"RAFFLES, THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN"

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

No. III.

The First Step

THAT night he told me the story of his earliest crime. Not since the fateful morning of the Ides of March, when he had just mentioned it as an unreported incident of a certain cricket tour, had I succeded in getting a word out of Raffles on the subject. It was not for want of trying; he would shake his head and watch his cigarette smoke thoughtfully, a subtle look in his eyes, half cynical, half wistful, as though the decent, honest days that were no more had had their merits after all. Raffle would plan a fresh enormity or glory in the last with the unmitigated enthusiasm of the artist. It was impossible to imagine one throb or twitter of compunction beneath those frankly egotistic and infectious transports. And yet the ghost of a dead remorse seemed still to visit him with the memory of his first felony, so that I had given the story up long before the night of our return from Milchester. Cricket, however, was in the air, and Raffles' cricket-bag back where he sometimes kept it, in the fender, with the remains of an Orient label still adhering to the leather. My eyes had been on this label for some time, and I suppose his eyes had been on mine, for all at once he asked me if I still burned to hear that yarn.

"It's no use," I replied. "You won't spin it. I must imagine it for myself."

"How can you?"

"Oh, I begin to know your methods."

"You take it I went in with my eyes open, as I do now, eh?"

"I can't imagine your doing otherwise."

"My dear Bunny, it was the most unpremeditated thing I ever did in my life."

His chair wheeled back into the books as he sprang up with sudden energy. There was quite an indignant glitter in his eyes.

"I can't believe that," said I craftily. "I can't pay you such a poor compliment."

"Then you must be a fool—"

He broke off, stared at me, and in a trice stood smiling in his own despite.

"Or a better knave than I thought you, Bunny, and by Jove it's the knave! Well—I suppose I'm fairly drawn; I give you best, as they say out there. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of the thing myself; last night's racket reminds me of it in one or two respects. I tell you what, though, this is an occasion in any case, and I'm going to celebrate it by breaking the one good rule of my life. I'm going to have a second drink!"

The whisky tinkled, the syphon fizzed, the ice plopped home; and seated there in his pajamas, with the inevitable cigarette, Raffles told me the story that I had given up hoping to hear. The windows were wide open; the sounds of Piccadilly floated in at first. Long before he finished the last wheels had rattled, the last brawler was removed, we alone broke the quiet of the Summer night.

" . . . No, they do you very well, indeed. You pay for nothing but drinks, so to speak, but I'm afraid mine were of a comprehensive character. I had started in a hole, I ought really to have refused the invitation; then we all went to the Melbourne Cup, and I had the certain winner that didn't win, and that's not the only way you can play the fool in Melbourne. I wasn't the steady old stager I am now, Bunny; my analysis was a confession in itself. But the others didn't know how hard up I was, and I swore they shouldn't. I tried the Jews, but they're extra fly out there. Then I thought of a kinsman of sorts, a second cousin of my father's whom none of us knew anything about, except that he was supposed to be in one or other of the Colonies. If he was a rich man, well and good. I would work him; if not, there would be no harm done. I tried to get on his tracks, and, as luck would have it, I succeeded (or thought I had) at the very moment when I happened to have a few days to myself. I was cut over on the hand, just before the big Christmas match, and couldn't have bowled a ball if they had played me.

"The surgeon who fixed me up happened to ask me if I was any relation of Raffles of the National Bank, and the pure luck of it almost took my breath away. A relation who was a high official in one of the banks, who would finance me on my mere name—could anything be better? I made up my mind that this Raffles was the man I wanted, and was awfully sold to find next moment that he wasn't a high official at all. Nor had the doctor so much as met him, but had merely read of him in connection with a small sensation at the suburban branch which my namesake managed; an armed robber had been rather pluckily beaten off, with a bullet in him, by this Raffles; and the sort of thing was so common out there that this was the first I had heard of it! A suburban branch—my financier had faded into some excellent fellow with a billet to lose if he called his soul his own. Still a manager was a manager, and I said I would soon see whether this was the relative I was looking for, if he would be good enough to give me the name of that branch.

