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RAFFLES

Amateur Crackerman.

By R. W. Hornung, author of "Shadow of the Hope," "Rogues' March," etc. "My little nigger, I could have sworn it was not there five minutes before." The tradesman had a disappointed look, but for a moment it brightened as he expatiated on the value of that ring and on the price his people had accepted for it. I was invited to guess the figure, but I shook a discreet head. I have seldom been more taciturn in my life. "Forty-five pounds," cried the jeweller; "and it would be cheap at 50 guineas."

The visitor stiffened in his chair. The assurance of his firm should be sufficient guarantee for that. "I guess I'm no better acquainted with their name than they are with mine," remarked Raffles laughing. "See here, though, I got a scheme. You pack 'em in this box, and I'll give you the cigarettes out of the tin box, while the jeweller and I joined wandering eyes. "Pack 'em in this," repeated Raffles, "the three things we want and never mind the boxes. You can pack 'em in cotton wool. Then we'll slip for string and seal with wax up the lid right here, and you can take 'em away in your grip. Within three days we'll have our remittance and mail you the money and you'll mail us this darned box with my seal unbroken! It's no use you lookin' so sick, Mr. Jowler; you won't trust us any, and we're goin' to trust you some. Keep the bell, Ezra, and we'll see if they've gotten any sealing wax and string." They had; and the thing was done. The tradesman did not like it; the precaution was absolutely unnecessary; but since he was taking all his goods away with him, the sold with the unsold, his sentimental objections soon fell to the ground. He packed necktie, ring and star with his own hands in cotton wool, and the cigarette box held them so easily that at the last moment, when the box was closed and the string ready, Raffles very nearly added a diamond bee brooch at £51 10s. This temptation, however, he ultimately overcame, to the other's chagrin. The cigarette box was tied up, and the string sealed, oddly enough, with the diamond of the ring that had been bought and paid for.

A Jubilee Present. No. 8 of the Series.

(Copyright 1901 by Chas. Scribner's Sons.) The Room of Gold in the British Museum is probably the most famous in the world. It is the room where the travelling American, A true Londoner, however, I myself had never heard of it until Raffles casually proposed a raid. "The older I grow, Bunny, the less I think of your so-called precious stones. When did they ever bring in half their market value in £. s. d.? There was the first little crib we ever cracked together—you with your innocent eyes shut. A thousand pounds that stuff was worth, but how many hundreds did it actually fetch? The Ardagh emeralds don't match better, or Lady Melrose's necklace was far worse, but that little lot the other night has about finished me. A cool hundred for goods priced well over four, and £25 to come off for bait, since we only got a tinner for the ring I bought and pawned at the pawnshop. I'll be shot if I ever touch a diamond again! Not if it was the Kohinoor; those few whacking stones are too well known, and to cut them up is to decrease their value by arithmetical progression. Besides, that brings you up against the Finesse ones more, and I'm sure you'll never get them for food and all. You talk about your editors and publishers, you literary swine! Barabbas was neither a robber nor a publisher, but a six-barred barbed-iron, spike-topped fence. What we really want is an incorruptible set of thieves with some public-spirited old fellow to run it for us on business lines." Raffles uttered these blasphemous words under his breath, not, I am afraid, out of any respect for my redeeming profession, but because we were taking a midnight airing on the roof after a whole day of June in the little flat below. The stars shone overhead, the lights of London underneath, and between the lips of Raffles a cigarette of the old and only brand. I had sent in secret for a box of the best, the boon had arrived that night, and the foregoing speech was the first result. I could afford to ignore the insolent sardonic, however, where the apparent contention was so manifestly unsound. "And how are you going to get rid of your gold?" said I pertinently. "Nothing easier, my dear rabbit. "In your Room of Gold a roomful of sovereigns!" Raffles laughed softly at my scorn. "No, Bunny, it's principally in the shape of archaic ornaments, whose value, I admit, is largely extrinsic. But gold, from Phoenicia to Klondike, and if we cleared the room we should eventually do very well. "How?" "I should melt it down into a nugget and bring it home from the U. S. A. to-morrow." "And then?" "Make them pay up in hard cash across the counter of the Bank of England. And you can make them." That I knew, and so said nothing for a time, remaining a hostile though a silent critic, while we paced the cool black leads with our bare feet softly as cats. "And how do you propose to get enough away," at length I asked, "to make it worth while?" "Ah, there you have it," said Raffles. "I only propose to reconnoitre the ground to see what we can see. We paced the cool black leads with our bare feet. We might find some hiding place for a night; that I am afraid, would be our only chance. "Have you ever been there before?" "Not since they got the one good, portable piece which I believe that they exhibit now. It's a long time since I read of it—I can't remember where—but I know many have got a gold cup or sorts worth several thousands. A number of the immorally rich clubbed together and presented it to the nation, and two of the richly immoral intend to snaffle it for themselves. At any rate we might go and have a look at it, Bunny, don't you think?" "Think! I selded his arm. "When? When? When?" I asked like a quick-firing gun. "The sooner the better, while old Theobald's away on his honeymoon. Our medical man had married the week before, nor was any fellow-practitioner taking his work—at least not that considerable branch of it that consisted of Raffles—during his brief absence from town. There were reasons, delightfully obvious to us, why such a plan would have been highly unwise in Dr. Theobald. I, however, was sending him daily screeds and both maternal and nocturnal telegrams, the composition of which afforded Raffles not a little enjoyment. Well, then, when—when?" I began to repeat. "To-morrow if you like." "Only to look?" "The limitation was my one regret. We must do so, Bunny, before we leap." "Very well," I sighed. "But to-morrow it is!" And the morrow it really was. I saw the porter that night and, I still think, bought his absolute allegiance for the second coin of the realm. My story, however, invented

