with men, and I might have

done worse.

I turned into the first room I came to. It was a bedroom--empty,

though lit up; and never shall I forget how I started as I entered, on

encountering the awful villain that was myself at full length in a

pier-glass! Masked, armed, and ragged, I was indeed fit carrion for a

bullet or the hangman, and to one or the other I made up my mind.

Nevertheless, I hid myself in the wardrobe behind the mirror; and there

I stood shivering and cursing my fate, my folly, and Raffles most of

all--Raffles first and last--for I daresay half an hour. Then the

wardrobe door was flung suddenly open; they had stolen into the room

without a sound; and I was hauled downstairs, an ignominious captive.

Gross scenes followed in the hall; the ladies were now upon the stage,

and at sight of the desperate criminal they screamed with one accord.

In truth I must have given them fair cause, though my mask was now torn

away and hid nothing but my left ear. Rosenthall answered their

shrieks with a roar for silence; the woman with the bath-sponge hair

swore at him shrilly in return; the place became a Babel impossible to

describe. I remember wondering how long it would be before the police

appeared. Purvis and the ladies were for calling them in and giving me

in charge without delay. Rosenthall would not hear of it. He swore

that he would shoot man or woman who left his sight. He had had enough

of the police. He was not going to have them coming there to spoil

sport; he was going to deal with me in his own way. With that he

dragged me from all other hands, flung me against a door, and sent a

bullet crashing through the wood within an inch of my ear.

"You drunken fool! It'll be murder!" shouted Purvis, getting in the

way a second time.

"Wha' do I care? He's armed, isn't he? I shot him in self-defence.

It'll be a warning to others. Will you stand aside, or d'ye want it

yourself?"

"You're drunk," said Purvis, still between us. "I saw you take a neat

tumblerful since you come in, and it's made you drunk as a fool. Pull

yourself together, old man. You ain't a-going to do what you'll be

sorry for."

"Then I won't shoot at him, I'll only shoot roun' an' roun' the beggar.

You're quite right, ole feller. Wouldn't hurt him. Great mishtake.

Roun' an' roun'. There--like that!"

His freckled paw shot up over Purvis's shoulder, mauve lightning came

from his ring, a red flash from his revolver, and shrieks from the

women as the reverberations died away. Some splinters lodged in my

hair.

Next instant the prize-fighter disarmed him; and I was safe from the

devil, but finally doomed to the deep sea. A policeman was in our

midst. He had entered through the drawing-room window; he was an

officer of few words and creditable promptitude. In a twinkling he had

the handcuffs on my wrists, while the pugilist explained the situation,

and his patron reviled the force and its representative with impotent

malignity. A fine watch they kept; a lot of good they did; coming in

when all was over and the whole household might have been murdered in

their sleep. The officer only deigned to notice him as he marched me

off.

"We know all about YOU, sir," said he contemptuously, and he refused

the sovereign Purvis proffered. "You will be seeing me again, sir, at

Marylebone."

"Shall I come now?"

"As you please, sir. I rather think the other gentleman requires you

more, and I don't fancy this young man means to give much trouble."

"Oh, I'm coming quietly," I said.

And I went.

In silence we traversed perhaps a hundred yards. It must have been

midnight. We did not meet a soul. At last I whispered:

"How on earth did you manage it?"

"Purely by luck," said Raffles. "I had the luck to get clear away

through knowing every brick of those back-garden walls, and the double

luck to have these togs with the rest over at Chelsea. The helmet is

one of a collection I made up at Oxford; here it goes over this wall,

and we'd better carry the coat and belt before we meet a real officer.

I got them once for a fancy ball--ostensibly--and thereby hangs a yarn.

I always thought they might come in useful a second time. My chief

crux to-night was getting rid of the hansom that brought me back. I

sent him off to Scotland Yard with ten bob and a special message to

good old Mackenzie. The whole detective department will be at

Rosenthall's in about half an hour. Of course, I speculated on our

gentleman's hatred of the police--another huge slice of luck. If you'd

got away, well and good; if not, I felt he was the man to play with his

mouse as long as possible. Yes, Bunny, it's been more of a costume

piece than I intended, and we've come out of it with a good deal less

credit. But, by Jove, we're jolly lucky to have come out of it at all!"

GENTLEMEN AND PLAYERS

Old Raffles may or may not have been an exceptional criminal, but as a

cricketer I dare swear he was unique. Himself a dangerous bat, a

brilliant field, and perhaps the very finest slow bowler of his decade,

he took incredibly little interest in the game at large. He never went

up to Lord's without his cricket-bag, or showed the slightest interest

in the result of a match in which he was not himself engaged. Nor was

this mere hateful egotism on his part. He professed to have lost all

enthusiasm for the game, and to keep it up only from the very lowest

motives.

"Cricket," said Raffles, "like everything else, is good enough sport

until you discover a better. As a source of excitement it isn't in it

with other things you wot of, Bunny, and the involuntary comparison

becomes a bore. What's the satisfaction of taking a man's wicket when

you want his spoons? Still, if you can bowl a bit your low cunning

won't get rusty, and always looking for the weak spot's just the kind

of mental exercise one wants. Yes, perhaps there's some affinity

between the two things after all. But I'd chuck up cricket to-morrow,

Bunny, if it wasn't for the glorious protection it affords a person of

my proclivities."

"How so?" said I. "It brings you before the public, I should have

thought, far more than is either safe or wise."

"My dear Bunny, that's exactly where you make a mistake. To follow

Crime with reasonable impunity you simply MUST have a parallel,

ostensible career--the more public the better. The principle is

obvious. Mr. Peace, of pious memory, disarmed suspicion by acquiring a

local reputation for playing the fiddle and taming animals, and it's my

profound conviction that Jack the Ripper was a really eminent public

man, whose speeches were very likely reported alongside his atrocities.

Fill the bill in some prominent part, and you'll never be suspected of

doubling it with another of equal prominence. That's why I want you to

cultivate journalism, my boy, and sign all you can. And it's the one

and only reason why I don't burn my bats for firewood."

Nevertheless, when he did play there was no keener performer on the

field, nor one more anxious to do well for his side. I remember how he

went to the nets, before the first match of the season, with his pocket

full of sovereigns, which he put on the stumps instead of bails. It

was a sight to see the professionals bowling like demons for the hard

cash, for whenever a stump was hit a pound was tossed to the bowler and

another balanced in its stead, while one man took #3 with a ball that

spreadeagled the wicket. Raffles's practice cost him either eight or

nine sovereigns; but he had absolutely first-class bowling all the

time; and he made fifty-seven runs next day.

It became my pleasure to accompany him to all his matches, to watch

every ball he bowled, or played, or fielded, and to sit chatting with

him in the pavilion when he was doing none of these three things. You

might have seen us there, side by side, during the greater part of the

Gentlemen's first innings against the Players (who had lost the toss)

on the second Monday in July. We were to be seen, but not heard, for

Raffles had failed to score, and was uncommonly cross for a player who

cared so little for the game. Merely taciturn with me, he was

positively rude to more than one member who wanted to know how it had

happened, or who ventured to commiserate him on his luck; there he sat,

with a straw hat tilted over his nose and a cigarette stuck between

lips that curled disagreeably at every advance. I was therefore much

surprised when a young fellow of the exquisite type came and squeezed

himself in between us, and met with a perfectly civil reception despite

the liberty. I did not know the boy by sight, nor did Raffles

introduce us; but their conversation proclaimed at once a slightness of

acquaintanceship and a license on the lad's part which combined to

puzzle me. Mystification reached its height when Raffles was informed

that the other's father was anxious to meet him, and he instantly

consented to gratify that whim.

"He's in the Ladies' Enclosure. Will you come round now?"

"With pleasure," says Raffles. "Keep a place for me, Bunny."

And they were gone.

"Young Crowley," said some voice further back. "Last year's Harrow

Eleven."

"I remember him. Worst man in the team."

"Keen cricketer, however. Stopped till he was twenty to get his

colors. Governor made him. Keen breed. Oh, pretty, sir! Very

pretty!"

The game was boring me. I only came to see old Raffles perform. Soon

I was looking wistfully for his return, and at length I saw him

beckoning me from the palings to the right.

"Want to introduce you to old Amersteth," he whispered, when I joined

him. "They've a cricket week next month, when this boy Crowley comes

of age, and we've both got to go down and play."

"Both!" I echoed. "But I'm no cricketer!"

"Shut up," says Raffles. "Leave that to me. I've been lying for all

I'm worth," he added sepulchrally as we reached the bottom of the

steps. "I trust to you not to give the show away."

There was a gleam in his eye that I knew well enough elsewhere, but was

unprepared for in those healthy, sane surroundings; and it was with

very definite misgivings and surmises that I followed the Zingari

blazer through the vast flower-bed of hats and bonnets that bloomed

beneath the ladies' awning.

Lord Amersteth was a fine-looking man with a short mustache and a

double chin. He received me with much dry courtesy, through which,

however, it was not difficult to read a less flattering tale. I was

accepted as the inevitable appendage of the invaluable Raffles, with

whom I felt deeply incensed as I made my bow.

"I have been bold enough," said Lord Amersteth, "to ask one of the

Gentlemen of England to come down and play some rustic cricket for us

next month. He is kind enough to say that he would have liked nothing

better, but for this little fishing expedition of yours, Mr.-----,

Mr.-----," and Lord Amersteth succeeded in remembering my name.

It was, of course, the first I had ever heard of that fishing

expedition, but I made haste to say that it could easily, and should

certainly, be put off. Raffles gleamed approval through his eyelashes.

Lord Amersteth bowed and shrugged.

"You're very good, I'm sure," said he. "But I understand you're a

cricketer yourself?"

"He was one at school," said Raffles, with infamous readiness.

"Not a real cricketer," I was stammering meanwhile.

"In the eleven?" said Lord Amersteth.

"I'm afraid not," said I.

"But only just out of it," declared Raffles, to my horror.

"Well, well, we can't all play for the Gentlemen," said Lord Amersteth

slyly. "My son Crowley only just scraped into the eleven at Harrow,

and HE'S going to play. I may even come in myself at a pinch; so you

won't be the only duffer, if you are one, and I shall be very glad if

you will come down and help us too. You shall flog a stream before

breakfast and after dinner, if you like."

"I should be very proud," I was beginning, as the mere prelude to

resolute excuses; but the eye of Raffles opened wide upon me; and I

hesitated weakly, to be duly lost.

"Then that's settled," said Lord Amersteth, with the slightest

suspicion of grimness. "It's to be a little week, you know, when my

son comes of age. We play the Free Foresters, the Dorsetshire

Gentlemen, and probably some local lot as well. But Mr. Raffles will

tell you all about it, and Crowley shall write. Another wicket! By

Jove, they're all out! Then I rely on you both." And, with a little

nod, Lord Amersteth rose and sidled to the gangway.

Raffles rose also, but I caught the sleeve of his blazer.

"What are you thinking of?" I whispered savagely. "I was nowhere near

the eleven. I'm no sort of cricketer. I shall have to get out of

this!"

"Not you," he whispered back. "You needn't play, but come you must.

If you wait for me after half-past six I'll tell you why."

But I could guess the reason; and I am ashamed to say that it revolted

me much less than did the notion of making a public fool of myself on a

cricket-field. My gorge rose at this as it no longer rose at crime,

and it was in no tranquil humor that I strolled about the ground while

Raffles disappeared in the pavilion. Nor was my annoyance lessened by

a little meeting I witnessed between young Crowley and his father, who

shrugged as he stopped and stooped to convey some information which

made the young man look a little blank. It may have been pure

self-consciousness on my part, but I could have sworn that the trouble

was their inability to secure the great Raffles without his

insignificant friend.

Then the bell rang, and I climbed to the top of the pavilion to watch

Raffles bowl. No subtleties are lost up there; and if ever a bowler

was full of them, it was A. J. Raffles on this day, as, indeed, all the

cricket world remembers. One had not to be a cricketer oneself to

appreciate his perfect command of pitch and break, his beautifully easy

action, which never varied with the varying pace, his great ball on the

leg-stump--his dropping head-ball--in a word, the infinite ingenuity of

that versatile attack. It was no mere exhibition of athletic prowess,

it was an intellectual treat, and one with a special significance in my

eyes. I saw the "affinity between the two things," saw it in that

afternoon's tireless warfare against the flower of professional

cricket. It was not that Raffles took many wickets for few runs; he

was too fine a bowler to mind being hit; and time was short, and the

wicket good. What I admired, and what I remember, was the combination

of resource and cunning, of patience and precision, of head-work and

handiwork, which made every over an artistic whole. It was all so

characteristic of that other Raffles whom I alone knew!

"I felt like bowling this afternoon," he told me later in the hansom.

"With a pitch to help me, I'd have done something big; as it is, three

for forty-one, out of the four that fell, isn't so bad for a slow

bowler on a plumb wicket against those fellows. But I felt venomous!

Nothing riles me more than being asked about for my cricket as though I

were a pro. myself."

"Then why on earth go?"

"To punish them, and--because we shall be jolly hard up, Bunny, before

the season's over!"

"Ah!" said I. "I thought it was that."

"Of course, it was! It seems they're going to have the very devil of a

week of it--balls--dinner parties--swagger house party--general

junketings--and obviously a houseful of diamonds as well. Diamonds

galore! As a general rule nothing would induce me to abuse my position

as a guest. I've never done it, Bunny. But in this case we're engaged

like the waiters and the band, and by heaven we'll take our toll!

Let's have a quiet dinner somewhere and talk it over."

"It seems rather a vulgar sort of theft," I could not help saying; and

to this, my single protest, Raffles instantly assented.

"It is a vulgar sort," said he; "but I can't help that. We're getting

vulgarly hard up again, and there's an end on 't. Besides, these

people deserve it, and can afford it. And don't you run away with the

idea that all will be plain sailing; nothing will be easier than

getting some stuff, and nothing harder than avoiding all suspicion, as,

of course, we must. We may come away with no more than a good working

plan of the premises. Who knows? In any case there's weeks of

thinking in it for you and me."

But with those weeks I will not weary you further than by remarking

that the "thinking," was done entirely by Raffles, who did not always

trouble to communicate his thoughts to me. His reticence, however, was

no longer an irritant. I began to accept it as a necessary convention

of these little enterprises. And, after our last adventure of the

kind, more especially after its denouement, my trust in Raffles was

much too solid to be shaken by a want of trust in me, which I still

believe to have been more the instinct of the criminal than the

judgment of the man.

It was on Monday, the tenth of August, that we were due at Milchester

Abbey, Dorset; and the beginning of the month found us cruising about

that very county, with fly-rods actually in our hands. The idea was

that we should acquire at once a local reputation as decent fishermen,

and some knowledge of the countryside, with a view to further and more

deliberate operations in the event of an unprofitable week. There was

another idea which Raffles kept to himself until he had got me down

there. Then one day he produced a cricket-ball in a meadow we were

crossing, and threw me catches for an hour together. More hours he

spent in bowling to me on the nearest green; and, if I was never a

cricketer, at least I came nearer to being one, by the end of that

week, than ever before or since.

Incident began early on the Monday. We had sallied forth from a

desolate little junction within quite a few miles of Milchester, had

been caught in a shower, had run for shelter to a wayside inn. A

florid, overdressed man was drinking in the parlor, and I could have

sworn it was at the sight of him that Raffles recoiled on the

threshold, and afterwards insisted on returning to the station through

the rain. He assured me, however, that the odor of stale ale had

almost knocked him down. And I had to make what I could of his

speculative, downcast eyes and knitted brows.

Milchester Abbey is a gray, quadrangular pile, deep-set in rich woody

country, and twinkling with triple rows of quaint windows, every one of

which seemed alight as we drove up just in time to dress for dinner.

The carriage had whirled us under I know not how many triumphal arches

in process of construction, and past the tents and flag-poles of a

juicy-looking cricket-field, on which Raffles undertook to bowl up to

his reputation. But the chief signs of festival were within, where we

found an enormous house-party assembled, including more persons of

pomp, majesty, and dominion than I had ever encountered in one room

before. I confess I felt overpowered. Our errand and my own presences

combined to rob me of an address upon which I have sometimes plumed

myself; and I have a grim recollection of my nervous relief when dinner

was at last announced. I little knew what an ordeal it was to prove.

I had taken in a much less formidable young lady than might have fallen

to my lot. Indeed I began by blessing my good fortune in this respect.

Miss Melhuish was merely the rector's daughter, and she had only been

asked to make an even number. She informed me of both facts before the

soup reached us, and her subsequent conversation was characterized by

the same engaging candor. It exposed what was little short of a mania

for imparting information. I had simply to listen, to nod, and to be

thankful.

When I confessed to knowing very few of those present, even by sight,

my entertaining companion proceeded to tell me who everybody was,

beginning on my left and working conscientiously round to her right.

This lasted quite a long time, and really interested me; but a great

deal that followed did not, and, obviously to recapture my unworthy

attention, Miss Melhuish suddenly asked me, in a sensational whisper,

whether I could keep a secret.

I said I thought I might, whereupon another question followed, in still

lower and more thrilling accents:

"Are you afraid of burglars?"

Burglars! I was roused at last. The word stabbed me. I repeated it

in horrified query.

"So I've found something to interest you at last!" said Miss Melhuish,

in naive triumph. "Yes--burglars! But don't speak so loud. It's

supposed to be kept a great secret. I really oughtn't to tell you at

all!"

"But what is there to tell?" I whispered with satisfactory impatience.

"You promise not to speak of it?"

"Of course!"

"Well, then, there are burglars in the neighborhood."

"Have they committed any robberies?"

"Not yet."

"Then how do you know?"

"They've been seen. In the district. Two well-known London thieves!"

Two! I looked at Raffles. I had done so often during the evening,

envying him his high spirits, his iron nerve, his buoyant wit, his

perfect ease and self-possession. But now I pitied him; through all my

own terror and consternation, I pitied him as he sat eating and

drinking, and laughing and talking, without a cloud of fear or of

embarrassment on his handsome, taking, daredevil face. I caught up my

champagne and emptied the glass.

"Who has seen them?" I then asked calmly.

"A detective. They were traced down from town a few days ago. They

are believed to have designs on the Abbey!"

"But why aren't they run in?"

"Exactly what I asked papa on the way here this evening; he says there

is no warrant out against the men at present, and all that can be done

is to watch their movements."

"Oh! so they are being watched?"

"Yes, by a detective who is down here on purpose. And I heard Lord

Amersteth tell papa that they had been seen this afternoon at Warbeck

Junction!"

The very place where Raffles and I had been caught in the rain! Our

stampede from the inn was now explained; on the other hand, I was no

longer to be taken by surprise by anything that my companion might have

to tell me; and I succeeded in looking her in the face with a smile.

"This is really quite exciting, Miss Melhuish," said I. "May I ask how

you come to know so much about it?"

"It's papa," was the confidential reply. "Lord Amersteth consulted

him, and he consulted me. But for goodness' sake don't let it get

about! I can't think WHAT tempted me to tell you!"

"You may trust me, Miss Melhuish. But--aren't you frightened?"

Miss Melhuish giggled.

"Not a bit! They won't come to the rectory. There's nothing for them

there. But look round the table: look at the diamonds: look at old

Lady Melrose's necklace alone!"

The Dowager Marchioness of Melrose was one of the few persons whom it

had been unnecessary to point out to me. She sat on Lord Amersteth's

right, flourishing her ear-trumpet, and drinking champagne with her

usual notorious freedom, as dissipated and kindly a dame as the world

has ever seen. It was a necklace of diamonds and sapphires that rose

and fell about her ample neck.

"They say it's worth five thousand pounds at least," continued my

companion. "Lady Margaret told me so this morning (that's Lady

Margaret next your Mr. Raffles, you know); and the old dear WILL wear

them every night. Think what a haul they would be! No; we don't feel

in immediate danger at the rectory."

When the ladies rose, Miss Melhuish bound me to fresh vows of secrecy;

and left me, I should think, with some remorse for her indiscretion,

but more satisfaction at the importance which it had undoubtedly given

her in my eyes. The opinion may smack of vanity, though, in reality,

the very springs of conversation reside in that same human, universal

itch to thrill the auditor. The peculiarity of Miss Melhuish was that

she must be thrilling at all costs. And thrilling she had surely been.

I spare you my feelings of the next two hours. I tried hard to get a

word with Raffles, but again and again I failed. In the dining-room he

and Crowley lit their cigarettes with the same match, and had their

heads together all the time. In the drawing-room I had the

mortification of hearing him talk interminable nonsense into the

ear-trumpet of Lady Melrose, whom he knew in town. Lastly, in the

billiard-room, they had a great and lengthy pool, while I sat aloof and

chafed more than ever in the company of a very serious Scotchman, who

had arrived since dinner, and who would talk of nothing but the recent

improvements in instantaneous photography. He had not come to play in

the matches (he told me), but to obtain for Lord Amersteth such a

series of cricket photographs as had never been taken before; whether

as an amateur or a professional photographer I was unable to determine.

I remember, however, seeking distraction in little bursts of resolute

attention to the conversation of this bore. And so at last the long

ordeal ended; glasses were emptied, men said good-night, and I followed

Raffles to his room.

"It's all up!" I gasped, as he turned up the gas and I shut the door.

"We're being watched. We've been followed down from town. There's a

detective here on the spot!"

"How do YOU know?" asked Raffles, turning upon me quite sharply, but

without the least dismay. And I told him how I knew.

"Of course," I added, "it was the fellow we saw in the inn this

afternoon."

"The detective?" said Raffles. "Do you mean to say you don't know a

detective when you see one, Bunny?"

"If that wasn't the fellow, which is?"

Raffles shook his head.

"To think that you've been talking to him for the last hour in the

billiard-room and couldn't spot what he was!"

"The Scotch photographer--"

I paused aghast.

"Scotch he is," said Raffles, "and photographer he may be. He is also

Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard--the very man I sent the message

to that night last April. And you couldn't spot who he was in a whole

hour! O Bunny, Bunny, you were never built for crime!"

"But," said I, "if that was Mackenzie, who was the fellow you bolted

from at Warbeck?"

"The man he's watching."

"But he's watching us!"

Raffles looked at me with a pitying eye, and shook his head again

before handing me his open cigarette-case.

"I don't know whether smoking's forbidden in one's bedroom, but you'd

better take one of these and stand tight, Bunny, because I'm going to

say something offensive."

I helped myself with a laugh.

"Say what you like, my dear fellow, if it really isn't you and I that

Mackenzie's after."

