

Bangs John Kendrick

**Mrs. Raffles: Being the
Adventures of an Amateur
Crackswoman**



John Bangs

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Bangs J.

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Bangs John Kendrick

Mrs. Raffles: Being the Adventures of an Amateur Crackswoman

I

THE ADVENTURE OF THE *HERALD* PERSONAL

That I was in a hard case is best attested by the fact that when I had paid for my Sunday *Herald* there was left in my purse just one tuppence-ha'penny stamp and two copper cents, one dated 1873, the other 1894. The mere incident that at this hour eighteen months later I can recall the dates of these coins should be proof, if any were needed, of the importance of the coppers in my eyes, and therefore of the relative scarcity of funds in my possession. Raffles was dead – killed as you may remember at the battle of Spion Kop – and I, his companion, who had never known want while his deft fingers were able to carry out the plans of that insinuating and marvellous mind of his, was now, in the vernacular of the American, up against it. I had come to the United States, not because I had any liking for that country or its people, who, to tell the truth, are too sharp for an ordinary burglar like myself, but because with the war at an end I had to go somewhere, and English soil was not safely to be trod by one who was required for professional reasons to evade the eagle eye of Scotland Yard until the Statute of Limitations began to have some bearing upon his case. That last affair of Raffles and mine, wherein we had successfully got away with the diamond stomacher of the duchess of Herringdale, was still a live matter in British detective circles, and the very audacity of the crime had definitely fastened the responsibility for it upon our shoulders. Hence it was America for me, where one could be as English as one pleased without being subject to the laws of his Majesty, King Edward VII., of Great Britain and Ireland and sundry other possessions upon which the sun rarely if ever sets. For two years I had led a precarious existence, not finding in the land of silk and money quite as many of those opportunities to add to the sum of my prosperity as the American War Correspondent I had met in the Transvaal led me to expect. Indeed, after six months of successful lecturing on the subject of the Boers before various lyceums in the country, I was reduced to a state of penury which actually drove me to thievery of the pettiest and most vulgar sort. There was little in the way of mean theft that I did not commit. During the coal famine, for instance, every day passing the coal-yards to and fro, I would appropriate a single piece of the precious anthracite until I had come into possession of a scuttleful, and this I would sell to the suffering poor at prices varying from three shillings to two dollars and a half – a precarious living indeed. The only respite I received for six months was in the rape of the hansom-cab, which I successfully carried through one bitter cold night in January. I hired the vehicle at Madison Square and drove to a small tavern on the Boston Post Road, where the icy cold of the day gave me an excuse for getting my cabby drunk in the guise of kindness. Him safely disposed of in a drunken stupor, I drove his jaded steed back to town, earned fifteen dollars with him before daybreak, and then, leaving the cab in the Central Park, sold the horse for eighteen dollars to a snow-removal contractor over on the East Side. It was humiliating to me, a gentleman born, and a partner of so illustrious a person as the late A. J. Raffles, to have to stoop to such miserable doings to keep body and soul together, but I was forced to confess that, whatever Raffles had left to me in the way of example, I was not his equal either in the conception of crime or in the nerve to carry a great enterprise through. My biggest coups had a way of failing at their very beginning – which was about the only blessing I enjoyed, since none of them progressed far enough to imperil my freedom, and, lacking confederates, I was of course unable to carry through the profitable series of abductions in the world of High Finance that I had contemplated. Hence my misfortunes, and now on this beautiful

Sunday morning, penniless but for the coppers and the postage-stamp, with no breakfast in sight, and, fortunately enough, not even an appetite, I turned to my morning paper for my solace.

Running my eye up and down the personal column, which has for years been my favorite reading of Sunday mornings, I found the usual assortment of matrimonial enterprises recorded: pathetic appeals from P. D. to meet Q. on the corner of Twenty-third Street at three; imploring requests from J. A. K. to return at once to "His Only Mother," who promises to ask no questions; and finally – could I believe my eyes now riveted upon the word? – my own sobriquet, printed as boldly and as plainly as though I were some patent cure for all known human ailments. It seemed incredible, but there it was beyond all peradventure:

"Wanted. – A Butler. BUNNY preferred. Apply to Mrs. A. J. Van Raffles,
Bolivar Lodge, Newport, R.I."