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seen wearing one of the rings; but the greatest fraud of all (from the forehead standpoint) is assuredly that very cup and which Raffles had spoken. Moreover, he felt this himself. "Why, it's as thin as paper," said he, "and enamelled like a middle-aged lady of quality! But, by Jove, it's one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life, Bunny. I should like to have it for its own sake, by all my gods!" The thing had a little square case of plate glass all to itself at one end of the room. It may have been the thing of beauty that Raffles affected to consider it, but I for my part was in no mood to look at it up to that light. Underneath were the names of the plutocrats who had subscribed for this national gewgaw, and I fell to wondering where their £25,000 came in, while Raffles devoured his two penny guide-book as greedily as a schoolgirl with a zeal for culture. "That's an account from the martyrdom of St. Agnes," said he. "I should think it was! Bunny, you Philistine, why can't you admire the thing for its own sake? It would be worth having once to live up to! There never was such rich enamelling on such thin gold, and what a good scheme to hang the lid up over it, so that you can see how thin it is. I wonder if we could lift it, Bunny, by hook or crook?" "You'd better try, sir," said a dry voice at his elbow. The madman seemed to think we had the room to ourselves. I knew better, but, like another madman, had let him ramble on unchecked. And here was a stolid constable confronting us in the short tunic that they wear in summer, his whistle on its chain, but no truncheon at his side. Heavens! how I see him now—a man of medium size, with a broad, good-humored perspiring face and a limp mustache. He looked sternly at Raffles and Raffles looked sternly at him. "Going to run me in, officer?" said he. "That would be a joke—my hat!" "I didn't say as I was, sir," replied the policeman. "But that's queer talk for a gentleman like you, sir, in the British Museum!" And he wagged his helmet at my invalid, who had taken his airing in frock coat and top hat, the more readily to assume his present part. "What!" cried Raffles, "simply saying to my friend that I'd like to lift the gold cup? Why, so I should, officer, so I should! I don't mind you taking me up so. It's one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life." "The constable's face had already relaxed, and now a grin peeped under the limp mustache. "I dare say there's many as feels like that, sir," said he. "Exactly, and I say what I feel, that's all," said Raffles airily. "But seriously, officer, is a valuable thing like this quite safe in a case like that?" "Safe enough as long as I'm here," replied the other between grim jest and stout earnest. Raffles studied his face; he was still watching Raffles, and I kept an eye on them both without putting in my word. "You appear to be single-handed," observed Raffles. "The note of anxiety was capitally caught; it was at once personal and public-spirited, that of the enthusiastic savant, afraid for a national treasure which few appreciated as he did himself. And, to be sure, the three of us now had the treasury to ourselves. One or two others had been there when we entered, but now they were gone. "I'm not single-handed," said the officer comfortably. "See that seat by the door? One of the attendants sits there all day long." "Then where is he now?" "Talking to another attendant just outside," in my own mind I even questioned whether they were in the corridor through which we had come. To me it sounded as though they were just outside the corridor. "You mean the fellow with the billiard cue who was here when we came in?" pursued Raffles. "That wasn't a billiard cue! It was a pointer, the intelligent officer explained. "It ought to be a javelin," said Raffles nervously. "It ought to be a better guarded than this. I shall write to the Times about it. You see if I don't!" "All at once, yet somehow not so suddenly as to excite suspicion, Raffles had become the elderly burly body with nerves; why I could not for the life of me imagine, and the policeman seemed equally at sea. "Lor' bless you, sir," said he, "I'm all right. Don't you bother your head about me." "But, you haven't even got a truncheon!" "Not likely to want one either. You see, sir, it's early as yet. In a few minutes these here rooms will fill up, and there's safety in numbers, as they say." "Oh, it will fill up soon, will it?" "Any minute now, sir." "Ah!" "It isn't often empty as long as this, sir. It's the jubilee, I suppose." "Meanwhile what if my friend and I had been professional thieves? Why, we could have overpowered you in an instant, my good fellow!" "If you couldn't, leastways not without bringing the whole place about your ears." "Well, I shall write to the Times all the same. I'm a connoisseur in all this sort of thing, and I won't have unnecessary risks run with the national property. You said there was an attendant just outside, but he sounds to me as though he were at the other end of the corridor. I shall write to-day!" "For an instant we all three listened, and Raffles was right. Then I saw two things in one glance. Raffles had stepped a few inches backward and stood poised upon the ball of each foot, his arms half raised, a light in his eyes. And another kind of light was breaking over the cross features of our friend the constable. "Then shall I tell you what I'll do?" he cried, with a sudden clutch at the whistle chain on his chest. The whistle flew out, but it never reached his lips. There were a couple of sharp smacks like double barrels discharged all but simultaneously, and the man recoiled against me so that I could not help catching him as he fell. "Well done, Bunny! I've knocked him out—I've knocked him out! Run him to the door and see if the attendants are not coming." To be continued.

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