"Well, then, it isn't, and it couldn't be, and nobody but a born Bunny

would suppose for a moment that it was! Do you seriously think he

would sit there and knowingly watch his man playing pool under his

nose? Well, he might; he's a cool hand, Mackenzie; but I'm not cool

enough to win a pool under such conditions. At least I don't think I

am; it would be interesting to see. The situation wasn't free from

strain as it was, though I knew he wasn't thinking of us. Crowley told

me all about it after dinner, you see, and then I'd seen one of the men

for myself this afternoon. You thought it was a detective who made me

turn tail at that inn. I really don't know why I didn't tell you at

the time, but it was just the opposite. That loud, red-faced brute is

one of the cleverest thieves in London, and I once had a drink with him

and our mutual fence. I was an Eastender from tongue to toe at the

moment, but you will understand that I don't run unnecessary risks of

recognition by a brute like that."

"He's not alone, I hear."

"By no means; there's at least one other man with him; and it's

suggested that there may be an accomplice here in the house."

"Did Lord Crowley tell you so?"

"Crowley and the champagne between them. In confidence, of course,

just as your girl told you; but even in confidence he never let on

about Mackenzie. He told me there was a detective in the background,

but that was all. Putting him up as a guest is evidently their big

secret, to be kept from the other guests because it might offend them,

but more particularly from the servants whom he's here to watch.

That's my reading of the situation, Bunny, and you will agree with me

that it's infinitely more interesting than we could have imagined it

would prove."

"But infinitely more difficult for us," said I, with a sigh of

pusillanimous relief. "Our hands are tied for this week, at all

events."

"Not necessarily, my dear Bunny, though I admit that the chances are

against us. Yet I'm not so sure of that either. There are all sorts

of possibilities in these three-cornered combinations. Set A to watch

B, and he won't have an eye left for C. That's the obvious theory, but

then Mackenzie's a very big A. I should be sorry to have any boodle

about me with that man in the house. Yet it would be great to nip in

between A and B and score off them both at once! It would be worth a

risk, Bunny, to do that; it would be worth risking something merely to

take on old hands like B and his men at their own old game! Eh, Bunny?

That would be something like a match. Gentlemen and Players at single

wicket, by Jove!"

His eyes were brighter than I had known them for many a day. They

shone with the perverted enthusiasm which was roused in him only by the

contemplation of some new audacity. He kicked off his shoes and began

pacing his room with noiseless rapidity; not since the night of the Old

Bohemian dinner to Reuben Rosenthall had Raffles exhibited such

excitement in my presence; and I was not sorry at the moment to be

reminded of the fiasco to which that banquet had been the prelude.

"My dear A. J.," said I in his very own tone, "you're far too fond of

the uphill game; you will eventually fall a victim to the sporting

spirit and nothing else. Take a lesson from our last escape, and fly

lower as you value our skins. Study the house as much as you like, but

do--not--go and shove your head into Mackenzie's mouth!"

My wealth of metaphor brought him to a stand-still, with his cigarette

between his fingers and a grin beneath his shining eyes.

"You're quite right, Bunny. I won't. I really won't. Yet--you saw

old Lady Melrose's necklace? I've been wanting it for years! But I'm

not going to play the fool; honor bright, I'm not; yet--by Jove!--to

get to windward of the professors and Mackenzie too! It would be a

great game, Bunny, it would be a great game!"

"Well, you mustn't play it this week."

"No, no, I won't. But I wonder how the professors think of going to

work? That's what one wants to know. I wonder if they've really got

an accomplice in the house? How I wish I knew their game! But it's

all right, Bunny; don't you be jealous; it shall be as you wish."

And with that assurance I went off to my own room, and so to bed with

an incredibly light heart. I had still enough of the honest man in me

to welcome the postponement of our actual felonies, to dread their

performance, to deplore their necessity: which is merely another way of

stating the too patent fact that I was an incomparably weaker man than

Raffles, while every whit as wicked.

I had, however, one rather strong point. I possessed the gift of

dismissing unpleasant considerations, not intimately connected with the

passing moment, entirely from my mind. Through the exercise of this

faculty I had lately been living my frivolous life in town with as much

ignoble enjoyment as I had derived from it the year before; and

similarly, here at Milchester, in the long-dreaded cricket-week, I had

after all a quite excellent time.

It is true that there were other factors in this pleasing

disappointment. In the first place, mirabile dictu, there were one or

two even greater duffers than I on the Abbey cricket-field. Indeed,

quite early in the week, when it was of most value to me, I gained

considerable kudos for a lucky catch; a ball, of which I had merely

heard the hum, stuck fast in my hand, which Lord Amersteth himself

grasped in public congratulation. This happy accident was not to be

undone even by me, and, as nothing succeeds like success, and the

constant encouragement of the one great cricketer on the field was in

itself an immense stimulus, I actually made a run or two in my very

next innings. Miss Melhuish said pretty things to me that night at the

great ball in honor of Viscount Crowley's majority; she also told me

that was the night on which the robbers would assuredly make their

raid, and was full of arch tremors when we sat out in the garden,

though the entire premises were illuminated all night long. Meanwhile

the quiet Scotchman took countless photographs by day, which he

developed by night in a dark room admirably situated in the servants'

part of the house; and it is my firm belief that only two of his

fellow-guests knew Mr. Clephane of Dundee for Inspector Mackenzie of

Scotland Yard.

The week was to end with a trumpery match on the Saturday, which two or

three of us intended abandoning early in order to return to town that

night. The match, however, was never played. In the small hours of

the Saturday morning a tragedy took place at Milchester Abbey.

Let me tell of the thing as I saw and heard it. My room opened upon

the central gallery, and was not even on the same floor as that on

which Raffles--and I think all the other men--were quartered. I had

been put, in fact, into the dressing-room of one of the grand suites,

and my too near neighbors were old Lady Melrose and my host and

hostess. Now, by the Friday evening the actual festivities were at an

end, and, for the first time that week, I must have been sound asleep

since midnight, when all at once I found myself sitting up breathless.

A heavy thud had come against my door, and now I heard hard breathing

and the dull stamp of muffled feet.

"I've got ye," muttered a voice. "It's no use struggling."

It was the Scotch detective, and a new fear turned me cold. There was

no reply, but the hard breathing grew harder still, and the muffled

feet beat the floor to a quicker measure. In sudden panic I sprang out

of bed and flung open my door. A light burnt low on the landing, and by

it I could see Mackenzie swaying and staggering in a silent tussle with

some powerful adversary.

"Hold this man!" he cried, as I appeared. "Hold the rascal!"

But I stood like a fool until the pair of them backed into me, when,

with a deep breath I flung myself on the fellow, whose face I had seen

at last. He was one of the footmen who waited at table; and no sooner

had I pinned him than the detective loosed his hold.

"Hang on to him," he cried. "There's more of 'em below."

And he went leaping down the stairs, as other doors opened and Lord

Amersteth and his son appeared simultaneously in their pyjamas. At

that my man ceased struggling; but I was still holding him when Crowley

turned up the gas.

"What the devil's all this?" asked Lord Amersteth, blinking. "Who was

that ran downstairs?"

"Mac--Clephane!" said I hastily.

"Aha!" said he, turning to the footman. "So you're the scoundrel, are

you? Well done! Well done! Where was he caught?"

I had no idea.

"Here's Lady Melrose's door open," said Crowley. "Lady Melrose! Lady

Melrose!"

"You forget she's deaf," said Lord Amersteth. "Ah! that'll be her maid."

An inner door had opened; next instant there was a little shriek, and a

white figure gesticulated on the threshold.

"Ou donc est l'ecrin de Madame la Marquise? La fenetre est ouverte.

Il a disparu!"

"Window open and jewel-case gone, by Jove!" exclaimed Lord Amersteth.

"Mais comment est Madame la Marquise? Est elle bien?"

"Oui, milor. Elle dort."

"Sleeps through it all," said my lord. "She's the only one, then!"

"What made Mackenzie--Clephane--bolt?" young Crowley asked me.

"Said there were more of them below."

"Why the devil couldn't you tell us so before?" he cried, and went

leaping downstairs in his turn.

He was followed by nearly all the cricketers, who now burst upon the

scene in a body, only to desert it for the chase. Raffles was one of

them, and I would gladly have been another, had not the footman chosen

this moment to hurl me from him, and to make a dash in the direction

from which they had come. Lord Amersteth had him in an instant; but

the fellow fought desperately, and it took the two of us to drag him

downstairs, amid a terrified chorus from half-open doors. Eventually

we handed him over to two other footmen who appeared with their

nightshirts tucked into their trousers, and my host was good enough to

compliment me as he led the way outside.

"I thought I heard a shot," he added. "Didn't you?"

"I thought I heard three."

And out we dashed into the darkness.

I remember how the gravel pricked my feet, how the wet grass numbed

them as we made for the sound of voices on an outlying lawn. So dark

was the night that we were in the cricketers' midst before we saw the

shimmer of their pyjamas; and then Lord Amersteth almost trod on

Mackenzie as he lay prostrate in the dew.

"Who's this?" he cried. "What on earth's happened?"

"It's Clephane," said a man who knelt over him. "He's got a bullet in

him somewhere."

"Is he alive?"

"Barely."

"Good God! Where's Crowley?"

"Here I am," called a breathless voice. "It's no good, you fellows.

There's nothing to show which way they've gone. Here's Raffles; he's

chucked it, too." And they ran up panting.

"Well, we've got one of them, at all events," muttered Lord Amersteth.

"The next thing is to get this poor fellow indoors. Take his

shoulders, somebody. Now his middle. Join hands under him. All

together, now; that's the way. Poor fellow! Poor fellow! His name

isn't Clephane at all. He's a Scotland Yard detective, down here for

these very villains!"

Raffles was the first to express surprise; but he had also been the

first to raise the wounded man. Nor had any of them a stronger or more

tender hand in the slow procession to the house.

In a little we had the senseless man stretched on a sofa in the

library. And there, with ice on his wound and brandy in his throat,

his eyes opened and his lips moved.

Lord Amersteth bent down to catch the words.

"Yes, yes," said he; "we've got one of them safe and sound. The brute

you collared upstairs." Lord Amersteth bent lower. "By Jove! Lowered

the jewel-case out of the window, did he? And they've got clean away

with it! Well, well! I only hope we'll be able to pull this good

fellow through. He's off again."

An hour passed: the sun was rising.

It found a dozen young fellows on the settees in the billiard-room,

drinking whiskey and soda-water in their overcoats and pyjamas, and

still talking excitedly in one breath. A time-table was being passed

from hand to hand: the doctor was still in the library. At last the

door opened, and Lord Amersteth put in his head.

"It isn't hopeless," said he, "but it's bad enough. There'll be no

cricket to-day."

Another hour, and most of us were on our way to catch the early train;

between us we filled a compartment almost to suffocation. And still we

talked all together of the night's event; and still I was a little hero

in my way, for having kept my hold of the one ruffian who had been

taken; and my gratification was subtle and intense. Raffles watched me

under lowered lids. Not a word had we had together; not a word did we

have until we had left the others at Paddington, and were skimming

through the streets in a hansom with noiseless tires and a tinkling

bell.

"Well, Bunny," said Raffles, "so the professors have it, eh?"

"Yes," said I. "And I'm jolly glad!"

"That poor Mackenzie has a ball in his chest?"

"That you and I have been on the decent side for once."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You're hopeless, Bunny, quite hopeless! I take it you wouldn't have

refused your share if the boodle had fallen to us? Yet you positively

enjoy coming off second best--for the second time running! I confess,

however, that the professors' methods were full of interest to me. I,

for one, have probably gained as much in experience as I have lost in

other things. That lowering the jewel-case out of the window was a

very simple and effective expedient; two of them had been waiting below

for it for hours."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I saw them from my own window, which was just above the dear old

lady's. I was fretting for that necklace in particular, when I went up

to turn in for our last night--and I happened to look out of my window.

In point of fact, I wanted to see whether the one below was open, and

whether there was the slightest chance of working the oracle with my

sheet for a rope. Of course I took the precaution of turning my light

off first, and it was a lucky thing I did. I saw the pros. right down

below, and they never saw me. I saw a little tiny luminous disk just

for an instant, and then again for an instant a few minutes later. Of

course I knew what it was, for I have my own watch-dial daubed with

luminous paint; it makes a lantern of sorts when you can get no better.

But these fellows were not using theirs as a lantern. They were under

the old lady's window. They were watching the time. The whole thing

was arranged with their accomplice inside. Set a thief to catch a

thief: in a minute I had guessed what the whole thing proved to be."

"And you did nothing!" I exclaimed.

"On the contrary, I went downstairs and straight into Lady Melrose's

room--"

"You did?"

"Without a moment's hesitation. To save her jewels. And I was

prepared to yell as much into her ear-trumpet for all the house to

hear. But the dear lady is too deaf and too fond of her dinner to wake

easily."

"Well?"

"She didn't stir."

"And yet you allowed the professors, as you call them, to take her

jewels, case and all!"

"All but this," said Raffles, thrusting his fist into my lap. "I would

have shown it you before, but really, old fellow, your face all day has

been worth a fortune to the firm!"

And he opened his fist, to shut it next instant on the bunch of

diamonds and of sapphires that I had last seen encircling the neck of

Lady Melrose.

LE PREMIER PAS

That night he told me the story of his earliest crime. Not since the

fateful morning of the Ides of March, when he had just mentioned it as

an unreported incident of a certain cricket tour, had I succeeded in

getting a word out of Raffles on the subject. It was not for want of

trying; he would shake his head, and watch his cigarette smoke

thoughtfully; a subtle look in his eyes, half cynical, half wistful, as

though the decent honest days that were no more had had their merits

after all. Raffles would plan a fresh enormity, or glory in the last,

with the unmitigated enthusiasm of the artist. It was impossible to

imagine one throb or twitter of compunction beneath those frankly

egotistic and infectious transports. And yet the ghost of a dead

remorse seemed still to visit him with the memory of his first felony,

so that I had given the story up long before the night of our return

from Milchester. Cricket, however, was in the air, and Raffles's

cricket-bag back where he sometimes kept it, in the fender, with the

remains of an Orient label still adhering to the leather. My eyes had

been on this label for some time, and I suppose his eyes had been on

mine, for all at once he asked me if I still burned to hear that yarn.

"It's no use," I replied. "You won't spin it. I must imagine it for

myself."

"How can you?"

"Oh, I begin to know your methods."

"You take it I went in with my eyes open, as I do now, eh?"

"I can't imagine your doing otherwise."

"My dear Bunny, it was the most unpremeditated thing I ever did in my

life!"

His chair wheeled back into the books as he sprang up with sudden

energy. There was quite an indignant glitter in his eyes.

"I can't believe that," said I craftily. "I can't pay you such a poor

compliment!"

"Then you must be a fool--"

He broke off, stared hard at me, and in a trice stood smiling in his

own despite.

"Or a better knave than I thought you, Bunny, and by Jove it's the

knave! Well--I suppose I'm fairly drawn; I give you best, as they say

out there. As a matter of fact I've been thinking of the thing myself;

last night's racket reminds me of it in one or two respects. I tell

you what, though, this is an occasion in any case, and I'm going to

celebrate it by breaking the one good rule of my life. I'm going to

have a second drink!"

The whiskey tinkled, the syphon fizzed, the ice plopped home; and

seated there in his pyjamas, with the inevitable cigarette, Raffles

told me the story that I had given up hoping to hear. The windows were

wide open; the sounds of Piccadilly floated in at first. Long before

he finished, the last wheels had rattled, the last brawler was removed,

we alone broke the quiet of the summer night.

"... No, they do you very well, indeed. You pay for nothing but drinks,

so to speak, but I'm afraid mine were of a comprehensive character. I

had started in a hole, I ought really to have refused the invitation;

then we all went to the Melbourne Cup, and I had the certain winner

that didn't win, and that's not the only way you can play the fool in

Melbourne. I wasn't the steady old stager I am now, Bunny; my analysis

was a confession in itself. But the others didn't know how hard up I

was, and I swore they shouldn't. I tried the Jews, but they're extra

fly out there. Then I thought of a kinsman of sorts, a second cousin of

my father's whom none of us knew anything about, except that he was

supposed to be in one or other of the Colonies. If he was a rich man,

well and good, I would work him; if not there would be no harm done. I

tried to get on his tracks, and, as luck would have it, I succeeded (or

thought I had) at the very moment when I happened to have a few days to

myself. I was cut over on the hand, just before the big Christmas

match, and couldn't have bowled a ball if they had played me.

"The surgeon who fixed me up happened to ask me if I was any relation

of Raffles of the National Bank, and the pure luck of it almost took my

breath away. A relation who was a high official in one of the banks,

who would finance me on my mere name--could anything be better? I made

up my mind that this Raffles was the man I wanted, and was awfully sold

to find next moment that he wasn't a high official at all. Nor had the

doctor so much as met him, but had merely read of him in connection

with a small sensation at the suburban branch which my namesake

managed; an armed robber had been rather pluckily beaten off, with a

bullet in him, by this Raffles; and the sort of thing was so common out

there that this was the first I had heard of it! A suburban branch--my

financier had faded into some excellent fellow with a billet to lose if

he called his soul his own. Still a manager was a manager, and I said I

would soon see whether this was the relative I was looking for, if he

would be good enough to give me the name of that branch.

"'I'll do more,' says the doctor. 'I'll get you the name of the branch

he's been promoted to, for I think I heard they'd moved him up one

already.' And the next day he brought me the name of the township of

Yea, some fifty miles north of Melbourne; but, with the vagueness which

characterized all his information, he was unable to say whether I

should find my relative there or not.

"'He's a single man, and his initials are W. F.,' said the doctor, who

was certain enough of the immaterial points. 'He left his old post

several days ago, but it appears he's not due at the new one till the

New Year. No doubt he'll go before then to take things over and settle

in. You might find him up there and you might not. If I were you I

should write.'

"'That'll lose two days,' said I, 'and more if he isn't there,' for I'd

grown quite keen on this up-country manager, and I felt that if I could

get at him while the holidays were still on, a little conviviality

might help matters considerably.

"'Then,' said the doctor, 'I should get a quiet horse and ride. You

needn't use that hand.'

"'Can't I go by train?'

"'You can and you can't. You would still have to ride. I suppose

you're a horseman?'

"'Yes.'

"'Then I should certainly ride all the way. It's a delightful road,

through Whittlesea and over the Plenty Ranges. It'll give you some

idea of the bush, Mr. Raffles, and you'll see the sources of the water

supply of this city, sir. You'll see where every drop of it comes

from, the pure Yan Yean! I wish I had time to ride with you.'

"'But where can I get a horse?'

"The doctor thought a moment.

"'I've a mare of my own that's as fat as butter for want of work,' said

he. 'It would be a charity to me to sit on her back for a hundred

miles or so, and then I should know you'd have no temptation to use

that hand.'

"'You're far too good!' I protested.

"'You're A. J. Raffles,' he said.

"And if ever there was a prettier compliment, or a finer instance of

even Colonial hospitality, I can only say, Bunny, that I never heard of

either."

He sipped his whiskey, threw away the stump of his cigarette, and lit

another before continuing.

"Well, I managed to write a line to W. F. with my own hand, which, as

you will gather, was not very badly wounded; it was simply this third

finger that was split and in splints; and next morning the doctor

packed me off on a bovine beast that would have done for an ambulance.

Half the team came up to see me start; the rest were rather sick with

me for not stopping to see the match out, as if I could help them to

win by watching them. They little knew the game I'd got on myself, but

still less did I know the game I was going to play.

"It was an interesting ride enough, especially after passing the place

called Whittlesea, a real wild township on the lower slope of the

ranges, where I recollect having a deadly meal of hot mutton and tea,

with the thermometer at three figures in the shade. The first thirty

miles or so was a good metal road, too good to go half round the world

to ride on, but after Whittlesea it was a mere track over the ranges, a

track I often couldn't see and left entirely to the mare. Now it

dipped into a gully and ran through a creek, and all the time the local

color was inches thick; gum-trees galore and parrots all colors of the

rainbow. In one place a whole forest of gums had been ring-barked, and

were just as though they had been painted white, without a leaf or a

living thing for miles. And the first living thing I did meet was the

sort to give you the creeps; it was a riderless horse coming full tilt

through the bush, with the saddle twisted round and the stirrup-irons

ringing. Without thinking, I had a shot at heading him with the

doctor's mare, and blocked him just enough to allow a man who came

galloping after to do the rest.

"'Thank ye, mister,' growled the man, a huge chap in a red checked

shirt, with a beard like W. G. Grace, but the very devil of an

expression.

"'Been an accident?' said I, reining up.

"'Yes,' said he, scowling as though he defied me to ask any more.

"'And a nasty one,' I said, 'if that's blood on the saddle!'

"Well, Bunny, I may be a blackguard myself, but I don't think I ever

looked at a fellow as that chap looked at me. But I stared him out,

and forced him to admit that it was blood on the twisted saddle, and

after that he became quite tame. He told me exactly what had happened.

A mate of his had been dragged under a branch, and had his nose

smashed, but that was all; had sat tight after it till he dropped from

loss of blood; another mate was with him back in the bush.

"As I've said already, Bunny, I wasn't the old stager that I am now--in

any respect--and we parted good enough friends. He asked me which way

I was going, and, when I told him, he said I should save seven miles,

and get a good hour earlier to Yea, by striking off the track and

making for a peak that we could see through the trees, and following a

creek that I should see from the peak. Don't smile, Bunny! I began by

saying I was a child in those days. Of course, the short cut was the

long way round; and it was nearly dark when that unlucky mare and I saw

the single street of Yea.

"I was looking for the bank when a fellow in a white suit ran down from

the veranda.

"'Mr. Raffles?' said he.

"'Mr. Raffles,' said I, laughing as I shook his hand.

"'You're late.'

"'I was misdirected.'

"'That all? I'm relieved,' he said. 'Do you know what they are

saying? There are some brand-new bushrangers on the road between

Whittlesea and this--a second Kelly gang! They'd have caught a Tartar

in you, eh?'

"'They would in you,' I retorted, and my tu quoque shut him up and

seemed to puzzle him. Yet there was much more sense in it than in his

compliment to me, which was absolutely pointless.

"'I'm afraid you'll find things pretty rough,' he resumed, when he had

unstrapped my valise, and handed my reins to his man. 'It's lucky

you're a bachelor like myself.'