"'I'll do more,' says the doctor. 'I'll get you the name of the branch he's been promoted to, for I think I heard they'd moved him up one already.' And the next day he brought me the name of the township of Yea, some 50 miles north of Melbourne; but, with the vagueness which characterized all his information, he was unable to say whether I should find my relative there or not.

"'He's a single man, and his initials are W. F.,' said the doctor, who was certain enough of the immaterial points. 'He left his old post several days ago, but it appears he's not due at the new one till the New Year. No doubt he'll go before then to take things over and settle in. You might find him up there and you might not. If I were you I should write.'

"'That'll lose two days,' said I, 'and more if he isn't there,' for I'd grown quite keen on this up-country manager, and I felt that if I could get at him while the holidays were still on a little conviviality might help matters considerably.

"'Then,' said the doctor, 'I should get a quiet horse and ride. You needn't use that hand.'

"'Can't I go by train?'

"'You can and you can't. You would still have to ride. I suppose you're a horseman?'

"'Yes.'

"'Then I should certainly ride all the way. It's a delightful road, through Whittlesea and over the Plenty Ranges. It'll give you some idea of the bush, Mr. Raffles, and you'll see the sources of the water supply of this city, sir. You'll see where every drop of it comes from, the pure Yan Yean. I wish I had time to ride with you.'

"'But where can I get a horse?'

"The doctor thought for a moment.

"'I've a mare of my own that's as fat as butter for want of work,' said he. 'It would be a charity to me to set on her back for a hundred miles or so; and then I should know you'd have no temptation to use that hand.'

"'You're far too good,' I protested.

"'You're A. J. Raffles,' he said.

"And if ever there was a prettier compliment or a finer instance of even Colonial hospitality I can only say, Bunny, that I never heard of either."

He sipped his whisky, threw away the stump of his cigarette and lit another before continuing.

"Well, I managed to write a line to W. F. with my own hand, which, as you will gather, was not very badly wounded—it was simply this third finger that was split and in splints—and next morning the the doctor packed me off on a bovine beast that would have done for an ambulance. Half the team came up to see me start; the rest were rather sick with me for not stopping to see the match out, as if I could help them to win by watching them. They little knew the game I'd got on myself, but still less did I know the game I was going to play.

"It was an interesting ride enough, especially after passing the place called Whittlesea, a real wild township on the lower slope of the ranges, where I recollect having a deadly meal of hot mutton and tea, with the thermometer at three figures in the shade. The first 30 miles or so was a good metal road, too good to go half round the world to ride on, but after Whittlesea it was a mere track over the ranges, track I often couldn't see and left entirely to the mare. Now it dipped into a gully and ran through a creek, and all the time the local color was inches thick—gum trees galore and parrots all colors of the rainbow. In one place a whole forest of gums had been ring-barked and were just as though they had been painted white, without a leaf or a living thing for miles. And the first living thing I did meet was the sort to give you the creeps; it was a riderless horse coming full tilt through the bush, with the saddle twisted around and the stirrup-irons ringing. Without thinking, I had a shot at heading him with the doctor's mare, and blocked him just enough to allow a man who came galloping after to do the rest.

"'Thank, ye, mister,' growled the man, a huge chap in a red-checked shirt, with a beard like W. G. Grace, but the very devil of an expression.

"'Been an accident?' said I, reining up.

"'Yes,' said he, scowling, as though he defied me to ask any more.

"'Well, Bunny, I may be a blackguard myself, but I don't think I ever looked at a fellow as that chap looked at me. But I stared him out and forced him to admit that it was blood on the twisted saddle, and after that he became quite tame. He told me exactly what had happened. A mate of his had been dragged under a branch and had his nose smashed, but that was all; had sat tight after it till he dropped from loss of blood; another mate was with him back in the bush.

"As I've said already, Bunny, I wasn't the old stager that I am now—in any respect—and we parted good enough friends. He asked me which way I was going, and, when I told him, he said I should save seven miles and get a good hour earlier to Yea by striking off the track and making for a peak that we could see through the trees and following a creek that I should see from the peak. Don't smile, Bunny! I began by saying I was a child in those days. Of course, the short cut was the long way round, and it was nearly dark when that unlucky mare and I saw the single street of Yea.

