

RAFFLES
The Amateur Cracksman

ADVENTURE
NUMBER
EIGHT

A Jubilee Present
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"A Bride from the Bush," "Stingaree Stories," "Dead Men Tell No
Tales," etc.
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9TH STORY
OUT NEXT
WEEK

RAFFLES
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Eighth Raffles Story

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

"The older I grow, Bunny, the less I think of your so-called precious stones. When did they ever bring in half their market value in £. s. d.? There was the first little crib we ever cracked together—you with your innocent eyes shut. A thousand pounds that stuff was worth, but how many hundreds did it actually fetch? The Ardagh emeralds weren't much better, old Lady Meirrose's necklace was far worse, but that little lot the other night has about finished me. A cool hundred for goods priced well over four, and £35 to come off for bait, since we only got a tenner for the ring I bought and paid for like an ass. I'll be shot if I ever touch a diamond again! Not if it was the Kohinoor; those few whacking stones are too well known, and to cut them up is to decrease their value by arithmetical retrogression. Besides, that brings you up against the Fence once more, and I'm done with the beggars for good and all. You talk about your editors and publishers, you literary swine! Barabbas was neither a robber nor a publisher, but a six-barred, barbed-wire, spike-topped Fence. What we really want is an Incorporated Society of Thieves, with some public-spirited old forger to run it for us on business lines."

Raffles uttered these blasphemous under his breath, not, I am afraid, out of any respect for my one redeeming profession, but because we were taking a midnight airing on the roof after a whole day of June in the little flat below. The stars shone overhead, the lights of London underneath, and between the lips of Raffles a cigarette of the old and only brand. I had sent in secret for a box of the best. The boon had arrived that night, and the foregoing speech was the result. I could afford to ignore the insolent asides, however, where the apparent contention was so manifestly un-sound.

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

"Nothing easier, my dear rabbit."

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

Raffles laughed softly at my scorn.

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

"How?"

"I should melt it down into a nugget and bring it home from the U. S. A. tomorrow."

"And then?"

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

That I knew, and so said nothing for a time, remaining a hostile though a silent critic, while we paced the cool, black leads with our bare feet softly as cats.

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

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

"Have you ever been there before?"

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

Think! I seized his arm.

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

"The sooner the better, while old Theobald is away on his honey-moon."

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

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

"Tomorrow, if you like."

"Only to look?"

The limitation was my one regret.

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

"Very well," I sighed. "But tomorrow it is!"

And the morrow it really was.

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

It was a little after 9 when we crawled together into the gardens; by half past my invalid had had enough, and out he tottered on my arm; a cab, a message to our coachman, a timely train to Baker street, another cab, and we were at the British Museum—brisk pedestrians now—very many minutes after the opening hour of 10 a. m.

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

"That's the room," said Raffles, who had bought the 2-penny guide, as we studied it openly on the nearest bench; "No. 43, upstairs and sharp round to the right. Come on, Bunny!"

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

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

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

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

"What! With gold in our pockets—"

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

And it is none of my business to describe the so-called Room of Gold, with which I, for one, was not a little disappointed. The glass cases, which both fill and line it, may contain unique examples of the goldsmith's art in times and places of which one heard quite enough



I RAN TO THE DOOR.

In the course of one's classical education, but from a professional point of view I would as lief have the ransacking of a single window in the West End as the pick of all those spoils of Etruria and of ancient Greece. The gold may not be so soft as it appears, but it certainly looks as though you could bite off the business ends of the spoons and stop your own teeth in doing so. Nor should I care to be seen wearing one of the rings; but the greatest fraud of all (from the aforesaid standpoint) is assuredly that very cup of which Raffles had spoken. Moreover, he felt this himself.

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

The thing had a little square case of plate glass all to itself at one end of the room. It may have been the thing of beauty that Raffles affected to consider it, but I, for my part, was in no mood to look at it in that light. Underneath was the name of the plutocrats who had subscribed for this national gewgaw, and I fell to wondering where their £8,000 came in, while Raffles devoured his 2-penny guide book as greedily as a school girl with a seal for culture.