"I could not quite see the point of this remark either, since, had I

been married, I should hardly have sprung my wife upon him in this

free-and-easy fashion. I muttered the conventional sort of thing, and

then he said I should find it all right when I settled, as though I had

come to graze upon him for weeks! 'Well,' thought I, 'these Colonials

do take the cake for hospitality!' And, still marvelling, I let him

lead me into the private part of the bank.

"'Dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour,' said he as we entered.

'I thought you might like a tub first, and you'll find all ready in the

room at the end of the passage. Sing out if there's anything you want.

Your luggage hasn't turned up yet, by the way, but here's a letter that

came this morning.'

"'Not for me?'

"'Yes; didn't you expect one?'

"'I certainly did not!'

"'Well, here it is.'

"And, as he lit me to my room, I read my own superscription of the

previous day--to W. F. Raffles!

"Bunny, you've had your wind bagged at footer, I daresay; you know what

that's like? All I can say is that my moral wind was bagged by that

letter as I hope, old chap, I have never yet bagged yours. I couldn't

speak. I could only stand with my own letter in my hands until he had

the good taste to leave me by myself.

"W. F. Raffles! We had mistaken EACH OTHER for W. F. Raffles--for the

new manager who had not yet arrived! Small wonder we had conversed at

cross-purposes; the only wonder was that we had not discovered our

mutual mistake. How the other man would have laughed! But I--I could

not laugh. By Jove, no, it was no laughing matter for me! I saw the

whole thing in a flash, without a tremor, but with the direst

depression from my own single point of view. Call it callous if you

like, Bunny, but remember that I was in much the same hole as you've

since been in yourself, and that I had counted on this W. F. Raffles

even as you counted on A. J. I thought of the man with the W. G.

beard--the riderless horse and the bloody saddle--the deliberate

misdirection that had put me off the track and out of the way--and now

the missing manager and the report of bushrangers at this end. But I

simply don't pretend to have felt any personal pity for a man whom I

had never seen; that kind of pity's usually cant; and besides, all mine

was needed for myself.

"I was in as big a hole as ever. What the devil was I to do? I doubt

if I have sufficiently impressed upon you the absolute necessity of my

returning to Melbourne in funds. As a matter of fact it was less the

necessity than my own determination which I can truthfully ascribe as

absolute.

"Money I would have--but how--but how? Would this stranger be open to

persuasion--if I told him the truth? No; that would set us all

scouring the country for the rest of the night. Why should I tell him?

Suppose I left him to find out his mistake ... would anything be

gained? Bunny, I give you my word that I went in to dinner without a

definite intention in my head, or one premeditated lie upon my lips. I

might do the decent, natural thing, and explain matters without loss of

time; on the other hand, there was no hurry. I had not opened the

letter, and could always pretend I had not noticed the initials;

meanwhile something might turn up. I could wait a little and see.

Tempted I already was, but as yet the temptation was vague, and its

very vagueness made me tremble.

"'Bad news, I'm afraid?' said the manager, when at last I sat down at

his table.

"'A mere annoyance,' I answered--I do assure you--on the spur of the

moment and nothing else. But my lie was told; my position was taken;

from that moment onward there was no retreat. By implication, without

realizing what I was doing, I had already declared myself W. F.

Raffles. Therefore, W. F. Raffles I would be, in that bank, for that

night. And the devil teach me how to use my lie!"

Again he raised his glass to his lips--I had forgotten mine. His

cigarette-case caught the gas-light as he handed it to me. I shook my

head without taking my eyes from his.

"The devil played up," continued Raffles, with a laugh. "Before I

tasted my soup I had decided what to do. I had determined to rob that

bank instead of going to bed, and to be back in Melbourne for breakfast

if the doctor's mare could do it. I would tell the old fellow that I

had missed my way and been bushed for hours, as I easily might have

been, and had never got to Yea at all. At Yea, on the other hand, the

personation and robbery would ever after be attributed to a member of

the gang that had waylaid and murdered the new manager with that very

object. You are acquiring some experience in such matters, Bunny. I

ask you, was there ever a better get-out? Last night's was something

like it, only never such a certainty. And I saw it from the

beginning--saw to the end before I had finished my soup!

"To increase my chances, the cashier, who also lived in the bank, was

away over the holidays, had actually gone down to Melbourne to see us

play; and the man who had taken my horse also waited at table; for he

and his wife were the only servants, and they slept in a separate

building. You may depend I ascertained this before we had finished

dinner. Indeed I was by way of asking too many questions (the most

oblique and delicate was that which elicited my host's name, Ewbank),

nor was I careful enough to conceal their drift.

"'Do you know,' said this fellow Ewbank, who was one of the downright

sort, 'if it wasn't you, I should say you were in a funk of robbers?

Have you lost your nerve?'

"'I hope not,' said I, turning jolly hot, I can tell you; 'but--well,

it is not a pleasant thing to have to put a bullet through a fellow!'

"'No?' said he, coolly. 'I should enjoy nothing better, myself;

besides, yours didn't go through.'

"'I wish it had!' I was smart enough to cry.

"'Amen!' said he.

"And I emptied my glass; actually I did not know whether my wounded

bank-robber was in prison, dead, or at large!

"But, now that I had had more than enough of it, Ewbank would come back

to the subject. He admitted that the staff was small; but as for

himself, he had a loaded revolver under his pillow all night, under the

counter all day, and he was only waiting for his chance.

"'Under the counter eh?' I was ass enough to say.

"'Yes; so had you!'

"He was looking at me in surprise, and something told me that to say

'of course--I had forgotten!' would have been quite fatal, considering

what I was supposed to have done. So I looked down my nose and shook

my head.

"'But the papers said you had!' he cried.

"'Not under the counter," said I.

"'But it's the regulation!'

"For the moment, Bunny, I felt stumped, though I trust I only looked

more superior than before, and I think I justified my look.

"'The regulation!' I said at length, in the most offensive tone at my

command. 'Yes, the regulation would have us all dead men! My dear

sir, do you expect your bank robber to let you reach for your gun in

the place where he knows it's kept? I had mine in my pocket, and I got

my chance by retreating from the counter with all visible reluctance.'

"Ewbank stared at me with open eyes and a five-barred forehead, then

down came his fist on the table.

"'By God! That was smart! Still,' he added, like a man who would not

be in the wrong, 'the papers said the other thing, you know!'

"'Of course,' I rejoined, 'because they said what I told them. You

wouldn't have had me advertise the fact that I improved upon the bank's

regulations, would you?'

"So that cloud rolled over, and by Jove it was a cloud with a golden

lining. Not silver--real good Australian gold! For old Ewbank hadn't

quite appreciated me till then; he was a hard nut, a much older man

than myself, and I felt pretty sure he thought me young for the place,

and my supposed feat a fluke. But I never saw a man change his mind

more openly. He got out his best brandy, he made me throw away the

cigar I was smoking, and opened a fresh box. He was a

convivial-looking party, with a red moustache, and a very humorous face

(not unlike Tom Emmett's), and from that moment I laid myself out to

attack him on his convivial flank. But he wasn't a Rosenthall, Bunny;

he had a treble-seamed, hand-sewn head, and could have drunk me under

the table ten times over.

"'All right,' I thought, 'you may go to bed sober, but you'll sleep

like a timber-yard!' And I threw half he gave me through the open

window, when he wasn't looking.

"But he was a good chap, Ewbank, and don't you imagine he was at all

intemperate. Convivial I called him, and I only wish he had been

something more. He did, however, become more and more genial as the

evening advanced, and I had not much difficulty in getting him to show

me round the bank at what was really an unearthly hour for such a

proceeding. It was when he went to fetch the revolver before turning

in. I kept him out of his bed another twenty minutes, and I knew every

inch of the business premises before I shook hands with Ewbank in my

room.

"You won't guess what I did with myself for the next hour. I undressed

and went to bed. The incessant strain involved in even the most

deliberate impersonation is the most wearing thing I know; then how

much more so when the impersonation is impromptu! There's no getting

your eye in; the next word may bowl you out; it's batting in a bad

light all through. I haven't told you of half the tight places I was

in during a conversation that ran into hours and became dangerously

intimate towards the end. You can imagine them for yourself, and then

picture me spread out on my bed, getting my second wind for the big

deed of the night.

"Once more I was in luck, for I had not been lying there long before I

heard my dear Ewbank snoring like a harmonium, and the music never

ceased for a moment; it was as loud as ever when I crept out and closed

my door behind me, as regular as ever when I stopped to listen at his.

And I have still to hear the concert that I shall enjoy much more. The

good fellow snored me out of the bank, and was still snoring when I

again stood and listened under his open window.

"Why did I leave the bank first? To catch and saddle the mare and

tether her in a clump of trees close by: to have the means of escape

nice and handy before I went to work. I have often wondered at the

instinctive wisdom of the precaution; unconsciously I was acting on

what has been one of my guiding principles ever since. Pains and

patience were required: I had to get my saddle without waking the man,

and I was not used to catching horses in a horse-paddock. Then I

distrusted the poor mare, and I went back to the stables for a hatful

of oats, which I left with her in the clump, hat and all. There was a

dog, too, to reckon with (our very worst enemy, Bunny); but I had been

'cute enough to make immense friends with him during the evening; and

he wagged his tail, not only when I came downstairs, but when I

reappeared at the back-door.

"As the soi-disant new manager, I had been able, in the most ordinary

course, to pump poor Ewbank about anything and everything connected

with the working of the bank, especially in those twenty last

invaluable minutes before turning in. And I had made a very natural

point of asking him where he kept, and would recommend me to keep, the

keys at night. Of course I thought he would take them with him to his

room; but no such thing; he had a dodge worth two of that. What it was

doesn't much matter, but no outsider would have found those keys in a

month of Sundays.

"I, of course, had them in a few seconds, and in a few more I was in

the strong-room itself. I forgot to say that the moon had risen and

was letting quite a lot of light into the bank. I had, however,

brought a bit of candle with me from my room; and in the strong-room,

which was down some narrow stairs behind the counter in the

banking-chamber, I had no hesitation in lighting it. There was no

window down there, and, though I could no longer hear old Ewbank

snoring, I had not the slightest reason to anticipate disturbance from

that quarter. I did think of locking myself in while I was at work,

but, thank goodness, the iron door had no keyhole on the inside.

"Well, there were heaps of gold in the safe, but I only took what I

needed and could comfortably carry, not much more than a couple of

hundred altogether. Not a note would I touch, and my native caution

came out also in the way I divided the sovereigns between all my

pockets, and packed them up so that I shouldn't be like the old woman

of Banbury Cross. Well, you think me too cautious still, but I was

insanely cautious then. And so it was that, just as I was ready to go,

whereas I might have been gone ten minutes, there came a violent

knocking at the outer door.

"Bunny, it was the outer door of the banking-chamber! My candle must

have been seen! And there I stood, with the grease running hot over my

fingers, in that brick grave of a strong-room!

"There was only one thing to be done. I must trust to the sound

sleeping of Ewbank upstairs, open the door myself, knock the visitor

down, or shoot him with the revolver I had been new chum enough to buy

before leaving Melbourne, and make a dash for that clump of trees and

the doctor's mare. My mind was made up in an instant, and I was at the

top of the strong-room stairs, the knocking still continuing, when a

second sound drove me back. It was the sound of bare feet coming along

a corridor.

"My narrow stair was stone, I tumbled down it with little noise, and

had only to push open the iron door, for I had left the keys in the

safe. As I did so I heard a handle turn overhead, and thanked my gods

that I had shut every single door behind me. You see, old chap, one's

caution doesn't always let one in!

"'Who's that knocking?' said Ewbank up above.

"I could not make out the answer, but it sounded to me like the

irrelevant supplication of a spent man. What I did hear, plainly, was

the cocking of the bank revolver before the bolts were shot back.

Then, a tottering step, a hard, short, shallow breathing, and Ewbank's

voice in horror--

"'My God! Good Lord! What's happened to you? You're bleeding like a

pig!'

"'Not now,' came with a grateful sort of sigh.

"'But you have been! What's done it?'

"'Bushrangers.'

"'Down the road?'

"'This and Whittlesea--tied to tree--cock shots--left me--bleed to

death ...'"

The weak voice failed, and the bare feet bolted. Now was my time--if

the poor devil had fainted. But I could not be sure, and there I

crouched down below in the dark, at the half-shut iron door, not less

spellbound than imprisoned. It was just as well, for Ewbank wasn't

gone a minute.

"'Drink this,' I heard him say, and, when the other spoke again, his

voice was stronger.

"'Now I begin to feel alive ...'

"'Don't talk!'

"'It does me good. You don't know what it was, all those miles alone,

one an hour at the outside! I never thought I should come through. You

must let me tell you--in case I don't!'

"'Well, have another sip.'

"'Thank you ... I said bushrangers; of course, there are no such

things nowadays.'

"'What were they, then?'

"'Bank-thieves; the one that had the pot shots was the very brute I

drove out of the bank at Coburg, with a bullet in him!"'

"I knew it!"

"Of course you did, Bunny; so did I, down in that strong-room; but old

Ewbank didn't, and I thought he was never going to speak again.

"'You're delirious,' he says at last. 'Who in blazes do you think you

are?'

"'The new manager.'

"'The new manager's in bed and asleep upstairs.'

"'When did he arrive?'

"'This evening.'

"'Call himself Raffles?'

"'Yes.'

"'Well, I'm damned!' whispered the real man. 'I thought it was just

revenge, but now I see what it was. My dear sir, the man upstairs is

an imposter--if he's upstairs still! He must be one of the gang. He's

going to rob the bank--if he hasn't done so already!'

"'If he hasn't done so already,' muttered Ewbank after him; 'if he's

upstairs still! By God, if he is, I'm sorry for him!'

"His tone was quiet enough, but about the nastiest I ever heard. I

tell you, Bunny, I was glad I'd brought that revolver. It looked as

though it must be mine against his, muzzle to muzzle.

"'Better have a look down here, first,' said the new manager.

"'While he gets through his window? No, no, he's not down here.'

"'It's easy to have a look.'

"Bunny, if you ask me what was the most thrilling moment of my infamous

career, I say it was that moment. There I stood at the bottom of those

narrow stone stairs, inside the strong-room, with the door a good foot

open, and I didn't know whether it would creak or not. The light was

coming nearer--and I didn't know! I had to chance it. And it didn't

creak a bit; it was far too solid and well-hung; and I couldn't have

banged it if I tried, it was too heavy; and it fitted so close that I

felt and heard the air squeeze out in my face. Every shred of light

went out, except the streak underneath, and it brightened. How I

blessed that door!

"'No, he's not down THERE,' I heard, as though through cotton-wool;

then the streak went out too, and in a few seconds I ventured to open

once more, and was in time to hear them creeping to my room.

"Well, now there was not a fifth of a second to be lost; but I'm proud

to say I came up those stairs on my toes and fingers, and out of that

bank (they'd gone and left the door open) just as gingerly as though my

time had been my own. I didn't even forget to put on the hat that the

doctor's mare was eating her oats out of, as well as she could with a

bit, or it alone would have landed me. I didn't even gallop away, but

just jogged off quietly in the thick dust at the side of the road

(though I own my heart was galloping), and thanked my stars the bank

was at that end of the township, in which I really hadn't set foot.

The very last thing I heard was the two managers raising Cain and the

coachman. And now, Bunny--"

He stood up and stretched himself, with a smile that ended in a yawn.

The black windows had faded through every shade of indigo; they now

framed their opposite neighbors, stark and livid in the dawn; and the

gas seemed turned to nothing in the globes.

"But that's not all?" I cried.

"I'm sorry to say it is," said Raffles apologetically. "The thing

should have ended with an exciting chase, I know, but somehow it

didn't. I suppose they thought I had got no end of a start; then they

had made up their minds that I belonged to the gang, which was not so

many miles away; and one of them had got as much as he could carry from

that gang as it was. But I wasn't to know all that, and I'm bound to

say that there was plenty of excitement left for me. Lord, how I made

that poor brute travel when I got among the trees! Though we must have

made it over fifty miles from Melbourne, we had done it at a snail's

pace; and those stolen oats had brisked the old girl up to such a pitch

that she fairly bolted when she felt her nose turned south. By Jove,

it was no joke, in and out among those trees, and under branches with

your face in the mane! I told you about the forest of dead gums? It

looked perfectly ghostly in the moonlight. And I found it as still as

I had left it--so still that I pulled up there, my first halt, and lay

with my ear to the ground for two or three minutes. But I heard

nothing--not a thing but the mare's bellow and my own heart. I'm

sorry, Bunny; but if ever you write my memoirs, you won't have any

difficulty in working up that chase. Play those dead gum-trees for all

they're worth, and let the bullets fly like hail. I'll turn round in

my saddle to see Ewbank coming up hell-to-leather in his white suit,

and I'll duly paint it red. Do it in the third person, and they won't

know how it's going to end."

"But I don't know myself," I complained. "Did the mare carry you all

the way back to Melbourne?"

"Every rod, pole or perch! I had her well seen to at our hotel, and

returned her to the doctor in the evening. He was tremendously tickled

to hear that I had been bushed; next morning he brought me the paper to

show me what I had escaped at Yea!"

"Without suspecting anything?"

"Ah!" said Raffles, as he put out the gas; "that's a point on which

I've never made up my mind. The mare and her color was a

coincidence--luckily she was only a bay--and I fancied the condition of

the beast must have told a tale. The doctor's manner was certainly

different. I'm inclined to think he suspected something, though not

the right thing. I wasn't expecting him, and I fear my appearance may

have increased his suspicions."

I asked him why.

"I used to have rather a heavy moustache," said Raffles, "but I lost it

the day after I lost my innocence."

WILFUL MURDER

Of the various robberies in which we were both concerned, it is but the

few, I find, that will bear telling at any length. Not that the others

contained details which even I would hesitate to recount; it is,

rather, the very absence of untoward incident which renders them

useless for my present purpose. In point of fact our plans were so

craftily laid (by Raffles) that the chances of a hitch were invariably

reduced to a minimum before we went to work. We might be disappointed

in the market value of our haul; but it was quite the exception for us

to find ourselves confronted by unforeseen impediments, or involved in

a really dramatic dilemma. There was a sameness even in our spoil;

for, of course, only the most precious stones are worth the trouble we

took and the risks we ran. In short, our most successful escapades

would prove the greatest weariness of all in narrative form; and none

more so than the dull affair of the Ardagh emeralds, some eight or nine

weeks after the Milchester cricket week. The former, however, had a

sequel that I would rather forget than all our burglaries put together.

It was the evening after our return from Ireland, and I was waiting at

my rooms for Raffles, who had gone off as usual to dispose of the

plunder. Raffles had his own method of conducting this very vital

branch of our business, which I was well content to leave entirely in

his hands. He drove the bargains, I believe, in a thin but subtle

disguise of the flashy-seedy order, and always in the Cockney dialect,

of which he had made himself a master. Moreover, he invariably

employed the same "fence," who was ostensibly a money-lender in a small

(but yet notorious) way, and in reality a rascal as remarkable as

Raffles himself. Only lately I also had been to the man, but in my

proper person. We had needed capital for the getting of these very

emeralds, and I had raised a hundred pounds, on the terms you would

expect, from a soft-spoken graybeard with an ingratiating smile, an

incessant bow, and the shiftiest old eyes that ever flew from rim to

rim of a pair of spectacles. So the original sinews and the final

spoils of war came in this case from the self-same source--a

circumstance which appealed to us both.

But these same final spoils I was still to see, and I waited and waited

with an impatience that grew upon me with the growing dusk. At my open

window I had played Sister Ann until the faces in the street below were

no longer distinguishable. And now I was tearing to and fro in the grip

of horrible hypotheses--a grip that tightened when at last the

lift-gates opened with a clatter outside--that held me breathless until

a well-known tattoo followed on my door.

"In the dark!" said Raffles, as I dragged him in. "Why, Bunny, what's

wrong?"

"Nothing--now you've come," said I, shutting the door behind him in a

fever of relief and anxiety. "Well? Well? What did they fetch?"

"Five hundred."

"Down?"

"Got it in my pocket."

"Good man!" I cried. "You don't know what a stew I've been in. I'll

switch on the light. I've been thinking of you and nothing else for

the last hour. I--I was ass enough to think something had gone wrong!"

Raffles was smiling when the white light filled the room, but for the

moment I did not perceive the peculiarity of his smile. I was

fatuously full of my own late tremors and present relief; and my first

idiotic act was to spill some whiskey and squirt the soda-water all

over in my anxiety to do instant justice to the occasion.

"So you thought something had happened?" said Raffles, leaning back in

my chair as he lit a cigarette, and looking much amused. "What would

you say if something had? Sit tight, my dear chap! It was nothing of

the slightest consequence, and it's all over now. A stern chase and a

long one, Bunny, but I think I'm well to windward this time."

And suddenly I saw that his collar was limp, his hair matted, his boots

thick with dust.

"The police?" I whispered aghast.

"Oh, dear, no; only old Baird."

"Baird! But wasn't it Baird who took the emeralds?"

"It was."

"Then how came he to chase you?"

"My dear fellow, I'll tell you if you give me a chance; it's really

nothing to get in the least excited about. Old Baird has at last

spotted that I'm not quite the common cracksman I would have him think

me. So he's been doing his best to run me to my burrow."

"And you call that nothing!"

"It would be something if he had succeeded; but he has still to do

that. I admit, however, that he made me sit up for the time being. It

all comes of going on the job so far from home. There was the old

brute with the whole thing in his morning paper. He KNEW it must have

been done by some fellow who could pass himself off for a gentleman,

and I saw his eyebrows go up the moment I told him I was the man, with

the same old twang that you could cut with a paper-knife. I did my

best to get out of it--swore I had a pal who was a real swell--but I

saw very plainly that I had given myself away. He gave up haggling.

He paid my price as though he enjoyed doing it. But I FELT him

following me when I made tracks; though, of course, I didn't turn round

to see."

"Why not?"

"My dear Bunny, it's the very worst thing you can do. As long as you

look unsuspecting they'll keep their distance, and so long as they keep

their distance you stand a chance. Once show that you know you're

being followed, and it's flight or fight for all you're worth. I never

even looked round; and mind you never do in the same hole. I just

hurried up to Blackfriars and booked for High Street, Kensington, at

the top of my voice; and as the train was leaving Sloane Square out I

hopped, and up all those stairs like a lamplighter, and round to the

studio by the back streets. Well, to be on the safe side, I lay low

there all the afternoon, hearing nothing in the least suspicious, and

only wishing I had a window to look through instead of that beastly

skylight. However, the coast seemed clear enough, and thus far it was

my mere idea that he would follow me; there was nothing to show he had.

