

RAFFLES, the AMATEUR CRACKSMAN.

THE GIFTS OF THE EMPEROR

Sixth Story in the Absorbing Raffles Series
BY E. W. HORNUNG

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When the King of the Cannibal Islands made faces at Queen Victoria and a European monarch set the cables tingling with his compliments on the exploit the indignation in England was not less than the surprise, for the thing was not so common as it has since become. But when it transpired that a gift of peculiar significance was to follow the congratulations, to give them weight, the inference prevailed that the white potentate and the black had taken simultaneous leave of their fourteen senses. For the gift was a pearl of price unparalleled picked up by a British subject from a Polynesian setting and presented by British royalty to the sovereign, who seized this opportunity of restoring it to its original possessor.

The incident would have been a good send to the press a few weeks later. Even in June there were leaders, letters, large headlines, leading to the Daily Chronicle devoting half its literary page to a charming drawing of the island capital which the new Pall Mall, in a leading article headed by a pun, advised the government to blow to flinders. It was myself driving a poor but not dishonest quill at the time, and the topic of the hour gilded me into satire verse which obtained a better place than anything I had yet turned out. I had let my flat in town and taken inexpensive quarters at Thames Ditton on the plea of a disinterested passion for the river.

"First-rate, old boy," said Raffles (who must needs come and see me there), lying back in the boat while I sculled and steered. "I suppose they pay you pretty well for these, eh?"

"Not a penny."

"Nonsense, Bunny! I thought they paid so well? Give them time and you'll get your check."

"Oh, no, I shan't," said I gloomily. "I've got to be content with the honor of getting in; the editor wrote to say so in so many words." I added, but I gave the gentleman his distinguished name.

"You don't mean to say you've written for payment already?"

No; it was the last thing I had intended to admit. But I had done it. The murder was out; there was no sense in further concealment. I had written for my money because I really needed it; if he must know, I was cursedly hard up. Raffles nodded as though he knew already. I warned to my woe. It was no easy matter to keep your end up as a raw fee lance of letters; for my part I was afraid I wrote neither well enough nor ill enough for success. I suffered from a persistent inefficiency feeling after style. Verse I could manage, but it did not pay. To personal paragraphs and the hazy journalism I could not and I would not stoop.

Raffles nodded again, this time with a smile that stayed in his eyes as he leaned back watching me. I knew that he was thinking of other things; I had stooped to, and I thought I knew what he was going to say. He had said it before so often; he was sure to say it again. I had my answer ready, but evidently he was tired of asking the same question. His lids fell, he took up the paper he had dropped, and I sculled the length of the old red wall of Hampton Court before he spoke again.

"And they gave you nothing for these! My dear Bunny, they're capital, not just qua verses but for crystallizing your sub-

recommend Cannes or Cairo?" It's all very well, A. J., but you forget what I told you about my funds."

"I forget nothing. I merely don't want to hurt your feelings. But look here, a sea voyage you shall have. I want a change myself, and you shall come with me as my guest. We'll spend July in the Mediterranean."

"But you're playing cricket!"

"Hang the cricket!"

"Well, I thought you meant it?"

"Of course I meant it. Will you come?"

"Like a shot—if you go."

And I shook his hand and waved mine in farewell, with the perfectly good-natured conviction that I should hear no more of the matter. It was a passing thought, no more, no less. I soon wished I was more; that week found me wishing myself out of England for good and all. I was making nothing. I could but subsist on the difference between the rent I paid for my flat and the rent at which I had sublet it, furnished, for the season. And the season was near its end and creditors awaited me in town. Was it possible to be entirely honest? I had run no bills when I had money in my pocket, and the more downright dishonesty seemed to me the less ignoble.

But from Raffles of course I heard nothing more; a week went by, and half an other week; then late on the second Wednesday night I found a telegram from him at my lodgings, after seeking him vainly in town and dining with desperation at the solitary club to which I still belonged.

"Arrange to leave Waterloo by North German Lloyd special," he wired, "9.25 a. m. Monday next will meet you Southampton aboard Uhlán with tickets and writing."