"I was looking for the bank when a fellow in a white suit ran down from a veranda.

"'Mr. Raffles?' said he.

"'Mr. Raffles!' said I laughing, as I shook his hand.

"'You're late.'

"'I was misdirected.'

"'That all? I'm relieved,' he said. 'Do you know what they are saying? There are some brand-new bushrangers on the road between Whittlesea and this—a second Kelly gang! They'd have caught a Tartar in you, eh?'

"'They would in you,' I retorted, and my tu quoque shut him up and seemed to puzzle him. Yet there was much more sense in it than in his compliment to me, which was absolutely pointless.

"'I'm afraid you'll find things pretty rough,' he resumed, when he had unstrapped my valise and handed my reins to his man. 'It's lucky you're a bachelor like myself.'

"I could not quite see the point of this remark, either since, had I been married, I should hardly have sprung my wife upon him in this free-and-easy fashion. I muttered the conventional sort of thing, and then he said I should find it all right when I settled, as though I had come to graze upon him for weeks! 'Well,' thought I, 'these colonials do take the cake for hospitality!' And still marveling, I let him lead me into the private part of the bank.

"'Dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour,' said he as we entered. 'I thought you might like a tub first, and you'll find all ready in the room at the end of the passage. Sing out if there's anything you want. Your luggage hasn't turned up yet, by the way, but here's a letter that came this morning.'

"'Not for me?'

"'Yes; didn't you expect one?'

"'I certainly did not.'

"'Well, here it is.'

"And, as he lit me to my room I read my own superscription of the previous day—to W. F. Raffles!

"'Bunny, you've had your wind bagged at footer, I dare say; you know what that's like? All I can say is that my moral wind was bagged by that letter as I hope, old chap, I have never yet bagged yours. I couldn't speak. I could only stand with my own letter in my hands until he had the good taste to leave me by myself.

"'W. F. Raffles! We had mistaken each other for W. F. Raffles—for the new manager who had not yet arrived! Small wonder we had conversed at cross-purposes; the only wonder was that we had not discovered our mutual mistake. How the other man would have laughed! But I—I could not laugh. By Jove, no, it was no laughing matter for me! I saw the whole thing in a flash, without a tremor, but with the direst depression from my own single point of view. Call it callous if you like, Bunny, but remember that I was in much the same hole as you've since been in yourself, and that I had counted on this W. F. Raffles even as you counted on A. J. I thought of the man with the W. G. beard—the riderless horse with the bloody saddle—the deliberate misdirection that had put me off the track and out of the way—and now the missing manager and the report of bushrangers at this end. But I simply don't pretend to have felt any personal pity for a man whom I had never seen; that kind of pity's usually cant; and besides, all mine was needed for myself.

"'I was in as big a hole as ever. What the devil was I to do? I doubt if I have sufficiently impressed upon you the absolute necessity of my returning to Melbourne in funds. As a matter of fact, it was less the necessity than my own determination, which I can truthfully describe as absolute.

"'Money I would have—but how—but how? Would this stranger be open to persuasion—if I told him the truth? No; that would set us all scouring the country for the rest of the night. Why should I tell him? Suppose I left him to find out his mistake, would anything be gained? Bunny, I give you my word that I went in to dinner without a definite intention in my head, or one premeditated lie upon my lips. I might do the decent natural thing and explain matters without loss of time; on the other hand, there was no hurry. I had not opened the letter, and could always pretend I had not noticed the initials; meanwhile something might turn up. I could wait a little and see. Tempted I already was, but as yet the temptation was vague, and its very vagueness made me tremble.

"'Bad news, I'm afraid?' said the manager when at last I sat down at his table.

"'A mere annoyance,' I answered—I do assure you—on the spur of the moment and nothing else. But my lie was told; my position was taken; from that moment onward there was no retreat. By implication, without realizing what I was doing, I had already declared myself W. F. Raffles. Therefore W. F. Raffles I would be in that bank for that night. And the devil teach me how to use my lie!"