To whom could that refer if not to myself, and what could it mean? Who was this Mrs. A. J. Van Raffles? – a name so like that of my dead friend that it seemed almost identical. My curiosity was roused to concert pitch. If this strange advertiser should be – But no, she would not send for me after that stormy interview in which she cast me over to take the hand of Raffles: the brilliant, fascinating Raffles, who would have won his Isabella from Ferdinand, Chloe from her Corydon, Pierrette from Pierrot – ay, even Heloise from Abelard. I never could find it in my heart to blame Henriette for losing her heart to him, even though she had already promised it to me, for I myself could not resist the fascination of the man at whose side I faithfully worked even after he had stolen from me this dearest treasure of my heart. And yet who else could it be if not the lovely Henriette? Surely the combination of Raffles, with or without the Van, and Bunny was not so usual as to permit of so remarkable a coincidence.

"I will go to Newport at once," I cried, rising and pacing the floor excitedly, for I had many times, in cursing my loneliness, dreamed of Henriette, and had oftener and oftener of late found myself wondering what had become of her, and then the helplessness of my position burst upon me with full force. How should I, the penniless wanderer in New York, get to Bolivar Lodge at Newport? It takes money in this sordid country to get about, even as it does in Britain – in sorry truth, things in detail differ little whether one lives under a king or a president; poverty is quite as hard to bear, and free passes on the railroad are just as scarce.

"Curses on these plutocrats!" I muttered, as I thought of the railway directors rolling in wealth, running trains filled with empty seats to and from the spot that might contain my fortune, and I unable to avail myself of them for the lack of a paltry dollar or two. But suddenly the thought flashed over me – telegraph collect. If it is she, she will respond at once.

And so it was that an hour later the following message was ticked over the wires:

"Personal to-day's *Herald* received. Telegraph railway fare and I will go to you
instantly.
(Signed),
Bunny."

For three mortal hours I paced the streets feverishly awaiting the reply, and at two-thirty it came, disconcerting enough in all conscience:

"If you are not a bogus Bunny you will know how to raise the cash. If you are
a bogus Bunny I don't want you."

It was simple, direct, and convincing, and my heart fluttered like the drum-beat's morning call to action the moment I read it.

"By Jove!" I cried. "The woman is right, of course. It must be Henriette, and I'll go to her if I have to rob a nickel-in-the-slot machine."

It was as of old. Faint-hearted I always was until some one gave me a bit of encouragement. A word of praise or cheer from Raffles in the old days and I was ready to batter down Gibraltar, a bit of discouragement and a rag was armor-plate beside me.

"If you are not a bogus Bunny you will know," I read, spreading the message out before me. "That is to say, *she* believes that if I am really myself I can surmount the insurmountable. Gad! I'll do it." And I set off hot-foot up Fifth Avenue, hoping to discover, or by cogitation in the balmy air of the spring-time afternoon, to conceive of some plan to relieve my necessities. But, somehow or other, it wouldn't come. There were no pockets about to be picked in the ordinary way. I hadn't the fare for a ride on the surface or elevated cars, where I might have found an opportunity to relieve some traveller of his purse, and as for snatching such a thing from some shopper, it was Sunday and the women who would have been an easy prey on a bargain-day carried neither purse nor side-bag with them. I was in despair, and then the pealing bells of St. Jondy's, the spiritual home of the multi-millionaires of New York, rang out the call to afternoon service. It was like an invitation – the way was clear. My plan was laid in an instant, and it worked beyond my most hopeful anticipations. Entering the church, I was ushered to a pew about halfway up the centre aisle – despite my poverty, I had managed to keep myself always well-groomed, and no one would have guessed, to look at my faultless frock-coat and neatly creased trousers, at my finely gloved hand and polished top-hat, that my pockets held scarcely a brass farthing. The service proceeded. A good sermon on the Vanity of Riches found lodgment in my ears, and then the supreme moment came. The collection-plate was passed, and, gripping my two pennies in my hand, I made as if to place them in the salver, but with studied awkwardness I knocked the alms-platter from the hands of the gentleman who passed it. The whole contents and the platter as well fell at my feet, and from my lips in reverent whispers poured forth no end of most abject apologies. Of course I assisted in recovering the fallen bills and coins, and in less time than it takes to tell it the vestryman was proceeding on his way up the aisle, gathering in the contributions from other generously disposed persons as he went, as unconsciously as though the *contretemps* had never occurred, and happily unaware that out of the moneys cast to the floor by my awkward act two yellow-backed fifty-dollar bills, five half-dollars, and a dime remained behind under the hassock at my feet, whither I had managed to push them with my toe while offering my apologies.