And write he did, a light-hearted letter enough, but full of serious solicitude for me and for my health and prospects—a letter almost touching in the light of our past relations, in the twilight of their complete rupture. He said that he had booked two berths to Naples, that we were bound for Capri, which was clearly the island of the Lotos-eaters, that we would have there together "and for a while forget." It was a charming letter. I had never seen Italy; the privilege of initiation should be his. No mistake was greater than to deem it an impossible country for the summer. The bay of Naples was never so divine, and he wrote of "faery lands forlorn," as though the poetry sprang unbidden to his pen. To come back to earth and prose. I might think it unparitotic of him to choose a German boat, but on no other line did you receive such attention and accommodation for your money. There was a hint of better reasons. Raffles wrote, as he had telegraphed from Bremen; and I gathered that the personal use of some little influence with the authorities there had resulted in a material reduction in our fares.

Imagine my excitement and delight! I managed to pay what I owed at Thames Ditton, to squeeze a small editor for a very small check and my tailors for one more flannel suit. I remember that I broke my last sovereign to get a box of Sullivan's cigarettes for Raffles to smoke on the voyage. But my heart was as light as my purse on the Monday morning, the fairest morning of an unfair summer, when

could think of nothing but the swift grimace which preceded a start of well-feigned astonishment.

"Why, Bunny?" cried Raffles. "Where have you sprung from?"

I stammered something as he pinched my hand.

"And are you coming in this ship? And to Naples, too? Well, upon my word! Miss Werner, may I introduce him?"

And he did so without a blush, describing me as an old school-fellow whom he had not seen for months, with willful circumstance and gratuitous detail that filled me at once with confusion, suspicion and revolt. I felt myself blushing for us both, and I did not care. My address utterly deserted me, and I made no effort to rectify it, to carry the thing off. All I would do was to mumble such words as Raffles actually put into my mouth, and that I doubt not with a thoroughly evil grace.

"So you saw my name in the list of passengers and came in search of me? Good old Bunny! I say, though, I wish you'd share my cabin. I've got a beauty on the promenade deck, but they wouldn't promise to keep me by myself. We ought to see about it before they shove in some alien. In any case we shall have to get out of this."

For a quarter-master had entered the wheel-house, and even while we had been speaking the pilot had taken possession of the bridge, as we descended the tender left us with flying handkerchiefs and shrill good-bys, and as we bowed to Miss Werner on the promenade deck there came a deep, throbbing under foot and our voyage had begun.

It did not begin pleasantly between Raffles and me. On deck he had overborne my stubborn perplexity by dint of a forced though forcible joviality; in his cabin the gloves were off.

"You idiot," he snarled, "you've given me away again!"

"How have I given you away?"

I ignored the separate insult in his last word.

"How? I should have thought any old could see that I meant us to meet by chance!"

"After taking both tickets yourself?"

"They know nothing about that on board; besides, I hadn't decided when I took the tickets."

"Then you should have let me know when you did decide. You lay your plans and never say a word, and expect me to tumble to them by light of nature. How was I to know you had anything on?"

I had turned the tables with some effect. Raffles almost hung his head.

"The fact is, Bunny, I didn't mean you to know. You—you've grown such a pious rabbit in your old age."

My nickname and his tone went far to reconcile me to things further, but I had much to forgive him still.

"If you were afraid of writing," I pursued, "it was your business to give me the point at the moment I set foot on board. I would have taken it all right. I am not so virtuous as all that."

Was it my imagination or did Raffles look slightly ashamed? If so it was for the first and last time in all the years I



"IN WHICH RECLINED A GIRL IN A WHITE DRILL COAT AND SKIRT"

I did not wait for him to finish his sentence.

"You've got it!" I cried, my face on fire, for I caught sight of it that moment in the stateroom mirror.

Raffles seemed taken aback.

"Not yet," said he; "but I mean to have it before we get to Naples."

"Is it on board?"

"Yes."

"But how—where—how's it got it?"

"A little German officer, a whippersnapper with perpendicular mustaches."

"I saw him in the smoker's room."

"That's the chap; he's always there. Herr Capt. Wilhelm von Heumann, if you look in the list. Well, he's the special envoy of the emperor, and he's taking the pearl out with him!"

"You found this out in Bremen?"

"No, in Berlin; from a newspaper man I know there. I'm ashamed to tell you, Bunny, that I went there on purpose!"

I burst out laughing.

"You needn't be ashamed. You are doing the very thing I was rather hoping you were going to propose the other day on the river."

"You were hoping it?" said Raffles, with his eyes wide open. Indeed, it was

day I like, and sooner or later I shall climb out for good. I suppose I can't very well turn myself into a Limited Liability Company. But I could retire and settle down and live blanchely ever after. I'm not sure that it couldn't be done on this pearl alone!"

"Then you don't still think it too remarkable to sell?"