Again he raised his glass to his lips—I had forgotten mine. His cigarette-case caught the gas light as he handed it to me. I shook my head, without taking my eyes from his.

"The devil played up," continued Raffles, with a laugh. "Before I tasted my soup I had decided what to do. I had determined to rob that bank instead of going to bed and to be back in Melbourne for breakfast if the doctor's mare could do it. I would tell the old fellow that I had missed my way and been bushed for hours, as I easily might have been, and had never got to Yea at all. At Yea, on the other hand, the personation and robbery would ever after be attributed to a member of the gang that had waylaid and murdered the new manager with that very object. You are acquiring some experience in such matters, Bunny. I ask you, was there ever a better get-out? Last night's was something like it, only never such a certainty. And I saw it from the beginning—saw to the end before I had finished my soup.

"To increase my chances the cashier, who also lived in the bank, was away over the holidays, had actually gone down to Melbourne to see us play; and the man who had taken my horse also waited at table, for he and his wife were the only servants, and they slept in a separate building. You may depend I ascertained this before we had finished dinner. Indeed I was by way of asking too many questions (the most oblique and delicate was that which elicited my host's name, Ewbank), nor was I careful enough to conceal their drift.

"'Do you know,' said this fellow Ewbank, who was one of the downright sort, 'if it wasn't you, I should say you were in a funk of robbers? Have you lost your nerve?'

"'I hope not,' said I, turning jolly hot. I can tell you; but—well, it's not a pleasant thing to have to put a bullet through a fellow.'

"'No?' said he coolly. 'I should enjoy nothing better myself; besides, yours didn't go through.'

"'I wish it had!' I was smart enough to cry.

"'Amen,' said he.

"And I emptied my glass. Actually I did not know whether my wounded bank robber was in prison, dead or at large.

"But, now that I had had more than enough of it, Ewbank would come back to the subject. He admitted that the staff was small, but as for himself, he had a loaded revolver under his pillow all night, under the counter all day, and he was only waiting for his chance.

"'Under the counter, eh?' I was ass enough to say.

"'Yes; so had you!'

"He was looking at me in surprise, and something told me that to say, 'Of course, I had forgotten!' would have been quite fatal, considering what I was supposed to have done. So I looked down my nose and shook my head.

"'But the papers said you had!' he cried.

"'Not under the counter,' said I.

"'But it's the regulation!'

"For the moment, Bunny, I felt stumped, though I trust I only looked more superior than before, and I think I justified my look.

"'The regulation!' I said at length, in the most offensive tone at my command. 'Yes, the regulation would have us all dead men! My dear sir, do you expect your bank robber to let you reach for your gun in the place where he knows it's kept? I had mine in my pocket, and I got my chance by retreating from the counter with all visible reluctance.'

"Ewbank stared at me with open eyes and a five-barred forehead, then down came his fist on the table.

"'By God! that was smart! Still,' he added, like a man who would not be in the wrong, 'the papers said the other thing, you know!'

"'Of course,' I rejoined, 'because they said what I told them. You wouldn't have had me advertise the fact that I improved upon the bank's regulations, would you?'

"So that cloud rolled over, and by Jove it was a cloud with a golden lining! Not silver—real good Australian gold! For old Ewbank hadn't quite appreciated me till then; he was a hard nut, a much older man than myself, and I felt pretty sure he thought me young for the place, and my supposed feat a fluke. But I never saw a man change his mind more openly. He got out his best brandy, he made me throw away the cigar I was smoking, and opened a fresh box. He was a convivial-looking party, with a red mustache, and a very humorous face (not unlike Tom Emmett's), and from that moment I laid myself out to attack him on his convivial flank. But he wasn't a Rosenthall, Bunny; he had a treble-seamed, hand-sewed head, and could have drunk me under the table ten times over.

"'Al right,' I thought, 'you may go to bed sober, but you'll sleep like a timber-yard!' And I threw half he gave me through the open window when he wasn't looking.