An hour later, having dined heartily at Delsherrico's, I was comfortably napping in a Pullman car on my way to the Social Capital of the United States.

II

THE ADVENTURE OF THE NEWPORT VILLA

There is little need for me to describe in detail the story of my railway journey from New York to Newport. It was uneventful and unproductive save as to the latter end of it, when, on the arrival of the train at Wickford, observing that the prosperous-looking gentleman bound for Boston who occupied the seat next mine in the Pullman car was sleeping soundly, I exchanged my well-worn covert coat for his richly made, sable-lined surtout, and made off as well with his suit-case on the chance of its holding something that might later serve some one of my many purposes. I mention this in passing only because the suit-case, containing as it did all the essential features of a gentleman's evening attire, even to three superb pearl studs in the bosom of an immaculately white shirt, all of them, marvellously enough, as perfectly fitting as though they had been made for me, with a hundred unregistered first-mortgage bonds of the United States Steel Company – of which securities there will be more anon – enabled me later to appear before Mrs. Van Raffles in a guise so prosperous as to win an immediate renewal of her favor.

"We shall be almost as great a combination as the original Bunny," she cried, enthusiastically, when I told her of this coup. "With my brains and your blind luck nothing can stop us."

My own feelings as I drove up to Bolivar Lodge were mixed. I still loved Henriette madly, but the contrast between her present luxury and my recent misery grated harshly upon me. I could not rid myself of the notion that Raffles had told her of the secret hiding-place of the diamond stomacher of the duchess of Herringdale, and that she had appropriated to her own use all the proceeds of its sale, leaving me, who had risked my liberty to obtain it, without a penny's worth of dividend for my pains. It did not seem quite a level thing to do, and I must confess that I greeted the lady in a reproachful spirit. It was, indeed, she, and more radiantly beautiful than ever – a trifle thinner perhaps, and her eyes more coldly piercing than seductively winning as of yore, but still Henriette whom I had once so madly loved and who had jilted me for a better man.

"Dear old Bunny!" she murmured, holding out both hands in welcome. "Just to think that after all these years and in a strange land and under such circumstances we should meet again!"

"It is strange," said I, my eye roving about the drawing-room, which from the point of view of its appointments and decoration was about the richest thing I had ever seen either by light of day or in the mysterious glimpses one gets with a dark lantern of the houses of the moneyed classes. "It seems more than strange," I added, significantly, "to see you surrounded by such luxury. A so-called lodge built of the finest grade of Italian marble; gardens fit for the palace of a king; a retinue of servants such as one scarcely finds on the ducal estates of the proudest families of England and a mansion that is furnished with treasures of art, any one of which is worth a queen's ransom."

"I do not wonder you are surprised," she replied, looking about the room with a smile of satisfaction that did little to soothe my growing wrath.