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

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

The madman seemed to think we had the room to ourselves. I knew better, but, like another madman, had let him ramble on unchecked. And here was a stolid constable confronting us in the short tunic that they wear in summer, his whistle on his chain, but no truncheon at his side. Heavens! how I see him now—a man of medium size, with a broad, good-humored, perspiring face and a limp mustache. He looked sternly at Raffles and Raffles looked merrily at him. "Going to run me in, officer?" said he. "That would be a joke—my hat!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The note of anxiety was capably caught; it was at once personal and public-spirited, that of the enthusiastic savant, afraid of a nation's treasure which few appreciated as he did himself. And, to be sure, the three of us now had the treasure to ourselves. One of two others had been there when we entered, but now they were gone. "I'm not single-handed," said the officer, comfortably. "See that seat by the door? One of the attendants sits there all day long."

"Then where is he now?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lor' bless you, sir," said he, "I'm all right. Don't you bother your head about me."

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

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

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

"Any minute now, sir."

"Ah!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mechanically I did as I was told. There was no time for thought, still less for remonstrance or reproach, though my surprise must have been even more complete than that of the constable before Raffles knocked the sense out of him. Even in my utter bewilderment, however, the instinctive caution of the real criminal did not desert me. I ran to the door, but I sauntered through it to plant myself before a Pompeian fresco in the corridor, and there were the two attendants still gossiping outside the further door; nor did they hear the dull crash which I heard even as I watched them out of the corner of each eye.

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

"Ah, very interesting, very interesting, but nothing to what they have in the museum at Naples or in Pompeii itself. You must go there some day, Bunny. I've a good mind to take you myself. Meanwhile—slow march—the beggar hasn't moved an eyelid. We may swing for him if you show indecent haste!"

"We!" I whispered. "We!"

And my knees knocked together as we came up to the chatting attendants. But Raffles must needs interrupt them to ask the way to the Prehistoric Saloon.

"At the top of the stairs."

"Thank you. Then we'll work around that way to the Egyptian part."

And we left them resuming their providential chat.

"I believe you're mad," I said bitterly as we went.

"I believe I was," admitted Raffles, "but I'm not now, and I'll

see you through. A hundred and thirty-nine yards, wasn't it? Then it cannot be more than 120 now—not as much. Steady, Bunny, for God's sake. It's slow march—for our lives!"

There was this much management. The rest was our colossal luck. A hansom was being paid off at the foot of the steps outside, and in we jumped, Raffles shouting "Charing Cross!" for all Bloomsbury to hear.

We had turned into Bloomsbury street without exchanging a syllable when he struck the trapdoor with his fist.

"Where the devil are you driving us?"

"Charing Cross, sir."

"I said King's Cross! Round your spin and drive like blazes or we miss our train! There's one to York at 10:35," added Raffles as the trapdoor slammed; "we'll book there, Bunny, and then we'll slope through the subway to the Metropolitan, and so to ground via Baker street and Earl's Court."

And actually in half an hour he was seated once more in the hired carrying chair, while the porter and I staggered upstairs with my decrepit charge, for whose shattered strength even one hour in Kew Gardens had proved too much! Then, and not until then, when we had got rid of the porter and were alone at last did I tell Raffles in the most nervous English at my command, frankly and exactly what I thought of him and of his latest deed. Once started, moreover, I spoke as I have seldom spoken to living man, and Raffles, of all men, stood my abuse without a murmur, or, rather, he sat it out, to astounded even to take off his hat, though I thought his eye brows would have lifted from his head.

"But it always was your infernal way," I was savagely concluding. "You make one plan and you tell me another—"

"Not today, Bunny, I swear!"

"You mean to tell me you really did start with the bare idea of finding a place to hide in for a night?"

"Of course I did."

"It was to be the mere reconnoiter you pretended?"

"There was no pretense about that, Bunny."

"Then why on earth go and do what you did?"

"The reason would be obvious to anyone but you," said Raffles, still with no unkindly scorn. "It was the temptation of a minute—the final impulse of the fraction of a second, when Roberto saw that I was tempted, and let me see that he saw it. It's not a thing I care to do, and I shan't be happy till the papers tell me the poor devil is alive. But a knockout shot was the only chance for us then."

"Why? You don't get run in for being tempted, nor yet for showing that you are?"

