

"RAFFLES, THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN"

By E. W. Hornung, Author of "The Shadow of the Rope," "The Rogue's March," Etc.

No. 11 A Costume Piece

LONDON was just then talking of one whose name is already a name and nothing more. Reuben Rosenthal had made his millions on the diamond fields of South Africa, and had come home to enjoy them according to his lights; how he went to work will scarcely be forgotten by any reader of the half-penny evening papers, which revealed in endless anecdotes of his original ingenuity and present frankness, varied with interesting particulars of the extraordinary establishment which the millionaire set up in St. John's Wood. Here he kept a retinue of Kafirs, who were literally his slaves; and hence he would stroll with his diamonds in his shirt and on his finger, in the company of a prize-fighter of heinous repute, who was not, however, by any means the worst element in the Rosenthal ménage. So said common gossip; but the fact was sufficiently established by the interference of the police on at least one occasion, followed by certain magisterial proceedings which were reported with justifiable gusto and huge headlines in the newspapers abroad. And this was all one knew of Reuben Rosenthal up to the time when the Old Bohemian Club, having fallen on evil days, found it worth while to organize a great dinner in honor of so wealthy an exponent of the club's principles.

It was not at the banquet myself, but a member took Raffles, who told me all about it that very night.

"Most extraordinary show I ever went to in my life," said he. "As for the man himself—well, I was prepared for something grotesque, but the fellow fairly took my breath away. To begin with, he's the most astounding brute to look at, well over six feet, with a chest like a barrel, and a great look none, and the reddish hair and whiskers you ever saw. Frank like a fire-engine, but only got drunk enough to make us a speech that I wouldn't have missed for ten pounds. I'm only sorry you weren't there, too, Bummy, old chap."

I began to sorry myself, for Raffles was anything but an excitable person, and never had I seen him so excited before. Had he been following Rosenthal's example? His coming to the dinner, I might merely tell me about his dinner, which was itself enough to excite a suspicion which was certainly at variance with my knowledge of A. J. Raffles.

"What did he say?" I inquired mechanically, divining some subtle explanation of his visit and wondering what on earth it could be.

"Say?" cried Raffles. "What did he not say? He boasted of his rise, he bragged of his riches, and he blackguarded society for taking him for his monk, and dropping him out of sheer pique and jealousy because he had so much. He mentioned names, too, with the most charming freedom, and swore he was as good a man as any old country had to show—pace the Old Bohemians. To prove it he pointed to a great diamond in the middle of his shirt-front with a little finger loaded with another just like it. Which of our bloated Princes could show a pair like that? As a matter of fact they seemed quite wonderful stones, with a fine sparkle, and I saw that he must have a lot of money. But old Rosenthal swore he wouldn't take 50,000 pounds for the two, and wanted to know where the other man was who went about with 250,000 on his shirt-front and another 250,000 on his little finger. He didn't exist, if he did, he wouldn't have the pluck to wear them. But he had—he'd tell us why. And before you could say Jack Robinson he had whipped out a shocking red revolver."

"Not at the table?"

"At the table. In the middle of his speech! But it was nothing what he wanted to do. He actually wanted us to let him write his name in bullets on the opposite wall to show us why he wasn't afraid to go about in a shirt-front with a pair of brute Purvis, the prize-fighter, who is his paid bully, had to bully his master before he could be persuaded out of it. There was quite a panic for the moment; one fellow rushed upon me, and I was at the table, and the waiters bolted to a man."

"What a grotesque scene!"

"Grotesque enough, but I rather wish they had let him go and whole hog and blaze away. He was as keen as knives to show us how he could take care of his purple diamonds; and, you know, Bummy, I was not a bit afraid of him. And Raffles leant toward me with a sly, slow smile that made the hidden meaning of his visit only too plain to me at last."

"So you think of having a try for his diamonds?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is horribly obvious, I admit. But—well, I have set my heart upon them. To be quite frank, I have had them on my conscience for some time; one couldn't hear so much of the man and his prize-fighter, and his diamonds, without feeling it a kind of duty to do something about them; but when it comes to handling a red revolver and practically challenging the world, the thing becomes inevitable. It is simply thrust upon me, and I am fated to bear that challenge, Bummy, and I, for one, must take it up. I was only sorry I couldn't get on my hind legs and say so myself."

"Well, I said, 'I don't see the necessity as things are with us; but, of course, I'm your man.'"

"My tone may have been half-hearted. I did my best to make it otherwise. But it was barely a month since the Bond-street exploit, and we certainly could have afforded to behave ourselves for some time to come. We had been getting along so nicely; by his advice I had scribbled a thing or two; inspired by Raffles, I had even done an article on our own jewel robbery; and for the moment I was quite satisfied with this sort of adventure. I thought we ought to know when we were well off, and could see no point in our running fresh risks before we were obliged to. On the other hand, I was anxious not to show the finger of attention to break the pledge that I had given a month ago. But it was not on my manifest disinclination that Raffles rested."

