RAFFLES · No 9 — THE · FATE · OF · FAUSTINA

by E. W. HORNUNG

This is the ninth of a series of thirteen new stories entitled "Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman."

Raffles is destined to achieve as widespread fame in his own peculiar line as did Sherlock Holmes in a totally different sphere, for Raffles and Holmes are exact opposites in view, character and career.

While Sherlock Holmes exercised his wonderful powers toward the detection of crime, Raffles is represented as a man of unusual intellect and of high birth and breeding who has sunk to employing his undoubted genius to enable him to live by his wits.

The tenth adventure of Raffles will appear next Sunday.

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Mar—ga—ri,
e derzo a Salvatore!
Mar—ga—ri,
Ma l'ommo e cacciatore!
Mar—ga—ri,
Nun ce aje corpa tu!
Chello ch' e fatto, e fatto un no parlammo
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 in 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 over," murmured Raffles behind me," and that's a characteristic touch, the one fellow singing while the other grinds; they always have that out there."

"He's rather a fine 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."

It was a couple of half-crowns that Raffles put into my hand, but I had thrown them into the street for pennies before I saw what they were. Thereupon I left the Italians bowing to the mud, as well they might, and I turned to protest against such wanton waste. But Raffles was walking up and down, his head bent, his eyes troubled, and his one excuse disarmed remonstrance.

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

Suddenly he stopped in his stride.

"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 start to finish. On the contrary, you have often asked me what turned my hair gray, and now you are going to hear."

This was promising, but Raffles' manner was something more. It was unique in my memory of the man. His fine face softened and set hard by turns. I never knew it so hard. I never knew it so soft. And the same might be said of his voice, now tender as any woman's, now flying to the other extreme of equally unwonted ferocity. But this was toward the end of his tale; the beginning he treated characteristically enough, though I could have wished 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 that glorified snag or for the mollusks its inhabitants. But they started by wounding my vanity, so perhaps I am prejudiced after all. I sprang myself upon them as a shipwrecked sailor—a sole survivor—stripped in the sea and landed without a stitch; yet they took no more interest in me than you do in Italian organ-grinders. 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, but held on longer than I did. I put in a few weeks in their infernal mines, simply to pick up a smattering of Italian; then got across to the mainland in a little wooden timber tramp and ungratefully glad I was 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 better and had altered myself 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 sailorman 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 absolutely honest man. The luxury of it, Bunny! I out-Heroded Herod, wouldn't touch a grape, and went 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 may I see it in my dreams till I die—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 the rummiest old house on the very 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 150 feet below.

"From the garden behind the house—such a garden, Bunny—oleanders and mimosa, myrtles, rosemary and red tangles of fiery, untamed flowers—in a corner of this garden was the top of a subterranean stair down to the sea; at least there were nearly 200 steps tunneled through the solid rock; then an iron gate, and another eighty steps in the open air, and last of all a cave fit for pirates a-penny-plain-and-twopence-colored. This cave gave upon the sweetest little thing in coves, 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 theater, with the tiers cut clean to this day; the well where he used to fatten his lampreys on his slaves, and a ruined temple of those ripping old Roman bricks, shallow as dominoes and ruddier than the cherry. I never was much of an antiquary, but I could have become one there if I'd had nothing else to do, but I had lots. When I wasn't busy with the boats 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 jaw. And can't I hear it and feel it, too! Squish, squash, bubble; quash, squish, guggle; 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 ball left 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 sitting in the room that had been bare 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 with schoolboy relish at every tinkle of the bell. This afternoon we felt fairly safe, for Theobald had called in the morning, and Mrs. Theobald still took up much of his time. Through the open window we could hear the piano-organ and "Mar—ga—ri" a few hundred yards farther on. I fancied Raffles was listening to it while he paused. He shook his head abstractedly when I handed him the cigarettes, and his tone hereafter was never just what it had been.