"But I should have deserved running in if I hadn't yielded to such a temptation as that, Bunny. It was a chance in a hundred thousand! We might go there every day of our lives and never again be the only outsiders in the room, with the billiard-marking Johnnie practically out of earshot at one and the same time. It was a gift from the gods; not to have taken it would have been flying in the face of Providence."

"But you didn't take it," said I. "You went and left it behind."

I wish I had had a kodak for the little smile with which Raffles shook his head, for it was one that he kept for those great moments of which our vocation is not devoid. All this time he had been wearing his hat tilted a little over eyebrows no longer raised. And now at last I knew where the gold cup was.

It stood for days upon his chimney piece, this costly trophy whose ancient and fluted feet filled newspaper columns even in these days of jubilee, and for which the flower of Scotland Yard was said to be seeking high and low. Our constable, we learned, had been stunned only, and from the moment that I brought him an evening paper with the news Raffles' spirits rose to a height inconsistent with his equable temperament, and as unusual in him as the sudden impulse upon which he had acted with such effect. The cup itself appealed to me no more than it had done before. Exquisite it might be, handsome it was, but so light in the hand that the mere gold of it would scarcely have ponied three figures out of the melting pot. And what said Raffles but that he would never melt it at all!

"Taking it was an offense against the laws of the land, Bunny. That is nothing. But destroying it would be a crime against God and Art, and may I be spitted on the vane of St. Mary Abbot's if I commit it!"

Talk such as this was unanswerable; indeed, the whole affair had passed the pale of useful comment, and the one course left to a practical person was to shrug his shoulders and enjoy the joke. This was not a little enhanced by the newspaper reports, which described Raffles as a handsome youth and his unwilling accomplice as an older man of blackguardly appearance and low type.

"Hits us both of rather neatly, Bunny," said he. "But what none of them do justice to is my dear cup. Look at it; only look at it, man! Was ever anything so rich and yet so chaste? St. Agnes must have had a pretty bad time, but it would be almost worth it to go down to posterity in such enamel upon such gold. And then the history of the thing. Do you realize that it's 500 years old and has belonged to Henry VIII and to Elizabeth among others? Bunny, when you have me cremated you can put my ashes in yonder cup and lay us in the deep-delved earth together!"

"And meanwhile?"

"It is the joy of my heart, the light of my life, the delight of mine eye."

"And suppose other eyes catch sight of it?"

"They never must; they never shall."

Raffles would have been too absurd had he not been thoroughly alive to his own absurdity. There was, nevertheless, an underlying sincerity in his appreciation of any and every form of beauty which all his nonsense could not conceal. And his infatuation for the cup was, as he declared, a very pure passion, since the circumstances debarred him from the chief joy of the average collector, that of showing his treasure to his friends. At last, however, and at the height of his craze, Raffles and reason seemed to come together again as suddenly as they had parted company in the Room of Gold.

"Bunny," he cried, frowning his newspaper across the room, "I've got an idea after your own heart. I know where I can place it after all!"

"Do you mean the cup?"

"I do."

"Then I congratulate you."

"Thanks."

"Upon the recovery of your senses."

"Thanks galore. But you've been confoundedly unsympathetic about this thing, Bunny, and I don't think I shall tell you my scheme till I've carried it out."

"Quite time enough," said I.

"It will mean your letting me loose for an hour or two under cloud of this very night. Tomorrow's Sunday, the jubilee's on Tuesday, and old Theobald's coming back for it."

"It doesn't much matter whether he's back or not if you go late enough."

"I mustn't be late. They don't keep open. No, it's no use you asking any questions. Go out and buy me a big box of Huntley & Palmer's biscuits, any sort you like, only they must be theirs, and absolutely the biggest box they sell."

"My dear man?"

"No questions, Bunny; you do your part and I'll do mine."

Subtlety and success were in his face. It was enough for me, and I had done his extraordinary bidding within a quarter of an hour. In another minute Raffles had opened the box and tumbled all the biscuits into the nearest chair.

"Now newspapers."

I fetched a pile. He hid the cup of gold a ridiculous farewell, wrapped it up in newspaper after newspaper, and finally packed it in the empty biscuit box.

"Now some brown paper. I don't want to be taken for the grocer's young man."

A neat enough parcel it made when the string had been tied and the ends cut close. What was more difficult was to wrap up Raffles