АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

THE DOINGS OF RAFFLES HAW

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Содержание

Arthur Conan Doyle
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CHAPTER I. A DOUBLE ENIGMA

"I'm afraid that he won't come," said Laura McIntyre, in a disconsolate voice.

"Why not?"

"Oh, look at the weather; it is something too awful."

As she spoke a whirl of snow beat with a muffled patter against the cosy red-curtained window, while a long blast of wind shrieked and whistled through the branches of the great white-limbed elms which skirted the garden.

Robert McIntyre rose from the sketch upon which he had been working, and taking one of the lamps in his hand peered out into the darkness. The long skeleton limbs of the bare trees tossed and quivered dimly amid the whirling drift. His sister sat by the fire, her fancy-work in her lap, and looked up at her brothers profile which showed against the brilliant yellow light. It was a handsome face, young and fair and clear cut, with wavy brown hair combed backwards and rippling down into that outward curve at the ends which one associates with the artistic temperament. There was refinement too in his slightly puckered eyes, his dainty gold-rimmed *pince-nez* glasses, and in the black velveteen coat which caught the light so richly upon its shoulder. In his mouth only there was something – a suspicion of coarseness, a possibility of weakness – which in the eyes of some, and of his sister among them, marred the grace and beauty of his features. Yet, as he was wont himself to say, when one thinks that each poor mortal is heir to a legacy of every evil trait or bodily taint of so vast a line of ancestors, lucky indeed is the man who does not find that Nature has scored up some long-owing family debt upon his features.

And indeed in this case the remorseless creditor had gone so far as to exact a claim from the lady also, though in her case the extreme beauty of the upper part of the face drew the eye away from any weakness which might be found in the lower. She was darker than her brother – so dark that her heavily coiled hair seemed to be black until the light shone slantwise across it. The delicate, half-petulant features, the finely traced brows, and the thoughtful, humorous eyes were all perfect in their way, and yet the combination left something to be desired. There was a vague sense of a flaw somewhere, in feature or in expression, which resolved itself, when analysed, into a slight out-turning and droop of the lower lip; small indeed, and yet pronounced enough to turn what would have been a beautiful face into a merely pretty one. Very despondent and somewhat cross she looked as she leaned back in the armchair, the tangle of bright-coloured silks and of drab holland upon her lap, her hands clasped behind her head, with her snowy forearms and little pink elbows projecting on either side.

"I know he won't come," she repeated.

"Nonsense, Laura! Of course he'll come. A sailor and afraid of the weather!"

"Ha!" She raised her finger, and a smile of triumph played over her face, only to die away again into a blank look of disappointment. "It is only papa," she murmured.

A shuffling step was heard in the hall, and a little peaky man, with his slippers very much down at the heels, came shambling into the room. Mr. McIntyre, sen., was pale and furtive-looking, with a thin straggling red beard shot with grey, and a sunken downcast face. Ill-fortune and ill-health had both left their marks upon him. Ten years before he had been one of the largest and richest gunmakers in Birmingham, but a long run of commercial bad luck had sapped his great fortune, and had finally driven him into the Bankruptcy Court. The death of his wife on the very day of his insolvency had filled his cup of sorrow, and he had gone about since with a stunned, half-dazed expression upon his weak pallid face which spoke of a mind unhinged. So complete had been his downfall that the

family would have been reduced to absolute poverty were it not for a small legacy of two-hundred a year which both the children had received from one of their uncles upon the mother's side who had amassed a fortune in Australia. By combining their incomes, and by taking a house in the quiet country district of Tamfield, some fourteen miles from the great Midland city, they were still able to live with some approach to comfort. The change, however, was a bitter one to all – to Robert, who had to forego the luxuries dear to his artistic temperament, and to think of turning what had been merely an overruling hobby into a means of earning a living; and even more to Laura, who winced before the pity of her old friends, and found the lanes and fields of Tamfield intolerably dull after the life and bustle of Edgbaston. Their discomfort was aggravated by the conduct of their father, whose life now was one long wail over his misfortunes, and who alternately sought comfort in the Prayer-book and in the decanter for the ills which had befallen him.

To Laura, however, Tamfield presented one attraction, which was now about to be taken from her. Their choice of the little country hamlet as their residence had been determined by the fact of their old friend, the Reverend John Spurling, having been nominated as the vicar. Hector Spurling, the elder son, two months Laura's senior, had been engaged to her for some years, and was, indeed, upon the point of marrying her when the sudden financial crash had disarranged their plans. A sub-lieutenant in the Navy, he was home on leave at present, and hardly an evening passed without his making his way from the Vicarage to Elmdene, where the McIntyres resided. To-day, however, a note had reached them to the effect that he had been suddenly ordered on duty, and that he must rejoin his ship at Portsmouth by the next evening. He would look in, were it but for half-an-hour, to bid them adieu.