"But he was a good chap, Ewbank, and don't you imagine he was at all intemperate. Convivial I called him, and I only wish he had been something more. He did, however, become more and more genial as the evening advanced, and I had not much difficulty in getting him to show me round the bank at what was really an unearthly hour for such a proceeding. It was when he went to fetch the revolver before turning in, I kept him out of his bed another twenty minutes, and I knew every inch of the business premises before I shook hands with Ewbank in my room.

"You won't guess what I did with myself for the next hour. I undressed and went to bed. The incessant strain involved in even the most deliberate impersonation is the most wearing thing I know. Then how much more so when the impersonation is impromptu! There's no getting your eye in; the next word may bowl you out; it's batting in a bad light all through. I haven't told you of half the tight places I was in during a conversation that ran into hours and became dangerously intimate toward the end. You can imagine them for yourself, and then picture me spread out on my bed, getting my second wind for the big deed of the night.

"Once more I was in luck, for I had not been lying there long before I heard my dear Ewbank snoring like a harmonium, and the music never ceased for a moment; it was as loud as ever when I crept out and closed my door behind me, as regular as ever when I stopped to listen at his. And I have still to hear the concert that I shall enjoy more. The good fellow snored me out of the bank and was still snoring when I again stood and listened under his open window.

"Why did I leave the bank first? To catch and saddle the mare and tether her in a clump of trees close by—to have the means of escape nice and handy before I went to work. I have often wondered at the instinctive wisdom of the precaution. Unconsciously I was acting on what has been one of my guiding principles ever since. Pains and patience were required—I had to get my saddle without waking the man, and I was not used to catching horses in a horse paddock. Then I distrusted the poor mare, and I went back to the stables for a hatful of oats, which I left with her in the clump, hat and all. There was a dog, too, to reckon with (our very worst enemy, Bunny); but I had been 'cute enough to make immense friends with him during the evening, and he wagged his tail, not only when I came downstairs, but when I reappeared at the back door.

"As the sol-distant new manager, I had been able, in the most ordinary course, to pump poor Ewbank about anything and everything connected with the working of the bank, especially in those 20 last invaluable minutes before turning in. And I had made a very natural point of asking him where he kept, and would recommend me to keep, the keys at night. Of course I thought he would take them with him to his room; but no such thing; he had a dodge worth two of that. What it was doesn't much matter, but no outsider would have found those keys in a month of Sundays.

"I, of course, had them in a few seconds, and in a few more I was in the strongroom itself. I forgot to say that the moon had risen and was letting quite a lot of light into the bank. I had, however, brought a bit of candle with me from my room; and in the strongroom, which was down some narrow stairs behind the counter in the banking chamber, I had no hesitation in lighting it. There was no window down there, and, though I could no longer hear old Ewbank snoring, I had not the slightest reason to anticipate disturbance from that quarter. I did think of locking myself in while I was at work, but, thank goodness, the iron door had no keyhole on the inside.

"Well, there were heaps of gold in the safe, but I only took what I needed and could comfortably carry, not much more that a couple of hundred altogether. Not a note would I touch, and my native caution came out also in the way I divided the sovereigns between all my pockets and packed them up so that I shouldn't be like the old woman of Banbury Cross. Well, you think me too cautious still, but I was insanely cautious then. And so it was that, just as I was ready to go, whereas I might have been gone ten minutes, there came a violent knocking at the outer door.

"Bunny, it was the outer door of the banking chamber! My candle must have been seen! And there I stood, with the grease running hot over my fingers, in that brick grave of a strong-room!

"There was only one thing to be done. I must trust to the sound sleeping of Ewbank upstairs, open the door myself, knock the visitor down or shoot him with the revolver I had been new chum enough to buy before leaving Melbourne, and make a dash for that clump of trees and the doctor's mare. My mind was made up in an instant, and I was at the top of the strong-room stairs, the knocking still continuing, when a second sound drove me back. It was the sound of bare feet coming along a corridor.

"My narrow stair was stone. I tumbled down it with little noise, and had only to push open the iron door, for I had left the keys in the safe. As I did so I heard a handle turn overhead and thanked my gods that I shut every single door behind me. You see, old chap, one's caution doesn't always let one in.

"'Who's that knocking?' said Ewbank up above.

