

RAFFLES

The Amateur Cracksman

ADVENTURE NUMBER TEN

The Last Laugh

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11TH STORY OUT NEXT WEEK

RAFFLES

The Amateur Cracksman

Tenth Raffles Story

AS I have had occasion to remark elsewhere, the pick of our exploits, from a frankly criminal point of view, are of least use for the comparatively pure purposes of these papers. They might be appreciated in a trade journal (if only that want could be supplied) by skilled manipulators of the jimmy and the large light bunch, but as records of unbroken yet insignificant success they would be found at once too trivial and too technical, if not so sordid and unprofitable into the bargain. The latter epithets and worse have indeed already been applied, if not to Raffles and all his works, at least to mine upon Raffles, by more than one worthy wielder of a virtuous pen. I need not say how heartily I disagree with that truly pious opinion. So far from admitting a single word of it, I maintain it is the liveliest warning that I am giving to the world. Raffles was a genius and he could not make it pay! Raffles had invention, resource, incomparable audacity and a nerve in ten thousand. He was both strategist and tactician, and we all now know the difference between the two. Yet for months he had been hiding like a rat in a hole, unable to show even his altered face by night or day without risk unless another risk were courted by three inches of conspicuous crape. Then thus far our rewards had often more than been no reward at all. Altogether it was a very different story from the old festive, unsuspected club and cricket days, with their notes ambrosian at the Albany.

And now, in addition to the eternal peril of recognition, there was yet another menace of which I knew nothing. I thought no more of our Neapolitan organ-grinders, though I did often think of the moving page that they had torn for me out of my friend's strange life in Italy. Raffles never alluded to the subject again, and for my part I had entirely forgotten his wild ideas connecting the organ-grinders with the Camorra and imagining them upon his own tracks. I heard no more of it and thought as little, as I say. Then one night in the autumn—I shrink from shocking the susceptible for nothing—but there was a certain house in Palace Gardens, and when we got there Raffles would pass on. I could see no soul in sight, no glimmer in the windows. But Raffles had my arm, and on we went without talking about it. Sharp to the left on the Notting Hill side, sharper still up Silver street, a little tacking west and south, a plunge across High street and presently we were home.

"Pajamas first," said Raffles with as much authority as though it mattered. It was a warm night, however, though September, and I did not mind till I came in clad as he commanded to find the auto-crat himself still booted and capped. He was peeping through the blind and the gas was still turned down. But he said that I could turn it up as he helped himself to a cigarette and nothing with it.

"May I mix you one?" said I.
"No, thanks."
"What's the trouble?"
"We were followed."
"Never!"
"You never saw it?"
"But you never looked round."
"I have an eye at the back of each ear, Bunny."

I helped myself and I fear with less moderation than might have been the case a minute before.

"So that was why?"
"That was why," said Raffles, nodding; but he did not smile and I put down my glass untouched.

"They were following us then?"
"All up Palace Gardens."
"I thought you would about coming back over the hill."
"Nevertheless one of them's in the street below at this moment."
No, he was not fooling me. He was very grim. And he had not taken off a thing; perhaps he did not think it worth while.

"Plain clothes?" I sighed, following the sartorial train of thought even to the loathly arrows that had decorated my person once already for a little season. Next time they would give me double. The skilly was in my stomach when I saw Raffles' face.

"Who said it was the police, Bunny?" said he. "It's the Italians. They're only after me; they won't hurt a hair of your head, let alone cropping it! Have a drink and don't mind me. I shall score them off before I'm done."

"And I'll help you!"
"No, old chap, you won't. This is my own little show. I've known about it for weeks. I first tumbled to it the day those Neapolitans came back with their organs, though I didn't seriously suspect things then; they never came again, those two, they had done their part. That's the Camorra all over, from all accounts. The Count I told you about is pretty high up in it by the way he spoke, but there will be grades and grades between him and the organ-grinders. I shouldn't be surprised if he had every low-down Neapolitan ice-cream in the town upon my tracks! The organization's incredible. Then do you remember the superior foreigner who came to the door a few days afterward? You said he had velvet eyes."

