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RAFFLES Amateur Cracksman.

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

By the way, you know the man who was upon whom the man acted with such effect? The cup itself appeared to me no more than it had done before. Exquisite it might be, handsome it was, but so light in the hand that the mere gold of it would scarcely have poured three figures out of melting pot. And what said Raffles but that he would never melt it.



I ran to the door.

is nothing. But destroying it would be a crime against God, Art, and may I be spitted on the vine of St. Mary Abbot's if I commit it!"

"My dear man!" "No questions, Bunny; you do your part and I'll do mine."

"Now newspapers?" "I fetched a pile. He hid the cup of gold in a newspaper after newspaper, and finally packed it in the empty biscuit box."

"Now some brown paper. I don't want to be taken for the grocer's young man."

"He's rather a meek chap, the singer," said I as the song ended. "My hat, what teeth! He's looking up here and grinning all round his head. Shall I chuck them anything?"

"Well, I have no reason to love the Neapolitans, but it takes me back—it takes me back! Yes, here you are, one each."

"They took me back," he repeated. "My God, how they took me back!"

"You don't understand, Bunny, old chap, but if you like, you shall. I always meant to tell you some day, but never felt worked up to it before, and it's not the kind of thing one talks about for talking's sake. It isn't a nursery story, Bunny, and there isn't a laugh in it from the start to the finish."

"This was promising, but Raffles' manner was something more. It was unlike in my memory of the man. His fine face softened and set of his mouth turned to a soft smile. And the same might be said of his voice, now tender as any woman's, now flying to the other extreme of equally unwelcome ferocity. But this was toward the end of his tale; the beginning was treated characteristically enough."

"I don't know, Bunny, whether you're a believer in transmigration of souls. I have often thought of it, though I could hardly wish for a less cavalier account of the island of Elba, where, upon his own showing, he had met with much humanity."

"Deadly, my dear Bunny, is not the word for the glorified snag of the molts, its inhabitants? But they started by wounding my vanity, so perhaps I am prejudiced after all. I sprung myself upon them as a shipwrecked sailor—a sole survivor—stripped in the sea and landed without a stitch; they took no more interest in me than you would in a dead organ-grinder. They were decent enough. I didn't have to pick and steal for a square meal and a pair of trousers; it would have been more exciting if I had. But what a place! Napoleon couldn't stand it, you remember, he held on longer than I did, but put in a few weeks in his infernal mines, simply to pick up a smattering of Italian; then got across to the mainland in a little wadded timber trunk, and ungratefully glad to leave Elba blazing in just such another sunset as the one you won't forget."

"The tramp was bound for Naples, but first touched at Baiae, where I carefully deserted in the night. There are too many English in Naples itself, though I thought it would make a first happy hunting ground when I knew the language a bit more. Meanwhile I got a billet of several sorts on one of the loveliest spots that ever I struck on all my travels. The place was a vineyard, but it overhung the sea, and I got taken on as tame sailor-man and emergency bottle-washer. The wages were the noble figure of a lira and a half, which is just over a bob, a day, but there were lashings of sound wine for one and all and better wine to bathe in. And for eight whole months, my boy, I was an absolute honest man. The luxury of it! Bunny! I out-Heroded Herod, wouldn't touch a grape, and when in the most delicious danger of being knifed for my principles by the thieving crew I had joined."

"It was the kind of place where every prospect pleases—and all the rest of it—especially all the rest. But as it was in the beginning—before anything began to happen. It was a wedge of rock sticking out into the bay, thatched with vines, and with every edge of all, a devil of a height above the sea. You might have sat at the windows and dropped your Sullivan-ends plumb into blue water a hundred and fifty feet below."

The Fate of Faustina.

No. 9 of the Series.

(Copyright 1901 by Chas. Scribner's Sons.)

Marg-ri, e perzo a Salvatore! Marg-ri, Ma Pommo e caclatore! Marg-ri, Nun ce aje corpa tu! Chello ch' e fatto, e fatto un no par-lammo echieu!

