

Twelfth Raffles Story---A Old Flame

placed himself like a recruit at the drill sergeant's voice.

"Of course he is," he snapped--"no ill as to need a nurse who can nurse, by way of a change."

With that his door shut in my face, and I had to go my way in the dark as to whether he had mistaken my meaning, and was telling me a lie, or not.

But for my misgivings upon this point I might have extracted some very genuine enjoyment out of the next few days. I had decent clothes to my back, with money, as I say, in most of the pockets, and more freedom to spend it than was possible in the constant society of a man whose personal liberty depended on a universal suspicion that he was dead. Raffles was as bold as ever, and I as fond of him, but whereas he would run any risk in a professional exploit, there were many innocent recreations still open to me which would have been sheer madness in him. He could not even watch a match, from the stony seats, at Lord's Cricketground, where the Gentlemen were every year in a worse way without him. He never traveled by rail, and dining out was a risk only to be run with some ulterior object in view. In fact, much as it had changed, Raffles could no longer show his face with perfect impunity in any quarter or at any hour. Moreover, after the lesson he had now learnt, I foresaw increased caution on his part in this respect. But myself was under no such perpetual disadvantage, and, while what was good enough for Raffles was quite good enough for me, so long as we were together, I saw no harm in profiting by the present opportunity of "doing myself well."

Such were my reflections on the way to Richmond in a hansom cab. Richmond had struck us both as the best center of operations in search of the suburban retreat which Raffles wanted, and by road, in a well-appointed, well-selected hansom, was certainly the most agreeable way of getting there. In a week or ten days Raffles was to write to me at the Richmond postoffice, but for at least a week I should be "on my own." It was not an unpleasant sensation as I lean back in the comfortable hansom, and rather to one side, in order to have a good look at myself in the beveled mirror that is almost as great an improvement in these vehicles as the rubber tires. Really I was not an ill-looking youth, if one may call one's self such at the age of 30. I could lay no claim either to the striking cast of countenance or to the peculiar charm of expression which made the face of Raffles like no other in the world. But this very distinction was in itself a danger, for its impression was indelible, whereas I might still have been mistaken for a hundred other young fellows at large in London. Incredible as it may appear to the moral-

ists, I had sustained no external hallmark by my term of imprisonment, and I am vain enough to believe that the evil which I did had not a separate existence in my face. This afternoon, indeed, I was struck by the purity of my fresh complexion, and rather depressed by the general innocence of the visage which peered into mine from the little mirror. My straw-colored mustache, grown in the flat after a protracted holiday, again preserved the most disappointing dimensions, and was still invisible in certain lights without wax. So far from discerning the desperate criminal who has "gone time" once, and deserved it over and over again, the superior but superficial observer might have imagined that he detected a certain element of folly in my face.

At all events it was not the face to shut the doors of a first-class hotel against me without accidental evidence of a more explicit kind, and it was with no little satisfaction that I directed the man to drive to the Star and Garter. I also told him to go through Richmond park, though he warned me that it would add considerably to the distance and his fare. It was autumn and it struck me that the tint would be fine. And I had learned from Raffles to appreciate such things, even amid the excitement of an audacious enterprise.

If I dwell upon my appreciation of this occasion it is because, like most pleasures, it was exceedingly short lived. I was very comfortable at the Star and Garter, which was so empty that I had a room worthy of a prince, where I could enjoy the finest of all views (in patriotic opinion) every morning while I shaved. I walked many miles through the noble park, over the commons of Ham and Wimbledon, and one day as far as that of Esher, where I was forcibly reminded of a service we once rendered to a distinguished resident in this delightful locality. But it was in Ham Common, one of the places which Raffles had mentioned as specially desirable, that I actually found an almost ideal retreat. This was a cottage where I heard, on inquiry, that rooms were to be let in the summer. The landlady, a motherly body, of visible excellence, was surprised indeed at receiving an application for the winter months; but I have generally found that the title of "author," claimed with an air, explains very little innocent irregularity of conduct of appearance, and even requires something of the kind to carry conviction to the lay intelligence. The present case was one in point, and when I said that I could only write in a room facing north, on mutton chops and milk, with a cold ham in the wardrobe in case of nocturnal inspiration, to which I was liable, my literary character was established beyond dispute. I secured the rooms, paid a month's rent in advance at my own request, and moped in them drearily until the week was up and

Raffles due any day. I explained that the inspiration would not come, and asked abruptly if the matter was New Zealand.