"I don't know, Bunny, whether you're a believer in transmigration of souls. I have often thought it easier to believe than lots of other things, and I have been pretty near believing in it myself since I had my being on that villa of Tiberius. The brute who had it in my day, if he isn't still running it with a whole skin, was or is as cold-blooded a blackguard as the worst of the Emperors, but I have often thought he had a lot in common with Tiberius. He had the great, high, sensual Roman nose, eyes that were sinks of iniquity in themselves, and that swelled with fatness, like the rest of him, so that he wheezed if he walked a yard; otherwise rather a fine beast to look at, with a huge gray mustache, like a flying gull, and the most courteous manners even to his men, but one of the worst, Bunny, one of the worst that ever was. It was said that the vineyard was his only hobby. If so, he did his best to make his hobby pay. He used to come out from Naples for the week-ends—in the tub when it wasn't too rough for his nerves—and he didn't always come alone. His very name sounded unhealthy—Corbucci. I suppose I ought to add that he was a Count, though Counts are two-a-penny in Naples and in season all the year round.

"He had a little English and liked to air it upon me, much to my disgust. If I could not hope to conceal my nationality as yet I at least did not want to have it advertised, and the swing had English friends. When he heard that I was bathing in November, when the bay is still as warm as new milk, he would shake his wicked old head and say, 'You are very audashuss—you are very audashuss!' and put on no end of side before his Italians. 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 lonesome swim 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!"

And he fetched a sigh that took away his words; then his jaws snapped together and his eyes spoke terribly while he conquered his emotion. I pen the last word advisedly. I fancy it is one which I have never used before in writing of A. J. Raffles, for I cannot at the moment recall any other occasion upon which its use would have been justified. On resuming, however, he was not only calm but cold, and this flying for safety to the other extreme is the single instance of self-distrust which the present Achates can record to the credit of his impious Aeneas.

"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 hole!

"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. But 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! Well, she did 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 about. 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 sea would call us—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 moonlit ones when you sculled through silver and could see for miles, or the dark nights when the fishermen's torches stood for 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 Count was in Naples five nights of the seven; the other two we sighed apart.

"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. And that was almost as old a story as the other.

"She was engaged—what! Had I never heard of 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 the heart—and would do it as soon as look at her—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 began to laugh at both. As if I was going to let her marry anybody else! As if a hair of her lovely head should be touched while I lived to protect her! I had a great mind to row away to blazes with her that very night and never go 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 a long time she refused to tell me, with splendid obduracy, but I was as determined as she, so that 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, of 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 spese, to have all ready for his master and current mistress, and stayed behind on the Monday to clear and lock up. Stefano! That worm! I could well understand his threatening a woman with a knife. What beat me was how any woman could ever have listened to him; above all, that Faustina should be the one! It passed my comprehension. But I questioned her as gently as I could, and her explanation was largely the threadbare one you would expect. Her parents were so poor. They were so many in family. Some of them begged—would I promise never to tell? Then some of them stole—sometimes—and all knew the pains of actual want. She looked after the cows, but there were only two of them, and brought the milk to the vineyard and elsewhere, but that was not employment for more than one, and there were countless sisters waiting to take her place. Then he was so rich, Stefano.

"'Rich?' I echoed. 'Stefano'.

"'Si, Arturo mio.'

"Yes, I played the game on that vineyard, Bunny, even to going by my own first name.

"'And how comes he to be rich?' I asked suspiciously.

"She did not know, but he had given her such beautiful jewels, the family had lived on them for months, she pretending an avocat had taken charge of them for her against her marriage. But I cared nothing about all that.

"'Jewels! Stefano!' I could only mutter.

"'Perhaps the Count has paid for some of them. He is very kind.'

"'To you, is he?'

"'Oh, yes, very kind.'

"'And you would live in his house afterward?'

"'Not now, mia cara—not now!'

"'No, by God, you don't!' said I in English. 'But you would have done so, eh?'

"'Of course. That was arranged. The Count is really very kind.'

"'Do you see anything of him when he comes here?'