A piano-organ was pouring the metallic music through our open windows, while a voice of brass brayed the words, which I have since obtained, and print above for identification by such as know their Italy better than I. They will not thank me for reminding them of a tune so lately epidemic in that land of aloes and blue skies, but at least it is unlikely to run in their heads as the ribald accompaniment to a tragedy, and it does in mine.

It was the early heat of August, and the hour that of the lawful and necessary siesta for such as turn night into day. I was therefore shutting my window in a rage and wondering whether I should do the same for Raffles, when he appeared in the silk pajamas to which the chronic solicitude of Dr. Theobald confined him from morning to night.

"Don't do that, Bunny," said he. "I rather like that thing and want to listen. What sort of fellows are they to look at, by the way?"

"I put my head out to see, it being a primary rule of our quaint establishment that Raffles must never show himself at any of the windows. I remember now how hot the sill was to my elbows, as I leaned upon it and looked down in order to satisfy a curiosity in which I could see no point."

"Dirty-looking beggars," said I over my shoulder; "dark as dark; blue china, oleaginous curls and earrings; ragged as they make them, but nothing picturesque in their rags."

"Neapolitans all," murmured Raffles behind me, "and that's a characteristic touch, the one fellow singing while the other grinds; they always have that out there."

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—see; at least there were nearly two hundred steps tunnelled through the solid rock; then an iron gate, and another eighty steps in the open air, and last of all a cave fit for colored lamps by penny-plain-and-two-pence-colored. This cave gave upon the sweetest little thing in caves, all deep blue water and honest rocks; and here I looked after the vineyard shipping, a pot-bellied tub with a brown sail, and a sort of dingy. The tub took the wine to Naples and the dingy was the tub's tender."

"The house above was said to be on the identical site of a suburban retreat of the admirable Tiberius. There was the old sinner's private theatre, with the tiers cut clean to this day, sitting on his slaves, and a ruined temple of those ripping old Roman brimble, shallow as dominoes and ruder than the cherry. I never was much of an antiquary, but I could have become one there if I had not been so busy with the bots I had to trim the vines or gather the grapes or even help make the wine itself in a cool, dark, musty vault underneath the temple that I can see and smell as I sit to-day. And can't I feel that squish, bubble, squish, and your feet as though you had been wading through slaughter to a throne. Yes, Bunny, you mightn't think it, but this good right foot, that never was on the wrong side of the crease when the left lift my hand has also been known to crush the lees of pleasure From sanguine grapes of pain."

He made a sudden pause as though he had stumbled on the truth in jest. His face filled with lines. He was silent for the first time that had been here when first I saw it. There were basket-chairs and a table in it now, all meant ostensibly for me, and hence Raffles would slip to his bed sitting in the room that he called the study, and Mrs. Theobald still took up much of his time. Through the open window we could hear the piano-organ and "Marg-ri" a few hundred yards further on. I fancied the best of it was about her. The Raffles was hissing his head abstractedly when I handed him the cigarettes, and his tone hereafter was never just what it had been.

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"From the garden behind the house—such a garden, Bunny—clematis and mimosa, myrtle, rosemary and red tangles of fiery, untamed flowers

end of side before his hands. By God, he had pitched upon the right word unawares, and I let him know it in the end!

"But that bathing, Bunny; it was absolutely the best I ever had anywhere. I said just now the water was like wine; in my own mind I used to call it blue champagne, and was rather annoyed that I had no one to admire the phrase. Otherwise I assure you that I missed my own particular kind very little indeed, though I often wished that you were there, old chap, particularly when I went for my luncheon, what first thing in the morning when the bay was all rose leaves, and last thing at night, when your body caught phosphorescent fire! Ah, yes, it was a good enough life for a change, a perfect paradise to lie low in, another Eden until . . ."

