

Raffles, Further Adventures of the Amateur Cracksman

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No Sinecure

I

I am still uncertain which surprised me more, the telegram calling my attention to the advertisement, or the advertisement itself. The telegram is before me as I write. It would appear to have been handed in at Vere Street at eight o'clock in the morning of May 11, 1897, and received before half-past at Holloway B.O. And in that drab region it duly found me, unwashed but at work before the day grew hot and my attic insupportable.

"See Mr. Maturin's advertisement Daily Mail might suit you earnestly beg try will speak if necessary ---- ----"

I transcribe the thing as I see it before me, all in one breath that took away mine; but I leave out the initials at the end, which completed the surprise. They stood very obviously for the knighted specialist whose consulting-room is within a cab-whistle of Vere Street, and who once called me kinsman for his sins. More recently he had called me other names. I was a disgrace, qualified by an adjective which seemed to me another. I had made my bed, and I could go and lie and die in it. If I ever again had the insolence to show my nose in that house, I should go out quicker than I came in. All this, and more, my least distant relative could tell a poor devil to his face; could ring for his man, and give him his brutal instructions on the spot; and then relent to the tune of this telegram! I have no phrase for my amazement. I literally could not believe my eyes. Yet their evidence was more and more conclusive: a very epistle could not have been more characteristic of its sender. Meanly elliptical, ludicrously precise, saving half-pence at the expense of sense, yet paying like a man for "Mr." Maturin, that was my distinguished relative from his bald patch to his corns. Nor was all the rest unlike him, upon second thoughts. He had a reputation for charity; he was

going to live up to it after all. Either that, or it was the sudden impulse of which the most calculating are capable at times; the morning papers with the early cup of tea, this advertisement seen by chance, and the rest upon the spur of a guilty conscience.

Well, I must see it for myself, and the sooner the better, though work pressed. I was writing a series of articles upon prison life, and had my nib into the whole System; a literary and philanthropical daily was parading my "charges," the graver ones with the more gusto; and the terms, if unhandsome for creative work, were temporary wealth to me. It so happened that my first check had just arrived by the eight o'clock post; and my position should be appreciated when I say that I had to cash it to obtain a Daily Mail.

Of the advertisement itself, what is to be said? It should speak for itself if I could find it, but I cannot, and only remember that it was a "male nurse and constant attendant" that was "wanted for an elderly gentleman in feeble health." A male nurse! An absurd tag was appended, offering "liberal salary to University or public-school man"; and of a sudden I saw that I should get this thing if I applied for it. What other "University or public-school man" would dream of doing so? Was any other in such straits as I? And then my relenting relative; he not only promised to speak for me, but was the very man to do so. Could any recommendation compete with his in the matter of a male nurse? And need the duties of such be necessarily loathsome and repellent? Certainly the surroundings would be better than those of my common lodging-house and own particular garret; and the food; and every other condition of life that I could think of on my way back to that unsavory asylum. So I dived into a pawnbroker's shop, where I was a stranger only upon my present errand, and within the hour was airing a decent if antiquated suit, but little corrupted by the pawnbroker's moth, and a new straw hat, on the top of a tram.

The address given in the advertisement was that of a flat at Earl's Court, which cost me a cross-country journey, finishing with the District Railway and a seven minutes' walk. It was now past mid-day, and the tarry wood-pavement was good to smell as I strode up the Earl's Court Road. It was great to walk the civilized world again. Here were men with coats on their backs, and ladies in gloves. My only fear was lest I might run up against one or other whom I had known of old. But it was my lucky day. I felt it in my bones. I was going to get this berth; and sometimes I should be able to smell the wood-pavement on the old boy's errands; perhaps he would insist on skimming over it in his bath-chair, with me behind.

I felt quite nervous when I reached the flats. They were a small pile in a side street, and I pitied the doctor whose plate I saw upon the palings before the ground-floor windows; he must be in a very small way, I thought. I rather pitied myself as well. I had indulged in visions of better flats than these. There were no balconies. The porter was out of livery. There was no lift, and my invalid on the third floor! I trudged up, wishing I had never lived in Mount Street, and brushed against a dejected individual coming down. A full-blooded young fellow in a frock-coat flung the right door open at my summons.

"Does Mr. Maturin live here?" I inquired.

"That's right," said the full-blooded young man, grinning all over a convivial countenance.

"I--I've come about his advertisement in the Daily Mail."

"You're the thirty-ninth," cried the blood; "that was the thirty-eighth you met upon the stairs, and the day's still young. Excuse my staring at you. Yes, you pass your prelim., and can come inside; you're one of the few. We had most just after breakfast, but now the porter's heading off the worst cases, and that last chap was the first for twenty minutes. Come in here."

And I was ushered into an empty room with a good bay-window, which enabled my full-blooded friend to inspect me yet more critically in a good light; this he did without the least false delicacy; then his questions began.

"Varsity man?"

"No."

"Public school?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

I told him, and he sighed relief.

"At last! You're the very first I've not had to argue with as to what is and what is not a public school. Expelled?"

"No," I said, after a moment's hesitation; "no, I was not expelled. And I hope you won't expel me if I ask a question in my turn?"

"Certainly not."