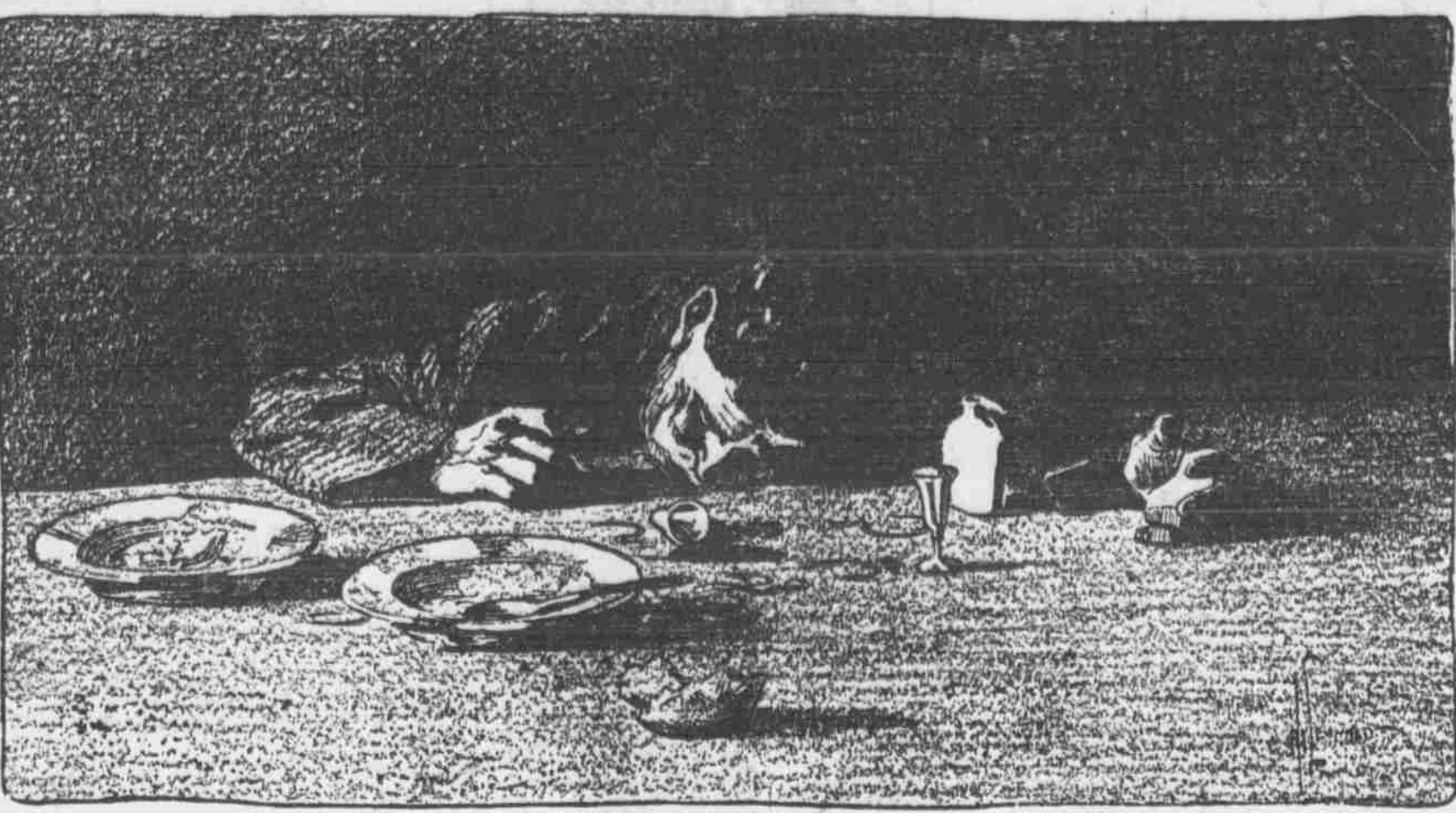
"I never connected him with those two?"
"Of course you didn't, Bunny, so you threatened to kick the fellow downstairs, and only made them keener on the scent. It was too late to say anything when you told me. But the very next time I showed my nose outside I heard a camera click as I passed, and the fend was a person with velvet eyes. Then there was a lull. That happened weeks ago. They had sent me to Italy for identification by Count Corbuetti."