There had I made fruitless inquiries at the Richmond postoffice, but on the tenth day I was in and out almost every hour. Not a word was there for me up to the last post at night. Home I trudged to Ham with horrible forebodings, and back again to Richmond after breakfast next morning. Still there was nothing. I could bear it no more. At ten minutes to eleven I was climbing the station stairs at Earl's Court.

It was a wretched morning there, a weeping mist shrouding the long straight street and clinging to one's face in clammy caresses. I felt how much better it was down at Ham as I turned into our street and saw the hats looming like mountains, the chimney-pots hidden in the mist. At our entrance stood a nebulous conveyance, that I took at first for a tradesman's van, to my horror it proved to be a hearse, and all at once the white breath ceased upon my lips.

I had looked up at our windows and the blinds were down.

I rushed within. The doctor's door stood open. I neither knocked nor rang, but found him in his consulting room with red eyes and a blotchy face. Otherwise he was in solemn black from head to heel.

"Who is dead?" I burst out. "Who is dead?"

The red eyes looked redder than ever as Dr. Theobald opened them at the unwelcome sight of me; and he was terribly slow in answering. But in the end he did answer, and he did not kick me out, as he evidently had a mind.

"Mr. Maturin," he said, and sighed like a beaten man.

I said nothing. It was no surprise to me. I had known it all these minutes. Nay, I had dreaded this from the first, had divined it at the last, though to the last I had refused to entertain my own conviction. Raffles dead! A real invalid after all! Raffles dead, and on the point of burial!

"Typhoid," he answered. "Kestington is full of it."

"He was sickening for it when I left, and you knew it, and could get rid of me then!"

"My good fellow, I was obliged to have a more experienced nurse for that very reason."

"What did he die of?" I asked, unconsciously drawing on that fund of grim self-control which the weakest of us seem to hold in reserve for real calamity.

The doctor's tone was so convincing that I remembered in an instant what a humbug the man was, and became suddenly possessed with the vague conviction that he was imposing upon me now.

"Are you sure it was typhoid at all?" I cried fiercely to his face. "Are you sure it wasn't cholera or marasmus?"

I confess that I can see little point in this speech as I write it down, but it was what I said in a burst of grief and of wild suspicion; nor was it without effect upon Dr. Theobald, who turned bright scarlet from his well-brushed hair to his immaculate collar.

"Do you want me to throw you out into the street?" he cried; and all at once I remembered that I had come to Raffles as a perfect stranger, and for his sake might as well preserve that character to the last.

"He was so good to me--I became so attached to him. You forget I am originally of his class."

"I did forget it," replied Theobald, looking relieved at my new tone, "and I beg your pardon for doing so. Hush! They are bringing him down. I must have a drink before we start, and you'd better join me."

There was no pretense about his drink this time, and a pretty stiff one it was, but I fancy my own must have run it hard. In my case it cast a merciful haze over much of the next hot hour, which I can truthfully describe as one of the most painful in my whole existence. I can have known very little of what I was doing. I only remember finding myself in a hansom, suddenly wondering why it was going so slowly, and asking the driver to take the truth. But it was to the truth itself more than to the liquor that I must have owed my dazed condition. My next recollection is of looking down into the open grave, in a sudden passionate anxiety to see the name for myself. It was not the name of my friend, of course, but it was the one under which he had passed for many months.

I was still stupefied by a sense of inconceivable loss, and had not raised my eyes from that which was slowly forcing me to realize what had happened, when there was a rustle at my elbow, and a shower of hot house flowers passed before them, falling like huge snowflakes where my gaze had rested. I looked up and at my side stood a majestic figure in deep mourning. The face was carefully veiled, but I was too close not to recognize the masterful beauty whom the world knew as Jacques Saillard. I had no sympathy with her; on the contrary, my blood boiled with the vague conviction that in some way she was responsible for this death. Yet she was the only woman present--there were not half a dozen of us altogether--and her flowers were the only flowers.

The melancholy ceremony was over, and Jacques Saillard had departed in a funeral brougham, evidently hired for the occasion. I had watched her drive away, and the sight of my own cabman, making signs to me through the fog, had suddenly reminded me that I had bidden him to wait. I was the last to leave, and had turned my back upon the grave diggers, already at their final task, when a hand fell lightly but firmly upon my shoulder.

"I don't want to make a scene in a cemetery," said a voice, in a not unkindly, almost confidential whisper. "Will you get into your own cab and come quietly?"

"Who on earth are you?" I exclaimed.

I now remembered having seen the fellow hovering about during the funeral, and subconsciously taking him for the undertaker's head man. He had certainly that appearance, and even now I could scarcely believe that he was anything else.

"My name won't help you," he said, pityingly. "But you will guess where I come from when I tell you that I have a warrant for your arrest."