"Why, where's Hector?" asked Mr. McIntyre, blinking round from side to side.

"He's not come, father. How could you expect him to come on such a night as this? Why, there must be two feet of snow in the glebe field."

"Not come, eh?" croaked the old man, throwing himself down upon the sofa. "Well, well, it only wants him and his father to throw us over, and the thing will be complete."

"How can you even hint at such a thing, father?" cried Laura indignantly. "They have been as true as steel. What would they think if they heard you."

"I think, Robert," he said, disregarding his daughter's protest, "that I will have a drop, just the very smallest possible drop, of brandy. A mere thimbleful will do; but I rather think I have caught cold during the snowstorm to-day."

Robert went on sketching stolidly in his folding book, but Laura looked up from her work.

"I'm afraid there is nothing in the house, father," she said.

"Laura! Laura!" He shook his head as one more in sorrow than in anger. "You are no longer a girl, Laura; you are a woman, the manager of a household, Laura. We trust in you. We look entirely towards you. And yet you leave your poor brother Robert without any brandy, to say nothing of me, your father. Good heavens, Laura! what would your mother have said? Think of accidents, think of sudden illness, think of apoplectic fits, Laura. It is a very grave res – a very grave response – a very great risk that you run."

"I hardly touch the stuff," said Robert curtly; "Laura need not provide any for me."

"As a medicine it is invaluable, Robert. To be used, you understand, and not to be abused. That's the whole secret of it. But I'll step down to the Three Pigeons for half an hour."

"My dear father," cried the young man "you surely are not going out upon such a night. If you must have brandy could I not send Sarah for some? Please let me send Sarah; or I would go myself, or – "

Pip! came a little paper pellet from his sister's chair on to the sketch-book in front of him! He unrolled it and held it to the light.

"For Heaven's sake let him go!" was scrawled across it.

"Well, in any case, wrap yourself up warm," he continued, laying bare his sudden change of front with a masculine clumsiness which horrified his sister. "Perhaps it is not so cold as it looks. You can't lose your way, that is one blessing. And it is not more than a hundred yards."

With many mumbles and grumbles at his daughter's want of foresight, old McIntyre struggled into his great-coat and wrapped his scarf round his long thin throat. A sharp gust of cold wind made the lamps flicker as he threw open the hall-door. His two children listened to the dull fall of his footsteps as he slowly picked out the winding garden path.

"He gets worse – he becomes intolerable," said Robert at last. "We should not have let him out; he may make a public exhibition of himself."

"But it's Hector's last night," pleaded Laura. "It would be dreadful if they met and he noticed anything. That was why I wished him to go."

"Then you were only just in time," remarked her brother, "for I hear the gate go, and – yes, you see."

As he spoke a cheery hail came from outside, with a sharp rat-tat at the window. Robert stepped out and threw open the door to admit a tall young man, whose black frieze jacket was all mottled and glistening with snow crystals. Laughing loudly he shook himself like a Newfoundland dog, and kicked the snow from his boots before entering the little lamplit room.

Hector Spurling's profession was written in every line of his face. The clean-shaven lip and chin, the little fringe of side whisker, the straight decisive mouth, and the hard weather-tanned cheeks all spoke of the Royal Navy. Fifty such faces may be seen any night of the year round the mess-table of the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth Dockyard – faces which bear a closer resemblance to each other than brother does commonly to brother. They are all cast in a common mould, the products of a system which teaches early self-reliance, hardihood, and manliness – a fine type upon the whole; less refined and less intellectual, perhaps, than their brothers of the land, but full of truth and energy and heroism. In figure he was straight, tall, and well-knit, with keen grey eyes, and the sharp prompt manner of a man who has been accustomed both to command and to obey.

"You had my note?" he said, as he entered the room. "I have to go again, Laura. Isn't it a bore? Old Smithers is short-handed, and wants me back at once." He sat down by the girl, and put his brown hand across her white one. "It won't be a very large order this time," he continued. "It's the flying squadron business – Madeira, Gibraltar, Lisbon, and home. I shouldn't wonder if we were back in March."

"It seems only the other day that you landed." she answered.