"It certainly leaves room for explanation," I retorted, coldly. "Of course, if Raffles told you where the Herringdale jewels were hid and you have disposed of them, some of all this could be accounted for; but what of me? Did it ever occur to you that I was entitled to some part of the swag?"

"Oh, you poor, suspicious old Bunny," she rippled. "Haven't I sent for you to give you some share of this – although truly you don't deserve it, for *this* is all mine. I haven't any more notion what became of the Herringdale jewels than the duchess of Herringdale herself."

"What?" I cried. "Then these surroundings –"

"Are self-furnishing," she said, with a merry little laugh, "and all through a plan of my own, Bunny. This house, as you may not be aware, is the late residence of Mr. and Mrs. Constant Scrappe –"

"Who are suing each other for divorce," I put in, for I knew of the Constant Scrapes in social life, as who did not, since a good third of the society items of the day concerned themselves with the matrimonial difficulties of this notable couple.

"Precisely," said Henriette. "Now Mrs. Scrappe is in South Dakota establishing a residence, and Colonel Scrappe is at Monte Carlo circulating his money with the aid of a wheel and a small ball. Bolivar Lodge, with its fine collection of old furniture, its splendid jades, its marvellous Oriental potteries, paintings, and innumerable small silver articles, is left here at Newport and for rent. What more natural, dear, than that I, needing a residence whose occupancy would in itself be an assurance of my social position, should snap it up with an eagerness which in this Newport atmosphere amounted nearly to a betrayal of plebeian origin?"

"But it must cost a fortune!" I cried, gazing about me at the splendors of the room, which even to a cursory inspection revealed themselves as of priceless value. "That cloisonné jar over by the fireplace is worth two hundred pounds alone."

"That is just the reason why I wanted this particular house, Bunny. It is also why I need your assistance in maintaining it," Mrs. Raffles returned.

"Woman is ever a mystery," I responded, with a harsh laugh. "Why in Heaven's name you think I can help you to pay your rent – "

"It is only twenty-five hundred dollars a month, Bunny," she said.

My answer was a roar of derisive laughter.

"Hear her!" I cried, addressing the empty air. "Only twenty-five hundred dollars a month! Why, my dear Henriette, if it were twenty-five hundred clam-shells a century I couldn't help you pay a day's rental, I am that strapped. Until this afternoon I hadn't seen thirty cents all at once for nigh on to six months. I have been so poor that I've had to take my morning coffee at midnight from the coffee-wagons of the New York, Boston, and Chicago sporting papers. In eight months I have not tasted a table-d'hôte dinner that an expert would value at fifteen cents net, and yet you ask me to help you pay twenty-five hundred dollars a month rent for a Newport palace! You must be mad."

"You are the same loquacious old Bunny that you used to be," said Mrs. Raffles, sharply, yet with a touch of affection in her voice. "You can't keep your trap shut for a second, can you? Do you know, Bunny, what dear old A. J. said to me just before he went to South Africa? It was that if you were as devoted to business as you were to words you'd be a wonder. His exact remark was that we would both have to look out for you for fear you would queer the whole business. Raffles estimated that your habit of writing-up full accounts of his various burglaries for the London magazines had made the risks one hundred per cent. bigger and the available swag a thousand per cent. harder to get hold of. 'Harry,' said he the night before he sailed, 'if I die over in the Transvaal and you decide to continue the business, get along as long as you can without a press-agent. If you go on the stage, surround yourself with 'em, but in the burglary trade they are a nuisance.'"

My answer was a sulky shrug of the shoulders.

"You haven't given me a chance to explain how you are to help me. I don't ask you for money, Bunny. Four dollars' worth of obedience is all I want," she continued. "The portable property in this mansion is worth about half a million dollars, my lad, and I want you to be – well, my official porter. I took immediate possession of this house, and my first month's rent was paid with the proceeds of a sale of three old bedsteads I found on the top floor, six pieces of Sèvres china from the southeast bedroom on the floor above this, and a Satsuma vase which I discovered in a hall-closet on the third floor."

A light began to dawn on me.