"We might take a fishery and haul it up with smaller fry. It would come after months of ill-luck, just as we were going to sell the schooner; by Jove, it would be the talk of the Pacific!"

"Well, we've got to get it first. Is this Von What's-his-name a formidable customer?"

"More so than he looks; and he has the cheek of the devil!"

As he spoke a white drill skirt fluttered past the open stateroom door, and I caught a glimpse of an upturned moustache beyond.

"But is he the chap we have to deal with? Won't the pearl be in the pirate's keeping?"

Raffles stood at the door, frowning out toward the Solent, but for an instant he turned to me and said:

"My good fellow, do you suppose the whole ship's company knows there's a gem like that aboard? You said that it was worth a thousand pounds; in Berlin they say it's priceless. I doubt if the skipper himself knows that Von Heumann has it on him."

"And he has?"

"Must have."

"Then we have only him to deal with?"

He answered me without a word. Something white was fluttering past once more, and Raffles, stepping forth, made the promenade three.

I used to think how he must long to have Raffles there to serve the same. It was not as though Von Heumann never had his innings. Raffles let him go in several times a day for the malicious pleasure of bowling him out as he was "getting set," those were his words when I taxed him disingenuously with obnoxious—but toward a German on a German boat.

"You'll make yourself disliked on board!"

"By Von Heumann merely."

"But is that wise when he's the man we've got to diddle?"

"The wisest thing I ever did. To have chummed up with him would have been fatal—the common dodge."

I was censored, encouraged, almost content. I had feared Raffles was neglecting things, and I told him so in a burst. Here we were near Gibraltar, and not a word since the Solent. He shook his head with a smile.

"Plenty of time, Bunny, plenty of time. We can do nothing before we get to Genoa, and that won't be till Sunday night. The voyage is a ill young and so are we; let's make the most of things while we can."

It was after dinner on the promenade deck, and as Raffles spoke he glanced sharply fore and aft, leaving me next moment with a step full of purpose. I retired to the smoking room to smoke and read in a corner and to watch Von Heumann, who very soon came to drink beer and to talk in a corner.

Few travelers tempt the Red Sea at midsummer; the Uhlán was very empty indeed. She had, however, but a limited supply of cabins on the promenade deck, and there was just that excuse for my sharing Raffles' room. I could have had

him as stretched and yawned. I noted, however, the good humor of his tone, and did my best to catch it.

"I have found something else, Bunny."

"I dare say!"

"You misunderstand me. The whippersnapper's making his century this afternoon. I've had other fish to fry."

I swung my legs over the side of my berth and sat forward, as he was sitting, all attention. The inner door, a grating, was shut and bolted and curtained like the open porthole.

"We shall be at Genoa before sunset," continued Raffles. "It's the place where the deed's got to be done."

"Did I ever say I didn't?"

"You have said so little either way."

"Advisedly so, my dear Bunny; why spoil a pleasure trip by talking unnecessary shop? But now the time has come; it must be done at Genoa or not at all."

"On land?"

"No, on board, tomorrow night. Tonight would do, but tomorrow is better in case of mishap. If we were forced to use violence we could get away by the earliest train and nothing be known till the ship was sailing and Von Heumann found dead or dragged."

"Not dead!" I exclaimed.

"Of course not," assented Raffles, "or there'd be no need for us to bolly about it. If we should have to bolt, Tuesday morning is our time, when the ship has got to sail whatever happens. But I don't anticipate any violence. 'A lance is a confession of terrible incompetence. In all these years how many blows have you known me to strike? Not one, I believe; but I have been quite ready to kill my man every time if the worst came to the worst."

I asked him how he proposed to enter Von Heumann's stateroom unobserved, and even through the cunning gloom of our his face lighted up.

"Climb into my bunk, Bunny, and you shall see."

I did so, but could see nothing. Raffles reached across me and tapped the ventilator, a sort of trap-door in the wall above his bed, some eighteen inches long and half that height. It opened outward into the ventilating shaft; there was a beam to stand on while you work."

"But if anybody should look up from below?"

"It's extremely unlikely that anybody will be sitting below—so unlikely that we can afford to chance it. No, I can't have you there to make sure. The great point is that neither of us should be seen from the time we turn in. A couple of ship's boys do sentry-go on these decks, and they shall be our witnesses; by Jove, it'll be the biggest mystery that ever was made!"

"If Von Heumann doesn't resist."