So at last I marched out in my proper rig--almost straight into old

Baird's arms!"

"What on earth did you do?"

"Walked past him as though I had never set eyes on him in my life, and

didn't then; took a hansom in the King's Road, and drove like the deuce

to Clapham Junction; rushed on to the nearest platform, without a

ticket, jumped into the first train I saw, got out at Twickenham,

walked full tilt back to Richmond, took the District to Charing Cross,

and here I am! Ready for a tub and a change, and the best dinner the

club can give us. I came to you first, because I thought you might be

getting anxious. Come round with me, and I won't keep you long."

"You're certain you've given him the slip?" I said, as we put on our

hats.

"Certain enough; but we can make assurance doubly sure," said Raffles,

and went to my window, where he stood for a moment or two looking down

into the street.

"All right?" I asked him.

"All right," said he; and we went downstairs forthwith, and so to the

Albany arm-in-arm.

But we were both rather silent on our way. I, for my part, was

wondering what Raffles would do about the studio in Chelsea, whither,

at all events, he had been successfully dogged. To me the point seemed

one of immediate importance, but when I mentioned it he said there was

time enough to think about that. His one other remark was made after

we had nodded (in Bond Street) to a young blood of our acquaintance who

happened to be getting himself a bad name.

"Poor Jack Rutter!" said Raffles, with a sigh. "Nothing's sadder than

to see a fellow going to the bad like that. He's about mad with drink

and debt, poor devil! Did you see his eye? Odd that we should have

met him to-night, by the way; it's old Baird who's said to have skinned

him. By God, but I'd like to skin old Baird!"

And his tone took a sudden low fury, made the more noticeable by

another long silence, which lasted, indeed, throughout an admirable

dinner at the club, and for some time after we had settled down in a

quiet corner of the smoking-room with our coffee and cigars. Then at

last I saw Raffles looking at me with his lazy smile, and I knew that

the morose fit was at an end.

"I daresay you wonder what I've been thinking about all this time?"

said he. "I've been thinking what rot it is to go doing things by

halves!"

"Well," said I, returning his smile, "that's not a charge that you can

bring against yourself, is it?"

"I'm not so sure," said Raffles, blowing a meditative puff; "as a

matter of fact, I was thinking less of myself than of that poor devil

of a Jack Rutter. There's a fellow who does things by halves; he's

only half gone to the bad; and look at the difference between him and

us! He's under the thumb of a villainous money-lender; we are solvent

citizens. He's taken to drink; we're as sober as we are solvent. His

pals are beginning to cut him; our difficulty is to keep the pal from

the door. Enfin, he begs or borrows, which is stealing by halves; and

we steal outright and are done with it. Obviously ours is the more

honest course. Yet I'm not sure, Bunny, but we're doing the thing by

halves ourselves!"

"Why? What more could we do?" I exclaimed in soft derision, looking

round, however, to make sure that we were not overheard.

"What more," said Raffles. "Well, murder--for one thing."

"Rot!"

"A matter of opinion, my dear Bunny; I don't mean it for rot. I've

told you before that the biggest man alive is the man who's committed a

murder, and not yet been found out; at least he ought to be, but he so

very seldom has the soul to appreciate himself. Just think of it!

Think of coming in here and talking to the men, very likely about the

murder itself; and knowing you've done it; and wondering how they'd

look if THEY knew! Oh, it would be great, simply great! But, besides

all that, when you were caught there'd be a merciful and dramatic end

of you. You'd fill the bill for a few weeks, and then snuff out with a

flourish of extra-specials; you wouldn't rust with a vile repose for

seven or fourteen years."

"Good old Raffles!" I chuckled. "I begin to forgive you for being in

bad form at dinner."

"But I was never more earnest in my life."

"Go on!"

"I mean it."

"You know very well that you wouldn't commit a murder, whatever else

you might do."

"I know very well I'm going to commit one to-night!"

He had been leaning back in the saddle-bag chair, watching me with keen

eyes sheathed by languid lids; now he started forward, and his eyes

leapt to mine like cold steel from the scabbard. They struck home to

my slow wits; their meaning was no longer in doubt. I, who knew the

man, read murder in his clenched hands, and murder in his locked lips,

but a hundred murders in those hard blue eyes.

"Baird?" I faltered, moistening my lips with my tongue.

"Of course."

"But you said it didn't matter about the room in Chelsea?"

"I told a lie."

"Anyway you gave him the slip afterwards!"

"That was another. I didn't. I thought I had when I came up to you

this evening; but when I looked out of your window--you remember? to

make assurance doubly sure--there he was on the opposite pavement down

below."

"And you never said a word about it!"

"I wasn't going to spoil your dinner, Bunny, and I wasn't going to let

you spoil mine. But there he was as large as life, and, of course, he

followed us to the Albany. A fine game for him to play, a game after

his mean old heart: blackmail from me, bribes from the police, the one

bidding against the other; but he sha'n't play it with me, he sha'n't

live to, and the world will have an extortioner the less. Waiter! Two

Scotch whiskeys and sodas. I'm off at eleven, Bunny; it's the only

thing to be done."

"You know where he lives, then?"

"Yes, out Willesden way, and alone; the fellow's a miser among other

things. I long ago found out all about him."

Again I looked round the room; it was a young man's club, and young men

were laughing, chatting, smoking, drinking, on every hand. One nodded

to me through the smoke. Like a machine I nodded to him, and turned

back to Raffles with a groan.

"Surely you will give him a chance!" I urged. "The very sight of your

pistol should bring him to terms."

"It wouldn't make him keep them."

"But you might try the effect?"

"I probably shall. Here's a drink for you, Bunny. Wish me luck."

"I'm coming too."

"I don't want you."

"But I must come!"

An ugly gleam shot from the steel blue eyes.

"To interfere?" said Raffles.

"Not I."

"You give me your word?"

"I do."

"Bunny, if you break it--"

"You may shoot me, too!"

"I most certainly should," said Raffles, solemnly. "So you come at your

own peril, my dear man; but, if you are coming--well, the sooner the

better, for I must stop at my rooms on the way."

Five minutes later I was waiting for him at the Piccadilly entrance to

the Albany. I had a reason for remaining outside. It was the

feeling--half hope, half fear--that Angus Baird might still be on our

trail--that some more immediate and less cold-blooded way of dealing

with him might result from a sudden encounter between the money-lender

and myself. I would not warn him of his danger; but I would avert

tragedy at all costs. And when no such encounter had taken place, and

Raffles and I were fairly on our way to Willesden, that, I think, was

still my honest resolve. I would not break my word if I could help it,

but it was a comfort to feel that I could break it if I liked, on an

understood penalty. Alas! I fear my good intentions were tainted with

a devouring curiosity, and overlaid by the fascination which goes hand

in hand with horror.

I have a poignant recollection of the hour it took us to reach the

house. We walked across St. James's Park (I can see the lights now,

bright on the bridge and blurred in the water), and we had some minutes

to wait for the last train to Willesden. It left at 11.21, I remember,

and Raffles was put out to find it did not go on to Kensal Rise. We had

to get out at Willesden Junction and walk on through the streets into

fairly open country that happened to be quite new to me. I could never

find the house again. I remember, however, that we were on a dark

footpath between woods and fields when the clocks began striking twelve.

"Surely," said I, "we shall find him in bed and asleep?"

"I hope we do," said Raffles grimly.

"Then you mean to break in?"

"What else did you think?"

I had not thought about it at all; the ultimate crime had monopolized

my mind. Beside it burglary was a bagatelle, but one to deprecate none

the less. I saw obvious objections: the man was au fait with cracksmen

and their ways: he would certainly have firearms, and might be the

first to use them.

"I could wish nothing better," said Raffles. "Then it will be man to

man, and devil take the worst shot. You don't suppose I prefer foul

play to fair, do you? But die he must, by one or the other, or it's a

long stretch for you and me."

"Better that than this!"

"Then stay where you are, my good fellow. I told you I didn't want

you; and this is the house. So good-night."

I could see no house at all, only the angle of a high wall rising

solitary in the night, with the starlight glittering on battlements of

broken glass; and in the wall a tall green gate, bristling with spikes,

and showing a front for battering-rams in the feeble rays an outlying

lamp-post cast across the new-made road. It seemed to me a road of

building-sites, with but this one house built, all by itself, at one

end; but the night was too dark for more than a mere impression.

Raffles, however, had seen the place by daylight, and had come prepared

for the special obstacles; already he was reaching up and putting

champagne corks on the spikes, and in another moment he had his folded

covert-coat across the corks. I stepped back as he raised himself, and

saw a little pyramid of slates snip the sky above the gate; as he

squirmed over I ran forward, and had my own weight on the spikes and

corks and covert-coat when he gave the latter a tug.

"Coming after all?"

"Rather!"

"Take care, then; the place is all bell-wires and springs. It's no

soft thing, this! There--stand still while I take off the corks."

The garden was very small and new, with a grass-plot still in separate

sods, but a quantity of full-grown laurels stuck into the raw clay

beds. "Bells in themselves," as Raffles whispered; "there's nothing

else rustles so--cunning old beast!" And we gave them a wide berth as

we crept across the grass.

"He's gone to bed!"

"I don't think so, Bunny. I believe he's seen us."

"Why?"

"I saw a light."

"Where?"

"Downstairs, for an instant, when I--"

His whisper died away; he had seen the light again; and so had I.

It lay like a golden rod under the front-door--and vanished. It

reappeared like a gold thread under the lintel--and vanished for good.

We heard the stairs creak, creak, and cease, also for good. We neither

saw nor heard any more, though we stood waiting on the grass till our

feet were soaked with the dew.

"I'm going in," said Raffles at last. "I don't believe he saw us at

all. I wish he had. This way."

We trod gingerly on the path, but the gravel stuck to our wet soles,

and grated horribly in a little tiled veranda with a glass door leading

within. It was through this glass that Raffles had first seen the

light; and he now proceeded to take out a pane, with the diamond, the

pot of treacle, and the sheet of brown paper which were seldom omitted

from his impedimenta. Nor did he dispense with my own assistance,

though he may have accepted it as instinctively as it was proffered.

In any case it was these fingers that helped to spread the treacle on

the brown paper, and pressed the latter to the glass until the diamond

had completed its circuit and the pane fell gently back into our hands.

Raffles now inserted his hand, turned the key in the lock, and, by

making a long arm, succeeded in drawing the bolt at the bottom of the

door; it proved to be the only one, and the door opened, though not

very wide.

"What's that?" said Raffles, as something crunched beneath his feet on

the very threshold.

"A pair of spectacles," I whispered, picking them up. I was still

fingering the broken lenses and the bent rims when Raffles tripped and

almost fell, with a gasping cry that he made no effort to restrain.

"Hush, man, hush!" I entreated under my breath. "He'll hear you!"

For answer his teeth chattered--even his--and I heard him fumbling with

his matches. "No, Bunny; he won't hear us," whispered Raffles,

presently; and he rose from his knees and lit a gas as the match burnt

down.

Angus Baird was lying on his own floor, dead, with his gray hairs glued

together by his blood; near him a poker with the black end glistening;

in a corner his desk, ransacked, littered. A clock ticked noisily on

the chimney-piece; for perhaps a hundred seconds there was no other

sound.

Raffles stood very still, staring down at the dead, as a man might

stare into an abyss after striding blindly to its brink. His breath

came audibly through wide nostrils; he made no other sign, and his lips

seemed sealed.

"That light!" said I, hoarsely; "the light we saw under the door!"

With a start he turned to me.

"It's true! I had forgotten it. It was in here I saw it first!"

"He must be upstairs still!"

"If he is we'll soon rout him out. Come on!"

Instead I laid a hand upon his arm, imploring him to reflect--that his

enemy was dead now--that we should certainly be involved--that now or

never was our own time to escape. He shook me off in a sudden fury of

impatience, a reckless contempt in his eyes, and, bidding me save my

own skin if I liked, he once more turned his back upon me, and this

time left me half resolved to take him at his word. Had he forgotten

on what errand he himself was here? Was he determined that this night

should end in black disaster? As I asked myself these questions his

match flared in the hall; in another moment the stairs were creaking

under his feet, even as they had creaked under those of the murderer;

and the humane instinct that inspired him in defiance of his risk was

borne in also upon my slower sensibilities. Could we let the murderer

go? My answer was to bound up the creaking stairs and to overhaul

Raffles on the landing.

But three doors presented themselves; the first opened into a bedroom

with the bed turned down but undisturbed; the second room was empty in

every sense; the third door was locked.

Raffles lit the landing gas.

"He's in there," said he, cocking his revolver. "Do you remember how we

used to break into the studies at school? Here goes!"

His flat foot crashed over the keyhole, the lock gave, the door flew

open, and in the sudden draught the landing gas heeled over like a

cobble in a squall; as the flame righted itself I saw a fixed bath, two

bath-towels knotted together--an open window--a cowering figure--and

Raffles struck aghast on the threshold.

"JACK--RUTTER?"

The words came thick and slow with horror, and in horror I heard myself

repeating them, while the cowering figure by the bathroom window rose

gradually erect.

"It's you!" he whispered, in amazement no less than our own; "it's you

two! What's it mean, Raffles? I saw you get over the gate; a bell

rang, the place is full of them. Then you broke in. What's it all

mean?"

"We may tell you that, when you tell us what in God's name you've done,

Rutter!"

"Done? What have I done?" The unhappy wretch came out into the light

with bloodshot, blinking eyes, and a bloody shirt-front. "You

know--you've seen--but I'll tell you if you like. I've killed a

robber; that's all. I've killed a robber, a usurer, a jackal, a

blackmailer, the cleverest and the cruellest villain unhung. I'm ready

to hang for him. I'd kill him again!"

And he looked us fiercely in the face, a fine defiance in his

dissipated eyes; his breast heaving, his jaw like a rock.

"Shall I tell you how it happened?" he went passionately on. "He's

made my life a hell these weeks and months past. You may know that. A

perfect hell! Well, to-night I met him in Bond Street. Do you

remember when I met you fellows? He wasn't twenty yards behind you; he

was on your tracks, Raffles; he saw me nod to you, and stopped me and

asked me who you were. He seemed as keen as knives to know, I couldn't

think why, and didn't care either, for I saw my chance. I said I'd

tell him all about you if he'd give me a private interview. He said he

wouldn't. I said he should, and held him by the coat; by the time I

let him go you were out of sight, and I waited where I was till he came

back in despair. I had the whip-hand of him then. I could dictate

where the interview should be, and I made him take me home with him,

still swearing to tell him all about you when we'd had our talk. Well,

when we got here I made him give me something to eat, putting him off

and off; and about ten o'clock I heard the gate shut. I waited a bit,

and then asked him if he lived alone.

"'Not at all,' says he; 'did you not see the servant?'

"I said I'd seen her, but I thought I'd heard her go; if I was mistaken

no doubt she would come when she was called; and I yelled three times

at the top of my voice. Of course there was no servant to come. I

knew that, because I came to see him one night last week, and he

interviewed me himself through the gate, but wouldn't open it. Well,

when I had done yelling, and not a soul had come near us, he was as

white as that ceiling. Then I told him we could have our chat at last;

and I picked the poker out of the fender, and told him how he'd robbed

me, but, by God, he shouldn't rob me any more. I gave him three

minutes to write and sign a settlement of all his iniquitous claims

against me, or have his brains beaten out over his own carpet. He

thought a minute, and then went to his desk for pen and paper. In two

seconds he was round like lightning with a revolver, and I went for him

bald-headed. He fired two or three times and missed; you can find the

holes if you like; but I hit him every time--my God! I was like a

savage till the thing was done. And then I didn't care. I went through

his desk looking for my own bills, and was coming away when you turned

up. I said I didn't care, nor do I; but I was going to give myself up

to-night, and shall still; so you see I sha'n't give you fellows much

trouble!"

He was done; and there we stood on the landing of the lonely house, the

low, thick, eager voice still racing and ringing through our ears; the

dead man below, and in front of us his impenitent slayer. I knew to

whom the impenitence would appeal when he had heard the story, and I

was not mistaken.

"That's all rot," said Raffles, speaking after a pause; "we sha'n't let

you give yourself up."

"You sha'n't stop me! What would be the good? The woman saw me; it

would only be a question of time; and I can't face waiting to be taken.

Think of it: waiting for them to touch you on the shoulder! No, no,

no; I'll give myself up and get it over."

His speech was changed; he faltered, floundered. It was as though a

clearer perception of his position had come with the bare idea of

escape from it.

"But listen to me," urged Raffles; "We're here at our peril ourselves.

We broke in like thieves to enforce redress for a grievance very like

your own. But don't you see? We took out a pane--did the thing like

regular burglars. Regular burglars will get the credit of all the

rest!"

"You mean that I sha'n't be suspected?"

"I do."

"But I don't want to get off scotfree," cried Rutter hysterically.

"I've killed him. I know that. But it was in self-defence; it wasn't

murder. I must own up and take the consequences. I shall go mad if I

don't!"

His hands twitched; his lips quivered; the tears were in his eyes.

Raffles took him roughly by the shoulder.

"Look here, you fool! If the three of us were caught here now, do you

know what those consequences would be? We should swing in a row at

Newgate in six weeks' time! You talk as though we were sitting in a

club; don't you know it's one o'clock in the morning, and the lights

on, and a dead man down below? For God's sake pull yourself together,

and do what I tell you, or you're a dead man yourself."

"I wish I was one!" Rutter sobbed. "I wish I had his revolver to blow

my own brains out. It's lying under him. O my God, my God!"

His knees knocked together: the frenzy of reaction was at its height.

We had to take him downstairs between us, and so through the front door

out into the open air.

All was still outside--all but the smothered weeping of the unstrung

wretch upon our hands. Raffles returned for a moment to the house;

then all was dark as well. The gate opened from within; we closed it

carefully behind us; and so left the starlight shining on broken glass

and polished spikes, one and all as we had found them.

We escaped; no need to dwell on our escape. Our murderer seemed set

upon the scaffold--drunk with his deed, he was more trouble than six

men drunk with wine. Again and again we threatened to leave him to his

fate, to wash our hands of him. But incredible and unmerited luck was

with the three of us. Not a soul did we meet between that and

Willesden; and of those who saw us later, did one think of the two

young men with crooked white ties, supporting a third in a seemingly

unmistakable condition, when the evening papers apprised the town of a

terrible tragedy at Kensal Rise?

We walked to Maida Vale, and thence drove openly to my rooms. But I

alone went upstairs; the other two proceeded to the Albany, and I saw

no more of Raffles for forty-eight hours. He was not at his rooms when

I called in the morning; he had left no word. When he reappeared the

papers were full of the murder; and the man who had committed it was on

the wide Atlantic, a steerage passenger from Liverpool to New York.

"There was no arguing with him," so Raffles told me; "either he must

make a clean breast of it or flee the country. So I rigged him up at

the studio, and we took the first train to Liverpool. Nothing would

induce him to sit tight and enjoy the situation as I should have

endeavored to do in his place; and it's just as well! I went to his

diggings to destroy some papers, and what do you think I found. The

police in possession; there's a warrant out against him already! The

idiots think that window wasn't genuine, and the warrant's out. It

won't be my fault if it's ever served!"

Nor, after all these years, can I think it will be mine.

NINE POINTS OF THE LAW

"Well," said Raffles, "what do you make of it?"

I read the advertisement once more before replying. It was in the last

column of the Daily Telegraph, and it ran:

TWO THOUSAND POUNDS REWARD--The above sum may be earned by any one

qualified to undertake delicate mission and prepared to run certain

risk.--Apply by telegram, Security, London.

"I think," said I, "it's the most extraordinary advertisement that ever

got into print!"

Raffles smiled.

"Not quite all that, Bunny; still, extraordinary enough, I grant you."

"Look at the figure!"

"It is certainly large."

"And the mission--and the risk!"

"Yes; the combination is frank, to say the least of it. But the really

original point is requiring applications by telegram to a telegraphic

address! There's something in the fellow who thought of that, and

something in his game; with one word he chokes off the million who

answer an advertisement every day--when they can raise the stamp. My

answer cost me five bob; but then I prepaid another."

"You don't mean to say that you've applied?"

"Rather," said Raffles. "I want two thousand pounds as much as any

man."

"Put your own name?"

"Well--no, Bunny, I didn't. In point of fact I smell something

interesting and illegal, and you know what a cautious chap I am. I

signed myself Glasspool, care of Hickey, 38, Conduit Street; that's my

tailor, and after sending the wire I went round and told him what to

expect. He promised to send the reply along the moment it came. I

shouldn't be surprised if that's it!"

And he was gone before a double-knock on the outer door had done

ringing through the rooms, to return next minute with an open telegram

and a face full of news.

"What do you think?" said he. "Security's that fellow Addenbrooke, the

police-court lawyer, and he wants to see me INSTANTER!"

"Do you know him, then?"

"Merely by repute. I only hope he doesn't know me. He's the chap who

got six weeks for sailing too close to the wind in the Sutton-Wilmer

case; everybody wondered why he wasn't struck off the rolls. Instead

of that he's got a first-rate practice on the seamy side, and every

blackguard with half a case takes it straight to Bennett Addenbrooke.

He's probably the one man who would have the cheek to put in an

advertisement like that, and the one man who could do it without

exciting suspicion. It's simply in his line; but you may be sure

there's something shady at the bottom of it. The odd thing is that I

have long made up my mind to go to Addenbrooke myself if accidents

should happen."

"And you're going to him now?"

"This minute," said Raffles, brushing his hat; "and so are you."

"But I came in to drag you out to lunch."

"You shall lunch with me when we've seen this fellow. Come on, Bunny,

and we'll choose your name on the way. Mine's Glasspool, and don't you

forget it."

Mr. Bennett Addenbrooke occupied substantial offices in Wellington

Street, Strand, and was out when we arrived; but he had only just gone

"over the way to the court"; and five minutes sufficed to produce a

brisk, fresh-colored, resolute-looking man, with a very confident,

rather festive air, and black eyes that opened wide at the sight of

Raffles.

"Mr.--Glasspool?" exclaimed the lawyer.

"My name," said Raffles, with dry effrontery.

"Not up at Lord's, however!" said the other, slyly. "My dear sir, I

have seen you take far too many wickets to make any mistake!"

For a single moment Raffles looked venomous; then he shrugged and

smiled, and the smile grew into a little cynical chuckle.