"Before coming here I eked out a miserable existence in New York as buyer for an antique dealer on Fourth Avenue," she explained. "He thinks I am still working for him, travelling about the country in search of bargains in high-boys, mahogany desks, antique tables, wardrobes, bedsteads – in short, valuable junk generally. Now do you see?"

"As Mrs. Raffles – or Van Raffles, as you have it now?" I demanded.

"Oh, Bunny, Bunny, Bunny! What a stupid you are! Never! As Miss Pratt-Robinson," she replied. "From this I earn fifteen dollars a week. The sources of the material I send him – well – do you see now, Bunny?"

"It is growing clearer," said I. "You contemplate paying the rent of this house with its contents, is that it?"

"What beautiful intelligence you have, Bunny!" she laughed, airily. "You know a hawk from a hand-saw. Nobody can pass a motor-car off on you for a horse, can they, Bunny dear? Not while you have that eagle eye of yours wide open. Yes, sir. That is the scheme. *I am going to pay the rental of this mansion with its contents.* Half a million dollars' worth of contents means how long at twenty-five hundred dollars a month? Eh?"

"Gad! Henriette," I cried. "You are worthy of Raffles, I swear it. You can be easy about your rent for sixteen years."

"That is about the size of it, as these Newport people have it," said Mrs. Raffles, beaming upon me.

"I'm still in the dark as to where I come in," said I.

"Promise to obey my directions implicitly," said Henriette "and you will receive your share of the booty."

"Henriette – " I cried, passionately, seizing her hand.

"No – Bunny – not now," she remonstrated, gently. "This is no time for sentiment. Just promise to obey, the love and honor business may come later."

"I will," said I.

"Well, then," she resumed, her color mounting high, and speaking rapidly, "you are to return at once to New York, taking with you three trunks which I have already packed, containing one of the most beautiful collections of jade ornaments that has ever been gathered together. You will rent a furnished apartment in some aristocratic quarter. Spread these articles throughout your rooms as though you were a connoisseur, and on Thursday next when Mr. Harold Van Gilt calls upon you to see your collection you will sell it to him for not less than eight thousand dollars."

"Aha!" said I. "I see the scheme."

"This you will immediately remit to me here," she continued, excitedly. "Mr. Van Gilt will pay cash."

I laughed. "Why eight thousand?" I demanded. "Are you living beyond your – ah – income?"

"No," she answered, "but next month's rent is due Tuesday, and I owe my servants and tradesmen twenty-five hundred dollars more."

"Even then there will be three thousand dollars over," I put in.

"True, Bunny, true. But I shall need it all, dear. I am invited to the P. J. D. Gasters on Sunday afternoon to play bridge," Henriette explained. "We must prepare for emergencies."

I returned to New York on the boat that night, and by Wednesday was safely ensconced in very beautifully furnished bachelor quarters near Gramercy Square, where on Thursday Mr. Harold Van Gilt called to see my collection of jades which I was selling because of a contemplated five-year journey into the East. On Friday Mr. Van Gilt took possession of the collection, and that night a check for eight thousand dollars went to Mrs. Van Raffles at Newport. Incidentally, I passed two thousand dollars to my own credit. As I figured it out, if Van Gilt was willing to pay ten thousand dollars for the stuff, and Henriette was willing to take eight thousand dollars for it, nobody was the loser by my pocketing two thousand dollars – unless, perhaps, it was Mr. and Mrs. Constant Scrappe who owned the goods. But that was none of my affair. I played straight with the others, and that was all there was to it as far as I was concerned.