"But this is all theory," I exclaimed. "How on earth can you know?"
"I don't know," said Raffles, "but I should like to bet. Our friend the bloodhound is hanging about the corner near the pillar box. Look through my window, it's dark in there, and tell me who he is."

The man was too far away for me to swear to his face, but he wore a covert coat of un-English length and the lamp across the road played steadily on his boots. They were very yellow and they made no noise when he took a turn. I strained my eyes, and all at once I remembered the thin-soled, low-heeled, splay yellow boots of the insidious foreigner with the soft eyes and the brown-paper face whom I had turned from the door as a palpable fraud. The ring at the bell was the first I had heard of him, there had been no warning step upon the stairs and my suspicious eye had searched his feet for rubber soles.

"It's the fellow," I said, returning to Raffles, and I described his boots.

Raffles was delighted.
"Well done, Bunny; you're coming on," said he. "Now I wonder if he's been over here all the time or if they sent him over expressly? You did better than you think in spotting those boots, for they can only have been made in Italy, and that looks like the special envoy.



THE COUNT'S GREAT CARCASS SPRAWLED UPON THE TABLE.

But it's no use speculating. I must find out."
"How can you?"
"He won't stay there all night."
"Well?"
"When he gets tired of it I shall return the compliment and follow him."
"Not alone," said I firmly.
"Well, we'll see; we'll see at once," said Raffles, rising. "Out with the gas, Bunny, while I take a look. Thank you. Now wait a bit."
"Yes! He's chuckled it; he's off already, and so am I!"
But I slipped to our outer door and held the passage.
"I don't let you go alone, you know."
"You can't come with me in pajamas."
"Now I see why you made me put them on!"
"Bunny, if you don't shift I shall have to shift you. This is my very private one-man show. But I'll be back in an hour—there!"
"You swear?"
"By all my gods."

I gave in. How could I help giving in? He did not look the man that he had been, but you never knew with Raffles, and I could not have him lay a hand on me. I let him go with a shrug and my blessing, then ran into his room to see the last of him from the window. The creature in the coat and boots had reached the end of our little street, where he appeared to have hesitated, so that Raffles was just in time to see which way he turned. And Raffles was after him at an easy pace, and had himself almost reached the corner when my attention was distracted from the alert nonchalance of his gait. I was marvelling that it alone had not long ago betrayed him, for nothing about him was so unconsciously characteristic, when suddenly I realized that Raffles was not the only person in the little lonely street. Another pedestrian had entered from the other end, a man heavily built and clad with an astrakhan collar to his coat on this warm night and a black slouch hat that hid his features from my bird's-eye view. His steps were the short and shuffling ones of a man advanced in years and in fatty degeneration, but of a sudden they stopped beneath my very eyes. I could have dropped a marble into the dented crown of the black felt hat. Then at the same moment Raffles turned the corner without looking round, and the big man below raised both his hands and his face. Of the latter I saw only the huge white mustache, like a flying gull, as Raffles had described it, for at a glance I divined that this was his arch-enemy, the Count Corbuetti himself.

I did not stop to consider the subtleties of the system by which the real hunter lagged behind, while his subordinate pointed the quarry like a sporting dog. I left the Count shuffling onward faster than before, and I jumped into some clothes as though the flats were on fire. If the Count was going to follow Raffles in his turn then I would follow the Count in mine, and there would be a midnight procession of us through the town. But I found no sign of him in the empty street and no sign in the Earl's Court road, that looked as empty for all its length save for a natural enemy standing like a waxwork with a glimmer at his belt.

"Officer," I gasped, "have you seen anything of an old gentleman with a big white mustache?"
The unlicked cub of a common constable seemed to eye me the more suspiciously for the flattering form of my address.

"Took a hansom," said he at length.
A hansom! Then he was not following the others on foot; there was no guessing his game. But something must be said or done.