"Necessity, my dear Bummy? Does the writer only write when the wolf is at the door? Does the painter paint for bread alone? But you are a month since you had crime like Tom of Bow and Dick of White-chapel? You pain me, my dear chap; you needn't laugh, because you do. Art for art's sake, is a very good thing, but I confess it appeals to me. In this case my motives are absolutely pure, for I doubt if we shall ever be able to dispose of such peculiar stones. But if I don't have a try for them—after thought—I shall never be able to hold up my head again."

"His eye twinkled, but he glittered, too. 'We shall have our work cut out,' was all I said."

"And do you suppose I should be keen on it if we hadn't?" cried Raffles. "My dear fellow, I would rob St. Paul's Cathedral if I could, but I could no more scoop a tit from the shopwalker wasn't looking than I could bag the apples out of an old woman's basket. Even that little business had a month with a word in it, but it was necessary, and I think it's strategy

reduced it to some extent. Now, there's some credit, and more sport, in going where they boast they're on their guard against you. The Bank of England, for example, is the ideal crib, but that would need half a dozen of us with years' experience to the job; and meanwhile Reuben Rosenthal is high enough game for you and me. We know he's armed. We know how Billy Purvis can fight. It'll be no soft thing, I grant you. But what of that, my good Bummy—what of that? A man's reach must exceed his grasp, dear boy, or what the dickens is a heavens' foot?"

"I wonder whether we didn't exceed ours just yet," I answered, laughing, for his spirit was irresistible, and the plan was growing upon me, despite my qualms.

"Trust me for that," was his reply; "I'll see you through. After all, I expect to find that the difficulties are nearly all on the surface. These fellows, both drink like the devil, and that should simplify matters considerably. But we shall see, and we must take our time. There will probably turn out to be a dozen different ways in which the thing might be done, and we shall have to choose between them. It will mean watching the house for at least a week in any case; it may mean lots of other things that will take much longer, but which I should like to tell you more. That's to say if you're really on."

"Of course I am," I replied indignantly. "But you're giving me a week? Why shouldn't we watch the house together?"

"Because two eyes are as good as four and take up less room. Never hunt in couples unless you're obliged. But don't you look offended, Bummy; there'll be plenty for you to do when the time comes, that I promise you. You shall have your share of the fun, never fear, and a purple diamond all to yourself—if we're lucky."

On the whole, however, this conversation like the less than lukewarm, and I still remember the depression which came upon me when Raffles was gone. I saw the folly of the enterprise to which I had committed myself—the rever, gratuitous, and unnecessary risk of a week's watch on the insatiable artist, and it charged with what mortification there still remained in me. Once more I felt the fascination of a contrary who with a few dazzling ones with a fresh and unsuspected flash of his character.

As we neared Piccadilly I wondered what he would do. He was not going into the Albany like that? No, he took another omnibus to Sloane street, I sitting behind him as before. At Sloane street he changed again, and was presently in the long lean artery of the King's Road. I was now all agog to know our destination, nor was I kept many more minutes in doubt. Raffles got down. I followed. He crossed the road and disappeared up a dark turning. I pressed after him, and was in time to see his coat-tails as he plunged into a still darker passage to the right. He was holding himself up and stepping out like a young man once more; also, in some subtle way, he already looked less disagreeable. But I alone was there to see him; the alley was absolutely deserted, and desperately dark. At the further end he opened a door with a latch-key, and it was darker yet within his reach. Instinctively I drew back and heard him chuckle. We could no longer see each other.

"All right, Bummy. There's no hanky-panky this time. These are studios, my friend, and I'm one of the lawful tenants. Indeed, in another minute we were in a lofty room with skylight, wash, dressing cupboard, platform and every other adjunct save the signs of actual labor. The first thing I saw, as Raffles lit the gas, was its reflection in his silk hat on the pegs beside the rest of his normal garments."

"Looking for the works of art?" continued Raffles, lighting a cigarette and beginning to direct himself of his ragged. "I'm afraid you won't find any, but instead the canvas I'm always going to make a start upon. I tell them I'm looking high and low for my ideal model. I have the stove lit on principles twice a week, and look in and leave a newspaper and a smell of Sullivan's—now they're after shag! Meanwhile I pay my rent and am a good tenant in every way; and it's a very useful little pied-a-terre—there

something of the premises; in fact, I was on the point of doing so when I heard a quick, shuffling step on the pavement behind me. I turned round and faced the dark scowl and the dirty clinched fist of a dispirited tramp.

"You fool!" said he. "You utter idiot!"

"Raffles?"

"That's it," he whispered savagely, "tell all the neighborhood—give me away at the top of your voice."

With that he turned his back upon me and shuffled down the road, shrugging his shoulders and muttering to himself as he went: "I don't know what he's got, but he's got something in his eye."

"You must forgive my heat, Bummy, but I really was very foolish of you. Here am I trying every dodge—begging at the door one night—hiding in the scrubs the next—doing every mortal thing but stand and stare at the house as you went and did. It's a costume piece, and in your rush, and take you straight into action then and there. There's nothing like putting the nervous players in first; it's the getting out of their hands on that counts their apple-cart; that was another of my reasons for being so confoundedly close. You must try to forgive me, I couldn't help remembering boys and you played up last trip, without any time to weaken on it beforehand. All I want is for you to be as cool and here's tomorrow night as you were then; though, by Jove, there's no comparison between the two cases."