"So you have bowled me out in my turn?" said he. "Well, I don't think

there's anything to explain. I am harder up than I wished to admit

under my own name, that's all, and I want that thousand pounds reward."

"Two thousand," said the solicitor. "And the man who is not above an

alias happens to be just the sort of man I want; so don't let that

worry you, my dear sir. The matter, however, is of a strictly private

and confidential character." And he looked very hard at me.

"Quite so," said Raffles. "But there was something about a risk?"

"A certain risk is involved."

"Then surely three heads will be better than two. I said I wanted that

thousand pounds; my friend here wants the other. We are both cursedly

hard up, and we go into this thing together or not at all. Must you

have his name too? I should give him my real one, Bunny."

Mr. Addenbrooke raised his eyebrows over the card I found for him; then

he drummed upon it with his finger-nail, and his embarrassment

expressed itself in a puzzled smile.

"The fact is, I find myself in a difficulty," he confessed at last.

"Yours is the first reply I have received; people who can afford to

send long telegrams don't rush to the advertisements in the Daily

Telegraph; but, on the other hand, I was not quite prepared to hear

from men like yourselves. Candidly, and on consideration, I am not

sure that you ARE the stamp of men for me--men who belong to good

clubs! I rather intended to appeal to the--er--adventurous classes."

"We are adventurers," said Raffles gravely.

"But you respect the law?"

The black eyes gleamed shrewdly.

"We are not professional rogues, if that's what you mean," said

Raffles, smiling. "But on our beam-ends we are; we would do a good

deal for a thousand pounds apiece, eh, Bunny?"

"Anything," I murmured.

The solicitor rapped his desk.

"I'll tell you what I want you to do. You can but refuse. It's

illegal, but it's illegality in a good cause; that's the risk, and my

client is prepared to pay for it. He will pay for the attempt, in case

of failure; the money is as good as yours once you consent to run the

risk. My client is Sir Bernard Debenham, of Broom Hall, Esher."

"I know his son," I remarked.

Raffles knew him too, but said nothing, and his eye drooped disapproval

in my direction. Bennett Addenbrooke turned to me.

"Then," said he, "you have the privilege of knowing one of the most

complete young black-guards about town, and the fons et origo of the

whole trouble. As you know the son, you may know the father too, at

all events by reputation; and in that case I needn't tell you that he

is a very peculiar man. He lives alone in a storehouse of treasures

which no eyes but his ever behold. He is said to have the finest

collection of pictures in the south of England, though nobody ever sees

them to judge; pictures, fiddles and furniture are his hobby, and he is

undoubtedly very eccentric. Nor can one deny that there has been

considerable eccentricity in his treatment of his son. For years Sir

Bernard paid his debts, and the other day, without the slightest

warning, not only refused to do so any more, but absolutely stopped the

lad's allowance. Well, I'll tell you what has happened; but first of

all you must know, or you may remember, that I appeared for young

Debenham in a little scrape he got into a year or two ago. I got him

off all right, and Sir Bernard paid me handsomely on the nail. And no

more did I hear or see of either of them until one day last week."

The lawyer drew his chair nearer ours, and leant forward with a hand on

either knee.

"On Tuesday of last week I had a telegram from Sir Bernard; I was to go

to him at once. I found him waiting for me in the drive; without a

word he led me to the picture-gallery, which was locked and darkened,

drew up a blind, and stood simply pointing to an empty picture-frame.

It was a long time before I could get a word out of him. Then at last

he told me that that frame had contained one of the rarest and most

valuable pictures in England--in the world--an original Velasquez. I

have checked this," said the lawyer, "and it seems literally true; the

picture was a portrait of the Infanta Maria Teresa, said to be one of

the artist's greatest works, second only to another portrait of one of

the Popes in Rome--so they told me at the National Gallery, where they

had its history by heart. They say there that the picture is

practically priceless. And young Debenham has sold it for five

thousand pounds!"

"The deuce he has," said Raffles.

I inquired who had bought it.

"A Queensland legislator of the name of Craggs--the Hon. John Montagu

Craggs, M.L.C., to give him his full title. Not that we knew anything

about him on Tuesday last; we didn't even know for certain that young

Debenham had stolen the picture. But he had gone down for money on the

Monday evening, had been refused, and it was plain enough that he had

helped himself in this way; he had threatened revenge, and this was it.

Indeed, when I hunted him up in town on the Tuesday night, he confessed

as much in the most brazen manner imaginable. But he wouldn't tell me

who was the purchaser, and finding out took the rest of the week; but I

did find out, and a nice time I've had of it ever since! Backwards and

forwards between Esher and the Metropole, where the Queenslander is

staying, sometimes twice a day; threats, offers, prayers, entreaties,

not one of them a bit of good!"

"But," said Raffles, "surely it's a clear case? The sale was illegal;

you can pay him back his money and force him to give the picture up."

"Exactly; but not without an action and a public scandal, and that my

client declines to face. He would rather lose even his picture than

have the whole thing get into the papers; he has disowned his son, but

he will not disgrace him; yet his picture he must have by hook or

crook, and there's the rub! I am to get it back by fair means or foul.

He gives me carte blanche in the matter, and, I verily believe, would

throw in a blank check if asked. He offered one to the Queenslander,

but Craggs simply tore it in two; the one old boy is as much a

character as the other, and between the two of them I'm at my wits'

end."

"So you put that advertisement in the paper?" said Raffles, in the dry

tones he had adopted throughout the interview.

"As a last resort. I did."

"And you wish us to STEAL this picture?"

It was magnificently said; the lawyer flushed from his hair to his

collar.

"I knew you were not the men!" he groaned. "I never thought of men of

your stamp! But it's not stealing," he exclaimed heatedly; "it's

recovering stolen property. Besides, Sir Bernard will pay him his five

thousand as soon as he has the picture; and, you'll see, old Craggs

will be just as loath to let it come out as Sir Bernard himself. No,

no--it's an enterprise, an adventure, if you like--but not stealing."

"You yourself mentioned the law," murmured Raffles.

"And the risk," I added.

"We pay for that," he said once more.

"But not enough," said Raffles, shaking his head. "My good sir,

consider what it means to us. You spoke of those clubs; we should not

only get kicked out of them, but put in prison like common burglars!

It's true we're hard up, but it simply isn't worth it at the price.

Double your stakes, and I for one am your man."

Addenbrooke wavered.

"Do you think you could bring it off?"

"We could try."

"But you have no--"

"Experience? Well, hardly!"

"And you would really run the risk for four thousand pounds?"

Raffles looked at me. I nodded.

"We would," said he, "and blow the odds!"

"It's more than I can ask my client to pay," said Addenbrooke, growing

firm.

"Then it's more than you can expect us to risk."

"You are in earnest?"

"God wot!"

"Say three thousand if you succeed!"

"Four is our figure, Mr. Addenbrooke."

"Then I think it should be nothing if you fail."

"Doubles or quits?" cried Raffles. "Well, that's sporting. Done!"

Addenbrooke opened his lips, half rose, then sat back in his chair, and

looked long and shrewdly at Raffles--never once at me.

"I know your bowling," said he reflectively. "I go up to Lord's

whenever I want an hour's real rest, and I've seen you bowl again and

again--yes, and take the best wickets in England on a plumb pitch. I

don't forget the last Gentleman and Players; I was there. You're up to

every trick--every one ... I'm inclined to think that if anybody could

bowl out this old Australian ... Damme, I believe you're my very man!"

The bargain was clinched at the Cafe Royal, where Bennett Addenbrooke

insisted on playing host at an extravagant luncheon. I remember that

he took his whack of champagne with the nervous freedom of a man at

high pressure, and have no doubt I kept him in countenance by an equal

indulgence; but Raffles, ever an exemplar in such matters, was more

abstemious even than his wont, and very poor company to boot. I can

see him now, his eyes in his plate--thinking--thinking. I can see the

solicitor glancing from him to me in an apprehension of which I did my

best to disabuse him by reassuring looks. At the close Raffles

apologized for his preoccupation, called for an A.B.C. time-table, and

announced his intention of catching the 3.2 to Esher.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Addenbrooke," said he, "but I have my own

idea, and for the moment I should much prefer to keep it to myself. It

may end in fizzle, so I would rather not speak about it to either of

you just yet. But speak to Sir Bernard I must, so will you write me

one line to him on your card? Of course, if you wish, you must come

down with me and hear what I say; but I really don't see much point in

it."

And as usual Raffles had his way, though Bennett Addenbrooke showed

some temper when he was gone, and I myself shared his annoyance to no

small extent. I could only tell him that it was in the nature of

Raffles to be self-willed and secretive, but that no man of my

acquaintance had half his audacity and determination; that I for my

part would trust him through and through, and let him gang his own gait

every time. More I dared not say, even to remove those chill

misgivings with which I knew that the lawyer went his way.

That day I saw no more of Raffles, but a telegram reached me when I was

dressing for dinner:

"Be in your rooms to-morrow from noon and keep rest of day clear,

Raffles."

It had been sent off from Waterloo at 6.42.

So Raffles was back in town; at an earlier stage of our relations I

should have hunted him up then and there, but now I knew better. His

telegram meant that he had no desire for my society that night or the

following forenoon; that when he wanted me I should see him soon enough.

And see him I did, towards one o'clock next day. I was watching for him

from my window in Mount Street, when he drove up furiously in a hansom,

and jumped out without a word to the man. I met him next minute at the

lift gates, and he fairly pushed me back into my rooms.

"Five minutes, Bunny!" he cried. "Not a moment more."

And he tore off his coat before flinging himself into the nearest chair.

"I'm fairly on the rush," he panted; "having the very devil of a time!

Not a word till I tell you all I've done. I settled my plan of

campaign yesterday at lunch. The first thing was to get in with this

man Craggs; you can't break into a place like the Metropole, it's got

to be done from the inside. Problem one, how to get at the fellow.

Only one sort of pretext would do--it must be something to do with this

blessed picture, so that I might see where he'd got it and all that.

Well, I couldn't go and ask to see it out of curiosity, and I couldn't

go as a second representative of the other old chap, and it was

thinking how I could go that made me such a bear at lunch. But I saw

my way before we got up. If I could only lay hold of a copy of the

picture I might ask leave to go and compare it with the original. So

down I went to Esher to find out if there was a copy in existence, and

was at Broom Hall for one hour and a half yesterday afternoon. There

was no copy there, but they must exist, for Sir Bernard himself

(there's 'copy' THERE!) has allowed a couple to be made since the

picture has been in his possession. He hunted up the painters'

addresses, and the rest of the evening I spent in hunting up the

painters themselves; but their work had been done on commission; one

copy had gone out of the country, and I'm still on the track of the

other."

"Then you haven't seen Craggs yet?"

"Seen him and made friends with him, and if possible he's the funnier

old cuss of the two; but you should study 'em both. I took the bull by

the horns this morning, went in and lied like Ananias, and it was just

as well I did--the old ruffian sails for Australia by to-morrow's boat.

I told him a man wanted to sell me a copy of the celebrated Infanta

Maria Teresa of Velasquez, that I'd been down to the supposed owner of

the picture, only to find that he had just sold it to him. You should

have seen his face when I told him that! He grinned all round his

wicked old head. 'Did OLD Debenham admit the sale?' says he; and when

I said he had he chuckled to himself for about five minutes. He was so

pleased that he did just what I hoped he would do; he showed me the

great picture--luckily it isn't by any means a large one--also the case

he's got it in. It's an iron map-case in which he brought over the

plans of his land in Brisbane; he wants to know who would suspect it of

containing an Old Master, too? But he's had it fitted with a new

Chubb's lock, and I managed to take an interest in the key while he was

gloating over the canvas. I had the wax in the palm of my hand, and I

shall make my duplicate this afternoon."

Raffles looked at his watch and jumped up saying he had given me a

minute too much.

"By the way," he added, "you've got to dine with him at the Metropole

to-night!"

"I?"

"Yes; don't look so scared. Both of us are invited--I swore you were

dining with me. I accepted for us both; but I sha'n't be there."

His clear eye was upon me, bright with meaning and with mischief.

I implored him to tell me what his meaning was.

"You will dine in his private sitting-room," said Raffles; "it adjoins

his bedroom. You must keep him sitting as long as possible, Bunny, and

talking all the time!"

In a flash I saw his plan.

"You're going for the picture while we're at dinner?"

"I am."

"If he hears you?"

"He sha'n't."

"But if he does!"

And I fairly trembled at the thought.

"If he does," said Raffles, "there will be a collision, that's all.

Revolver would be out of place in the Metropole, but I shall certainly

take a life-preserver."

"But it's ghastly!" I cried. "To sit and talk to an utter stranger and

to know that you're at work in the next room!"

"Two thousand apiece," said Raffles, quietly.

"Upon my soul I believe I shall give it away!"

"Not you, Bunny. I know you better than you know yourself."

He put on his coat and his hat.

"What time have I to be there?" I asked him, with a groan.

"Quarter to eight. There will be a telegram from me saying I can't

turn up. He's a terror to talk, you'll have no difficulty in keeping

the ball rolling; but head him off his picture for all you're worth.

If he offers to show it to you, say you must go. He locked up the case

elaborately this afternoon, and there's no earthly reason why he should

unlock it again in this hemisphere."

"Where shall I find you when I get away?"

"I shall be down at Esher. I hope to catch the 9.55."

"But surely I can see you again this afternoon?" I cried in a ferment,

for his hand was on the door. "I'm not half coached up yet! I know I

shall make a mess of it!"

"Not you," he said again, "but \_I\_ shall if I waste any more time.

I've got a deuce of a lot of rushing about to do yet. You won't find

me at my rooms. Why not come down to Esher yourself by the last train?

That's it--down you come with the latest news! I'll tell old Debenham

to expect you: he shall give us both a bed. By Jove! he won't be able

to do us too well if he's got his picture."

"If!" I groaned as he nodded his adieu; and he left me limp with

apprehension, sick with fear, in a perfectly pitiable condition of pure

stage-fright.

For, after all, I had only to act my part; unless Raffles failed where

he never did fail, unless Raffles the neat and noiseless was for once

clumsy and inept, all I had to do was indeed to "smile and smile and be

a villain." I practiced that smile half the afternoon. I rehearsed

putative parts in hypothetical conversations. I got up stories. I

dipped in a book on Queensland at the club. And at last it was 7.45,

and I was making my bow to a somewhat elderly man with a small bald

head and a retreating brow.

"So you're Mr. Raffles's friend?" said he, overhauling me rather rudely

with his light small eyes. "Seen anything of him? Expected him early

to show me something, but he's never come."

No more, evidently, had his telegram, and my troubles were beginning

early. I said I had not seen Raffles since one o'clock, telling the

truth with unction while I could; even as we spoke there came a knock

at the door; it was the telegram at last, and, after reading it

himself, the Queenslander handed it to me.

"Called out of town!" he grumbled. "Sudden illness of near relative!

What near relatives has he got?"

I knew of none, and for an instant I quailed before the perils of

invention; then I replied that I had never met any of his people, and

again felt fortified by my veracity.

"Thought you were bosom pals?" said he, with (as I imagined) a gleam of

suspicion in his crafty little eyes.

"Only in town," said I. "I've never been to his place."

"Well," he growled, "I suppose it can't be helped. Don't know why he

couldn't come and have his dinner first. Like to see the death-bed I'D

go to without MY dinner; it's a full-skin billet, if you ask me. Well,

must just dine without him, and he'll have to buy his pig in a poke

after all. Mind touching that bell? Suppose you know what he came to

see me about? Sorry I sha'n't see him again, for his own sake. I

liked Raffles--took to him amazingly. He's a cynic. Like cynics. One

myself. Rank bad form of his mother or his aunt, and I hope she will

go and kick the bucket."

I connect these specimens of his conversation, though they were

doubtless detached at the time, and interspersed with remarks of mine

here and there. They filled the interval until dinner was served, and

they gave me an impression of the man which his every subsequent

utterance confirmed. It was an impression which did away with all

remorse for my treacherous presence at his table. He was that terrible

type, the Silly Cynic, his aim a caustic commentary on all things and

all men, his achievement mere vulgar irreverence and unintelligent

scorn. Ill-bred and ill-informed, he had (on his own showing) fluked

into fortune on a rise in land; yet cunning he possessed, as well as

malice, and he chuckled till he choked over the misfortunes of less

astute speculators in the same boom. Even now I cannot feel much

compunction for my behavior by the Hon. J. M. Craggs, M.L.C.

But never shall I forget the private agonies of the situation, the

listening to my host with one ear and for Raffles with the other! Once

I heard him--though the rooms were not divided by the old-fashioned

folding-doors, and though the door that did divide them was not only

shut but richly curtained, I could have sworn I heard him once. I

spilt my wine and laughed at the top of my voice at some coarse sally

of my host's. And I heard nothing more, though my ears were on the

strain. But later, to my horror, when the waiter had finally withdrawn,

Craggs himself sprang up and rushed to his bedroom without a word. I

sat like stone till he returned.

"Thought I heard a door go," he said. "Must have been mistaken ...

imagination ... gave me quite a turn. Raffles tell you priceless

treasure I got in there?"

It was the picture at last; up to this point I had kept him to

Queensland and the making of his pile. I tried to get him back there

now, but in vain. He was reminded of his great ill-gotten possession.

I said that Raffles had just mentioned it, and that set him off. With

the confidential garrulity of a man who has dined too well, he plunged

into his darling topic, and I looked past him at the clock. It was

only a quarter to ten.

In common decency I could not go yet. So there I sat (we were still at

port) and learnt what had originally fired my host's ambition to

possess what he was pleased to call a "real, genuine, twin-screw,

double-funnelled, copper-bottomed Old Master"; it was to "go one

better" than some rival legislator of pictorial proclivities. But even

an epitome of his monologue would be so much weariness; suffice it that

it ended inevitably in the invitation I had dreaded all the evening.

"But you must see it. Next room. This way."

"Isn't it packed up?" I inquired hastily.

"Lock and key. That's all."

"Pray don't trouble," I urged.

"Trouble be hanged!" said he. "Come along."

And all at once I saw that to resist him further would be to heap

suspicion upon myself against the moment of impending discovery. I

therefore followed him into his bedroom without further protest, and

suffered him first to show me the iron map-case which stood in one

corner; he took a crafty pride in this receptacle, and I thought he

would never cease descanting on its innocent appearance and its Chubb's

lock. It seemed an interminable age before the key was in the latter.

Then the ward clicked, and my pulse stood still.

"By Jove!" I cried next instant.

The canvas was in its place among the maps!

"Thought it would knock you," said Craggs, drawing it out and unrolling

it for my benefit. "Grand thing, ain't it? Wouldn't think it had been

painted two hundred and thirty years? It has, though, MY word! Old

Johnson's face will be a treat when he sees it; won't go bragging about

HIS pictures much more. Why, this one's worth all the pictures in

Colony o' Queensland put together. Worth fifty thousand pounds, my

boy--and I got it for five!"

He dug me in the ribs, and seemed in the mood for further confidences.

My appearance checked him, and he rubbed his hands.

"If you take it like that," he chuckled, "how will old Johnson take it?

Go out and hang himself to his own picture-rods, I hope!"

Heaven knows what I contrived to say at last. Struck speechless first

by my relief, I continued silent from a very different cause. A new

tangle of emotions tied my tongue. Raffles had failed--Raffles had

failed! Could I not succeed? Was it too late? Was there no way?

"So long," he said, taking a last look at the canvas before he rolled

it up--"so long till we get to Brisbane."

The flutter I was in as he closed the case!

"For the last time," he went on, as his keys jingled back into his

pocket. "It goes straight into the strong-room on board."

For the last time! If I could but send him out to Australia with only

its legitimate contents in his precious map-case! If I could but

succeed where Raffles had failed!

We returned to the other room. I have no notion how long he talked, or

what about. Whiskey and soda-water became the order of the hour. I

scarcely touched it, but he drank copiously, and before eleven I left

him incoherent. And the last train for Esher was the 11.50 out of

Waterloo.

I took a hansom to my rooms. I was back at the hotel in thirteen

minutes. I walked upstairs. The corridor was empty; I stood an instant

on the sitting-room threshold, heard a snore within, and admitted

myself softly with my gentleman's own key, which it had been a very

simple matter to take away with me.

Craggs never moved; he was stretched on the sofa fast asleep. But not

fast enough for me. I saturated my handkerchief with the chloroform I

had brought, and laid it gently over his mouth. Two or three stertorous

breaths, and the man was a log.

I removed the handkerchief; I extracted the keys from his pocket.

In less than five minutes I put them back, after winding the picture

about my body beneath my Inverness cape. I took some whiskey and

soda-water before I went.

The train was easily caught--so easily that I trembled for ten minutes

in my first-class smoking carriage--in terror of every footstep on the

platform, in unreasonable terror till the end. Then at last I sat back

and lit a cigarette, and the lights of Waterloo reeled out behind.

Some men were returning from the theatre. I can recall their

conversation even now. They were disappointed with the piece they had

seen. It was one of the later Savoy operas, and they spoke wistfully of

the days of "Pinafore" and "Patience." One of them hummed a stave, and

there was an argument as to whether the air was out of "Patience" or

the "Mikado." They all got out at Surbiton, and I was alone with my

triumph for a few intoxicating minutes. To think that I had succeeded

where Raffles had failed!

Of all our adventures this was the first in which I had played a

commanding part; and, of them all, this was infinitely the least

discreditable. It left me without a conscientious qualm; I had but

robbed a robber, when all was said. And I had done it myself,

single-handed--ipse egomet!

I pictured Raffles, his surprise, his delight. He would think a little

more of me in future. And that future, it should be different. We had

two thousand pounds apiece--surely enough to start afresh as honest

men--and all through me!

In a glow I sprang out at Esher, and took the one belated cab that was

waiting under the bridge. In a perfect fever I beheld Broom Hall, with

the lower story still lit up, and saw the front door open as I climbed

the steps.

"Thought it was you," said Raffles cheerily. "It's all right. There's

a bed for you. Sir Bernard's sitting up to shake your hand."

His good spirits disappointed me. But I knew the man: he was one of

those who wear their brightest smile in the blackest hour. I knew him

too well by this time to be deceived.

"I've got it!" I cried in his ear. "I've got it!"

"Got what?" he asked me, stepping back.

"The picture!"

"WHAT?"

"The picture. He showed it me. You had to go without it; I saw that.

So I determined to have it. And here it is."