"I could not make out the answer, but it sounded to me like the irrelevant supplication of a spent man. What I did hear plainly was the cocking of the bank revolver before the bolts were shot back. Then a tottering step, a hard, short, shallow breathing, and Ewbank's voice in horror:

"'My God! Good Lord! What's happened to you? Your'e bleeding like a pig!'

"'Not now,' came with a grateful sort of sigh.

"'But you have been! What's done it?'

"'Bushrangers.'

"'Down the road?'

"'This and Whittlesea—tied to a tree—cock shots—left me—bleed to death—'

"The weak voice failed, and the bare feet bolted. Now was my time—if the poor devil had fainted. But I could not be sure, and there I crouched down below in the dark, at the half-shut iron door, not less spellbound than imprisoned. It was just as well, for Ewbank wasn't gone a minute.

"'Drink this,' I heard him say, and, when the other spoke again, his voice was stronger.

"'Now I began to feel alive.'

"'Don't talk.'

"'It does me good. You don't know what it was—all those miles alone, one an hour at the outside. I never thought I should come through. You must let me tell you—in case I don't.'

"'Well, have another sip.'

"'Thank you. . . . I said bushrangers; of course, there are no such things nowadays.'

"'What were they, then?'

"'Bank thieves; the one that had the pot shots was the very brute I drove out of the bank at Coburg with a bullet in him!'"

"I knew it!"

"Of course you did, Bunny; so did I, down in that strong-room; but old Ewbank didn't, and I thought he was never going to speak again.

"'You're delirious,' he says at last. 'Who in blazes do you think you are?'

"'The new manager.'

"'The new manager's in bed and asleep upstairs!'

"'When did he arrive?'

"'This evening.'

"'Call himself Raffles?'

"'Yes.'

"'Well, I'm damned!' whispered the real man. I thought it was just revenge, but now I see what it was. My dear sir, the man upstairs is an imposter—if he's upstairs still! He must be one of the gang. He's going to rob the bank—if he hasn't done so already!'

"'If he hasn't done so already,' muttered Ewbank after him; 'if he's upstairs still! By God, if he is I'm sorry for him!'

"His tone was quiet enough, but about the nastiest I ever heard. I tell you, Bunny, I was glad I'd brought that revolver. It looked as though it must be mine against his muzzle to muzzle.

"'Better have a look down here, first,' said the new manager.

"'While he gets through his window? No, no, he's not down here.'

"'It's easy to have a look.'

"Bunny, if you ask me what was the most thrilling moment of my infamous career, I say it was that moment. There I stood at the bottom of those narrow stairs, inside the strong room, with the door a good foot open, and I didn't know whether it would creak or not. The light was coming nearer—and I didn't know! I had to chance it. And it didn't creak a bit; it was far too solid and well-hung; and I couldn't have banged it if I tried, it was too heavy; and it fitted so close that I felt and heard the air squeeze out in my face. Every shred of light went out, except the streak underneath, and it brightened. How I blessed that door!

"'No, he's not down there.' I heard as though through cotton-wool; then the streak went out, too, and in a few seconds I ventured to open once more, and was in time to hear them creeping to my room.

"Well, now there was not a fifth of a second to be lost; but I'm proud to say I came up those stairs on my toes and fingers, and out of that bank (the'd gone and left the door open) just as gingerly as though my time had been my own. I didn't even forget to put on the hat the doctor's mare was eating her oats out of, as well as she could with a bit, or it alone would have landed me. I didn't even gallop away, but just jogged off quietly in the thick dust at the side of the road (though I own my heart was galloping), and thanked my stars the bank was at that end of the township in which I really hadn't set foot. The very last thing I heard was the two managers raising Cain and the coachman. And now, Bunny—"

He stood up and stretched himself, with a smile that ended in a yawn. The black windows had faded through every shade of indigo; they now framed their opposite neighbors, stark and livid in the dawn; and the gas seemed turned to nothing in the globes.

"But that's not all?" I cried.