"Poor little girl! But it won't be long. Mind you take good care of her, Robert when I am gone. And when I come again, Laura, it will be the last time mind! Hang the money! There are plenty who manage on less. We need not have a house. Why should we? You can get very nice rooms in Southsea at 2 pounds a week. McDougall, our paymaster, has just married, and he only gives thirty shillings. You would not be afraid, Laura?"

"No, indeed."

"The dear old governor is so awfully cautious. Wait, wait, wait, that's always his cry. I tell him that he ought to have been in the Government Heavy Ordnance Department. But I'll speak to him tonight. I'll talk him round. See if I don't. And you must speak to your own governor. Robert here will back you up. And here are the ports and the dates that we are due at each. Mind that you have a letter waiting for me at every one."

He took a slip of paper from the side pocket of his coat, but, instead of handing it to the young lady, he remained staring at it with the utmost astonishment upon his face.

"Well, I never!" he exclaimed. "Look here, Robert; what do you call this?"

"Hold it to the light. Why, it's a fifty-pound Bank of England note. Nothing remarkable about it that I can see."

"On the contrary. It's the queerest thing that ever happened to me. I can't make head or tail of it."

"Come, then, Hector," cried Miss McIntyre with a challenge in her eyes. "Something very queer happened to me also to-day. I'll bet a pair of gloves that my adventure was more out of the common than yours, though I have nothing so nice to show at the end of it."

"Come, I'll take that, and Robert here shall be the judge."

"State your cases." The young artist shut up his sketch-book, and rested his head upon his hands with a face of mock solemnity. "Ladies first! Go along Laura, though I think I know something of your adventure already."

"It was this morning, Hector," she said. "Oh, by the way, the story will make you wild. I had forgotten that. However, you mustn't mind, because, really, the poor fellow was perfectly mad."

"What on earth was it?" asked the young officer, his eyes travelling from the bank-note to his *fiancee*.

"Oh, it was harmless enough, and yet you will confess it was very queer. I had gone out for a walk, but as the snow began to fall I took shelter under the shed which the workmen have built at the near end of the great new house. The men have gone, you know, and the owner is supposed to be coming to-morrow, but the shed is still standing. I was sitting there upon a packing-case when a man came down the road and stopped under the same shelter. He was a quiet, pale-faced man, very tall and thin, not much more than thirty, I should think, poorly dressed, but with the look and bearing of a gentleman. He asked me one or two questions about the village and the people, which, of course, I answered, until at last we found ourselves chatting away in the pleasantest and easiest fashion about all sorts of things. The time passed so quickly that I forgot all about the snow until he drew my attention to its having stopped for the moment. Then, just as I was turning to go, what in the world do you suppose that he did? He took a step towards me, looked in a sad pensive way into my face, and said: `I wonder whether you could care for me if I were without a penny.' Wasn't it strange? I was so frightened that I whisked out of the shed, and was off down the road before he could add another word. But really, Hector, you need not look so black, for when I look back at it I can quite see from his tone and manner that he meant no harm. He was thinking aloud, without the least intention of being offensive. I am convinced that the poor fellow was mad."

"Hum! There was some method in his madness, it seems to me," remarked her brother.

"There would have been some method in my kicking," said the lieutenant savagely. "I never heard of a more outrageous thing in my life."

"Now, I said that you would be wild!" She laid her white hand upon the sleeve of his rough frieze jacket. "It was nothing. I shall never see the poor fellow again. He was evidently a stranger to this part of the country. But that was my little adventure. Now let us have yours."

The young man crackled the bank-note between his fingers and thumb, while he passed his other hand over his hair with the action of a man who strives to collect himself.

"It is some ridiculous mistake," he said. "I must try and set it right. Yet I don't know how to set about it either. I was going down to the village from the Vicarage just after dusk when I found a fellow in a trap who had got himself into broken water. One wheel had sunk into the edge of the ditch which had been hidden by the snow, and the whole thing was high and dry, with a list to starboard enough to slide him out of his seat. I lent a hand, of course, and soon had the wheel in the road again. It was quite dark, and I fancy that the fellow thought that I was a bumpkin, for we did not exchange five words. As he drove off he shoved this into my hand. It is the merest chance that I did not chuck it away, for, feeling that it was a crumpled piece of paper, I imagined that it must be a tradesman's advertisement or something of the kind. However, as luck would have it, I put it in my pocket, and there I found it when I looked for the dates of our cruise. Now you know as much of the matter as I do."

Brother and sister stared at the black and white crinkled note with astonishment upon their faces.

