

LE PREMIER PAS

No. 3 of the Series

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THAT might he told me the story of his earliest crime. Not since the fateful morning of the day of March, when he had just mentioned it as an unreported incident of a certain cricket tour, had I succeeded 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. Raffles would plan a fresh enormity or glory in the last with the unmitigated enthusiasm of the artist. It was impossible to imagine one throbbing with 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 was 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 glimmer 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 hard 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 siphon 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 morning 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 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 fifty 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. I'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 sit 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 slipped 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 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 thirty 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, a track I often couldn't see and left entirely to the mare. Now it dipped into gully and ran through a creek, and all the time the local color was laches 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 leathers 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 black-guard 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 had 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



Posed by Kylie Bellew.

"My God! You're bleeding like a pig!"

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 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 gaslight 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

DONT DELAY--DO IT NOW

We hope that all the farmers who read the Review have taken the advice offered them last week and have carefully inspected their machines and implements and know just what they will need to

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The open winter has given fine opportunity to get all the farm in readiness, to mend the fences, build sheds and barns and to have all in ship shape condition.

Seed Time Coming

It is not only an object to get your seeding done early, but to get it done right.

Experience tells us that home grown seed is as good as high-priced imported seed, if it is properly cared for. There is no use in planting dirt and dust and small, lifeless seed.

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Planting Is The Next

SEEDERS—The Gorham and the Deere. These excellent machines have been on the market for years. They are the Standards of Excellence. They never wear out and they plant evenly and well. By reason of their simple, strong construction guaranteeing a long life, they are by far the **CHEAPEST SEEDERS ON THE MARKET.**

Good Seed Well Sown

Must still be cultivated and as you all know this is where the Disc Harrow comes into use. Perhaps you do not know that the Deere Model "B" Disc Harrow is the best yet placed on the market. It has not only the two end levers but a **CENTER LEVER** which applies the pressure so that it is not alone the end discs which do their work well. The gangs are the most flexible of those on any machine and are **Especially adapted for work on side hills.** There is also a special arrangement that makes the discs run evenly throughout. There is practically no woodwork on this machine, it is all made of the very best steel. There are other good discs but we can honestly recommend the "Model B" for evenness and smooth running. When you call ask to see this machine and let us show you its good points.

The Deere and Emerson Harrows are as staple as sugar. We have them in all sizes and styles and sell them at very close prices

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