My sensations at this announcement may not be believed, but I solemnly declare that I have seldom experienced so fierce a satisfaction. Here was a new excitement in which to draw my grief, here was something to think about; and I should be spared the intolerable experience of a solitary return to the little place at Ham. It was as though I had lost a limb and some one had struck me hard in the face that the greater agony was forgotten. I got into the hansom without a word, my captor following at my heels, and giving his own directions to the cabman before taking his seat. The word "Station" was the only one I caught, and I wondered whether it was to be Bow Street again. My companion's next words, however, rather the tone in which he uttered them, destroyed my capacity for idle speculation.

"Mr. Maturin!" said he. "Mr. Maturin, indeed!"

"Well," said I, "what about him?"

"Do you think we don't know who he was?"

"Who was he?" I asked, defiantly.

"You ought to know," said he. "You got locked up through him the other time, too. His favorite name was Raffles, wasn't it?"

"It was his real name," I said, indignantly. "And he has been dead for years."

My captor simply shrugged.

"He's at the bottom of the sea, I say."

But I do not know why I should have told him with such spirit, for what could it matter to Raffles now? I did not think; instinct was still stronger than reason, and, fresh from his funeral, I had taken up the cudgels for my dead friend as though he were still alive. Next moment I saw this for myself, and my tears came no nearer the surface than they had been yet; but the fellow at my side laughed outright.

"Shall I tell you something else?"

"As you like."

"He's not even at the bottom of that grave! He's no more dead than you or I, and a sham burial is his latest piece of villainy!"

I doubt if I could have spoken if I had tried. I did not try. I had no use for speech. I did not even ask him if he was, sure. I was so sure myself. It was all as plain to me as riddles usually are when one has the answer. The doctor's alarms, the stimulated illness, my own dismissal, each fitted in its obvious place, and not even the last had power as yet to mar my joy in the one central fact to which all the rest were as tapers to the sun.

"He is alive!" I cried. "Nothing else matters--he is alive!"

At last I did ask whether they had got him too; but thankful as I was for the greater knowledge, I confess that I did not much care what answer I had received. Already I was figuring out how much we might each get, and how old we should be when we came out. But my companion tilted his hat to the back of his head, at the same time putting his face closer to mine and compelling my scrutiny. And my answer, as you have already guessed, was the face of Raffles himself, superbly disguised (but less superbly than his voice), and yet so thin that I should have known him to the back of his head, at the same time putting his face closer to mine and compelling my scrutiny. And my answer, as you have already guessed, was the face of Raffles himself, superbly disguised (but less superbly than his voice), and yet so thin that I should have known him to the back of his head, at the same time putting his face closer to mine and compelling my scrutiny. And my answer, as you have already guessed, was the face of Raffles himself, superbly disguised (but less superbly than his voice), and yet so thin that I should have known him to the back of his head, at the same time putting his face closer to mine and compelling my scrutiny.

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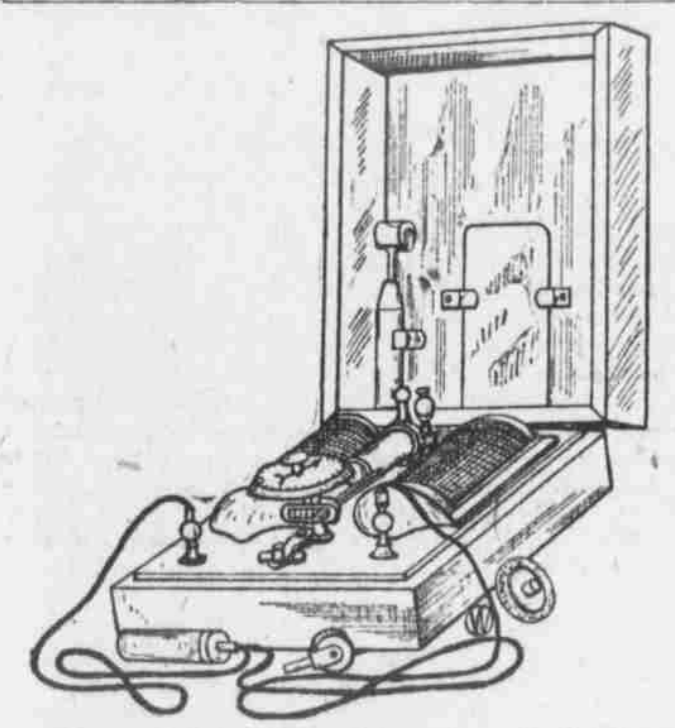
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