"Yes, he had sometimes brought her little presents, sweetmeats, ribbons and the like, but the offering had always been made through this toad of a Stefano. Knowing the man, I now knew all. But Faustina, she had the pure and simple heart and the white soul, by the God who made it, and for all her kindness to a tattered scapegrace who made love to her in broken Italian between the ripples and the stars. She was not to know what I was, remember, and besides Corbucci and his henchman I was the Archangel Gabriel come down to earth.

"Well; as I lay awake that night two more lines of Swinburne came into my head and came to stay:

"God said, 'Let him who wins her take
And keep Faustine.'

"On that couplet I slept at last, and it was my text and watchword when I awoke in the morning. I forgot how well you know your Swinburne, Bunny, but don't you run away with the idea that there was anything else in common between his Faustine and mine. For the last time let me tell you that poor Faustina was the whitest and the best I ever knew.

"Well, I was strung up for trouble when the next Sunday came, and I'll tell you what I had done. I had broken the pledge and burgled Corbucci's villa in my best manner during his absence in Naples. Not that it gave me the slightest trouble, but no human being could have told that I had been in when I came out. And I had stolen nothing, mark you, but only borrowed a revolver from a drawer in the Count's desk, with one or two trifling accessories, or by this time I had the measure of these damned Neapolitans. They are spry enough with a knife, but you show them the business end of a shooting iron and they'll streak like rabbits for the nearest hole. But the revolver wasn't for my own use. It was for Faustina, and I taught her how to use it in the cave down there by the sea shooting at candles stuck upon the rock. The noise in the cave was something frightful, but high up above it couldn't be heard at all, as we proved to each other's satisfaction pretty early in the proceedings. So now Faustina was armed with munitions of self-defense, and I knew enough of her character to entertain no doubt as to their spirited use upon occasion. Between the two of us, in fact, our friend Stefano seemed tolerably certain of a warm week-end.

"But the Saturday brought word that the Count was not coming this week, being in Rome on business and unable to return in time, so for a whole Sunday we were promised peace, and made bold plans accordingly. There was no further merit in hushing this thing up. 'Let him who wins her take and keep Faustine.' Yes, but let him win her openly, or lose her and be damned to him! So on the Sunday I was going to have it out with her people—with the Count and Stefano as soon as they showed their noses. I had no inducement, remember, ever to return to surreptitious life within a cab fare of Wormwood Scrubbs. Faustina and the bay of Naples were quite good enough for me. And the prehistoric man in me rather exulted in the idea of fighting for my desire.

"On the Saturday, however, we were to meet for the last time as heretofore—just once more in secret, down there in the cave, as soon as might be after dark. Neither of us minded it if we were kept for hours; each knew that in the end the other would come, and there was a charm of its own even in waiting for such knowledge. But that night I did lose patience, not in the cave but up above, where first on one pretext and then on another the direttore kept me going until I smelled a rat. He was not given to exacting overtime, this direttore, whose only fault was his servile subjection to our common boss. It seemed pretty obvious, therefore, that he was acting upon some secret instructions from Corbucci himself, and the moment I suspected this I asked him to his face if it was not the case. And it was; he admitted it with many shrugs, being a conveniently weak person, whom one felt almost ashamed of bullying as the occasion demanded.

"The fact was, however, that the Count had sent for him on finding he had to go to Rome, and had said he was very sorry to go just then, as among other things he intended to speak to me about Faustina. Stefano had told him all about his row with her, and, moreover, that it was on my account, which Faustina had never told me, though I had guessed as much for myself. Well, the Count was going to take his jackal's part for all he was worth, which was just exactly what I expected him to do. He intended going for me on his return, but meanwhile I was not to make hay in his absence, and so this tool of direttore had orders to keep me at it night and day. I undertook not to give the poor beast away, but at the same time told him I had not the faintest intention of doing another stroke of work that night.

"It was very dark, and I remember knocking my head against the oranges as I ran up the long shallow steps which ended the journey between the direttore's lodge and the villa itself. But at the back of the villa was the garden I spoke about, and also a bare chunk of the cliff where it was bored by that subterranean stair. So I saw the stars close overhead, and the fishermen's torches far below, the coastwise lights and the crimson hieroglyph that spelt Vesuvius before I plunged into the darkness of the shaft. And that was the last time I appreciated the unique and peaceful charm of this outlandish spot.