"Are you Mr. Maturin's son?"

"No, my name's Theobald. You may have seen it down below."

"The doctor?" I said.

"His doctor," said Theobald, with a satisfied eye. "Mr. Maturin's doctor. He is having a male nurse and attendant by my advice, and he wants a gentleman if he can get one. I rather think he'll see you, though he's only seen two or three all day. There are certain questions which he prefers to ask himself, and it's no good

going over the same ground twice. So perhaps I had better tell him about you before we get any further."

And he withdrew to a room still nearer the entrance, as I could hear, for it was a very small flat indeed. But now two doors were shut between us, and I had to rest content with murmurs through the wall until the doctor returned to summon me.

"I have persuaded my patient to see you," he whispered, "but I confess I am not sanguine of the result. He is very difficult to please. You must prepare yourself for a querulous invalid, and for no sinecure if you get the billet."

"May I ask what's the matter with him?"

"By all means--when you've got the billet."

Dr. Theobald then led the way, his professional dignity so thoroughly intact that I could not but smile as I followed his swinging coat-tails to the sick-room. I carried no smile across the threshold of a darkened chamber which reeked of drugs and twinkled with medicine bottles, and in the middle of which a gaunt figure lay abed in the half-light.

"Take him to the window, take him to the window," a thin voice snapped, "and let's have a look at him. Open the blind a bit. Not as much as that, damn you, not as much as that!"

The doctor took the oath as though it had been a fee. I no longer pitied him. It was now very clear to me that he had one patient who was a little practice in himself. I determined there and then that he should prove a little profession to me, if we could but keep him alive between us. Mr. Maturin, however, had the whitest face that I have ever seen, and his teeth gleamed out through the dusk as though the withered lips no longer met about them; nor did they except in speech; and anything ghastlier than the perpetual grin of his repose I defy you to

imagine. It was with this grin that he lay regarding me while the doctor held the blind.

"So you think you could look after me, do you?"

"I'm certain I could, sir."

"Single-handed, mind! I don't keep another soul. You would have to cook your own grub and my slops. Do you think you could do all that?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Why do you? Have you any experience of the kind?"

"No, sir, none."

"Then why do you pretend you have?"

"I only meant that I would do my best."

"Only meant, only meant! Have you done your best at everything else, then?"

I hung my head. This was a facer. And there was something in my invalid which thrust the unspoken lie down my throat.

"No, sir, I have not," I told him plainly.

"He, he, he!" the old wretch tittered; "and you do well to own it; you do well, sir, very well indeed. If you hadn't owned up, out you would have gone, out neck-and-crop! You've saved your bacon. You may do more. So you are a public-school boy, and a very good school yours is, but you weren't at either University. Is that correct?"

"Absolutely."

"What did you do when you left school?"

"I came in for money."

"And then?"

"I spent my money."

"And since then?"

I stood like a mule.

"And since then, I say!"

"A relative of mine will tell you if you ask him. He is an eminent man, and he has promised to speak for me. I would rather say no more myself."

"But you shall, sir, but you shall! Do you suppose that I suppose a public-school boy would apply for a berth like this if something or other hadn't happened? What I want is a gentleman of sorts, and I don't much care what sort; but you've got to tell me what did happen, if you don't tell anybody else. Dr. Theobald, sir, you can go to the devil if you won't take a hint. This man may do or he may not. You have no more to say to it till I send him down to tell you one thing or the other. Clear out, sir, clear out; and if you think you've anything to complain of, you stick it down in the bill!"

In the mild excitement of our interview the thin voice had gathered strength, and the last shrill insult was screamed after the devoted medico, as he retired in such order that I felt certain he was going to take this trying patient at his word. The bedroom door closed, then the outer one, and the doctor's heels went drumming down the common stair. I was alone in the flat with this highly singular and rather terrible old man.

"And a damned good riddance!" croaked the invalid, raising himself on one elbow without delay. "I may not have much body left to boast about, but at least I've got a lost old soul to call my own. That's why I want a gentleman of sorts about me. I've been too dependent on that chap. He won't even let me smoke, and he's been in the flat all day to see I didn't. You'll find the cigarettes behind the Madonna of the Chair."

It was a steel engraving of the great Raffaele, and the frame was tilted from the wall; at a touch a packet of cigarettes tumbled down from behind.

"Thanks; and now a light."

I struck the match and held it, while the invalid inhaled with normal lips; and suddenly I sighed. I was irresistibly reminded of my poor dear old Raffles. A smoke-ring worthy of the great A. J. was floating upward from the sick man's lips.

"And now take one yourself. I have smoked more poisonous cigarettes. But even these are not Sullivans!"

I cannot repeat what I said. I have no idea what I did. I only know--I only knew--that it was A. J. Raffles in the flesh!

II

"Yes, Bunny, it was the very devil of a swim; but I defy you to sink in the Mediterranean. That sunset saved me. The sea was on fire. I hardly swam under water at all, but went all I knew for the sun itself; when it set I must have been a mile away; until it did I was the invisible man. I figured on that, and only hope it wasn't set down as a case of suicide. I shall get outed quite soon enough, Bunny, but I'd rather be dropped by the hangman than throw my own wicket away."

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