

RAFFLES
The Amateur Cracksman

LAST
RAFFLES
ADVENTURE

The Wrong House
By E. W. HORNUNG.
Author of "The Shadow of the Rope," "The Rogue's March,"
"A Bride from the Bush," "Stingaree Stories," "Dead Men Tell No
Tales," etc. (Copyright, 1901, by Charles Scribner's Sons)

NEXT WEEK
SHERLOCK
HOLMES

RAFFLES
The Amateur Cracksman

Last Raffles Story

MY brother Ralph, who now lived with me on the edge of Ham Common, had come home from Australia with a curious affection of the eyes, due to long exposure to the glare out there, and necessitating the use of clouded spectacles in the open air. He had not the rich complexion of the typical colonist, being indeed peculiarly pale, but it appeared that he had been confined to his berth for the greater part of the voyage, while his prematurely gray hair was sufficient proof that the rigors of bush life had at last undermined an originally tough constitution. Our landlady, who spoiled my brother from the first, was much concerned on his behalf and wished to call in the local doctor; but Ralph said dreadful things about the profession and quite frightened the good woman by arbitrarily forbidding her ever to let a doctor inside her door. I had to apologize to her for the painful prejudices and violent language of "these colonists," but the old soul was easily mollified. She had fallen in love with my brother at first sight, and she never could do too much for him. It was owing to our landlady that I took to calling him Ralph, for the first time in our lives, on her beginning to speak of and to him as "Mr. Raffles."

"This won't do," said he to me. "It's a name that sticks."
"It must be my fault! She must have heard it from me," said I, self-reproachfully.

"You must tell her it's the short for Ralph."
"But it's longer."

"It's the short," said he, "and you've got to tell her so."
Henceforth I heard as much of "Mr. Ralph," his likes and his dislikes, what he would fancy and what he would not, and, oh, what a dear gentleman he was, that I often remembered to say, "Ralph, old chap," myself.

It was an ideal cottage, as I said when I found it, and in it our delicate man became rapidly robust. Not that the air was also ideal, for, when it was not raining, we had the same faithful mist from November to March. But it was something to Ralph to get any air at all, other than night air, and the bicycle did the rest. We taught ourselves, and may I never forget our earlier rides through and through Richmond Park when the afternoons were shortest, upon the incomparable Ripley Road when we gave a day to it. Raffles rode a Beeston Humber, a Royal Sunbeam was good enough for me, but he insisted on our both having Dunlop tires.

"They seem the most popular brand. I had my eye on the road all the way from Ripley to Cobham, and there were more Dunlop marks than any other kind. Bless you, yes, they all leave their special tracks, and we don't want ours to be extra special; the Dunlop's like a rattlesnake, and the Palmer leaves telegraph wires, but surely the serpent is more in our line."

That was the winter when there were so many burglaries in the Thames Valley from Richmond upward. It was said that the thieves used bicycles in every case, but what is not said? They were sometimes on foot, to my knowledge, and we took a great interest in the series, or, rather, sequence, of successful crimes. Raffles would often get his devoted old lady to read him the latest local accounts, while I was busy with my writing (much I wrote) in my own room. We even rode out by night ourselves to see if we could not get on the tracks of the thieves, and never did we fail to find hot coffee on the hob for our return. We had indeed fallen upon our feet. Also, the misty nights might have been made for the thieves. But their success was not so consistent, and never so enormous, as people said, especially the sufferers, who lost more valuables than had ever been known to possess. Failure was often the cat's paw, and disaster once; owing, ironically enough, to that very mist which should have served them. But I am going to tell the story with some particularity, and perhaps some gusto, you will see why who read.

The right house stood on high ground near the river, with quite a drive (in at one gate and out at the other) sweeping past the steps. Between the two gates was a half-moon of shrubs, to the left of the steps a conservatory, and to their right the walk leading to the tradesmen's entrance and the back premises; here also was the pantry window, of which more anon. The right house was the residence of an opulent stock broker who wore a heavy watchchain and seemed far game. There would have been two objections to it had I been the stockbroker. The house was one of a row, though a goodly row, and an army-crammer had established himself next door. There is a type of such institutions in the suburbs, the youths go about in knickerbockers, smoking pipes, except on Saturday nights, when they lead each other home from the last train. It was none of our business to spy upon these boys, but their manners and customs fell within the field of observation. And we did not choose the night upon which the whole row was likely to be kept awake.