"He's a friend of mine," I explained, "and I want to overtake him. Did you hear where he told the fellow to drive?"

A curt negative was the policeman's reply to that, and if ever I take part in a night assault-at-arms, revolver versus baton in the back kitchen, I know which member of the Metropolitan Police Force I should like for my opponent.

If there was no overtaking the Count, however, it should be a comparatively simple matter in the case of the couple on foot, and I wildly hailed the first hansom that crawled into my ken. I must tell Raffles who it was that I had seen. The Earl's Court road was long and the time since he vanished in it but a few short minutes. I drove down the length of that useful thoroughfare with an eye apiece on either pavement, sweeping each as with a brush, but never a Raffles came into the pan. Then I tried the Fulham road, first to the west, then to the east, and in the end drove home to the flat as bold as brass. I did not realize my indiscretion until I had paid the man and was on the stairs. Raffles never dreamed of driving all the way back, but I was hoping now to find him waiting up above. He had said an hour. I had remembered it suddenly. And now the hour was more than up. But the flat was as empty as I had left it. The very light that had encouraged me, pale though it was, as I turned the corner in my hansom, was but the light that I myself had left burning in the desolate passage.

I can give you no conception of the night that I spent. Most of it I hung across the sill, throwing a wide net with my ears, catching every footstep afar off, every hansom bell further still, only to gather in some alien whom I seldom even landed in our street. Then I would listen at the door. He might come over the roof, and eventually some one did, but now it was broad daylight, and I flung the door open in the milkman's face, which whitened at the shock as though I had ducked him in his own pail.

"You're late," I thundered as the first excuse for my excitement.

"Beg your pardon," said he indignantly, "but I'm half an hour before my usual time."

"Then I beg yours," said I, "but the fact is Mr. Maturin has had one of his bad nights, and I seem to have been waiting hours for milk to make him a cup of tea."

This little fib (ready enough for a Raffles, though I say it) earned me not only forgiveness, but that obliging sympathy which is a branch of the business of the man at the door. The good fellow said that he could see I had been sitting up all night, and he left me pluming myself upon the accidental art with which I had told my very necessary tarradiddle. On reflection I gave the credit to instinct, not accident, and then sighed afresh as I realized how the influence of the matter was sinking into me, and he heaven knew where! But my punishment was swift to follow, for within the hour the bell rang imperiously twice, and there was Dr. Theobald on our mat in a yellow Jaeger suit, with a chin as yellow jutting over the flaps that he had turned up to hide his pajamas.

"What's this about a bad night?" said he.
"He couldn't sleep and he wouldn't let me," I whispered, never loosening my grasp of the door and standing tight against the other wall. "But he's sleeping like a baby now."
"I must see him."
"He gave strict orders that you should not."
"I'm his medical man and I!"

"You know what he is," I said, shrugging; "the least thing wakes him, and you will if you insist on seeing him now. It will be the last time, I warn you! I know what he said and you don't!"

The doctor cursed me under his fiery mustache.

"I shall come up during the course of the morning," he snarled.

"And I shall tie up the bell," I said, "and if it doesn't ring he'll be sleeping still, but I will not risk waking him by coming to the door again."

And with that I shut it in his face. I was improving, as Raffles had said, but what would it profit me if some evil had befallen him? And now I was prepared for the worst. A boy came up whistling and leaving papers on the mats. It was getting on for 8 o'clock, and the whisky and soda of half-past 12 stood untouched and stagnant in the tumbler. If the worst had happened to Raffles I felt that I would either never drink again or else seldom do anything else.

Meanwhile I could not even break my fast, but roamed the flat in a misery not to be described, my very linen still unchanged, my cheeks and chin now tawny from the unwholesome night. How long would it go on? I wondered for a time. Then I changed my tune: how long could I endure it?

It went on actually until the forenoon only, but my endurance cannot be measured by the time, for to me every hour of it was an arctic night. Yet it cannot have been much after 11 when the ring came at the bell, which I had forgotten to tie up after all. But this was not the doctor; neither, too well I knew, was it the wanderer returned. Our bell was the pneumatic one that tells you if the touch be light or heavy; the hand upon it now was tentative and shy.