"Let's see," said Raffles grimly.

I threw off my cape and unwound the canvas from about my body. While I

was doing so an untidy old gentleman made his appearance in the hall,

and stood looking on with raised eyebrows.

"Looks pretty fresh for an Old Master, doesn't she?" said Raffles.

His tone was strange. I could only suppose that he was jealous of my

success.

"So Craggs said. I hardly looked at it myself."

"Well, look now--look closely. By Jove, I must have faked her better

than I thought!"

"It's a copy!" I cried.

"It's THE copy," he answered. "It's the copy I've been tearing all

over the country to procure. It's the copy I faked back and front, so

that, on your own showing, it imposed upon Craggs, and might have made

him happy for life. And you go and rob him of that!"

I could not speak.

"How did you manage it?" inquired Sir Bernard Debenham.

"Have you killed him?" asked Raffles sardonically.

I did not look at him; I turned to Sir Bernard Debenham, and to him I

told my story, hoarsely, excitedly, for it was all that I could do to

keep from breaking down. But as I spoke I became calmer, and I

finished in mere bitterness, with the remark that another time Raffles

might tell me what he meant to do.

"Another time!" he cried instantly. "My dear Bunny, you speak as

though we were going to turn burglars for a living!"

"I trust you won't," said Sir Bernard, smiling, "for you are certainly

two very daring young men. Let us hope our friend from Queensland will

do as he said, and not open his map-case till he gets back there. He

will find my check awaiting him, and I shall be very much surprised if

he troubles any of us again."

Raffles and I did not speak till I was in the room which had been

prepared for me. Nor was I anxious to do so then. But he followed me

and took my hand.

"Bunny," said he, "don't you be hard on a fellow! I was in the deuce

of a hurry, and didn't know that I should ever get what I wanted in

time, and that's a fact. But it serves me right that you should have

gone and undone one of the best things I ever did. As for YOUR

handiwork, old chap, you won't mind my saying that I didn't think you

had it in you. In future--"

"Don't talk to me about the future!" I cried. "I hate the whole thing!

I'm going to chuck it up!"

"So am I," said Raffles, "when I've made my pile."

THE RETURN MATCH

I had turned into Piccadilly, one thick evening in the following

November, when my guilty heart stood still at the sudden grip of a hand

upon my arm. I thought--I was always thinking--that my inevitable hour

was come at last. It was only Raffles, however, who stood smiling at

me through the fog.

"Well met!" said he. "I've been looking for you at the club."

"I was just on my way there," I returned, with an attempt to hide my

tremors. It was an ineffectual attempt, as I saw from his broader

smile, and by the indulgent shake of his head.

"Come up to my place instead," said he. "I've something amusing to

tell you."

I made excuses, for his tone foretold the kind of amusement, and it was

a kind against which I had successfully set my face for months. I have

stated before, however, and I can but reiterate, that to me, at all

events, there was never anybody in the world so irresistible as Raffles

when his mind was made up. That we had both been independent of crime

since our little service to Sir Bernard Debenham--that there had been

no occasion for that masterful mind to be made up in any such direction

for many a day--was the undeniable basis of a longer spell of honesty

than I had hitherto enjoyed during the term of our mutual intimacy. Be

sure I would deny it if I could; the very thing I am to tell you would

discredit such a boast. I made my excuses, as I have said.

But his arm slid through mine, with his little laugh of light-hearted

mastery. And even while I argued we were on his staircase in the

Albany.

His fire had fallen low. He poked and replenished it after lighting

the gas. As for me, I stood by sullenly in my overcoat until he

dragged it off my back.

"What a chap you are!" said Raffles, playfully. "One would really think

I had proposed to crack another crib this blessed night! Well, it

isn't that, Bunny; so get into that chair, and take one of these

Sullivans and sit tight."

He held the match to my cigarette; he brought me a whiskey and soda.

Then he went out into the lobby, and, just as I was beginning to feel

happy, I heard a bolt shot home. It cost me an effort to remain in

that chair; next moment he was straddling another and gloating over my

discomfiture across his folded arms.

"You remember Milchester, Bunny, old boy?"

His tone was as bland as mine was grim when I answered that I did.

"We had a little match there that wasn't down on the card. Gentlemen

and Players, if you recollect?"

"I don't forget it."

"Seeing that you never got an innings, so to speak, I thought you

might. Well, the Gentlemen scored pretty freely, but the Players were

all caught."

"Poor devils!"

"Don't be too sure. You remember the fellow we saw in the inn? The

florid, over-dressed chap who I told you was one of the cleverest

thieves in town?"

"I remember him. Crawshay his name turned out to be."

"Well, it was certainly the name he was convicted under, so Crawshay

let it be. You needn't waste any pity on HIM, old chap; he escaped

from Dartmoor yesterday afternoon."

"Well done!"

Raffles smiled, but his eyebrows had gone up, and his shoulders

followed suit.

"You are perfectly right; it was very well done indeed. I wonder you

didn't see it in the paper. In a dense fog on the moor yesterday good

old Crawshay made a bolt for it, and got away without a scratch under

heavy fire. All honor to him, I agree; a fellow with that much grit

deserves his liberty. But Crawshay has a good deal more. They hunted

him all night long; couldn't find him for nuts; and that was all you

missed in the morning papers."

He unfolded a Pall Mall, which he had brought in with him.

"But listen to this; here's an account of the escape, with just the

addition which puts the thing on a higher level. 'The fugitive has

been traced to Totnes, where he appears to have committed a peculiarly

daring outrage in the early hours of this morning. He is reported to

have entered the lodgings of the Rev. A. H. Ellingworth, curate of the

parish, who missed his clothes on rising at the usual hour; later in

the morning those of the convict were discovered neatly folded at the

bottom of a drawer. Meanwhile Crawshay had made good his second

escape, though it is believed that so distinctive a guise will lead to

his recapture during the day.' What do you think of that, Bunny?"

"He is certainly a sportsman," said I, reaching for the paper.

"He's more," said Raffles, "he's an artist, and I envy him. The

curate, of all men! Beautiful--beautiful! But that's not all. I saw

just now on the board at the club that there's been an outrage on the

line near Dawlish. Parson found insensible in the six-foot way. Our

friend again! The telegram doesn't say so, but it's obvious; he's

simply knocked some other fellow out, changed clothes again, and come

on gayly to town. Isn't it great? I do believe it's the best thing of

the kind that's ever been done!"

"But why should he come to town?"

In an instant the enthusiasm faded from Raffles's face; clearly I had

reminded him of some prime anxiety, forgotten in his impersonal joy

over the exploit of a fellow-criminal. He looked over his shoulder

towards the lobby before replying.

"I believe," said he, "that the beggar's on MY tracks!"

And as he spoke he was himself again--quietly amused--cynically

unperturbed--characteristically enjoying the situation and my surprise.

"But look here, what do you mean?" said I. "What does Crawshay know

about you?"

"Not much; but he suspects."

"Why should he?"

"Because, in his way he's very nearly as good a man as I am; because,

my dear Bunny, with eyes in his head and brains behind them, he

couldn't help suspecting. He saw me once in town with old Baird. He

must have seen me that day in the pub on the way to Milchester, as well

as afterwards on the cricket-field. As a matter of fact, I know he

did, for he wrote and told me so before his trial."

"He wrote to you! And you never told me!"

The old shrug answered the old grievance.

"What was the good, my dear fellow? It would only have worried you."

"Well, what did he say?"

"That he was sorry he had been run in before getting back to town, as

he had proposed doing himself the honor of paying me a call; however,

he trusted it was only a pleasure deferred, and he begged me not to go

and get lagged myself before he came out. Of course he knew the

Melrose necklace was gone, though he hadn't got it; and he said that

the man who could take that and leave the rest was a man after his own

heart. And so on, with certain little proposals for the far future,

which I fear may be the very near future indeed! I'm only surprised he

hasn't turned up yet."

He looked again towards the lobby, which he had left in darkness, with

the inner door shut as carefully as the outer one. I asked him what he

meant to do.

"Let him knock--if he gets so far. The porter is to say I'm out of

town; it will be true, too, in another hour or so."

"You're going off to-night?"

"By the 7.15 from Liverpool Street. I don't say much about my people,

Bunny, but I have the best of sisters married to a country parson in

the eastern counties. They always make me welcome, and let me read the

lessons for the sake of getting me to church. I'm sorry you won't be

there to hear me on Sunday, Bunny. I've figured out some of my best

schemes in that parish, and I know of no better port in a storm. But I

must pack. I thought I'd just let you know where I was going, and why,

in case you cared to follow my example."

He flung the stump of his cigarette into the fire, stretched himself as

he rose, and remained so long in the inelegant attitude that my eyes

mounted from his body to his face; a second later they had followed his

eyes across the room, and I also was on my legs. On the threshold of

the folding doors that divided bedroom and sitting-room, a well-built

man stood in ill-fitting broadcloth, and bowed to us until his bullet

head presented an unbroken disk of short red hair.

Brief as was my survey of this astounding apparition, the interval was

long enough for Raffles to recover his composure; his hands were in his

pockets, and a smile upon his face, when my eyes flew back to him.

"Let me introduce you, Bunny," said he, "to our distinguished

colleague, Mr. Reginald Crawshay."

The bullet head bobbed up, and there was a wrinkled brow above the

coarse, shaven face, crimson also, I remember, from the grip of a

collar several sizes too small. But I noted nothing consciously at the

time. I had jumped to my own conclusion, and I turned on Raffles with

an oath.

"It's a trick!" I cried. "It's another of your cursed tricks! You got

him here, and then you got me. You want me to join you, I suppose?

I'll see you damned!"

So cold was the stare which met this outburst that I became ashamed of

my words while they were yet upon my lips.

"Really, Bunny!" said Raffles, and turned his shoulder with a shrug.

"Lord love yer," cried Crawshay, "'\_E\_ knew nothin'. \_'E\_ didn't

expect me; 'E'S all right. And you're the cool canary, YOU are," he

went on to Raffles. "I knoo you were, but, do me proud, you're one

after my own kidney!" And he thrust out a shaggy hand.

"After that," said Raffles, taking it, "what am I to say? But you must

have heard my opinion of you. I am proud to make your acquaintance.

How the deuce did you get in?"

"Never you mind," said Crawshay, loosening his collar; "let's talk

about how I'm to get out. Lord love yer, but that's better!"

There was a livid ring round his bull-neck, that he fingered tenderly.

"Didn't know how much longer I might have to play the gent," he

explained; "didn't know who you'd bring in."

"Drink whiskey and soda?" inquired Raffles, when the convict was in the

chair from which I had leapt.

"No, I drink it neat," replied Crawshay, "but I talk business first.

You don't get over me like that, Lor' love yer!"

"Well, then, what can I do for you?"

"You know without me tellin' you."

"Give it a name."

"Clean heels, then; that's what I want to show, and I leaves the way to

you. We're brothers in arms, though I ain't armed this time. It ain't

necessary. You've too much sense. But brothers we are, and you'll see

a brother through. Let's put it at that. You'll see me through in yer

own way. I leaves it all to you."

His tone was rich with conciliation and concession; he bent over and

tore a pair of button boots from his bare feet, which he stretched

towards the fire, painfully uncurling his toes.

"I hope you take a larger size than them," said he. "I'd have had a

see if you'd given me time. I wasn't in long afore you."

"And you won't tell me how you got in?"

"Wot's the use? I can't teach YOU nothin'. Besides, I want out. I

want out of London, an' England, an' bloomin' Europe too. That's all I

want of you, mister. I don't arst how YOU go on the job. You know

w'ere I come from, 'cos I 'eard you say; you know w'ere I want to 'ead

for, 'cos I've just told yer; the details I leaves entirely to you."

"Well," said Raffles, "we must see what can be done."

"We must," said Mr. Crawshay, and leaned back comfortably, and began

twirling his stubby thumbs.

Raffles turned to me with a twinkle in his eye; but his forehead was

scored with thought, and resolve mingled with resignation in the lines

of his mouth. And he spoke exactly as though he and I were alone in

the room.

"You seize the situation, Bunny? If our friend here is 'copped,' to

speak his language, he means to 'blow the gaff' on you and me. He is

considerate enough not to say so in so many words, but it's plain

enough, and natural enough for that matter. I would do the same in his

place. We had the bulge before; he has it now; it's perfectly fair. We

must take on this job; we aren't in a position to refuse it; even if we

were, I should take it on! Our friend is a great sportsman; he has got

clear away from Dartmoor; it would be a thousand pities to let him go

back. Nor shall he; not if I can think of a way of getting him abroad."

"Any way you like," murmured Crawshay, with his eyes shut. "I leaves

the 'ole thing to you."

"But you'll have to wake up and tell us things."

"All right, mister; but I'm fair on the rocks for a sleep!"

And he stood up, blinking.

"Think you were traced to town?"

"Must have been."

"And here?"

"Not in this fog--not with any luck."

Raffles went into the bedroom, lit the gas there, and returned next

minute.

"So you got in by the window?"

"That's about it."

"It was devilish smart of you to know which one; it beats me how you

brought it off in daylight, fog or no fog! But let that pass. You

don't think you were seen?"

"I don't think it, sir."

"Well, let's hope you are right. I shall reconnoitre and soon find

out. And you'd better come too, Bunny, and have something to eat and

talk it over."

As Raffles looked at me, I looked at Crawshay, anticipating trouble;

and trouble brewed in his blank, fierce face, in the glitter of his

startled eyes, in the sudden closing of his fists.

"And what's to become o' me?" he cried out with an oath.

"You wait here."

"No, you don't," he roared, and at a bound had his back to the door.

"You don't get round me like that, you cuckoos!"

Raffles turned to me with a twitch of the shoulders. "That's the worst

of these professors," said he; "they never will use their heads. They

see the pegs, and they mean to hit 'em; but that's all they do see and

mean, and they think we're the same. No wonder we licked them last

time!"

"Don't talk through yer neck," snarled the convict. "Talk out

straight, curse you!"

"Right," said Raffles. "I'll talk as straight as you like. You say

you put yourself in my hands--you leave it all to me--yet you don't

trust me an inch! I know what's to happen if I fail. I accept the

risk. I take this thing on. Yet you think I'm going straight out to

give you away and make you give me away in my turn. You're a fool, Mr.

Crawshay, though you have broken Dartmoor; you've got to listen to a

better man, and obey him. I see you through in my own way, or not at

all. I come and go as I like, and with whom I like, without your

interference; you stay here and lie just as low as you know how, be as

wise as your word, and leave the whole thing to me. If you won't--if

you're fool enough not to trust me--there's the door. Go out and say

what you like, and be damned to you!"

Crawshay slapped his thigh.

"That's talking!" said he. "Lord love yer, I know where I am when you

talk like that. I'll trust yer. I know a man when he gets his tongue

between his teeth; you're all right. I don't say so much about this

other gent, though I saw him along with you on the job that time in the

provinces; but if he's a pal of yours, Mr. Raffles, he'll be all right

too. I only hope you gents ain't too stony--"

And he touched his pockets with a rueful face.

"I only went for their togs," said he. "You never struck two such

stony-broke cusses in yer life!"

"That's all right," said Raffles. "We'll see you through properly.

Leave it to us, and you sit tight."

"Rightum!" said Crawshay. "And I'll have a sleep time you're gone.

But no sperrits--no, thank'ee--not yet! Once let me loose on the lush,

and, Lord love yer, I'm a gone coon!"

Raffles got his overcoat, a long, light driving-coat, I remember, and

even as he put it on our fugitive was dozing in the chair; we left him

murmuring incoherently, with the gas out, and his bare feet toasting.

"Not such a bad chap, that professor," said Raffles on the stairs; "a

real genius in his way, too, though his methods are a little elementary

for my taste. But technique isn't everything; to get out of Dartmoor

and into the Albany in the same twenty-four hours is a whole that

justifies its parts. Good Lord!"

We had passed a man in the foggy courtyard, and Raffles had nipped my

arm.

"Who was it?"

"The last man we want to see! I hope to heaven he didn't hear me!"

"But who is he, Raffles?"

"Our old friend Mackenzie, from the Yard!"

I stood still with horror.

"Do you think he's on Crawshay's track?"

"I don't know. I'll find out."

And before I could remonstrate he had wheeled me round; when I found my

voice he merely laughed, and whispered that the bold course was the

safe one every time.

"But it's madness--"

"Not it. Shut up! Is that YOU, Mr. Mackenzie?"

The detective turned about and scrutinized us keenly; and through the

gaslit mist I noticed that his hair was grizzled at the temples, and

his face still cadaverous, from the wound that had nearly been his

death.

"Ye have the advantage o' me, sirs," said he.

"I hope you're fit again," said my companion. "My name is Raffles, and

we met at Milchester last year."

"Is that a fact?" cried the Scotchman, with quite a start. "Yes, now I

remember your face, and yours too, sir. Ay, yon was a bad business,

but it ended vera well, an' that's the main thing."

His native caution had returned to him. Raffles pinched my arm.

"Yes, it ended splendidly, but for you," said he. "But what about this

escape of the leader of the gang, that fellow Crawshay? What do you

think of that, eh?"

"I havena the parteeculars," replied the Scot.

"Good!" cried Raffles. "I was only afraid you might be on his tracks

once more!"

Mackenzie shook his head with a dry smile, and wished us good evening

as an invisible window was thrown up, and a whistle blown softly

through the fog.

"We must see this out," whispered Raffles. "Nothing more natural than a

little curiosity on our part. After him, quick!"

And we followed the detective into another entrance on the same side as

that from which we had emerged, the left-hand side on one's way to

Piccadilly; quite openly we followed him, and at the foot of the stairs

met one of the porters of the place. Raffles asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing, sir," said the fellow glibly.

"Rot!" said Raffles. "That was Mackenzie, the detective. I've just

been speaking to him. What's he here for? Come on, my good fellow; we

won't give you away, if you've instructions not to tell."

The man looked quaintly wistful, the temptation of an audience hot upon

him; a door shut upstairs, and he fell.

"It's like this," he whispered. "This afternoon a gen'leman comes

arfter rooms, and I sent him to the orfice; one of the clurks, 'e goes

round with 'im an' shows 'im the empties, an' the gen'leman's partic'ly

struck on the set the coppers is up in now. So he sends the clurk to

fetch the manager, as there was one or two things he wished to speak

about; an' when they come back, blowed if the gent isn't gone! Beg yer

pardon, sir, but he's clean disappeared off the face o' the premises!"

And the porter looked at us with shining eyes.

"Well?" said Raffles.

"Well, sir, they looked about, an' looked about, an' at larst they give

him up for a bad job; thought he'd changed his mind an' didn't want to

tip the clurk; so they shut up the place an' come away. An' that's all

till about 'alf an hour ago, when I takes the manager his extry-speshul

Star; in about ten minutes he comes running out with a note, an' sends

me with it to Scotland Yard in a hansom. An' that's all I know,

sir--straight. The coppers is up there now, and the tec, and the

manager, and they think their gent is about the place somewhere still.

Least, I reckon that's their idea; but who he is, or what they want him

for, I dunno."

"Jolly interesting!" said Raffles. "I'm going up to inquire. Come on,

Bunny; there should be some fun."

"Beg yer pardon, Mr. Raffles, but you won't say nothing about me?"

"Not I; you're a good fellow. I won't forget it if this leads to

sport. Sport!" he whispered as we reached the landing. "It looks like

precious poor sport for you and me, Bunny!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. There's no time to think. This, to start with."

And he thundered on the shut door; a policeman opened it. Raffles

strode past him with the air of a chief commissioner, and I followed

before the man had recovered from his astonishment. The bare boards

rang under us; in the bedroom we found a knot of officers stooping over

the window-ledge with a constable's lantern. Mackenzie was the first

to stand upright, and he greeted us with a glare.

"May I ask what you gentlemen want?" said he.

"We want to lend a hand," said Raffles briskly. "We lent one once

before, and it was my friend here who took over from you the fellow who

split on all the rest, and held him tightly. Surely that entitles him,

at all events, to see any fun that's going? As for myself, well, it's

true I only helped to carry you to the house; but for old acquaintance

I do hope, my dear Mr. Mackenzie, that you will permit us to share such

sport as there may be. I myself can only stop a few minutes, in any

case."

"Then ye'll not see much," growled the detective, "for he's not up

here. Constable, go you and stand at the foot o' the stairs, and let

no other body come up on any conseederation; these gentlemen may be

able to help us after all."

"That's kind of you, Mackenzie!" cried Raffles warmly. "But what is it

all? I questioned a porter I met coming down, but could get nothing

out of him, except that somebody had been to see these rooms and not

since been seen himself."

"He's a man we want," said Mackenzie. "He's concealed himself

somewhere about these premises, or I'm vera much mistaken. D'ye reside

in the Albany, Mr. Raffles?"

"I do."

"Will your rooms be near these?"

"On the next staircase but one."

"Ye'll just have left them?"

"Just."

"Been in all the afternoon, likely?"

"Not all."

"Then I may have to search your rooms, sir. I am prepared to search

every room in the Albany! Our man seems to have gone for the leads;

but unless he's left more marks outside than in, or we find him up

there, I shall have the entire building to ransack."

"I will leave you my key," said Raffles at once. "I am dining out, but

I'll leave it with the officer down below."

I caught my breath in mute amazement. What was the meaning of this

insane promise? It was wilful, gratuitous, suicidal; it made me catch

at his sleeve in open horror and disgust; but, with a word of thanks,

Mackenzie had returned to his window-sill, and we sauntered unwatched

through the folding-doors into the adjoining room. Here the window

looked down into the courtyard; it was still open; and as we gazed out

in apparent idleness, Raffles reassured me.

"It's all right, Bunny; you do what I tell you and leave the rest to

me. It's a tight corner, but I don't despair. What you've got to do

is to stick to these chaps, especially if they search my rooms; they

mustn't poke about more than necessary, and they won't if you're there."

"But where will you be? You're never going to leave me to be landed

alone?"

"If I do, it will be to turn up trumps at the right moment. Besides,

there are such things as windows, and Crawshay's the man to take his

risks. You must trust me, Bunny; you've known me long enough."

"Are you going now?"

"There's no time to lose. Stick to them, old chap; don't let them

suspect YOU, whatever else you do." His hand lay an instant on my

shoulder; then he left me at the window, and recrossed the room.

"I've got to go now," I heard him say; "but my friend will stay and see

this through, and I'll leave the gas on in my rooms, and my key with

the constable downstairs. Good luck, Mackenzie; only wish I could

stay."