III

THE ADVENTURE OF MRS. GASTER'S MAID

Two days after my bargain with Mr. Harold Van Gilt, in which he acquired possession of the Scrappe jades and Mrs. Van Raffles and I shared the proceeds of the ten thousand dollars check, I was installed at Bolivar Lodge as head-butler and steward, my salary to consist of what I could make out of it on the side, plus ten per cent. of the winnings of my mistress. It was not long before I discovered that the job was a lucrative one. From various tradesmen of the town I received presents of no little value in the form sometimes of diamond scarf-pins, gold link sleeve-buttons, cases of fine wines for my own use, and in one or two instances checks of substantial value. There was also what was called a steward's rebate on the monthly bills, which in circles where lavish entertainment is the order of the day amounted to a tidy little income in itself. My only embarrassment lay in the contact into which I was necessarily brought with other butlers, with whom I was perforce required to associate. This went very much against the grain at first, for, although I am scarcely more than a thief after all, I am an artistic one, and still retain the prejudice against inferior associations which an English gentleman whatever the vicissitudes of his career can never quite rid himself of. I had to join their club – an exclusive organization of butlers and "gentlemen's gentlemen" – otherwise valets – and in order to quiet all suspicion of my real status in the Van Raffles household I was compelled to act the part in a fashion which revolted me. Otherwise the position was pleasant, and, as I have intimated, more than lucrative.

It did not take me many days to discover that Henriette was a worthy successor to her late husband. Few opportunities for personal profit escaped her eye, and I was able to observe as time went on and I noted the accumulation of spoons, forks, nutcrackers, and gimcracks generally that she brought home with her after her calls upon or dinners with ladies of fashion that she had that quality of true genius which never overlooks the smallest details.

The first big coup after my arrival, as the result of her genius, was in the affair of Mrs. Gaster's maid. Henriette had been to a bridge afternoon at Mrs. Gaster's and upon her return manifested an extraordinary degree of excitement. Her color was high, and when she spoke her voice was tremulous. Her disturbed condition was so evident that my heart sank into my boots, for in our business nerve is a *sine qua non* of success, and it looked to me as if Henriette was losing hers. She has probably lost at cards to-day, I thought, and it has affected her usual calmness. I must do something to warn her against this momentary weakness. With this idea in mind, when the opportunity presented itself later I spoke.

"You lost at bridge to-day, Henriette," I said.

"Yes," she replied. "Twenty-five hundred dollars in two hours. How did you guess?"

"By your manner," said I. "You are as nervous as a young girl at a commencement celebration. This won't do, Henriette. Nerves will prove your ruin, and if you can't stand your losses at bridge, what will you do in the face of the greater crisis which in our profession is likely to confront us in the shape of an unexpected visit of police at any moment?"

Her answer was a ringing laugh.

"You absurd old rabbit," she murmured. "As if I cared about my losses at bridge! Why, my dear Bunny, I lost that money on purpose. You don't suppose that I am going to risk my popularity with these Newport ladies by winning, do you? Not I, my boy. I plan too far ahead for that. For the good of our cause it is my task to lose steadily and with good grace. This establishes my credit, proves my amiability, and confirms my popularity."

"But you are very much excited by something, Henriette," said I. "You cannot deny that."

"I don't – but it is the prospect of future gain, not the reality of present losses, that has taken me off my poise," she said. "Whom do you suppose I saw at Mrs. Gaster's to-day?"

"No detectives, I hope," I replied, paling at the thought.

"No, sir," she laughed. "Mrs. Gaster's maid. We must get her, Bunny."

"Oh, tush!" I ejaculated. "All this powwow over another woman's maid!"

"You don't understand," said Henriette. "It wasn't the maid so much as the woman that startled me, Bunny. You can't guess who she was."

"How should I?" I demanded.

"She was Fiametta de Belleville, one of the most expert hands in our business. Poor old Raffles used to say that she diminished his income a good ten thousand pounds a year by getting in her fine work ahead of his," explained Henriette. "He pointed her out to me in Piccadilly once and I have never forgotten her face."

"I hope she did not recognize you," I observed.