"Why, your unknown traveller must have been Monte Cristo, or Rothschild at the least!" said Robert. "I am bound to say, Laura, that I think you have lost your bet."

"Oh, I am quite content to lose it. I never heard of such a piece of luck. What a perfectly delightful man this must be to know."

"But I can't take his money," said Hector Spurling, looking somewhat ruefully at the note. "A little prize-money is all very well in its way, but a Johnny must draw the line somewhere. Besides it must have been a mistake. And yet he meant to give me something big, for he could not mistake a note for a coin. I suppose I must advertise for the fellow."

"It seems a pity too," remarked Robert. "I must say that I don't quite see it in the same light that you do."

"Indeed I think that you are very Quixotic, Hector," said Laura McIntyre. "Why should you not accept it in the spirit in which it was meant? You did this stranger a service – perhaps a greater service than you know of – and he meant this as a little memento of the occasion. I do not see that there is any possible reason against your keeping it."

"Oh, come!" said the young sailor, with an embarrassed laugh, "it is not quite the thing – not the sort of story one would care to tell at mess."

"In any case you are off to-morrow morning," observed Robert. "You have no time to make inquiries about the mysterious Croesus. You must really make the best of it."

"Well, look here, Laura, you put it in your work-basket," cried Hector Spurling. "You shall be my banker, and if the rightful owner turns up then I can refer him to you. If not, I suppose we must look on it as a kind of salvage-money, though I am bound to say I don't feel entirely comfortable about it." He rose to his feet, and threw the note down into the brown basket of coloured wools which stood beside her. "Now, Laura, I must up anchor, for I promised the governor to be back by nine. It won't be long this time, dear, and it shall be the last. Good-bye, Robert! Good luck!"

"Good-bye, Hector! *Bon voyage!*"

The young artist remained by the table, while his sister followed her lover to the door. In the dim light of the hall he could see their figures and overhear their words.

"Next time, little girl?"

"Next time be it, Hector."

"And nothing can part us?"

"Nothing."

"In the whole world?"

"Nothing."

Robert discreetly closed the door. A moment later a thud from without, and the quick footsteps crunching on the snow told him that their visitor had departed.

CHAPTER II. THE TENANT OF THE NEW HALL

The snow had ceased to fall, but for a week a hard frost had held the country side in its iron grip. The roads rang under the horses' hoofs, and every wayside ditch and runlet was a street of ice. Over the long undulating landscape the red brick houses peeped out warmly against the spotless background, and the lines of grey smoke streamed straight up into the windless air. The sky was of the lightest palest blue, and the morning sun, shining through the distant fog-wreaths of Birmingham, struck a subdued glow from the broad-spread snow fields which might have gladdened the eyes of an artist.

It did gladden the heart of one who viewed it that morning from the summit of the gently-curving Tamfield Hill Robert McIntyre stood with his elbows upon a gate-rail, his Tam-o'-Shanter hat over his eyes, and a short briar-root pipe in his mouth, looking slowly about him, with the absorbed air of one who breathes his fill of Nature. Beneath him to the north lay the village of Tamfield, red walls, grey roofs, and a scattered bristle of dark trees, with his own little Elmdene nestling back from the broad, white winding Birmingham Road. At the other side, as he slowly faced round, lay a vast stone building, white and clear-cut, fresh from the builders' hands. A great tower shot up from one corner of it, and a hundred windows twinkled ruddily in the light of the morning sun. A little distance from it stood a second small square low-lying structure, with a tall chimney rising from the midst of it, rolling out a long plume of smoke into the frosty air. The whole vast structure stood within its own grounds, enclosed by a stately park wall, and surrounded by what would in time be an extensive plantation of fir-trees. By the lodge gates a vast pile of *debris*, with lines of sheds for workmen, and huge heaps of planks from scaffoldings, all proclaimed that the work had only just been brought to an end.