"My poor Eve!" "I called the girl Eve," said he. "Her real name was Faustina, and she was one of a vast family who hung out in a hovel on the inland border of the vineyard. And Aphrodite rising from the sea was less wonderful and not more beautiful than Aphrodite emerging from that hovel!"

"It was the most exquisite face I ever saw or shall see in this life—absolutely perfect features, a skin that reminded you of old gold, so delicate was its bronze; magnificent hair, not black but nearly, and such eyes and teeth that would have made the fortune of a face without another point. I tell you, Bunny, London would go mad about a girl like that, and I don't believe there's such another in the world. And there she was wasting her sweetness upon that lovely but desolate little corner of it! Wei, she was not waste it upon me. I would have married her and lived happily ever after in such a hovel as her people's—with her. Only to look at her—only to look at her for the rest of my days—I could have lain low and remained dead even to you! And that's all I'm going to tell you about that, Bunny; cursed be he who tells more! Yet don't you run away with the idea that this poor Faustina was the only woman I ever cared for. I don't believe in all that 'only' rot; nevertheless I tell you that she was the one being who ever entirely satisfied my sense of beauty, and I honestly believe I could have chucked the world and been true to Faustina for that alone."

"We met sometimes in the little temple I told you about, sometimes among the vines, now by honest accident, now by flagrant design, and found a ready-made rendezvous, romantic as one could wish, in the cave down all those subterranean steps. Then the only call to me was my blue champagne, my sparkling cobalt—and there was the dingy ready to our hand. Oh, those nights! I never knew which I liked best—the moonlight ones when you sculled through silver and could see for miles, or the dark nights when the fishermen's torches shined from the sea and a red zigzag in the sky for old Vesuvius. We were happy. I don't mind owning it. We seemed not to have a care between us. My mates took no interest in my affairs and Faustina's family did not appear to bother about her. The Raffles was hissing his head abstractedly when I handed him the cigarettes, and his tone hereafter was never just what it had been."

"At first it was the oldest story in literature—Eden plus Eve. The place had been a heaven on earth before, but now it was heaven itself. So for a little. Then one night—a Monday night—Faustina burst out crying in the boat, and sobbed her story as we drifted without mishap by the mercy of the Lord."

"She was engaged—what! Had I never heard it? Did I mean to upset the boat? What was her engagement beside our love? 'Niente, niente,' crooned Faustina, sighing yet smiling through her tears. No, but what did matter was that the man had threatened to stab her to death—heart—and would do so as soon as I knew—that I knew."

"I knew it merely from my knowledge of the Neapolitans, for I had no idea who the man might be. I knew it, and yet I took this detail better than the fact of the engagement, though now I begin to laugh at both. As if I was going to let her marry anybody else! As if a hair of her lively head should be touched while I lived to protect her! I had a great mind to row away to blades with her that very night and never get near the vineyard again, or let her either. But we had not a lira between us at the time, and only the rags in which we sat barefoot in the boat. Besides, I had to know the name of the animal who had threatened a woman, and such a woman as this."

"For long time she refused to tell me, with splendid obduracy; but I was as determined as she, so at last she made conditions. I was not to go and get put in prison for sticking a knife into him—he wasn't worth it—and I did promise not to stab him in the back. Faustina seemed quite satisfied, though a little puzzled by my manner, having herself the racial tolerance for cold steel, and next moment she had taken away my breath 'It is Stefano,' she whispered and hung her head."

"And well she might, poor thing! Stefano! all creatures on God's earth—for her!" "Bunny, he was a miserable little undersized wretch, ill-favored, servile, surly and second only to his master in bestial cunning and hypocrisy. His face was enough for me; that was what I read in it, and I don't often make mistakes. He was Corbucci's own confidential body servant, and that alone was enough to damn him in decent eyes; always came out first on the Saturday with the spess, to have all ready for his master and curdled a mistress, and stayed behind on the Monday to clear and look up. Stefano! That wretch! I could well understand his threatening a woman with a knife. What beast me was how any woman could ever have listened to him! Above all that Faustina

(To be continued.)

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