"Resist! He won't get the chance. He drinks too much beer to sleep light, and nothing is so easy as to chloroform a heavy sleeper; you've even done it yourself on an occasion of which it's perhaps unfair to remind you. Von Heumann will be past sensation almost as soon as I get my hand through his ventilator. I shall crawl in over his body, Bunny, my boy."

"And I?"

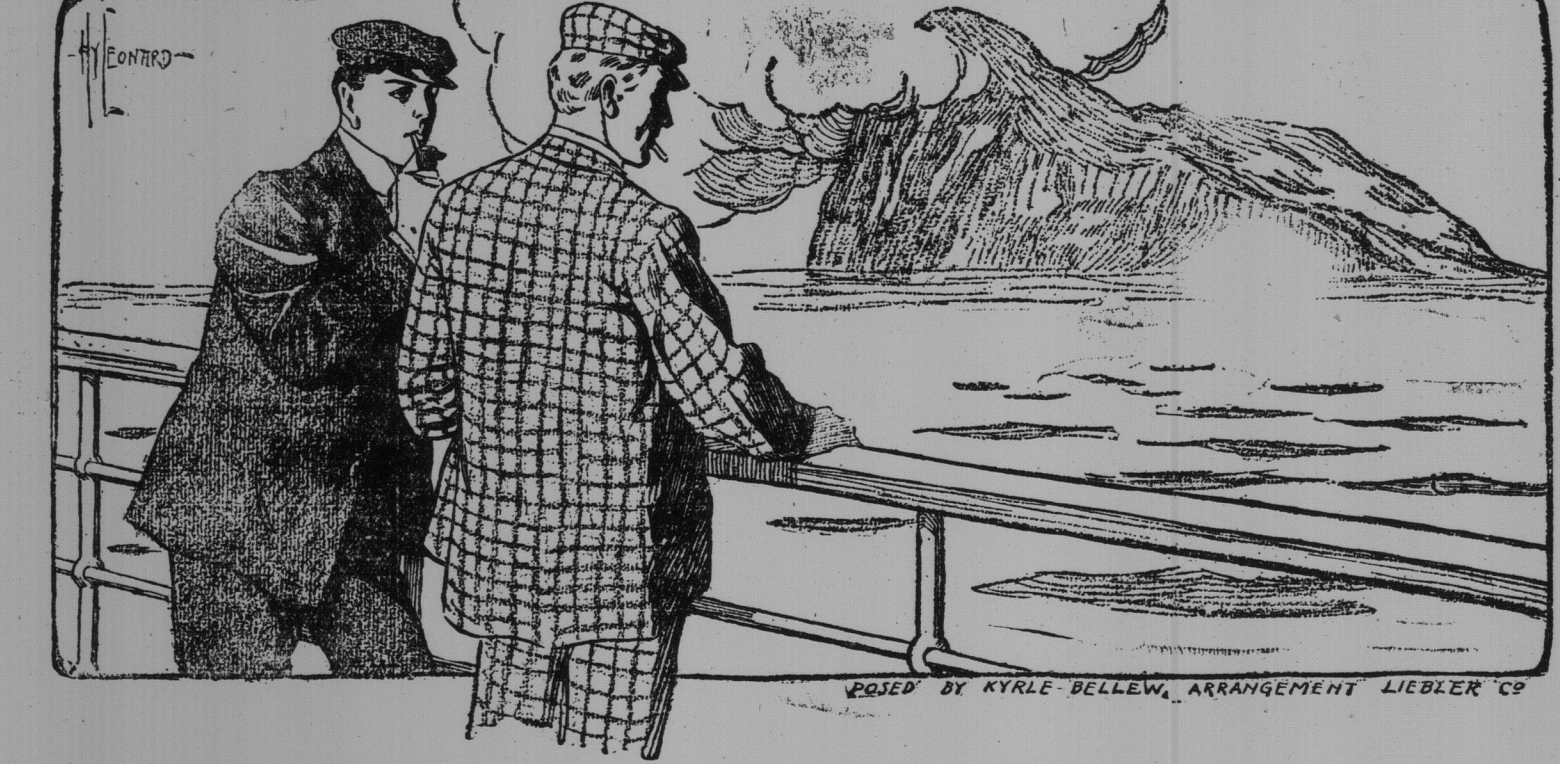
"You will hand me what I want and then get out of this room as quickly as generally lend me the moral support you've made me require. It's a luxury, Bunny, but I found it devilish difficult to do without it after a nervous night."