Robert McIntyre looked down with curious eyes at the broad-spread building. It had long been a mystery and a subject of gossip for the whole country side. Hardly a year had elapsed since the rumour had first gone about that a millionaire had bought a tract of land, and that it was his intention to build a country seat upon it. Since then the work had been pushed on night and day, until now it was finished to the last detail in a shorter time than it takes to build many a six-roomed cottage. Every morning two long special trains had arrived from Birmingham, carrying down a great army of labourers, who were relieved in the evening by a fresh gang, who carried on their task under the rays of twelve enormous electric lights. The number of workmen appeared to be only limited by the space into which they could be fitted. Great lines of waggons conveyed the white Portland stone from the depot by the station. Hundreds of busy toilers handed it over, shaped and squared, to the actual masons, who swung it up with steam cranes on to the growing walls, where it was instantly fitted and mortared by their companions. Day by day the house shot higher, while pillar and cornice and carving seemed to bud out from it as if by magic. Nor was the work confined to the main building. A large separate structure sprang up at the same time, and there came gangs of pale-faced men from London with much extraordinary machinery, vast cylinders, wheels and wires, which they fitted up in this outlying building. The great chimney which rose from the centre of it, combined with these strange furnishings, seemed to mean that it was reserved as a factory or place of business, for it was rumoured that this rich man's hobby was the same as a poor man's necessity, and that he was fond of working with his own hands amid chemicals and furnaces. Scarce, too, was the second storey begun ere the wood-workers and plumbers and furnishers were busy beneath, carrying out a thousand strange and costly schemes for the greater comfort and convenience of the owner. Singular stories were told all round the country, and even in Birmingham itself, of the extraordinary luxury and the absolute disregard for money which marked all these arrangements. No sum appeared to be too great to spend upon the smallest detail which might do away with or lessen any of the petty inconveniences of life. Waggons and waggons of the richest furniture had passed through the village between lines of staring villagers. Costly skins, glossy carpets, rich rugs, ivory, and ebony, and metal; every glimpse into these storehouses of treasure had given rise to some new legend. And finally, when all had been

arranged, there had come a staff of forty servants, who heralded the approach of the owner, Mr. Raffles Haw himself.

It was no wonder, then, that it was with considerable curiosity that Robert McIntyre looked down at the great house, and marked the smoking chimneys, the curtained windows, and the other signs which showed that its tenant had arrived. A vast area of greenhouses gleamed like a lake on the further side, and beyond were the long lines of stables and outhouses. Fifty horses had passed through Tamfield the week before, so that, large as were the preparations, they were not more than would be needed. Who and what could this man be who spent his money with so lavish a hand? His name was unknown. Birmingham was as ignorant as Tamfield as to his origin or the sources of his wealth. Robert McIntyre brooded languidly over the problem as he leaned against the gate, puffing his blue clouds of bird's-eye into the crisp, still air.

Suddenly his eye caught a dark figure emerging from the Avenue gates and striding up the winding road. A few minutes brought him near enough to show a familiar face looking over the stiff collar and from under the soft black hat of an English clergyman.

"Good-morning, Mr. Spurling."

"Ah, good-morning, Robert. How are you? Are you coming my way? How slippery the roads are!"

His round, kindly face was beaming with good nature, and he took little jumps as he walked, like a man who can hardly contain himself for pleasure.

"Have you heard from Hector?"

"Oh, yes. He went off all right last Wednesday from Spithead, and he will write from Madeira. But you generally have later news at Elmdene than I have."

"I don't know whether Laura has heard. Have you been up to see the new comer?"

"Yes; I have just left him."

"Is he a married man – this Mr. Raffles Haw?"

"No, he is a bachelor. He does not seem to have any relations either, as far as I could learn. He lives alone, amid his huge staff of servants. It is a most remarkable establishment. It made me think of the Arabian Nights."

"And the man? What is he like?"

"He is an angel – a positive angel. I never heard or read of such kindness in my life. He has made me a happy man."

The clergyman's eyes sparkled with emotion, and he blew his nose loudly in his big red handkerchief.

Robert McIntyre looked at him in surprise.

"I am delighted to hear it," he said. "May I ask what he has done?"

"I went up to him by appointment this morning. I had written asking him if I might call. I spoke to him of the parish and its needs, of my long struggle to restore the south side of the church, and of our efforts to help my poor parishioners during this hard weather. While I spoke he said not a word, but sat with a vacant face, as though he were not listening to me. When I had finished he took up his pen. 'How much will it take to do the church?' he asked. 'A thousand pounds,' I answered; 'but we have already raised three hundred among ourselves. The Squire has very handsomely given fifty pounds.' 'Well,' said he, 'how about the poor folk? How many families are there?' 'About three hundred,' I answered. 'And coals, I believe, are at about a pound a ton', said he. 'Three tons ought to see them through the rest of the winter. Then you can get a very fair pair of blankets for two pounds. That would make five pounds per family, and seven hundred for the church.' He dipped his pen in the ink, and, as I am a living man, Robert, he wrote me a cheque then and there for two thousand two hundred pounds. I don't know what I said; I felt like a fool; I could not stammer out words with which to thank him. All my troubles have been taken from my shoulders in an instant, and indeed, Robert, I can hardly realise it."