The night that we did choose was as misty as even the Thames Valley is capable of making them. Raffles smeared vaseline upon the plated parts of his Beeston Humber before starting, and our dear landlady cosseted us both and prayed we might see nothing of the nasty burglars, not denying as the reward would be very handy to them that got it, to say nothing of the honor and glory. We had promised her a liberal perquisite in the event of our success, but she must not give other cyclists our idea by mentioning it to a soul. It was about midnight when we cycled through Kingston to Surbiton, having trundled our machines across Ham Fields, mournful in the mist as those by Acheron, and so over Teddington Bridge.

I often wonder why the pantry window is the vulnerable point of nine houses out of ten. This house of ours was almost the tenth, for the window in question had bars of sorts, but not the right sort. The only bars that Raffles allowed to beat him were the kind that are let into the stone outside; those fixed within are merely screwed to the woodwork, and you may unscrew as many as necessary if you take the trouble and have the time. Barred windows are usually devoid of other fasteners worthy the name; this one was no exception to that foolish rule, and a push with the penknife did its business. I am giving householders some valuable hints, and perhaps deserving a good mark from the critics. These, in any case, are the points that I would see of, were I a rich stockbroker in a river-side suburb. In giving good advice, however, I should not have omitted to say that we had left our machines in the semi-circular shrubbery in front, or that Raffles had most ingeniously fitted our lamps with dark slides, which enabled us to leave them burning.

It proved sufficient to unscrew the bars at the bottom only, and then to wrench them to either side. Neither of us had grown stout with advancing years, and in a few minutes we had both wormed through into the sink, and thence to the floor. It was not an absolutely noiseless process, but once in the pantry we were nice, and no longer blind mice. There was a gas bracket, but we did not meddle with that. Raffles went armed these nights with a better light than gas; if it were not immoral, I might recommend a dark-lantern which was more or less his patent. It was that handy invention, the electric torch, fitted by Raffles with a dark hood to fulfil the functions of a slide. I had held it through the bars while he undid the screws, and now he held it to the keyhole, in which a key was turned upon the other side.

There was a pause for consideration, and in the pause we put on our masks. It was never known that these Thames Valley robberies were all committed by miscreants decked in the livery of crime, but that was because until this night we had never even shown our masks. It was a point upon which Raffles had insisted on all feasible occasions since his furtive return to the world. Tonight it twice nearly lost us everything—but you shall hear.

There is a forceps for turning keys from the wrong side of the door, but the implement is not so easy of manipulation as it might be. Raffles for one preferred a sharp knife and the corner of the panel. You go through the panel because that is thinnest, of course in the

corner nearest the key, and you use a knife when you can, because it makes least noise. But it does take minutes, and even I can remember shifting the electric torch from one hand to the other before the aperture was large enough to receive the hand and wrist of Raffles.

He had at such times a motto of which I might have made earlier use, but the fact is that I have only once before described a downright burglary in which I assisted, and that without knowing it at the time. The most solemn student of these annals cannot affirm that he has cut through many doors in our company, since (what was to me) the maiden effort to which I allude, I, however, have cracked only too many a crib in conjunction with A. J. Raffles, and at the crucial moment he would whisper, "Victory or Wormwood Scrubbs, Bunny!" or instead of Wormwood Scrubbs it might be Portland Bill. This time it was neither one nor the other, for with that very word "victory" upon his lips they whitened and parted with the first taste of defeat.

"My hand's held!" gasped Raffles, and the white of his eyes showed all round the iris, a rarer thing than you may think.

At the same moment I heard the shuffling feet and the low, excited young voices on the other side of the door, and a faint light shone round Raffles' wrist.

"Well done, Beefy!"
"Hang on to him!"
"Good old Beefy!"
"Beefy's got him!"
"So have I—so have I!"

And Raffles caught my arm with his one free hand. "They've got me tight," he whispered. "I'm done."
"Blaze through the door," I urged, and might have done it had I been armed. But I never was. It was Raffles who monopolized that risk.

"I can't—it's the boys—the wrong house!" he whispered. "Curse the fog—it's done me. But you get out, Bunny, while you can; never mind me, it's my turn, old chap."

His one hand tightened in affectionate farewell. I put the electric torch in it before I went, trembling in every inch, but without a word.