"Good-by, sir," came in a preoccupied voice, "and many thanks."

Mackenzie was still busy at his window, and I remained at mine, a prey

to mingled fear and wrath, for all my knowledge of Raffles and of his

infinite resource. By this time I felt that I knew more or less what

he would do in any given emergency; at least I could conjecture a

characteristic course of equal cunning and audacity. He would return

to his rooms, put Crawshay on his guard, and--stow him away? No--there

were such things as windows. Then why was Raffles going to desert us

all? I thought of many things--lastly of a cab. These bedroom windows

looked into a narrow side-street; they were not very high; from them a

man might drop on to the roof of a cab--even as it passed--and be

driven away even under the noses of the police! I pictured Raffles

driving that cab, unrecognizable in the foggy night; the vision came to

me as he passed under the window, tucking up the collar of his great

driving-coat on the way to his rooms; it was still with me when he

passed again on his way back, and stopped to hand the constable his key.

"We're on his track," said a voice behind me. "He's got up on the

leads, sure enough, though how he managed it from yon window is a

myst'ry to me. We're going to lock up here and try what like it is

from the attics. So you'd better come with us if you've a mind."

The top floor at the Albany, as elsewhere, is devoted to the

servants--a congeries of little kitchens and cubicles, used by many as

lumber-rooms--by Raffles among the many. The annex in this case was,

of course, empty as the rooms below; and that was lucky, for we filled

it, what with the manager, who now joined us, and another tenant whom

he brought with him to Mackenzie's undisguised annoyance.

"Better let in all Piccadilly at a crown a head," said he. "Here, my

man, out you go on the roof to make one less, and have your truncheon

handy."

We crowded to the little window, which Mackenzie took care to fill; and

a minute yielded no sound but the crunch and slither of constabulary

boots upon sooty slates. Then came a shout.

"What now?" cried Mackenzie.

"A rope," we heard, "hanging from the spout by a hook!"

"Sirs," purred Mackenzie, "yon's how he got up from below! He would do

it with one o' they telescope sticks, an' I never thocht o't! How long

a rope, my lad?"

"Quite short. I've got it."

"Did it hang over a window? Ask him that!" cried the manager. "He can

see by leaning over the parapet."

The question was repeated by Mackenzie; a pause, then "Yes, it did."

"Ask him how many windows along!" shouted the manager in high

excitement.

"Six, he says," said Mackenzie next minute; and he drew in his head and

shoulders. "I should just like to see those rooms, six windows along."

"Mr. Raffles," announced the manager after a mental calculation.

"Is that a fact?" cried Mackenzie. "Then we shall have no difficulty

at all. He's left me his key down below."

The words had a dry, speculative intonation, which even then I found

time to dislike; it was as though the coincidence had already struck

the Scotchman as something more.

"Where is Mr. Raffles?" asked the manager, as we all filed downstairs.

"He's gone out to his dinner," said Mackenzie.

"Are you sure?"

"I saw him go," said I. My heart was beating horribly. I would not

trust myself to speak again. But I wormed my way to a front place in

the little procession, and was, in fact, the second man to cross the

threshold that had been the Rubicon of my life. As I did so I uttered

a cry of pain, for Mackenzie had trod back heavily on my toes; in

another second I saw the reason, and saw it with another and a louder

cry.

A man was lying at full length before the fire on his back, with a

little wound in the white forehead, and the blood draining into his

eyes. And the man was Raffles himself!

"Suicide," said Mackenzie calmly. "No--here's the poker--looks more

like murder." He went on his knees and shook his head quite

cheerfully. "An' it's not even murder," said he, with a shade of

disgust in his matter-of-fact voice; "yon's no more than a flesh-wound,

and I have my doubts whether it felled him; but, sirs, he just stinks

o' chloryform!"

He got up and fixed his keen gray eyes upon me; my own were full of

tears, but they faced him unashamed.

"I understood ye to say ye saw him go out?" said he sternly.

"I saw that long driving-coat; of course, I thought he was inside it."

"And I could ha' sworn it was the same gent when he give me the key!"

It was the disconsolate voice of the constable in the background; on

him turned Mackenzie, white to the lips.

"You'd think anything, some of you damned policemen," said he. "What's

your number, you rotter? P 34? You'll be hearing more of this, Mr. P

34! If that gentleman was dead--instead of coming to himself while I'm

talking--do you know what you'd be? Guilty of his manslaughter, you

stuck pig in buttons! Do you know who you've let slip, butter-fingers?

Crawshay--no less--him that broke Dartmoor yesterday. By the God that

made ye, P 34, if I lose him I'll hound ye from the forrce!"

Working face--shaking fist--a calm man on fire. It was a new side of

Mackenzie, and one to mark and to digest. Next moment he had flounced

from our midst.

"Difficult thing to break your own head," said Raffles later;

"infinitely easier to cut your own throat. Chloroform's another

matter; when you've used it on others, you know the dose to a nicety.

So you thought I was really gone? Poor old Bunny! But I hope

Mackenzie saw your face?"

"He did," said I. I would not tell him all Mackenzie must have seen,

however.

"That's all right. I wouldn't have had him miss it for worlds; and you

mustn't think me a brute, old boy, for I fear that man, and, know, we

sink or swim together."

"And now we sink or swim with Crawshay, too," said I dolefully.

"Not we!" said Raffles with conviction. "Old Crawshay's a true

sportsman, and he'll do by us as we've done by him; besides, this makes

us quits; and I don't think, Bunny, that we'll take on the professors

again!"

THE GIFT OF THE EMPEROR

I

When the King of the Cannibal Islands made faces at Queen Victoria, and

a European monarch set the cables tingling with his compliments on the

exploit, the indignation in England was not less than the surprise, for

the thing was not so common as it has since become. But when it

transpired that a gift of peculiar significance was to follow the

congratulations, to give them weight, the inference prevailed that the

white potentate and the black had taken simultaneous leave of their

fourteen senses. For the gift was a pearl of price unparalleled,

picked aforetime by British cutlasses from a Polynesian setting, and

presented by British royalty to the sovereign who seized this

opportunity of restoring it to its original possessor.

The incident would have been a godsend to the Press a few weeks later.

Even in June there were leaders, letters, large headlines, leaded type;

the Daily Chronicle devoting half its literary page to a charming

drawing of the island capital which the new Pall Mall, in a leading

article headed by a pun, advised the Government to blow to flinders. I

was myself driving a poor but not dishonest quill at the time, and the

topic of the hour goaded me into satiric verse which obtained a better

place than anything I had yet turned out. I had let my flat in town,

and taken inexpensive quarters at Thames Ditton, on the plea of a

disinterested passion for the river.

"First-rate, old boy!" said Raffles (who must needs come and see me

there), lying back in the boat while I sculled and steered. "I suppose

they pay you pretty well for these, eh?"

"Not a penny."

"Nonsense, Bunny! I thought they paid so well? Give them time, and

you'll get your check."

"Oh, no, I sha'n't," said I gloomily. "I've got to be content with the

honor of getting in; the editor wrote to say so, in so many words," I

added. But I gave the gentleman his distinguished name.

"You don't mean to say you've written for payment already?"

No; it was the last thing I had intended to admit. But I had done it.

The murder was out; there was no sense in further concealment. I had

written for my money because I really needed it; if he must know, I was

cursedly hard up. Raffles nodded as though he knew already. I warmed

to my woes. It was no easy matter to keep your end up as a raw

freelance of letters; for my part, I was afraid I wrote neither well

enough nor ill enough for success. I suffered from a persistent

ineffectual feeling after style. Verse I could manage; but it did not

pay. To personal paragraphs and the baser journalism I could not and I

would not stoop.

Raffles nodded again, this time with a smile that stayed in his eyes as

he leant back watching me. I knew that he was thinking of other things

I had stooped to, and I thought I knew what he was going to say. He

had said it before so often; he was sure to say it again. I had my

answer ready, but evidently he was tired of asking the same question.

His lids fell, he took up the paper he had dropped, and I sculled the

length of the old red wall of Hampton Court before he spoke again.

"And they gave you nothing for these! My dear Bunny, they're capital,

not only qua verses but for crystallizing your subject and putting it

in a nutshell. Certainly you've taught ME more about it than I knew

before. But is it really worth fifty thousand pounds--a single pearl?"

"A hundred, I believe; but that wouldn't scan."

"A hundred thousand pounds!" said Raffles, with his eyes shut. And

again I made certain what was coming, but again I was mistaken. "If

it's worth all that," he cried at last, "there would be no getting rid

of it at all; it's not like a diamond that you can subdivide. But I

beg your pardon, Bunny. I was forgetting!"

And we said no more about the emperor's gift; for pride thrives on an

empty pocket, and no privation would have drawn from me the proposal

which I had expected Raffles to make. My expectation had been half a

hope, though I only knew it now. But neither did we touch again on

what Raffles professed to have forgotten--my "apostasy," my "lapse into

virtue," as he had been pleased to call it. We were both a little

silent, a little constrained, each preoccupied with his own thoughts.

It was months since we had met, and, as I saw him off towards eleven

o'clock that Sunday night, I fancied it was for more months that we

were saying good-by.

But as we waited for the train I saw those clear eyes peering at me

under the station lamps, and when I met their glance Raffles shook his

head.

"You don't look well on it, Bunny," said he. "I never did believe in

this Thames Valley. You want a change of air."

I wished I might get it.

"What you really want is a sea voyage."

"And a winter at St. Moritz, or do you recommend Cannes or Cairo? It's

all very well, A. J., but you forget what I told you about my funds."

"I forget nothing. I merely don't want to hurt your feelings. But,

look here, a sea voyage you shall have. I want a change myself, and

you shall come with me as my guest. We'll spend July in the

Mediterranean."

"But you're playing cricket--"

"Hang the cricket!"

"Well, if I thought you meant it--"

"Of course I mean it. Will you come?"

"Like a shot--if you go."

And I shook his hand, and waved mine in farewell, with the perfectly

good-humored conviction that I should hear no more of the matter. It

was a passing thought, no more, no less. I soon wished it were more;

that week found me wishing myself out of England for good and all. I

was making nothing. I could but subsist on the difference between the

rent I paid for my flat and the rent at which I had sublet it,

furnished, for the season. And the season was near its end, and

creditors awaited me in town. Was it possible to be entirely honest?

I had run no bills when I had money in my pocket, and the more

downright dishonesty seemed to me the less ignoble.

But from Raffles, of course, I heard nothing more; a week went by, and

half another week; then, late on the second Wednesday night, I found a

telegram from him at my lodgings, after seeking him vainly in town, and

dining with desperation at the solitary club to which I still belonged.

"Arrange to leave Waterloo by North German Lloyd special," he wired,

"9.25 A. M. Monday next will meet you Southampton aboard Uhlan with

tickets am writing."

And write he did, a light-hearted letter enough, but full of serious

solicitude for me and for my health and prospects; a letter almost

touching in the light of our past relations, in the twilight of their

complete rupture. He said that he had booked two berths to Naples,

that we were bound for Capri, which was clearly the island of the

Lotos-eaters, that we would bask there together, "and for a while

forget." It was a charming letter. I had never seen Italy; the

privilege of initiation should be his. No mistake was greater than to

deem it an impossible country for the summer. The Bay of Naples was

never so divine, and he wrote of "faery lands forlorn," as though the

poetry sprang unbidden to his pen. To come back to earth and prose, I

might think it unpatriotic of him to choose a German boat, but on no

other line did you receive such attention and accommodation for your

money. There was a hint of better reasons. Raffles wrote, as he had

telegraphed, from Bremen; and I gathered that the personal use of some

little influence with the authorities there had resulted in a material

reduction in our fares.

Imagine my excitement and delight! I managed to pay what I owed at

Thames Ditton, to squeeze a small editor for a very small check, and my

tailors for one more flannel suit. I remember that I broke my last

sovereign to get a box of Sullivan's cigarettes for Raffles to smoke on

the voyage. But my heart was as light as my purse on the Monday

morning, the fairest morning of an unfair summer, when the special

whirled me through the sunshine to the sea.

A tender awaited us at Southampton. Raffles was not on board, nor did

I really look for him till we reached the liner's side. And then I

looked in vain. His face was not among the many that fringed the rail;

his hand was not of the few that waved to friends. I climbed aboard in

a sudden heaviness. I had no ticket, nor the money to pay for one. I

did not even know the number of my room. My heart was in my mouth as I

waylaid a steward and asked if a Mr. Raffles was on board. Thank

heaven--he was! But where? The man did not know, was plainly on some

other errand, and a-hunting I must go. But there was no sign of him on

the promenade deck, and none below in the saloon; the smoking-room was

empty but for a little German with a red moustache twisted into his

eyes; nor was Raffles in his own cabin, whither I inquired my way in

desperation, but where the sight of his own name on the baggage was

certainly a further reassurance. Why he himself kept in the

background, however, I could not conceive, and only sinister reasons

would suggest themselves in explanation.

"So there you are! I've been looking for you all over the ship!"

Despite the graven prohibition, I had tried the bridge as a last

resort; and there, indeed, was A. J. Raffles, seated on a skylight, and

leaning over one of the officers' long chairs, in which reclined a girl

in a white drill coat and skirt--a slip of a girl with a pale skin,

dark hair, and rather remarkable eyes. So much I noted as he rose and

quickly turned; thereupon I could think of nothing but the swift

grimace which preceded a start of well-feigned astonishment.

"Why--BUNNY?" cried Raffles. "Where have YOU sprung from?"

I stammered something as he pinched my hand.

"And are you coming in this ship? And to Naples, too? Well, upon my

word! Miss Werner, may I introduce him?"

And he did so without a blush, describing me as an old schoolfellow

whom he had not seen for months, with wilful circumstance and

gratuitous detail that filled me at once with confusion, suspicion, and

revolt. I felt myself blushing for us both, and I did not care. My

address utterly deserted me, and I made no effort to recover it, to

carry the thing off. All I would do was to mumble such words as

Raffles actually put into my mouth, and that I doubt not with a

thoroughly evil grace.

"So you saw my name in the list of passengers and came in search of me?

Good old Bunny; I say, though, I wish you'd share my cabin. I've got a

beauty on the promenade deck, but they wouldn't promise to keep me by

myself. We ought to see about it before they shove in some alien. In

any case we shall have to get out of this."

For a quartermaster had entered the wheelhouse, and even while we had

been speaking the pilot had taken possession of the bridge; as we

descended, the tender left us with flying handkerchiefs and shrill

good-bys; and as we bowed to Miss Werner on the promenade deck, there

came a deep, slow throbbing underfoot, and our voyage had begun.

It did not begin pleasantly between Raffles and me. On deck he had

overborne my stubborn perplexity by dint of a forced though forceful

joviality; in his cabin the gloves were off.

"You idiot," he snarled, "you've given me away again!"

"How have I given you away?"

I ignored the separate insult in his last word.

"How? I should have thought any clod could see that I meant us to meet

by chance!"

"After taking both tickets yourself?"

"They knew nothing about that on board; besides, I hadn't decided when

I took the tickets."

"Then you should have let me know when you did decide. You lay your

plans, and never say a word, and expect me to tumble to them by light

of nature. How was I to know you had anything on?"

I had turned the tables with some effect. Raffles almost hung his head.

"The fact is, Bunny, I didn't mean you to know. You--you've grown such

a pious rabbit in your old age!"

My nickname and his tone went far to mollify me, other things went

farther, but I had much to forgive him still.

"If you were afraid of writing," I pursued, "it was your business to

give me the tip the moment I set foot on board. I would have taken it

all right. I am not so virtuous as all that."

Was it my imagination, or did Raffles look slightly ashamed? If so, it

was for the first and last time in all the years I knew him; nor can I

swear to it even now.

"That," said he, "was the very thing I meant to do--to lie in wait in

my room and get you as you passed. But--"

"You were better engaged?"

"Say otherwise."

"The charming Miss Werner?"

"She is quite charming."

"Most Australian girls are," said I.

"How did you know she was one?" he cried.

"I heard her speak."

"Brute!" said Raffles, laughing; "she has no more twang than you have.

Her people are German, she has been to school in Dresden, and is on her

way out alone."

"Money?" I inquired.

"Confound you!" he said, and, though he was laughing, I thought it was

a point at which the subject might be changed.

"Well," I said, "it wasn't for Miss Werner you wanted us to play

strangers, was it? You have some deeper game than that, eh?"

"I suppose I have."

"Then hadn't you better tell me what it is?"

Raffles treated me to the old cautious scrutiny that I knew so well;

the very familiarity of it, after all these months, set me smiling in a

way that might have reassured him; for dimly already I divined his

enterprise.

"It won't send you off in the pilot's boat, Bunny?"

"Not quite."

"Then--you remember the pearl you wrote the--"

I did not wait for him to finish his sentence.

"You've got it!" I cried, my face on fire, for I caught sight of it

that moment in the stateroom mirror.

Raffles seemed taken aback.

"Not yet," said he; "but I mean to have it before we get to Naples."

"Is it on board?"

"Yes."

"But how--where--who's got it?"

"A little German officer, a whipper-snapper with perpendicular

mustaches."

"I saw him in the smoke-room."

"That's the chap; he's always there. Herr Captain Wilhelm von Heumann,

if you look in the list. Well, he's the special envoy of the emperor,

and he's taking the pearl out with him."

"You found this out in Bremen?"

"No, in Berlin, from a newspaper man I know there. I'm ashamed to tell

you, Bunny, that I went there on purpose!"

I burst out laughing.

"You needn't be ashamed. You are doing the very thing I was rather

hoping you were going to propose the other day on the river."

"You were HOPING it?" said Raffles, with his eyes wide open. Indeed,

it was his turn to show surprise, and mine to be much more ashamed than

I felt.

"Yes," I answered, "I was quite keen on the idea, but I wasn't going to

propose it."

"Yet you would have listened to me the other day?"

Certainly I would, and I told him so without reserve; not brazenly, you

understand; not even now with the gusto of a man who savors such an

adventure for its own sake, but doggedly, defiantly, through my teeth,

as one who had tried to live honestly and failed. And, while I was

about it, I told him much more. Eloquently enough, I daresay, I gave

him chapter and verse of my hopeless struggle, my inevitable defeat;

for hopeless and inevitable they were to a man with my record, even

though that record was written only in one's own soul. It was the old

story of the thief trying to turn honest man; the thing was against

nature, and there was an end of it.

Raffles entirely disagreed with me. He shook his head over my

conventional view. Human nature was a board of checkers; why not

reconcile one's self to alternate black and white? Why desire to be

all one thing or all the other, like our forefathers on the stage or in

the old-fashioned fiction? For his part, he enjoyed himself on all

squares of the board, and liked the light the better for the shade. My

conclusion he considered absurd.

"But you err in good company, Bunny, for all the cheap moralists who

preach the same twaddle: old Virgil was the first and worst offender of

you all. I back myself to climb out of Avernus any day I like, and

sooner or later I shall climb out for good. I suppose I can't very

well turn myself into a Limited Liability Company. But I could retire

and settle down and live blamelessly ever after. I'm not sure that it

couldn't be done on this pearl alone!"

"Then you don't still think it too remarkable to sell?"

"We might take a fishery and haul it up with smaller fry. It would

come after months of ill luck, just as we were going to sell the

schooner; by Jove, it would be the talk of the Pacific!"

"Well, we've got to get it first. Is this von What's-his-name a

formidable cuss?"

"More so than he looks; and he has the cheek of the devil!"

As he spoke a white drill skirt fluttered past the open state-room

door, and I caught a glimpse of an upturned moustache beyond.

"But is he the chap we have to deal with? Won't the pearl be in the

purser's keeping?"

Raffles stood at the door, frowning out upon the Solent, but for an

instant he turned to me with a sniff.

"My good fellow, do you suppose the whole ship's company knows there's

a gem like that aboard? You said that it was worth a hundred thousand

pounds; in Berlin they say it's priceless. I doubt if the skipper

himself knows that von Heumann has it on him."

"And he has?"

"Must have."

"Then we have only him to deal with?"

He answered me without a word. Something white was fluttering past

once more, and Raffles, stepping forth, made the promenaders three.

II

I do not ask to set foot aboard a finer steamship than the Uhlan of the

Norddeutscher Lloyd, to meet a kindlier gentleman than her commander,

or better fellows than his officers. This much at least let me have

the grace to admit. I hated the voyage. It was no fault of anybody

connected with the ship; it was no fault of the weather, which was

monotonously ideal. Not even in my own heart did the reason reside;

conscience and I were divorced at last, and the decree made absolute.

With my scruples had fled all fear, and I was ready to revel between

bright skies and sparkling sea with the light-hearted detachment of

Raffles himself. It was Raffles himself who prevented me, but not

Raffles alone. It was Raffles and that Colonial minx on her way home

from school.

What he could see in her--but that begs the question. Of course he saw

no more than I did, but to annoy me, or perhaps to punish me for my

long defection, he must turn his back on me and devote himself to this

chit from Southampton to the Mediterranean. They were always together.

It was too absurd. After breakfast they would begin, and go on until

eleven or twelve at night; there was no intervening hour at which you

might not hear her nasal laugh, or his quiet voice talking soft

nonsense into her ear. Of course it was nonsense! Is it conceivable

that a man like Raffles, with his knowledge of the world, and his

experience of women (a side of his character upon which I have

purposely never touched, for it deserves another volume); is it

credible, I ask, that such a man could find anything but nonsense to

talk by the day together to a giddy young schoolgirl? I would not be

unfair for the world.

I think I have admitted that the young person had points. Her eyes, I

suppose, were really fine, and certainly the shape of the little brown

face was charming, so far as mere contour can charm.

I admit also more audacity than I cared about, with enviable health,

mettle, and vitality. I may not have occasion to report any of this

young lady's speeches (they would scarcely bear it), and am therefore

the more anxious to describe her without injustice. I confess to some

little prejudice against her. I resented her success with Raffles, of

whom, in consequence, I saw less and less each day. It is a mean thing

to have to confess, but there must have been something not unlike

jealousy rankling within me.

Jealousy there was in another quarter--crude, rampant, undignified

jealousy. Captain von Heumann would twirl his mustaches into twin

spires, shoot his white cuffs over his rings, and stare at me

insolently through his rimless eyeglasses; we ought to have consoled

each other, but we never exchanged a syllable. The captain had a

murderous scar across one of his cheeks, a present from Heidelberg, and

I used to think how he must long to have Raffles there to serve the

same. It was not as though von Heumann never had his innings. Raffles

let him go in several times a day, for the malicious pleasure of

bowling him out as he was "getting set"; those were his words when I

taxed him disingenuously with obnoxious conduct towards a German on a

German boat.