"He must be a most charitable man."

"Extraordinarily so. And so unpretending. One would think that it was I who was doing the favour and he who was the beggar. I thought of that passage about making the heart of the widow sing for joy. He made my heart sing for joy, I can tell you. Are you coming up to the Vicarage?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Spurling. I must go home and get to work on my new picture. It's a five-foot canvas – the landing of the Romans in Kent. I must have another try for the Academy. Good-morning."

He raised his hat and continued down the road, while the vicar turned off into the path which led to his home.

Robert McIntyre had converted a large bare room in the upper storey of Elmdene into a studio, and thither he retreated after lunch. It was as well that he should have some little den of his own, for his father would talk of little save of his ledgers and accounts, while Laura had become peevish and querulous since the one tie which held her to Tamfield had been removed. The chamber was a bare and bleak one, un-papered and un-carpeted, but a good fire sparkled in the grate, and two large windows gave him the needful light. His easel stood in the centre, with the great canvas balanced across it, while against the walls there leaned his two last attempts, "The Murder of Thomas of Canterbury" and "The Signing of Magna Charta." Robert had a weakness for large subjects and broad effects. If his ambition was greater than his skill, he had still all the love of his art and the patience under discouragement which are the stuff out of which successful painters are made. Twice his brace of pictures had journeyed to town, and twice they had come back to him, until the finely gilded frames which had made such a call upon his purse began to show signs of these varied adventures. Yet, in spite of their depressing company, Robert turned to his fresh work with all the enthusiasm which a conviction of ultimate success can inspire.

But he could not work that afternoon.

In vain he dashed in his background and outlined the long curves of the Roman galleys. Do what he would, his mind would still wander from his work to dwell upon his conversation with the vicar in the morning. His imagination was fascinated by the idea of this strange man living alone amid a crowd, and yet wielding such a power that with one dash of his pen he could change sorrow into joy, and transform the condition of a whole parish. The incident of the fifty-pound note came back to his mind. It must surely have been Raffles Haw with whom Hector Spurling had come in contact. There could not be two men in one parish to whom so large a sum was of so small an account as to be thrown to a bystander in return for a trifling piece of assistance. Of course, it must have been Raffles Haw. And his sister had the note, with instructions to return it to the owner, could he be found. He threw aside his palette, and descending into the sitting-room he told Laura and his father of his morning's interview with the vicar, and of his conviction that this was the man of whom Hector was in quest.

"Tut! Tut!" said old McIntyre. "How is this, Laura? I knew nothing of this. What do women know of money or of business? Hand the note over to me and I shall relieve you of all responsibility. I will take everything upon myself."

"I cannot possibly, papa," said Laura, with decision. "I should not think of parting with it."

"What is the world coming to?" cried the old man, with his thin hands held up in protest. "You grow more undutiful every day, Laura. This money would be of use to me – of use, you understand. It may be the corner-stone of the vast business which I shall re-construct. I will use it, Laura, and I will pay something – four, shall we say, or even four and a-half – and you may have it back on any day. And I will give security – the security of my – well, of my word of honour."

"It is quite impossible, papa," his daughter answered coldly. "It is not my money. Hector asked me to be his banker. Those were his very words. It is not in my power to lend it. As to what you say, Robert, you may be right or you may be wrong, but I certainly shall not give Mr. Raffles Haw or anyone else the money without Hector's express command."

"You are very right about not giving it to Mr. Raffles Haw," cried old McIntyre, with many nods of approbation. "I should certainly not let it go out of the family."

"Well, I thought that I would tell you."

Robert picked up his Tam-o'-Shanter and strolled out to avoid the discussion between his father and sister, which he saw was about to be renewed. His artistic nature revolted at these petty and sordid disputes, and he turned to the crisp air and the broad landscape to soothe his ruffled feelings. Avarice had no place among his failings, and his father's perpetual chatter about money inspired him with a positive loathing and disgust for the subject.

Robert was lounging slowly along his favourite walk which curled over the hill, with his mind turning from the Roman invasion to the mysterious millionaire, when his eyes fell upon a tall, lean man in front of him, who, with a pipe between his lips, was endeavouring to light a match under cover of his cap. The man was clad in a rough pea-jacket, and bore traces of smoke and grime upon his face and hands. Yet there is a Freemasonry among smokers which overrides every social difference, so Robert stopped and held out his case of fusees.

"A light?" said he.