Get out! His turn! Yes, I would get out, but only to come in again, for it was my turn—mine—not his. Would Raffles leave me held by a hand through a hole in a door? What would he have done in my place was the thing for me to do now. I began by diving head-first through the pantry window and coming to earth upon all fours. But even as I stood up and brushed the gravel from the palms of my hands and the knees of my knickerbockers I had no notion what to do next. And yet I was half-way to the front door before I remembered the vile crape mask upon my face, and tore it off as the door flew open and my feet were on the steps.

"He's into the next garden," I cried to a bevy of pajamas with bare feet and young faces at either end of them.

"Who? Who?" said they, giving way before me.

"Some fellow who came through one of your windows headfirst."
"The other Johnny, the other Johnny," the cherubs chorused.

"Biking past—saw the light—why, what have you there?"
Of course, it was Raffles' hand that they had, but now I was in the hall among them. A red-faced barrel of a boy did all the holding, one hand round the wrist, the other palm to palm, and his knees braced up against the panel. Another was rendering ostentatious but ineffectual aid, and three or four others danced about in their pajamas. After all, they were not more than four to one. I had raised my voice, so that Raffles might hear me and take heart, and now I raised it again. Yet to this day I cannot account for my inspiration, that proved nothing less.

"Don't talk so loud," they were crying below their breath; "don't wake 'em upstairs, this is our show."

"Then I see you've got one of them," said I, as desired. "Well, if you want the other you can have him, too. I believe he's hurt himself."

"After him, after him!" they exclaimed, as one.

"But I think he got over the wall!"
"Come on, you chaps, come on!"
And there was a soft stampede to the hall door.

"Don't all desert me, I say!" gasped the red-faced hero who held Raffles prisoner.

"We must have them both, Beefy!"
"That's all very well!"
"Look here," I interposed, "I'll stay by you. I've a friend outside, I'll get him, too."

"Thanks, awfully," said the valiant Beefy.

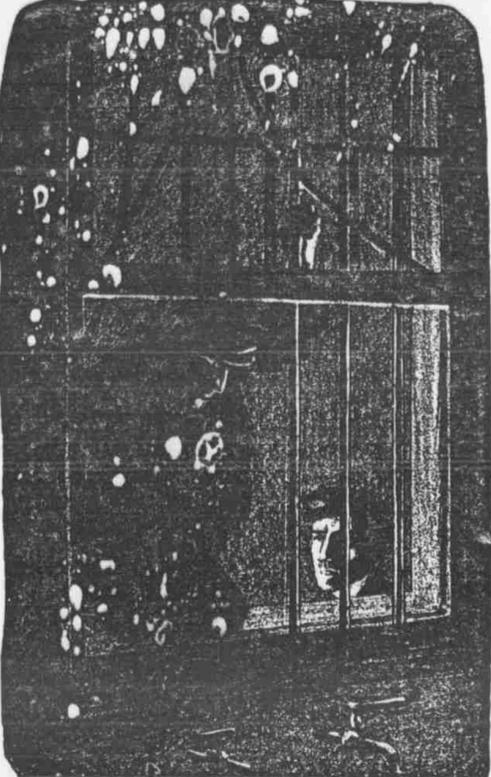
The hall was empty now. My heart beat high.

"How did you hear them?" I inquired, my eye running over him.

"We were down having drinks—game o' nap—in there."
Beefy jerked his great head toward an open door, and the tall of my eye caught the glint of glasses in the firelight, but the rest of it was otherwise engaged.

"Let me relieve you," I said, trembling.

"No, I'm all right."
"Then I must insist."
And before he could answer I had him round the neck with such



"WE BOTH WORMED THROUGH."

not the smallest desire to throttle this innocent lad (nor did I), but only to extricate Raffles from the most hopeless position he was ever in; and, after all, it was better than a blow from behind. On the whole, I will not alter a word, nor whine about the thing any more.

We lifted the plucky fellow into Raffles' place in the pantry, locked the door on him, and put the key through the panel. Now was the moment for thinking of ourselves, and again that infernal mask which Raffles swore by came near being the undoing of us both. We had reached the steps when we were hailed by a voice, not from within, but from without, and I had just time to tear the accursed thing from Raffles' face before he turned.

A stout man with a blond mustache was on the stairs, in his pajamas like the boys.

"What are you doing here?" said he.
"There has been an attempt upon your house," said I, still spokesman for the night, and still on the wings of inspiration.

