

RAFFLES
The Amateur Cracksman

ADVENTURE
NUMBER
FOUR

"Wilful Murder"
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"A Bride from the Bush," "Stingaree Stories," "Dead Men Tell No
Tales," etc.
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FIFTH STORY
OUT NEXT
WEEK

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Fourth Raffles Story

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 spoils; 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 room 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 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 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 shiftest 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 hypothesis—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 whisky 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 should 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 the wind-ward 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."

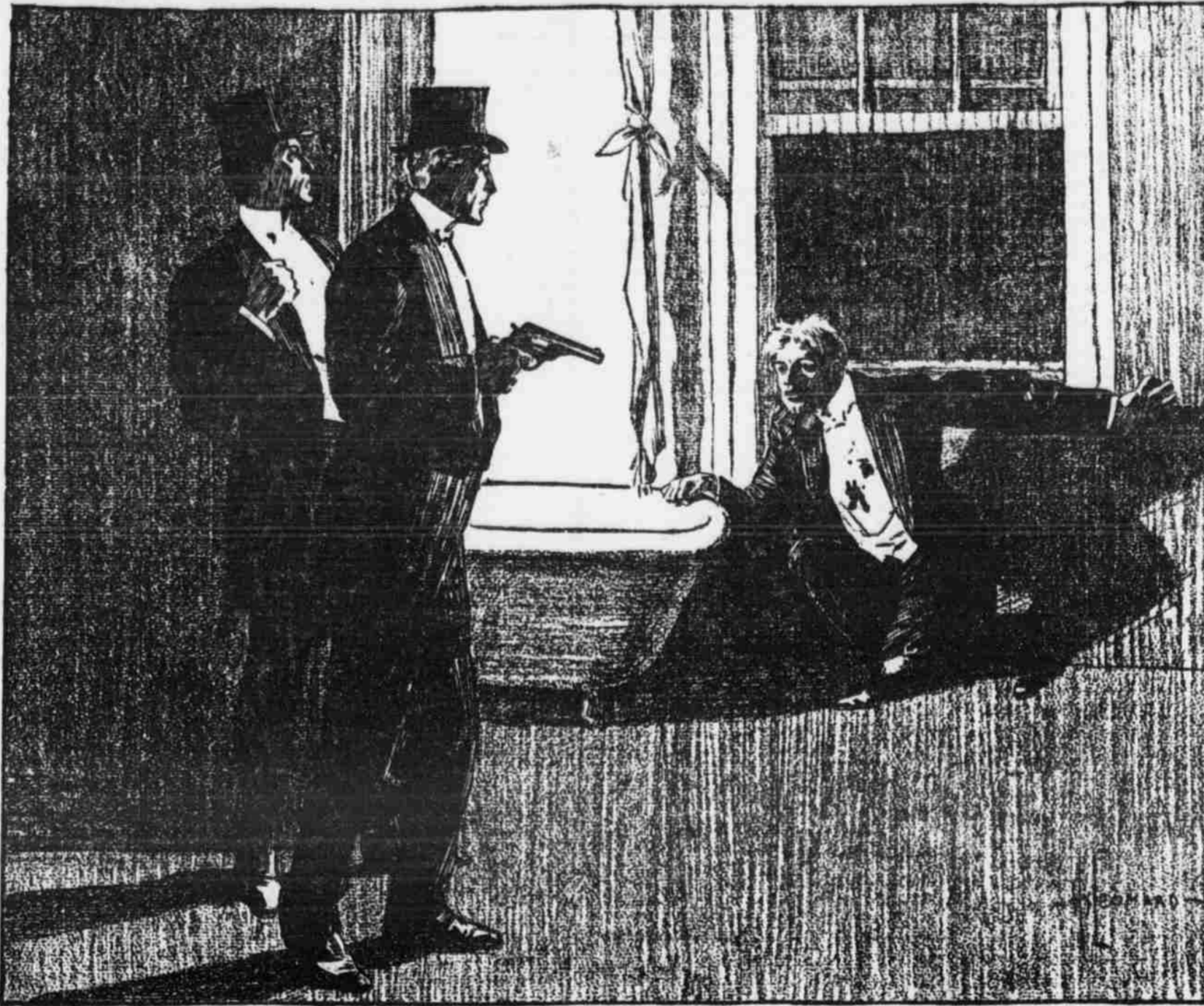
"Baird! But wasn't it Baird who took the emeralds?"

"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?"



THE COWERING FIGURE ROSE GRADUALLY ERECT.