"Thank you." The man picked out a fusee, struck it, and bent his head to it. He had a pale, thin face, a short straggling beard, and a very sharp and curving nose, with decision and character in the straight thick eyebrows which almost met on either side of it. Clearly a superior kind of workman, and possibly one of those who had been employed in the construction of the new house. Here was a chance of getting some first-hand information on the question which had aroused his curiosity. Robert waited until he had lit his pipe, and then walked on beside him.

"Are you going in the direction of the new Hall?" he asked.

"Yes."

The man's voice was cold, and his manner reserved.

"Perhaps you were engaged in the building of it?"

"Yes, I had a hand in it."

"They say that it is a wonderful place inside. It has been quite the talk of the district. Is it as rich as they say?"

"I am sure I don't know. I have not heard what they say."

His attitude was certainly not encouraging, and it seemed to Robert that he gave little sidelong suspicious glances at him out of his keen grey eyes. Yet, if he were so careful and discreet there was the more reason to think that there was information to be extracted, if he could but find a way to it.

"Ah, there it lies!" he remarked, as they topped the brow of the hill, and looked down once more at the great building. "Well, no doubt it is very gorgeous and splendid, but really for my own part I would rather live in my own little box down yonder in the village."

The workman puffed gravely at his pipe.

"You are no great admirer of wealth, then?" he said.

"Not I. I should not care to be a penny richer than I am. Of course I should like to sell my pictures. One must make a living. But beyond that I ask nothing. I dare say that I, a poor artist, or you, a man who work for your bread, have more happiness out of life than the owner of that great palace."

"Indeed, I think that it is more than likely," the other answered, in a much more conciliatory voice.

"Art," said Robert, warming to the subject, "is her own reward. What mere bodily indulgence is there which money could buy which can give that deep thrill of satisfaction which comes on the man who has conceived something new, something beautiful, and the daily delight as he sees it grow under his hand, until it stands before him a completed whole? With my art and without wealth I am happy. Without my art I should have a void which no money could fill. But I really don't know why I should say all this to you."

The workman had stopped, and was staring at him earnestly with a look of the deepest interest upon his smoke-darkened features.

“I am very glad to hear what you say,” said he. “It is a pleasure to know that the worship of gold is not quite universal, and that there are at least some who can rise above it. Would you mind my shaking you by the hand?”

It was a somewhat extraordinary request, but Robert rather prided himself upon his Bohemianism, and upon his happy facility for making friends with all sorts and conditions of men. He readily exchanged a cordial grip with his chance acquaintance.

“You expressed some curiosity as to this house. I know the grounds pretty well, and might perhaps show you one or two little things which would interest you. Here are the gates. Will you come in with me?”

Here was, indeed, a chance. Robert eagerly assented, and walked up the winding drive amid the growing fir-trees. When he found his uncouth guide, however, marching straight across the broad, gravel square to the main entrance, he felt that he had placed himself in a false position.

“Surely not through the front door,” he whispered, plucking his companion by the sleeve. “Perhaps Mr. Raffles Haw might not like it.”

“I don’t think there will be any difficulty,” said the other, with a quiet smile. “My name is Raffles Haw.”

CHAPTER III. A HOUSE OF WONDERS

Robert McIntyre's face must have expressed the utter astonishment which filled his mind at this most unlooked-for announcement. For a moment he thought that his companion must be joking, but the ease and assurance with which he lounged up the steps, and the deep respect with which a richly-clad functionary in the hall swung open the door to admit him, showed that he spoke in sober earnest. Raffles Haw glanced back, and seeing the look of absolute amazement upon the young artist's features, he chuckled quietly to himself.

"You will forgive me, won't you, for not disclosing my identity?" he said, laying his hand with a friendly gesture upon the other's sleeve. "Had you known me you would have spoken less freely, and I should not have had the opportunity of learning your true worth. For example, you might hardly have been so frank upon the matter of wealth had you known that you were speaking to the master of the Hall."

"I don't think that I was ever so astonished in my life," gasped Robert.

"Naturally you are. How could you take me for anything but a workman? So I am. Chemistry is one of my hobbies, and I spend hours a day in my laboratory yonder. I have only just struck work, and as I had inhaled some not-over-pleasant gases, I thought that a turn down the road and a whiff of tobacco might do me good. That was how I came to meet you, and my toilet, I fear, corresponded only too well with my smoke-grimed face. But I rather fancy I know you by repute. Your name is Robert McIntyre, is it not?"

"Yes, though I cannot imagine how you knew."