"Your sons?"
"My pupils."
"Indeed. Well, they heard it, drove off the thieves and have given chase."

"And where do you come in?" inquired the stout man, descending.

"We were bicycling past, and I actually saw one fellow come headfirst through your pantry window. I think he got over the wall." Here a breathless boy returned.

"Can't see anything of him," he gasped.

"It's true, then," remarked the crammer.

"Look at that door," said I.

But, unfortunately, the breathless boy looked also, and now he was being joined by others equally short of wind.

"Where's Beefy?" he screamed. "What on earth's happened to Beefy?"

"My good boys," exclaimed the crammer, "will one of you be kind enough to tell me what you've been doing, and what these gentlemen have been doing for you? Come in all, before you get your death. I see lights in the classroom, and more than lights. Can these be signs of a carouse?"

"A very innocent one, sir," said a well-set-up youth with more mustache than I have yet.

"Well, Olphert, boys will be boys. Suppose you tell me what happened, before we come to recriminations."

The bad old proverb was my first warning. I caught two of the youths exchanging glances under raised eyebrows. Yet their stout, easy-going mentor had given me such a reassuring glance of sidelong humor, as between man of the world and man of the world, that it was difficult to suspect him of suspicion. I was nevertheless itching to be gone.

Young Olphert told his story with engaging candor. It was true that they had come down for an hour's nap and cigarettes; well, and there was no denying that was whisky in the glasses. The boys were now all back in their classroom, I think entirely for the sake of warmth; but Raffles and I were in knickerbockers and Norfolk jackets, and very naturally remained without, while the army-crammer (who wore bedroom slippers) stood on the threshold, with an eye each way. The more I saw of the man the better I liked and the more I feared him. His chief annoyance thus far was that they had not called him when they heard the noise, that they had dreamt of leaving him out of the fun. But he seemed more hurt than angry about that.

"Well, sir," concluded Olphert, "we left old Beefy Smith hanging on to his hand, and this gentleman with him, so perhaps he can tell us what happened next?"

"I wish I could," I cried, with all their eyes upon me, for I had had time to think.

a will that not a gurgle passed my fingers, for they were almost buried in his hot, smooth flesh. Oh, I am not proud of it; the act was as vile as act could be; but I was not going to see Raffles taken, my one desire was to be the saving of him, and I tremble even now to think to what lengths I might have gone for its fulfillment. As it was, I squeezed and tugged until one strong hand gave way after the other and came feeling round for me, but feebly because they had held on so long. And what do you suppose was happening at the same moment? The pinched white hand of Raffles, reddening with returning blood, and with a clot of blood upon the wrist, was craning upward and turning the key in the lock without a moment's loss.

"Steady on, Bunny!"

And I saw that Beefy's ears were blue; but Raffles was feeling in his pockets as he spoke.

"Now let him breathe," said he, clapping his handkerchief over the poor youth's mouth. An empty phial was in his other hand, and the first few stertorous breaths that the poor boy took were the end of him for the time being. Oh, but it was villainous, my part especially, for he must have been far gone to go the rest of the way so readily. I began by saying I was not proud of this deed, but its dastardly character has come home to me more than ever with the penance of writing it out. I see in myself, at least my then self, things that I never saw quite so clearly before. Yet let me be quite sure that I would not do the same again. I had

not the smallest desire to throttle this innocent lad (nor did I), but only to extricate Raffles from the most hopeless position he was ever in; and, after all, it was better than a blow from behind. On the whole, I will not alter a word, nor whine about the thing any more.

We lifted the plucky fellow into Raffles' place in the pantry, locked the door on him, and put the key through the panel. Now was the moment for thinking of ourselves, and again that infernal mask which Raffles swore by came near being the undoing of us both. We had reached the steps when we were hailed by a voice, not from within, but from without, and I had just time to tear the accursed thing from Raffles' face before he turned.

A stout man with a blond mustache was on the stairs, in his pajamas like the boys.

"What are you doing here?" said he.
"There has been an attempt upon your house," said I, still spokesman for the night, and still on the wings of inspiration.

"Your sons?"
"My pupils."
"Indeed. Well, they heard it, drove off the thieves and have given chase."

"And where do you come in?" inquired the stout man, descending.

"We were bicycling past, and I actually saw one fellow come headfirst through your pantry window. I think he got over the wall." Here a breathless boy returned.

"Can't see anything of him," he gasped.

"It's true, then," remarked the crammer.