The owner of the hand I had never seen before. He was young and rugged, with one eye blank, but the other ablaze with some fell excitement. And straightway he burst into a low torrent of words, of which all I knew that they were Italian, and therefore news of Raffles, if only I had known the language! But dumb show might help us somewhat, and in I dragged him, though against his will, a new alarm in his one wild eye.

"Non capite?" he cried when I had him inside and had withstood the torrent.

"No, I'm bothered if I do!" I answered, guessing his question from his tone.

"Vostro amico," he repeated over and over again; and then, "Poco tempo, poco tempo, poco tempo!"

For once in my life the classical education of my public school days was of real value. "My pal, my pal, and no time to be lost!" I translated freely and flew for my hat.

"Ecco, signore!" cried the fellow, snatching the watch from my waistcoat pocket and putting one black thumb nail on the long hand, the other on the numeral 12. "Mezzogiorno—poco tempo—poco tempo!" And again I seized his meaning that it was twenty past 11 and we

must be there by 12. But where, but where? It was maddening to be summoned like this and not to know what had happened nor to have any means of finding out. But my presence of mind stood by me still, I was improving by seven-league strides, and I crammed my handkerchief between the drum and hammer of the bell before leaving. The doctor could ring now till he was black in the face, but I was not coming, and he need not think it.

I half expected to find a hansom waiting, but there was none, and we had gone some distance down the Earl's Court road before we got one; in fact, we had to run to the stand. Opposite is the church with the clock upon it, as everybody knows, and at sight of the dial my companion had wrung his hands. It was close upon the half hour.

"Poco tempo—pochissimo!" he wailed. "Bloomberre Ske-warr," he then cried to the cabman—"numero trentotto!"

"Bloomberre Square," I roared on my own account. "I'll show you the house when we get there, only drive like he-d-d!"

My companion lay back gasping in his corner. The small glass told me that my own face was pretty red.

"A nice show!" I cried; "and not a word can you tell me. Didn't you bring me a note?"

I might have known by this time that he had not, still I went through the pantomime of writing with my finger on my cuff. But he shrugged and shook his head.

"Niente," said he. "Una questione di vita, di vita!"

"What's that?" I snapped, my early training come in again. "Say it slowly—adante—rallentando."

Thank Italy for the stage instructions in the songs one used to murder! The fellow actually understood.

"Una—questione—di—vita."
"Or mors, eh?" I shouted, and up went the trap door over our heads.

"Avanti, avanti, avanti!" cried the Italian, turning up his one-eyed face.

"Hell-to-leather," I translated, "and double fare if you do it by 12 o'clock."

But in the streets of London how is one to know the time? In the Earl's Court road it had not been half-past, and at Barker's in High street it was but a minute later. A long half mile a minute, that was going like the wind, and indeed we had done much of it at a gallop. But the next hundred yards took us five minutes by the next clock, and which was one to believe? I fell back upon my own old watch (it was my own), which made it eighteen minutes to the hour as we swung across the Serpentine bridge, and by the quarter we were in the Baywater road—not up for once.

"Presto, presto," my pale guide murmured. "Affrettatevi—avanti!"

"Ten bob if you do it," I cried through the trap, without the slightest notion of what we were to do. But it was "una questione di vita," and "vostro amico" must and could only be my miserable Raffles.

What a very godsend is the perfect hansom to the man or woman in a hurry! It had been our great good fortune to jump into a perfect hansom. There was no choice; we had to take the first upon the rank, but it must have deserved its place with the rest nowhere. New tires, superb springs, a horse in a thousand and a driver up to every trick of his trade! In and out we went like a fast half-back at the Rugby game, yet where the traffic was thinnest there were we. And how he knew his way! At the Marble Arch he slipped out of the main stream, and so into Wigmore street, then up and in and out on until I saw the gold tips of the Museum palisade gleaming between the horses' ears in the sun. Plop, plop, plop; ting, ling, ling; bell and horseshoes, horseshoes and bell, until the colossal figure of C. J. Fox in a grimy toga spelled Bloomsbury Square, with my watch still wanting three minutes to the hour.