He said that Von Heumann was certain to sleep with a bolted door, which he of course would leave unbolted, and spoke of other ways of laying a false scent while rifling the cabin. Not that Raffles anticipated a tireless search. The pearl would be about Von Heumann's person; in fact, Raffles knew exactly where and in what he kept it. Naturally I asked how he could have come by such knowledge, and his answer led up to a momentary unpleasantness.

"It's a very old story, Bunny. I read



AND STARE AT ME THROUGH HIS RIMLESS EYGLASSES



"RAFFLES AND I LEANED TOGETHER OVER THE RAIL"

the special whirled me through the sunshine to the sea.

A tender awaited us at Southampton. Raffles was not on board, nor did I really look for him till we reached the liner's side. And then I looked in vain. His face was not among the many that fringed the rail; his hand was not of the ten that waved to friends. I climbed aboard in a sudden heaviness. I had no ticket, nor the money to pay for one. I did not even know the number of my room. My heart was in my mouth as I waylaid a steward and asked if a Mr. Raffles was on board. Thank heavens—he was! But where? The man did not know, was plainly on some other errand, and a hunting I must go. But there was no sign of him on the promenade deck and none below in the saloon; the smoking room was empty, but for a little German with a red moustache twisted into his eye; nor was Raffles in his own cabin, whither I inquired my way in desperation, but where the sight of his own name on the baggage was certainly a further reassurance. Why he himself kept in the background, however, I could not conceive, and only sinister reasons would suggest themselves in explanation.

"So there you are! I've been looking for you all over the ship!"

Despite the proven prohibition I had tried the bridge as a last resort and there indeed was A. J. Raffles seated on a skylight and leaning over one of the officers' long chairs, in which reclined a girl in a white drill coat and skirt—a slip of a girl with a pale skin, dark hair and rather remarkable eyes. So much I noted as he rose and quickly turned; thereupon I

know him; nor can I swear to it even now.

"That," said he, "was the very thing I meant to do—to lie in wait in my room and get you as you passed. But"—

"You were better engaged?"

"Say otherwise."

"The charming Miss Werner?"

"She is quite charming."

"Meet Australian girls are," said I.

"How did you know she was one?" he cried.

"I heard her speak."

"Brute!" said Raffles, laughing; "she has no more twang than you have. Her people are German, she has been to school in Dresden and is on her way out alone."

"Money?" I inquired.

"Confound you!" he said, and though he was laughing, I thought it was a point at which the subject might be changed.

"Well," I said, "it wasn't for Miss Werner you wanted us to play strangers, was it?"

"You have some deeper game than that, eh?"

"I suppose I have."

"Then didn't you better tell me what it is?"

Raffles treated me to the old, cautious scrutiny that I knew so well; the very familiarity of it, after all these months, set me smiling in a way that might have assured him, for dimly already I divined his enterprise.

"It won't send you off in the pilot's boat, Bunny."

"Not quite."

"Then—remember the pearl you wrote the"—

his turn to show surprise, and mine to be much more ashamed than I felt.

"Yes," I answered, "I was quite keen on the idea, but I wasn't going to propose it."

"Yet you would have listened to me the other day?"

Certainly I would, and I told him so without reserve; not brazenly, you understand; not even now with the gusto of a man who savors such an adventure for its own sake, but doggedly defiantly, through my teeth, as one who had tried to live honestly and failed. And while I was about it I told him much more. Eloquent enough I dare say, I gave him chapter and verse of my hopeless struggle, my inevitable defeat; for hopeles and inevitable they were to a man with my record, even though that record was written only in one's own soul. It was the old story of the thief trying to turn honest man; the thing was against nature, and there was an end of it.

Raffles entirely disagreed with me. He shook his head over my conventional view. Human nature was a board of checkers; why not reconcile one's self to alternate black and white? Why desire to be all one thing or all the other, like our forefathers on the stage or in the old-fashioned fiction? For his part he enjoyed himself on all squares of the board and liked the light the better for the shade. My conclusion he considered absurd.

"But you err in good company, Bunny, for all the cheap moralists who preach the same twaddle; old Virgil was the first and worst offender of you all. I bet myself to climb out of Avernus any

one to myself downstairs, but I must be up above. Raffles had insisted that I should insist on the point. So we were together, I think, without suspicion, though also without any object that I could see.

On the Sunday afternoon I was asleep in my berth, the lower one, when the curtains were shaken by Raffles, who was in his shirt-sleeves on the settee.

"Achilles sulking in his bunk!"

"What else is there to do?" I asked

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