"Look at that door," said I.

But, unfortunately, the breathless boy looked also, and now he was being joined by others equally short of wind.

"Where's Beefy?" he screamed. "What on earth's happened to Beefy?"

"My good boys," exclaimed the crammer, "will one of you be kind enough to tell me what you've been doing, and what these gentlemen have been doing for you? Come in all, before you get your death. I see lights in the classroom, and more than lights. Can these be signs of a carouse?"

"A very innocent one, sir," said a well-set-up youth with more mustache than I have yet.

"Well, Olphert, boys will be boys. Suppose you tell me what happened, before we come to recriminations."

The bad old proverb was my first warning. I caught two of the youths exchanging glances under raised eyebrows. Yet their stout, easy-going mentor had given me such a reassuring glance of sidelong humor, as between man of the world and man of the world, that it was difficult to suspect him of suspicion. I was nevertheless itching to be gone.

Young Olphert told his story with engaging candor. It was true that they had come down for an hour's nap and cigarettes; well, and there was no denying that was whisky in the glasses. The boys were now all back in their classroom, I think entirely for the sake of warmth; but Raffles and I were in knickerbockers and Norfolk jackets, and very naturally remained without, while the army-crammer (who wore bedroom slippers) stood on the threshold, with an eye each way. The more I saw of the man the better I liked and the more I feared him. His chief annoyance thus far was that they had not called him when they heard the noise, that they had dreamt of leaving him out of the fun. But he seemed more hurt than angry about that.

"Well, sir," concluded Olphert, "we left old Beefy Smith hanging on to his hand, and this gentleman with him, so perhaps he can tell us what happened next?"

"I wish I could," I cried, with all their eyes upon me, for I had had time to think.

"Some of you must have heard me say I'd fetch my friend in from the road?"

"Yes, I did," piped an innocent from within.

"Well, and when I came back with him things were exactly as you see them now. Evidently the man's strength was too much for the boys'; but whether he ran upstairs or out I know no more than you."

"It wasn't like that boy to run either way," said the crammer, cocking a clear blue eye on me.

"But if he gave chase?"
"It wasn't like him ever to let go."

"I don't believe Beefy even would," put in Olphert. "That's why we gave him the billet."

"He may have followed through the pantry window," I suggested.

"But the door's shut," put in a boy.

"I'll have a look at it," said the crammer.

And the key no longer in the lock, and the insensible youth without the key would be missed, the door kicked in; nay, with the man's eye still upon me, I thought I could smell the chloroform, I thought I could hear a moan, and prepared for either any moment. And how he did stare! I have detected blue eyes ever since, and blond mustaches, and the whole stout, easy-going type that is not such a tool as it looks. I had brazened it out with the boys, but the first grown man was too many for me, and the blood ran out of my heart as though there was no Raffles at my back. Indeed, I had forgotten him. I had so longed to put this thing through by myself! Even in my extremity it was almost a disappointment to me when his dear, cool voice fell like a delicious draught upon my ears. But its effect upon the others is more interesting to recall. Until now the crammer had the center of the stage, but at this point Raffles usurped a place which was always his at will. People would wait for what he had to say, as these people waited now for the simplest and most natural thing in the world.

"One moment!" he had begun.

"Well?" said the crammer, relieving me of his eyes at last.

"I don't want to lose any of the fun!"
"Nor must you," said the crammer, with emphasis.

"But we've left our bikes outside, and mine's a Beeston Humber," continued Raffles. "If you don't mind, we'll bring 'em in before these fellows get away on them."

And out he went without a look to see the effect of his words, I after him with a determined imitation of his self-control. But I would have given something to turn round. I believe that for one moment the shrewd instructor was taken in, but as I reached the steps I heard him asking his pupils whether any of them had seen bicycles outside.

That moment, however, made the difference. We were in the shrubbery, Raffles with his electric torch drawn and blazing, when we heard them kicking at the pantry door, and in the drive with "our bicycles before man and boys poured pell-mell down the steps."

We rushed our machines to the nearer gate, for both were shut, and we got through and swung it home behind us in the nick of time. Even I could mount before they could reopen the gate, which Raffles held against them for half an instant with unnecessary gallantry. But he would see me in front of him, and so it fell to me to lead the way.