"I'm sorry to say it it," said Raffles apologetically. "The thing should have ended with an exciting chase, I know, but somehow it didn't. I suppose they thought I had got no end of a start; then they had made up their minds that I belonged to the gang, which was not so many miles away, and one of them had got as much as he could carry from that gang as it was. But I wasn't to know all that, and I'm bound to say there was plenty of excitement left for me. Lord, how I made that poor brute travel when I got among the trees! Though we must have made it over 50 miles from Melbourne, we had done it at a snail's pace, and those stolen oats had brisked the old girl up to such a pitch that she fairly bolted when she felt her nose turned south. By Jove, it was no joke, in and out among those trees and under branches with your face in the mane. I told you about the forest of dead gums? It looked perfectly ghostly in the moonlight. And I found it as still as I had left it—so still that I pulled up there, my first halt, and lay my ear to the ground for two or three minutes. But I heard nothing—not a thing but the mare's bellow and my own heart. I'm sorry, Bunny, but if you ever write my memoirs, you won't have any difficulty in working up that chase. Play those dead gum trees for all they're worth, and let the bullets fly like hail. I'll turn around in my saddle to see Ewbank coming up hell-to-leather in his white suit, and I'll duly paint it red. Do it in the third person, and they won't know how it's going to end."

"But I don't know myself," I complained. "Did the mare carry you all the way back to Melbourne?"

"Every rod, pole or perch. I had her well seen to at our hotel and returned her to the doctor in the evening. He was tremendously tickled to hear I had been bushed. Next morning he brought me the paper to show me what I had escaped at Yea."

"Without suspecting anything?"

"Ah," said Raffles as he put out the gas, "that's a point on which I've never made up my mind. The mare and her color was a coincidence—luckily she was only a bay—and I fancy the condition of the beast must have told a tale. The doctor's manner was certainly different. I'm inclined to think he suspected something, though not the right thing. I wasn't expecting him, and I fear my appearance may have increased his suspicions."

I asked him why.

"I used to have rather a heavy mustache," said Raffles, "but I lost it the day after I lost my innocence."—(Copyright by Scribner & Sons.)

I PULLED UP AND LAY WITH MY EAR TO THE GROUND FOR TWO OR THREE MINUTES.

Posed by Kyrle Bellew. Permission of Liebler & Co.

DETECTIVE STORY NOT ART

Mystery Destroyed, No One Cares to Read It a Second Time.

London Daily News.

I know of one good reason, and one only, which really prevents detective stories standing among the noblest forms of art.

Most of the objections raised against them by the vague-minded world of modern culture (probably the most vague-minded world that has ever existed) are quite narrow and childish. To say that the detective tale is sensational is simply to say that it is full of feeling or is esthetic. Esthetic is the Greek for sensational. Sensational is the Latin for esthetic.

To say that the thrill which it gives is connected with bald and positive sin, with bald and positive death, and not with any of the fine-spun drawing-room emotions which it is now the fashion to consider "deep" is to pay it a high compliment.

The Bible is concerned with these great plain sins and judgments; so are the great Greek dramas; so are the tragedies of the Elizabethans; so are the old ballads. And so are all men anywhere who live lives sufficiently real to have ever seen the great plain sins and judgments.

There is one good argument, as I have said, and one only, against the police mystery. And that is that police mysteries exist to destroy mystery when they have created it. A sad tale should be saddest when we finish it. A happy tale should be happiest when we finish it. A stirring tale should be most stirring at the end; fantastic tale most fantastic at the end.

But this kind of mysterious tale is not most mysterious at the end. It is then least mysterious, or rather not mysterious at all. Instead of making a commonplace thing mystical (the aim of all good art), the detective reverses the process and makes a mystical thing commonplace.

And from this comes that one fatal weakness in the sensational novel of crime and detection, the only thing that does separate it, I am afraid, from great fiction, the fact that there is no impulse to read it again.

A detective tale we have read is an empty bottle of wine, an exploded shell, a thing destroyed. The mystery of the sanity of Hamlet is alive and kicking still.

"You didn't go to church last Sunday." "No. I didn't have any money for the collection." "No?" "No. I didn't have anything less than a dime, and there was no place to get it changed."—Philadelphia Press.

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