"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 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 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 lamp-lighter, 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 minute 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 the 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 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 tonight, 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 dare say 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 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. Obvi-

ously, ours is the more honest course. Yet I'm not sure, Bunny, but we're doing things 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 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 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 tonight!"

He had been leaning back in the saddleback 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 afterward."

"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 shan't play it with me, he shan't live to, and the world will have an extortioner the less. Waiter! Two Scotch whiskies and sodas. I'm off at 11, 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 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' 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 12.

"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 would 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 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 glimmer 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 of battering rams in the feeble rays an out-lying 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 folded his 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 cunningly 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?"

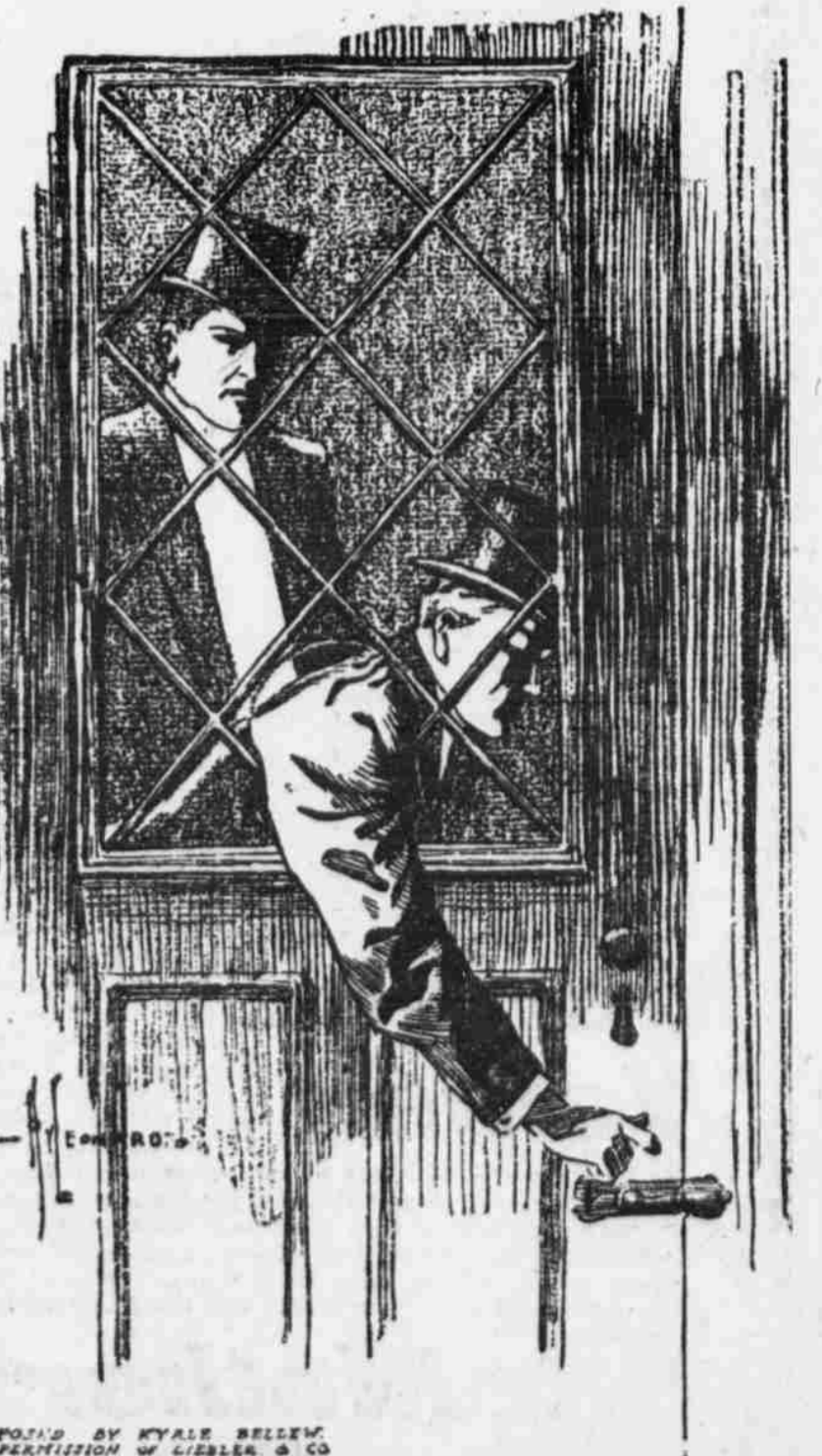
"I saw a light."

"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 dew.

"I'm going in," said Raffles, at last. "I don't believe he saw us at



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