"No, indeed – she never saw me before, so how could she? But I knew her the minute she took my cloak," said Henriette. "She's dyed her hair, but her eyes were the same as ever, and that peculiar twist of the lip that Raffles had spoken of as constituting one of her fascinations remained unchanged. Moreover, just to prove myself right, I left my lace handkerchief and a five hundred dollar bill in the cloak pocket. When I got the cloak back both were gone. Oh, she's Fiametta de Belleville all right, and we must get her."

"What for – to rob you?"

"No," returned Henriette, "rather that we – but there, there, Bunny, I'll manage this little thing myself. It's a trifle too subtle for a man's intellect – especially when that man is you."

"What do you suppose she is doing here?" I asked.

"You silly boy," laughed Henriette.

"Doing? Why, Mrs. Gaster, of course. She is after the Gaster jewels."

"Humph!" I said, gloomily. "That cuts us out, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" asked Henriette, enigmatically.

It was about ten weeks later that the newspapers of the whole country were ringing with the startling news of the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Gaster's jewels. The lady had been robbed of three hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars worth of gems, and there was apparently no clew even to the thief. Henriette and I, of course, knew that Fiametta de Belleville had accomplished her mission, but apparently no one else knew it. True, she had been accused, and had been subjected to a most rigid examination by the Newport police and the New York Central Office, but no proof of any kind establishing her guilt could be adduced, and after a week of suspicion she was to all intents and purposes relieved of all odium.

"She'll skip now," said I.

"Not she," said Henriette. "To disappear now would be a confession of guilt. If Fiametta de Belleville is the woman I take her for she'll stay right here as if nothing had happened, but of course not at Mrs. Gaster's."

"Where then?" I asked.

"With Mrs. A. J. Van Raffles," replied Henriette. "The fact is," she added, "I have already engaged her. She has acted her part well, and has seemed so prostrated by the unjust suspicion of the world that even Mrs. Gaster is disturbed over her condition. She has asked her to remain, but Fiametta has refused. 'I couldn't, madam,' she said when Mrs. Gaster asked her to stay. 'You have accused me of a fearful crime – a crime of which I am innocent – and – I'd rather work in a factory, or become a shop-girl in a department store, than stay longer in a house where such painful things have happened.' Result, next Tuesday Fiametta de Belleville comes to me as *my* maid."

"Well, Henriette," said I, "I presume you know your own business, but why you lay yourself open to being robbed yourself and to having the profits of your own business diminished I can't see. Please remember that I warned you against this foolish act."

"All right, Bunny, I'll remember," smiled Mrs. Van Raffles, and there the matter was dropped for the moment.

The following Tuesday Fiametta de Belleville was installed in the Van Raffles household as the maid of Mrs. A. J. Van Raffles. To her eagle eye it was another promising field for profit, for Henriette had spared neither pains nor money to impress Fiametta with the idea that next to Mrs. Gaster she was about as lavish and financially capable a householder as could be found in the Social Capital of the United States. As for me, I was the picture of gloom. The woman's presence in our household could not be but a source of danger to our peace of mind as well as to our profits, and for the life of me I could not see why Henriette should want her there. But I was not long in finding out.

A week after Fiametta's arrival Mrs. Raffles rang hurriedly for me.

"Yes, madam," I said, responding immediately to her call.

"Bunny," she said, her hand trembling a little, "the hour for action has arrived. I have just sent Fiametta on an errand to Providence. She will be gone three hours."

"Yes!" said I. "What of it?"

"I want you during her absence to go with me to her room – "

The situation began to dawn on me.

"Yes!" I cried, breathlessly. "And search her trunks?"

"No, Bunny, no – the eaves," whispered Henriette. "I gave her that room in the wing because it has so many odd cubby-holes where she could conceal things. I am inclined to think – well, the moment she leaves the city let me know. Follow her to the station, and don't return till you know she is safely out of town and on her way to Providence. Then *our* turn will come."

Oh, that woman! If I had not adored her before I – but enough. This is no place for sentiment. The story is the thing, and I must tell it briefly.

I followed out Henriette's instructions to the letter, and an hour later returned with the information that Fiametta was, indeed, safely on her way.