"The stair was in two long flights, with an airhole or two at the top of the upper one, but not another pinprick till you came to the iron gate at the bottom of the lower. As you may read of an infinitely lighter place, in a finer work of fiction than you are ever likely to write, Bunny, it was 'gloomy at noon, dark as midnight at dusk and black as the ninth plague of Egypt at midnight.' I won't swear to my quotation, but I will to those stairs. They were as black that night as the inside of the safest safe in the strongest strong-room in the Chancery Lane Deposit. Yet I had not got far down them with my bare feet before I heard somebody else coming up in boots. You may imagine what a turn that gave me! It could not be Faustina, who went barefoot three seasons of the four, and yet there was Faustina waiting for me down below. What a fright she must have had! And all at once my own blood ran cold, for the man sang like a kettle as he plodded up and up. It was, it must be, the short-winded Count himself, whom we all supposed to be in Rome!

"Higher he came and nearer, nearer, slowly yet hurriedly, now stopping to cough and gasp, now taking a few steps to elephantine assault. I should have enjoyed the situation if it had not been for poor Faustina in the cave; as it was I was filled with nameless fears. But I could not resist giving that grampus Corbucci one bad moment on account. A crazy handrail ran up one wall, so I carefully flattened myself against the other and he passed within six inches of me, puffing and wheezing like a brass band. I let him go a few steps higher, and then I let him have it with both lungs.

"'Buona sera, eccellenza signor!' I roared after him. And a scream came down in answer—such a scream. A dozen different terrors were in it and the wheezing had stopped with the old scoundrel's heart.

"'Chi sta la?' he squeaked at last, gibbering and whimpering like a whipped monkey, so that I could not bear to miss his face and got a match all ready to strike.

"'Arturo, signor!.'

"He didn't repeat my name, nor did he damn me in heaps. He did nothing but wheeze for a good minute and when he spoke it was with insinuating civility, in his best English.

"'Come nearer, Arturo. You are in the lower regions down there. I want to speak with you.'

"'No, thanks. I'm in a hurry,' I said, and dropped that match back into my pocket. He might be armed, and I was not.

"'So you are in a 'urry!' and he wheezed amusement. 'And you thought I was still in Rome, no doubt; and so I was until this afternoon, when I caught the train from Naples to Pozzuoli. I have been rowed here now by a fisherman of Pozzuoli. I had not time to stop anywhere in Naples, but only to drive from station to station. So I am without Stefano, Arturo, I am without Stefano.'

"His sly voice sounded preternaturally sly in the absolute darkness, but even through that impenetrable veil I knew it for a sham. I had laid hold of the handrail. It shook violently in my hand; he also was holding it where he stood. And these suppressed tremors, or rather their detection in this way, struck a strange chill to my heart, just as I was beginning to pluck it up.

"'It is lucky for Stefano,' said I, grim as death.

"'Ah, but you must not be too 'ard on 'im,' remonstrated the Count. 'You have stole his girl; he speak with me about it, and I wish to speak with you. It is very audashuss, Arturo, very audashuss! Perhaps you are even going to meet her now, eh?'

"I told him straight that I was.

"'Then there is no 'urry, for she is not there.'

"'You didn't see her in the cave?' I cried, too delighted at the thought to keep it to myself.

"'I had no such fortune,' the old devil said.

"'She is there, all the same.'

"'I only wish I 'ad known.'

"'And I've kept her long enough!'

"In fact, I threw this over my shoulder as I turned and went running down.

"'I 'ope you will find her!' his malicious voice came croaking after me. 'I 'ope you will—I 'ope so.'

"And find her I did."

Raffles had been on his feet some time, unable to sit still or to stand, moving excitedly about the room. But now he stood still enough, his elbows on the cast-iron

"I WENT FOR HIM WITH MY BARE HANDS"

(Continued on Page Three.)