"What number?" cried the good fellow overhead.

"Trentotto, trentotto," said my guide, but he was looking to the right, and I bundled him out to show the house on foot. I had not half a sovereign after all, but I fung our dear driver a whole one instead, and only wish that it had been a hundred.

Already the Italian had his latchkey in the door of 38, and in another moment we were rushing up the narrow stairs of a dingy London house as prejudiced countryman can conceive. It was panelled, but it was dark and evil-smelling, and how we should have found our way even to the stairs but for an unwholesome jet of yellow gas in the hall I cannot myself imagine. However, up we went pell-mell to the right about on the half landing, and so like a whirlwind into the drawing-room a few steps higher. There the gas was also burning behind closed shutters, and the scene is photographed upon my brain, though I cannot have looked upon it for a whole instant as I sprang in at my leader's heels.

This room also was panelled, and in the middle of the wall on our left, his hands

lashed to a ring-bolt high above his head, his toes barely touching the floor, his neck pinioned by a strap passing through smaller ring-bolts under each ear and every inch of him secured on the same principle, stood, or rather hung, all that was left of Raffles, for at the first glance I believed him dead. A black ruler gagged him, the ends lashed behind his neck, the blood upon it caked to bronze in the gas light. And in front of him, ticking like a siegehammer, its only hand upon the stroke of 12, stood a simple, old-fashioned grandfather's clock—but not for half an instant longer—only until my guide could hurl himself upon it and send the whole thing crashing into the corner. An ear-splitting report accompanied the crash, a white cloud lifted from the fallen clock, and I saw a revolver smoking in a vise screwed below the dial, an arrangement of wires sprouting from the dial itself, and the single hand at once at its zenith and in contact with these.

"Tumble to it, Bunny!"

He was alive; these were his words; the Italian had the blood-caked ruler in his hand, and with his knife was reaching up to cut the thongs that lashed the hands. He was not tall enough. I seized and lifted him up, then fell to work with my own knife on the straps. And Raffles smiled faintly upon us through his blood stains.

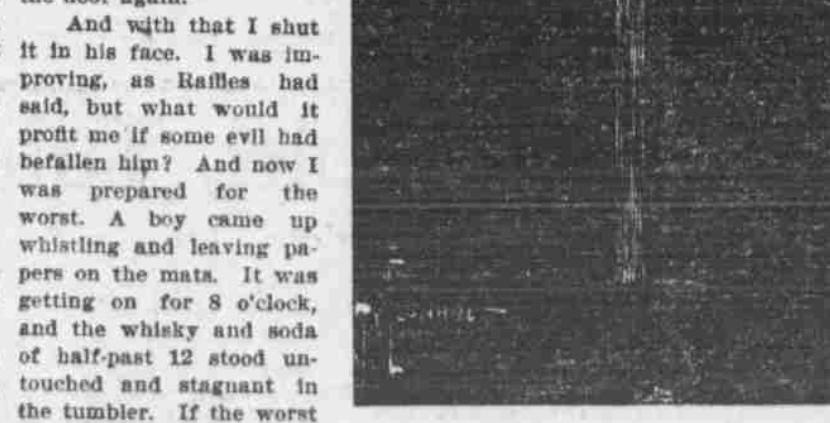
"I want you to tumble to it," he whispered; "the nearest thing in revenge I ever knew, and another minute would have fixed it. I've been waiting for it twelve hours, watching the clock round, death at the end of the lap! Electric connection. Simple enough. Hour hand only—O Lord!"

We had cut the last strap. He could not stand. We supported him between us to a horsehair sofa, for the room was furnished, and I begged him not to speak, while his one-eyed deliverer was at the door before Raffles recalled him with a sharp word in Italian.

"He wants to get me a d-ink, but that can wait," said he in a hoarse voice. "I shall enjoy it the more when I've told you what happened. Don't let him go, Bunny; put your back against the door. He's



"POCO TEMPO, POCO TEMPO."



"I GOT A CRACK ON THE HEAD."