"Good," said Mrs. Raffles. "And now, Bunny, for the Gaster jewels."

Mounting the stairs rapidly, taking care, of course, that there were none of the other servants about to spy upon us, we came to the maid's room. Everything in it betokened a high mind and a good character. There were religious pictures upon the bureau, prayer-books, and some volumes of essays of a spiritual nature were scattered about – nothing was there to indicate that the occupant was anything but a simple, sweet child of innocence except —

Well, Henriette was right – except the Gaster jewels. Even as my mistress had suspected, they were cached under the eaves, snuggled close against the huge dormer-window looking out upon the gardens; laid by for a convenient moment to get them out of Newport, and then – back to England for Fiametta. And what a gorgeous collection they were! Dog-collars of diamonds, yards of pearl rope, necklaces of rubies of the most lustrous color and of the size of pigeons' eggs, rings, brooches, tiaras – everything in the way of jewelled ornament the soul of woman could desire – all packed closely away in a tin box that I now remembered Fiametta had brought with her in her hand the day of her arrival. And now all these things were ours – Henriette's and mine – without our having had to stir out-of-doors to get them. An hour later they were in the safety-deposit vault of Mrs. A. J. Van Raffles in the sturdy cellars of the Tiverton Trust Company, as secure against intrusion as though they were locked in the heart of Gibraltar itself.

And Fiametta? Well – a week later she left Newport suddenly, her eyes red with weeping and her slight little figure convulsed with grief. Her favorite aunt had just died, she said, and she was going back to England to bury her.

IV

THE PEARL ROPE OF MRS. GUSHINGTON-ANDREWS

"Bunny," said Henrietta one morning, shortly after we had come into possession of the Gaster jewels, "how is your nerve? Are you ready for a coup requiring a lot of it?"

"Well," I replied, pluming myself a bit, "I don't wish to boast, Henriette, but I think it is pretty good. I managed to raise twenty-seven hundred dollars on my own account by the use of it last night."

"Indeed?" said Henriette, with a slight frown. "How, Bunny? You know you are likely to complicate matters for all of us if you work on the side. What, pray, did you do last night?"

And then I unfolded to her the incidents of the night before when, by assuming at a moment's notice the position of valet to young Robertson de Pelt, the frisky young favorite of the inner set, I had relieved that high-flying young bachelor of fifteen hundred dollars in cash and some twelve hundred dollars worth of jewels as well.

"I was spending the evening at the Gentlemen's Gentlemen's Club," I explained, "when word came over the telephone to Digby, Mr. de Pelt's valet, that Mr. de Pelt was at the Rockerbilts' and in no condition to go home alone. It happened that it was I who took the message, and observing that Digby was engaged in a game of billiards, and likely to remain so for some time to come, I decided to go after the gentleman myself without saying anything to Digby about it. Muffling myself up so that no one could recognize me, I hired a cab and drove out to the Rockerbilt mansion, sent in word that Mr. de Pelt's man was waiting for him, and in ten minutes had the young gentleman in my possession. I took him to his apartment, dismissed the cab, and, letting ourselves into his room with his own latch-key, put him to bed. His clothes I took, as a well-ordered valet should, from his bed-chamber into an adjoining room, where, after removing the contents of his pockets, I hung them neatly over a chair and departed, taking with me, of course, everything of value the young gentleman had about him, even down to the two brilliant rubies he wore in his garter buckles. This consisted of two handfuls of crumpled twenty-dollar bills from his trousers, three rolls of one-hundred-dollar bills from his waistcoat, and sundry other lots of currency, both paper and specie, that I found stowed away in his overcoat and dinner-coat pockets. There were also ten twenty-dollar gold pieces in a little silver chain-bag he carried on his wrist. As I say, there was about fifteen hundred dollars of this loose change, and I reckon up the value of his studs, garter rubies, and finger-rings at about twelve hundred dollars more, or a twenty-seven hundred dollars pull in all. Eh?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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