Now, I have said that it was a very misty night (hence the whole thing), and also that these houses were on a hill. But they were not nearly on the top of the hill, and I did what I firmly believe that almost everybody would have done in my place. Raffles, indeed, said he would have done it himself, but that was his generosity, and he was the one man who would not. What I did was to turn in the opposite direction to the other gate, where we might so easily have been cut off, and to pedal for my life—up hill!

"My God!" I shouted when I found it out.

"Can you turn in your own length?" asked Raffles, following loyally.

"Not certain."

"Then stick to it. You couldn't help it. But it's the devil of a hill!"
"And here they come!"
"Let them," said Raffles, and brandished his electric torch, our only light as yet.

A hill seems endless in the dark, for you cannot see the end, and with the patter of bare feet gaining on us, I thought this one could have no end at all. Of course the boys could charge up it quicker than we could pedal, but I even heard the voice of their stout instructor growling louder through the mist.

"Oh, to think I've let you in for this!" I groaned, my head over the handle-bars, every ounce of my weight first on one foot and then on the other. I glanced at Raffles, and in the white light of his torch he was doing it all with his ankles, exactly as though he had been riding in a gymkhana.

"It's the most sporting chase I was ever in," said he.

"All my fault!"

"My dear Bunny, I wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

Nor would he force ahead of me, though he could have done so in a moment, he who from his boyhood had done everything of the kind so much better than anybody else. No, he must ride a wheel's length behind me, and now we could not only hear the boys running, but breathing also. And then of a sudden I saw Raffles on my right striking with his torch; a face flew out of the darkness to meet the thick glass bulb with the glowing wire inclosed; it was the face of the boy Olphert, with his enviable mustache, but it vanished with the crash of glass, and the naked wire thickened like a tuning-fork struck red-hot.

I saw no more of that. One of them had crept up on my side also; as I looked, hearing him pant, he was grabbing at my left handle, and I nearly sent Raffles into the hedge by the sharp turn I took to the right. His wheel's length saved him. But my boy could run, was overhauling me again, seemed certain of me this time, when all at once the Sunbeam ran easily; every ounce of my weight with either foot once more, and I was over the crest of the hill, the gray road reeling out from under me as I felt for my brake. I looked back at Raffles. He had put up his feet. I screwed my head round still further, and there were the boys in their pajamas, their hands upon their knees, like so many wicket-keepers, and a big man shaking his fist. A lamp-post was on the hill-top, and that was the last I saw.

We stalled down to the river, then on through Thames Dixon as far as Esber Station, when we turned sharp to the right, and from the dark stretch by Imber Court came to light in Molesey, and were soon pedalling like gentlemen of leisure through Bushley Park, our lights turned up, the broken torch put out and away. The big gates had long been shut, but you can manoeuvre a bicycle through the others. We had no further adventures on the way home, and our coffee was still warm upon the hob.

"But I think it's an occasion for Sullivans," said Raffles, who now kept them for such. "By all my gods, Bunny, it's been the most sporting night we ever had in our lives! And do you know which was the most sporting part of it?"

"That up-hill ride?"

"I wasn't thinking of it."
"Turning your torch into a truncheon?"

"My dear Bunny! A gallant lad—I hated hitting him."

"I know," I said. "The way you got us out of the house!"

"No, Bunny," said Raffles, blowing rings. "It came before that, you sinner, and you know it!"

"You don't mean anything I did?" said I, self-consciously, for I began to see that this was what he did mean. And now at latest it will also be seen why this story has been told with undue and inexcusable gusto; there is none other like it for me to tell; it is my one ewe-lamb in all these annals. But Raffles had a ruder name for it.

"It was the Apotheosis of the Bunny," said he.

I hardly knew what I was doing or saying," I said. "The whole thing was a fluke."

"Then," said Raffles, "it was the kind of fluke I always trusted you to make when runs were wanted."

And he held out his dear old hand.

(END OF LAST RAFFLES STORY)

ANOTHER SERIES OF
Fascinating Sherlock Holmes Stories
By A. CONAN DOYLE

THE unparalleled popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories printed in The Bee has created a demand which can be filled only by another series of STARTLING ADVENTURES from the pen of the same author depicting the marvelous results achieved by that MOST SKILLFUL OF ALL DETECTIVES. These stories which will appear from week to week in The Sunday Bee are sure to hold the interest of every reader from the beginning to the end of the series. To avoid missing any of them make sure you receive The Bee as a regular subscriber.

A SHERLOCK HOLMES STORY NEXT SUNDAY