"I thought you would find it so."

"You were right, I have. Mind you, I don't want to be the toughest job all around; we shall probably get the getting out of their hands on that counts their apple-cart; that was another of my reasons for being so confoundedly close. You must try to forgive me, I couldn't help remembering boys and you played up last trip, without any time to weaken on it beforehand. All I want is for you to be as cool and here's tomorrow night as you were then; though, by Jove, there's no comparison between the two cases."

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need, and, of course, my name is not Raffles in the King's Road. So you will see that one might bolt further and fare worse."

"Meanwhile you use the place as a dressing-room?"

"It's my private pavilion," said Raffles. "Disguised in some cases they're half the battle, and it's always pleasant to feel that, if the worst comes to the worst, you needn't necessarily be convicted under your own name. Then they're indispensable in dealing with the fences. I drive all my bargains in the tongue and raiment of Shore-ditch. I didn't there'd be the very devil to pay in blackmail. Now, this cupboard is full of all sorts of toggery. I tell the woman who cleans the room that it's for my models when I find 'em. By the way, I only hope I've got something that'll fit you, for you'll want a rig for tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?" I exclaimed.

"Why, what do you mean then? I left them to you, to ask you to look me up tomorrow afternoon; then I was going to unfold my plan of campaign and take you straight into action then and there. There's nothing like putting the nervous players in first; it's the getting out of their hands on that counts their apple-cart; that was another of my reasons for being so confoundedly close. You must try to forgive me, I couldn't help remembering boys and you played up last trip, without any time to weaken on it beforehand. All I want is for you to be as cool and here's tomorrow night as you were then; though, by Jove, there's no comparison between the two cases."

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ly, 'You look about the greatest ruffian I ever saw!' These make alone with a nigger, if we meet one. But I'm glad I remembered to tell you not to shove. You'll pass for Whitechapel if the worst comes to the worst and you don't forget to talk the lingo. Better slink like a mule if you're not sure of your ground, and dialogue to me, but please our stars, there will be no need. Now, are you ready?"

"Quite."

"Get your gag?"

"Yes."

"Shooter?"

I turned into the first room I came to, was a bedroom, forty, though it was up; and never shall I forget how I started as I entered, on encountering the awful villain that was myself at full length in a pier-glass. Masked, armed and ragged, I was loaded fit carriage for a bullet, the hangman, and to one or the other I made up my mind. Nevertheless, I hid myself in the wardrobe behind the mirror; and there I stood, shivering and cursing my fate, my folly, and Raffles' most of all—Raffles first and last—for I dare say half an hour. Then the wardrobe door was flung suddenly open; I had stolen into the room without a sound; and I was hailed downstairs, an ignominious captive.

Gross scenes followed in the hall; the ladies were now upon the stage, and at sight of the desperate criminal they screamed with one accord. In truth I must have given them fair cause, though my mask was now torn away and hid nothing but my left ear. Rosenthal answered their shrieks with a roar for silence; the woman behind the stage-hair swore at him shrilly in return; the place became a Babel impossible to describe. I remember wondering how long it would be before the police appeared. Purvis and the ladies called out to them in giving me in charge without delay. Rosenthal would not hear of it. He swore that he would shoot the man or woman who left his sight. He had enough of the police. He was not going to have them coming in there to spoil sport; he was going to deal with me in his own way. With that he dragged me from all other hands, swung me against a door, and sent a bullet crashing through the wood within an inch of my ear.

"You drank too much, it'll be murder!" shouted Purvis, getting in the way a second time.

"What do I care? He's armed, isn't he? I shot him in self-defense. It's a warning to others. Will you stand aside, or do you want to yourself?"

"You're drunk," said Purvis, still between. "I saw you take a most tremendous since you came, and it's enough you drunk as a fool. Pull yourself together, old man. You ain't a-going to do what you'd be sorry for."

"Then I won't shoot at him, I'll only shoot you an' your'n the beggar. You're quite right, old fellow. Wouldn't hurt him. Great mistake. Shoot an' over. There—like that!"

His freckled paw shot up over Purvis' shoulder, maybe lightning came from his ring, a red flash from his revolver, and a stilette from the corner as the reverberations died away. Some splinters lodged in my hair.

Next instant the prize-fighter disarmed him, and I was safe from the danger, but finally doomed to the death-deal. A policeman was in our midst. He had entered through the drawing-room window; he was an officer of few words, and creditable promptitude. He was a twinkling he had the handcuffs on my wrists, while the pugilist explained the situation and his patron reviled the force and the representative of order. Purvis, however, was not to be trifled with. He kept a lot of good over; he came in when all was over and the whole household might have been murdered in a left-hand corner. He was a policeman, he was in our midst. He had entered through the drawing-room window; he was an officer of few words, and creditable promptitude. He was a twinkling he had the handcuffs on my wrists, while the pugilist explained the situation and his patron reviled the force and the representative of order. Purvis, however, was not to be trifled with. 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