"You'll make yourself disliked on board!"

"By von Heumann merely."

"But is that wise when he's the man we've got to diddle?"

"The wisest thing I ever did. To have chummed up with him would have

been fatal--the common dodge."

I was consoled, encouraged, almost content. I had feared Raffles was

neglecting things, and I told him so in a burst. Here we were near

Gibraltar, and not a word since the Solent. He shook his head with a

smile.

"Plenty of time, Bunny, plenty of time. We can do nothing before we

get to Genoa, and that won't be till Sunday night. The voyage is still

young, and so are we; let's make the most of things while we can."

It was after dinner on the promenade deck, and as Raffles spoke he

glanced sharply fore and aft, leaving me next moment with a step full

of purpose. I retired to the smoking-room, to smoke and read in a

corner, and to watch von Heumann, who very soon came to drink beer and

to sulk in another.

Few travellers tempt the Red Sea at midsummer; the Uhlan was very empty

indeed. She had, however, but a limited supply of cabins on the

promenade deck, and there was just that excuse for my sharing Raffles's

room. I could have had one to myself downstairs, but I must be up

above. Raffles had insisted that I should insist on the point. So we

were together, I think, without suspicion, though also without any

object that I could see.

On the Sunday afternoon I was asleep in my berth, the lower one, when

the curtains were shaken by Raffles, who was in his shirt-sleeves on

the settee.

"Achilles sulking in his bunk!"

"What else is there to do?" I asked him as I stretched and yawned. I

noted, however, the good-humor of his tone, and did my best to catch it.

"I have found something else, Bunny."

"I daresay!"

"You misunderstand me. The whipper-snapper's making his century this

afternoon. I've had other fish to fry."

I swung my legs over the side of my berth and sat forward, as he was

sitting, all attention. The inner door, a grating, was shut and

bolted, and curtained like the open porthole.

"We shall be at Genoa before sunset," continued Raffles. "It's the

place where the deed's got to be done."

"So you still mean to do it?"

"Did I ever say I didn't?"

"You have said so little either way."

"Advisedly so, my dear Bunny; why spoil a pleasure trip by talking

unnecessary shop? But now the time has come. It must be done at Genoa

or not at all."

"On land?"

"No, on board, to-morrow night. To-night would do, but to-morrow is

better, in case of mishap. If we were forced to use violence we could

get away by the earliest train, and nothing be known till the ship was

sailing and von Heumann found dead or drugged--"

"Not dead!" I exclaimed.

"Of course not," assented Raffles, "or there would be no need for us to

bolt; but if we should have to bolt, Tuesday morning is our time, when

this ship has got to sail, whatever happens. But I don't anticipate

any violence. Violence is a confession of terrible incompetence. In

all these years how many blows have you known me to strike? Not one, I

believe; but I have been quite ready to kill my man every time, if the

worst came to the worst."

I asked him how he proposed to enter von Heumann's state-room

unobserved, and even through the curtained gloom of ours his face

lighted up.

"Climb into my bunk, Bunny, and you shall see."

I did so, but could see nothing. Raffles reached across me and tapped

the ventilator, a sort of trapdoor in the wall above his bed, some

eighteen inches long and half that height. It opened outwards into the

ventilating shaft.

"That," said he, "is our door to fortune. Open it if you like; you

won't see much, because it doesn't open far; but loosening a couple of

screws will set that all right. The shaft, as you may see, is more or

less bottomless; you pass under it whenever you go to your bath, and

the top is a skylight on the bridge. That's why this thing has to be

done while we're at Genoa, because they keep no watch on the bridge in

port. The ventilator opposite ours is von Heumann's. It again will

only mean a couple of screws, and there's a beam to stand on while you

work."

"But if anybody should look up from below?"

"It's extremely unlikely that anybody will be astir below, so unlikely

that we can afford to chance it. No, I can't have you there to make

sure. The great point is that neither of us should be seen from the

time we turn in. A couple of ship's boys do sentry-go on these decks,

and they shall be our witnesses; by Jove, it'll be the biggest mystery

that ever was made!"

"If von Heumann doesn't resist."

"Resist! He won't get the chance. He drinks too much beer to sleep

light, and nothing is so easy as to chloroform a heavy sleeper; you've

even done it yourself on an occasion of which it's perhaps unfair to

remind you. Von Heumann will be past sensation almost as soon as I get

my hand through his ventilator. I shall crawl in over his body, Bunny,

my boy!"

"And I?"

"You will hand me what I want and hold the fort in case of accidents,

and generally lend me the moral support you've made me require. It's a

luxury, Bunny, but I found it devilish difficult to do without it after

you turned pi!"

He said that Von Heumann was certain to sleep with a bolted door, which

he, of course, would leave unbolted, and spoke of other ways of laying

a false scent while rifling the cabin. Not that Raffles anticipated a

tiresome search. The pearl would be about von Heumann's person; in

fact, Raffles knew exactly where and in what he kept it. Naturally I

asked how he could have come by such knowledge, and his answer led up

to a momentary unpleasantness.

"It's a very old story, Bunny. I really forget in what Book it comes;

I'm only sure of the Testament. But Samson was the unlucky hero, and

one Delilah the heroine."

And he looked so knowing that I could not be in a moment's doubt as to

his meaning.

"So the fair Australian has been playing Delilah?" said I.

"In a very harmless, innocent sort of way."

"She got his mission out of him?"

"Yes, I've forced him to score all the points he could, and that was

his great stroke, as I hoped it would be. He has even shown Amy the

pearl."

"Amy, eh! and she promptly told you?"

"Nothing of the kind. What makes you think so? I had the greatest

trouble in getting it out of her."

His tone should have been a sufficient warning to me. I had not the

tact to take it as such. At last I knew the meaning of his furious

flirtation, and stood wagging my head and shaking my finger, blinded to

his frowns by my own enlightenment.

"Wily worm!" said I. "Now I see through it all; how dense I've been!"

"Sure you're not still?"

"No; now I understand what has beaten me all the week. I simply

couldn't fathom what you saw in that little girl. I never dreamt it

was part of the game."

"So you think it was that and nothing more?"

"You deep old dog--of course I do!"

"You didn't know she was the daughter of a wealthy squatter?"

"There are wealthy women by the dozen who would marry you to-morrow."

"It doesn't occur to you that I might like to draw stumps, start clean,

and live happily ever after--in the bush?"

"With that voice? It certainly does not!"

"Bunny!" he cried, so fiercely that I braced myself for a blow.

But no more followed.

"Do you think you would live happily?" I made bold to ask him.

"God knows!" he answered. And with that he left me, to marvel at his

look and tone, and, more than ever, at the insufficiently exciting

cause.

III

Of all the mere feats of cracksmanship which I have seen Raffles

perform, at once the most delicate and most difficult was that which he

accomplished between one and two o'clock on the Tuesday morning, aboard

the North German steamer Uhlan, lying at anchor in Genoa harbor.

Not a hitch occurred. Everything had been foreseen; everything

happened as I had been assured everything must. Nobody was about

below, only the ship's boys on deck, and nobody on the bridge. It was

twenty-five minutes past one when Raffles, without a stitch of clothing

on his body, but with a glass phial, corked with cotton-wool, between

his teeth, and a tiny screw-driver behind his ear, squirmed feet first

through the ventilator over his berth; and it was nineteen minutes to

two when he returned, head first, with the phial still between his

teeth, and the cotton-wool rammed home to still the rattling of that

which lay like a great gray bean within. He had taken screws out and

put them in again; he had unfastened von Heumann's ventilator and had

left it fast as he had found it--fast as he instantly proceeded to make

his own. As for von Heumann, it had been enough to place the drenched

wad first on his mustache, and then to hold it between his gaping lips;

thereafter the intruder had climbed both ways across his shins without

eliciting a groan.

And here was the prize--this pearl as large as a filbert--with a pale

pink tinge like a lady's fingernail--this spoil of a filibustering

age--this gift from a European emperor to a South Sea chief. We gloated

over it when all was snug. We toasted it in whiskey and soda-water

laid in overnight in view of the great moment. But the moment was

greater, more triumphant, than our most sanguine dreams. All we had

now to do was to secrete the gem (which Raffles had prised from its

setting, replacing the latter), so that we could stand the strictest

search and yet take it ashore with us at Naples; and this Raffles was

doing when I turned in. I myself would have landed incontinently, that

night, at Genoa and bolted with the spoil; he would not hear of it, for

a dozen good reasons which will be obvious.

On the whole I do not think that anything was discovered or suspected

before we weighed anchor; but I cannot be sure. It is difficult to

believe that a man could be chloroformed in his sleep and feel no

tell-tale effects, sniff no suspicious odor, in the morning.

Nevertheless, von Heumann reappeared as though nothing had happened to

him, his German cap over his eyes and his mustaches brushing the peak.

And by ten o'clock we were quit of Genoa; the last lean, blue-chinned

official had left our decks; the last fruitseller had been beaten off

with bucketsful of water and left cursing us from his boat; the last

passenger had come aboard at the last moment--a fussy graybeard who

kept the big ship waiting while he haggled with his boatman over half a

lira. But at length we were off, the tug was shed, the lighthouse

passed, and Raffles and I leaned together over the rail, watching our

shadows on the pale green, liquid, veined marble that again washed the

vessel's side.

Von Heumann was having his innings once more; it was part of the design

that he should remain in all day, and so postpone the inevitable hour;

and, though the lady looked bored, and was for ever glancing in our

direction, he seemed only too willing to avail himself of his

opportunities. But Raffles was moody and ill-at-ease. He had not the

air of a successful man. I could but opine that the impending parting

at Naples sat heavily on his spirit.

He would neither talk to me, nor would he let me go.

"Stop where you are, Bunny. I've things to tell you. Can you swim?"

"A bit."

"Ten miles?"

"Ten?" I burst out laughing. "Not one! Why do you ask?"

"We shall be within a ten miles' swim of the shore most of the day."

"What on earth are you driving at, Raffles?"

"Nothing; only I shall swim for it if the worst comes to the worst. I

suppose you can't swim under water at all?"

I did not answer his question. I scarcely heard it: cold beads were

bursting through my skin.

"Why should the worst come to the worst?" I whispered. "We aren't

found out, are we?"

"No."

"Then why speak as though we were?"

"We may be; an old enemy of ours is on board."

"An old enemy?"

"Mackenzie."

"Never!"

"The man with the beard who came aboard last."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure! I was only sorry to see you didn't recognize him too."

I took my handkerchief to my face; now that I thought of it, there had

been something familiar in the old man's gait, as well as something

rather youthful for his apparent years; his very beard seemed

unconvincing, now that I recalled it in the light of this horrible

revelation. I looked up and down the deck, but the old man was nowhere

to be seen.

"That's the worst of it," said Raffles. "I saw him go into the

captain's cabin twenty minutes ago."

"But what can have brought him?" I cried miserably. "Can it be a

coincidence--is it somebody else he's after?"

Raffles shook his head.

"Hardly this time."

"Then you think he's after you?"

"I've been afraid of it for some weeks."

"Yet there you stand!"

"What am I to do? I don't want to swim for it before I must. I begin

to wish I'd taken your advice, Bunny, and left the ship at Genoa. But

I've not the smallest doubt that Mac was watching both ship and station

till the last moment. That's why he ran it so fine."

He took a cigarette and handed me the case, but I shook my head

impatiently.

"I still don't understand," said I. "Why should he be after you? He

couldn't come all this way about a jewel which was perfectly safe for

all he knew. What's your own theory?"

"Simply that he's been on my track for some time, probably ever since

friend Crawshay slipped clean through his fingers last November. There

have been other indications. I am really not unprepared for this. But

it can only be pure suspicion. I'll defy him to bring anything home,

and I'll defy him to find the pearl! Theory, my dear Bunny? I know

how he's got here as well as though I'd been inside that Scotchman's

skin, and I know what he'll do next. He found out I'd gone abroad, and

looked for a motive; he found out about von Heumann and his mission,

and there was his motive cut-and-dried. Great chance--to nab me on a

new job altogether. But he won't do it, Bunny; mark my words, he'll

search the ship and search us all, when the loss is known; but he'll

search in vain. And there's the skipper beckoning the whippersnapper

to his cabin: the fat will be in the fire in five minutes!"

Yet there was no conflagration, no fuss, no searching of the

passengers, no whisper of what had happened in the air; instead of a

stir there was portentous peace; and it was clear to me that Raffles

was not a little disturbed at the falsification of all his predictions.

There was something sinister in silence under such a loss, and the

silence was sustained for hours during which Mackenzie never

reappeared. But he was abroad during the luncheon-hour--he was in our

cabin! I had left my book in Raffles's berth, and in taking it after

lunch I touched the quilt. It was warm from the recent pressure of

flesh and blood, and on an instinct I sprang to the ventilator; as I

opened it the ventilator opposite was closed with a snap.

I waylaid Raffles. "All right! Let him find the pearl."

"Have you dumped it overboard?"

"That's a question I shan't condescend to answer."

He turned on his heel, and at subsequent intervals I saw him making the

most of his last afternoon with the inevitable Miss Werner. I remember

that she looked both cool and smart in quite a simple affair of brown

holland, which toned well with her complexion, and was cleverly

relieved with touches of scarlet. I quite admired her that afternoon,

for her eyes were really very good, and so were her teeth, yet I had

never admired her more directly in my own despite. For I passed them

again and again in order to get a word with Raffles, to tell him I knew

there was danger in the wind; but he would not so much as catch my eye.

So at last I gave it up. And I saw him next in the captain's cabin.

They had summoned him first; he had gone in smiling; and smiling I

found him when they summoned me. The state-room was spacious, as

befitted that of a commander. Mackenzie sat on the settee, his beard

in front of him on the polished table; but a revolver lay in front of

the captain; and, when I had entered, the chief officer, who had

summoned me, shut the door and put his back to it. Von Heumann

completed the party, his fingers busy with his mustache.

Raffles greeted me.

"This is a great joke!" he cried. "You remember the pearl you were so

keen about, Bunny, the emperor's pearl, the pearl money wouldn't buy?

It seems it was entrusted to our little friend here, to take out to

Canoodle Dum, and the poor little chap's gone and lost it; ergo, as

we're Britishers, they think we've got it!"

"But I know ye have," put in Mackenzie, nodding to his beard.

"You will recognize that loyal and patriotic voice," said Raffles.

"Mon, 'tis our auld acquaintance Mackenzie, o' Scoteland Yarrd an'

Scoteland itsel'!"

"Dat is enough," cried the captain. "Have you submid to be searge, or

do I vorce you?"

"What you will," said Raffles, "but it will do you no harm to give us

fair play first. You accuse us of breaking into Captain von Heumann's

state-room during the small hours of this morning, and abstracting from

it this confounded pearl. Well, I can prove that I was in my own room

all night long, and I have no doubt my friend can prove the same."

"Most certainly I can," said I indignantly. "The ship's boys can bear

witness to that."

Mackenzie laughed, and shook his head at his reflection in the polished

mahogany.

"That was ver clever," said he, "and like enough it would ha' served ye

had I not stepped aboard. But I've just had a look at they

ventilators, and I think I know how ye worrked it. Anyway, captain, it

makes no matter. I'll just be clappin' the derbies on these young

sparks, an' then--"

"By what right?" roared Raffles, in a ringing voice, and I never saw

his face in such a blaze. "Search us if you like; search every scrap

and stitch we possess; but you dare to lay a finger on us without a

warrant!"

"I wouldna' dare," said Mackenzie, as he fumbled in his breast pocket,

and Raffles dived his hand into his own. "Haud his wrist!" shouted the

Scotchman; and the huge Colt that had been with us many a night, but

had never been fired in my hearing, clattered on the table and was

raked in by the captain.

"All right," said Raffles savagely to the mate. "You can let go now. I

won't try it again. Now, Mackenzie, let's see your warrant!"

"Ye'll no mishandle it?"

"What good would that do me? Let me see it," said Raffles,

peremptorily, and the detective obeyed. Raffles raised his eyebrows as

he perused the document; his mouth hardened, but suddenly relaxed; and

it was with a smile and a shrug that he returned the paper.

"Wull that do for ye?" inquired Mackenzie.

"It may. I congratulate you, Mackenzie; it's a strong hand, at any

rate. Two burglaries and the Melrose necklace, Bunny!" And he turned

to me with a rueful smile.

"An' all easy to prove," said the Scotchman, pocketing the warrant.

"I've one o' these for you," he added, nodding to me, "only not such a

long one."

"To think," said the captain reproachfully, "that my shib should be

made a den of thiefs! It shall be a very disagreeable madder, I have

been obliged to pud you both in irons until we get to Nables."

"Surely not!" exclaimed Raffles. "Mackenzie, intercede with him; don't

give your countrymen away before all hands! Captain, we can't escape;

surely you could hush it up for the night? Look here, here's

everything I have in my pockets; you empty yours, too, Bunny, and they

shall strip us stark if they suspect we've weapons up our sleeves. All

I ask is that we are allowed to get out of this without gyves upon our

wrists!"

"Webbons you may not have," said the captain; "but wad aboud der bearl

dat you were sdealing?"

"You shall have it!" cried Raffles. "You shall have it this minute if

you guarantee no public indignity on board!"

"That I'll see to," said Mackenzie, "as long as you behave yourselves.

There now, where is't?"

"On the table under your nose."

My eyes fell with the rest, but no pearl was there; only the contents

of our pockets--our watches, pocket-books, pencils, penknives,

cigarette cases--lay on the shiny table along with the revolvers

already mentioned.

"Ye're humbuggin' us," said Mackenzie. "What's the use?"

"I'm doing nothing of the sort," laughed Raffles. "I'm testing you.

Where's the harm?"

"It's here, joke apart?"

"On that table, by all my gods."

Mackenzie opened the cigarette cases and shook each particular

cigarette. Thereupon Raffles prayed to be allowed to smoke one, and,

when his prayer was heard, observed that the pearl had been on the

table much longer than the cigarettes. Mackenzie promptly caught up

the Colt and opened the chamber in the butt.

"Not there, not there," said Raffles; "but you're getting hot. Try the

cartridges."

Mackenzie emptied them into his palm, and shook each one at his ear

without result.

"Oh, give them to me!"

And, in an instant, Raffles had found the right one, had bitten out the

bullet, and placed the emperor's pearl with a flourish in the centre of

the table.

"After that you will perhaps show me such little consideration as is in

your power. Captain, I have been a bit of a villain, as you see, and

as such I am ready and willing to lie in irons all night if you deem it

requisite for the safety of the ship. All I ask is that you do me one

favor first."

"That shall debend on wad der vafour has been."

"Captain, I've done a worse thing aboard your ship than any of you

know. I have become engaged to be married, and I want to say good-by!"

I suppose we were all equally amazed; but the only one to express his

amazement was von Heumann, whose deep-chested German oath was almost

his first contribution to the proceedings. He was not slow to follow

it, however, with a vigorous protest against the proposed farewell; but

he was overruled, and the masterful prisoner had his way. He was to

have five minutes with the girl, while the captain and Mackenzie stood

within range (but not earshot), with their revolvers behind their

backs. As we were moving from the cabin, in a body, he stopped and

gripped my hand.

"So I 've let you in at last, Bunny--at last and after all! If you

knew how sorry I am.... But you won't get much--I don't see why you

should get anything at all. Can you forgive me? This may be for years,

and it may be for ever, you know! You were a good pal always when it

came to the scratch; some day or other you mayn't be so sorry to

remember you were a good pal at the last!"

There was a meaning in his eye that I understood; and my teeth were

set, and my nerve strung ready, as I wrung that strong and cunning hand

for the last time in my life.

How that last scene stays with me, and will stay to my death! How I

see every detail, every shadow on the sunlit deck! We were among the

islands that dot the course from Genoa to Naples; that was Elba falling

back on our starboard quarter, that purple patch with the hot sun

setting over it. The captain's cabin opened to starboard, and the

starboard promenade deck, sheeted with sunshine and scored with shadow,

was deserted, but for the group of which I was one, and for the pale,

slim, brown figure further aft with Raffles. Engaged? I could not

believe it, cannot to this day. Yet there they stood together, and we

did not hear a word; there they stood out against the sunset, and the

long, dazzling highway of sunlit sea that sparkled from Elba to the

Uhlan's plates; and their shadows reached almost to our feet.

Suddenly--an instant--and the thing was done--a thing I have never

known whether to admire or to detest. He caught her--he kissed her

before us all--then flung her from him so that she almost fell. It was

that action which foretold the next. The mate sprang after him, and I

sprang after the mate.

Raffles was on the rail, but only just.

"Hold him, Bunny!" he cried. "Hold him tight!"

And, as I obeyed that last behest with all my might, without a thought

of what I was doing, save that he bade me do it, I saw his hands shoot

up and his head bob down, and his lithe, spare body cut the sunset as

cleanly and precisely as though he had plunged at his leisure from a

diver's board!

\* \* \* \* \*

Of what followed on deck I can tell you nothing, for I was not there.

Nor can my final punishment, my long imprisonment, my everlasting

disgrace, concern or profit you, beyond the interest and advantage to

be gleaned from the knowledge that I at least had my deserts. But one

thing I must set down, believe it who will--one more thing only and I

am done.

It was into a second-class cabin, on the starboard side, that I was

promptly thrust in irons, and the door locked upon me as though I were

another Raffles. Meanwhile a boat was lowered, and the sea scoured to

no purpose, as is doubtless on record elsewhere. But either the

setting sun, flashing over the waves, must have blinded all eyes, or

else mine were victims of a strange illusion.

For the boat was back, the screw throbbing, and the prisoner peering

through his porthole across the sunlit waters that he believed had

closed for ever over his comrade's head. Suddenly the sun sank behind

the Island of Elba, the lane of dancing sunlight was instantaneously

quenched and swallowed in the trackless waste, and in the middle

distance, already miles astern, either my sight deceived me or a black

speck bobbed amid the gray. The bugle had blown for dinner: it may well

be that all save myself had ceased to strain an eye. And now I lost

what I had found, now it rose, now sank, and now I gave it up utterly.

Yet anon it would rise again, a mere mote dancing in the dim gray

distance, drifting towards a purple island, beneath a fading western

sky, streaked with dead gold and cerise. And night fell before I knew

whether it was a human head or not.

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