"Well, I naturally took some little trouble to learn something of my neighbours. I had heard that there was an artist of that name, and I presume that artists are not very numerous in Tamfield. But how do you like the design? I hope it does not offend your trained taste."

"Indeed, it is wonderful – marvellous! You must yourself have an extraordinary eye for effect."

"Oh, I have no taste at all; not the slightest. I cannot tell good from bad. There never was such a complete Philistine. But I had the best man in London down, and another fellow from Vienna. They fixed it up between them."

They had been standing just within the folding doors upon a huge mat of bison skins. In front of them lay a great square court, paved with many-coloured marbles laid out in a labyrinth of arabesque design. In the centre a high fountain of carved jade shot five thin feathers of spray into the air, four of which curved towards each corner of the court to descend into broad marble basins, while the fifth mounted straight up to an immense height, and then tinkled back into the central reservoir. On either side of the court a tall, graceful palm-tree shot up its slender stem to break into a crown of drooping green leaves some fifty feet above their heads. All round were a series of Moorish arches, in jade and serpentine marble, with heavy curtains of the deepest purple to cover the doors which lay between them. In front, to right and to left, a broad staircase of marble, carpeted with rich thick Smyrna rug work, led upwards to the upper storeys, which were arranged around the central court. The temperature within was warm and yet fresh, like the air of an English May.

"It's taken from the Alhambra," said Raffles Haw. "The palm-trees are pretty. They strike right through the building into the ground beneath, and their roots are all girt round with hot-water pipes. They seem to thrive very well."

"What beautifully delicate brass-work!" cried Robert, looking up with admiring eyes at the bright and infinitely fragile metal trellis screens which adorned the spaces between the Moorish arches.

"It is rather neat. But it is not brass-work. Brass is not tough enough to allow them to work it to that degree of fineness. It is gold. But just come this way with me. You won't mind waiting while I remove this smoke?"

He led the way to a door upon the left side of the court, which, to Robert's surprise, swung slowly open as they approached it. "That is a little improvement which I have adopted," remarked the master of the house. "As you go up to a door your weight upon the planks releases a spring which causes the hinges to revolve. Pray step in. This is my own little sanctum, and furnished after my own heart."

If Robert expected to see some fresh exhibition of wealth and luxury he was woefully disappointed, for he found himself in a large but bare room, with a little iron truckle-bed in one corner, a few scattered wooden chairs, a dingy carpet, and a large table heaped with books, bottles, papers, and all the other *debris* which collect around a busy and untidy man. Motioning his visitor into a chair, Raffles Haw pulled off his coat, and, turning up the sleeves of his coarse flannel shirt, he began to plunge and scrub in the warm water which flowed from a tap in the wall.

"You see how simple my own tastes are," he remarked, as he mopped his dripping face and hair with the towel. "This is the only room in my great house where I find myself in a congenial atmosphere. It is homely to me. I can read here and smoke my pipe in peace. Anything like luxury is abhorrent to me."

"Really, I should not have though it," observed Robert.

"It is a fact, I assure you. You see, even with your views as to the worthlessness of wealth, views which, I am sure, are very sensible and much to your credit, you must allow that if a man should happen to be the possessor of vast – well, let us say of considerable – sums of money, it is his duty to get that money into circulation, so that the community may be the better for it. There is the secret of my fine feathers. I have to exert all my ingenuity in order to spend my income, and yet keep the money in legitimate channels. For example, it is very easy to give money away, and no doubt I could dispose of my surplus, or part of my surplus, in that fashion, but I have no wish to pauperise anyone, or to do mischief by indiscriminate charity. I must exact some sort of money's worth for all the money which I lay out You see my point, don't you?"

"Entirely; though really it is something novel to hear a man complain of the difficulty of spending his income."

"I assure you that it is a very serious difficulty with me. But I have hit upon some plans – some very pretty plans. Will you wash your hands? Well, then, perhaps you would care to have a look round. Just come into this corner of the room, and sit upon this chair. So. Now I will sit upon this one, and we are ready to start."

The angle of the chamber in which they sat was painted for about six feet in each direction of a dark chocolate-brown, and was furnished with two red plush seats protruding from the walls, and in striking contrast with the simplicity of the rest of the apartment.

"This," remarked Raffles Haw, "is a lift, though it is so closely joined to the rest of the room that without the change in colour it might puzzle you to find the division. It is made to run either horizontally or vertically. This line of knobs represents the various rooms. You can see 'Dining,' 'Smoking,' 'Billiard,' 'Library' and so on, upon them. I will show you the upward action. I press this one with 'Kitchen' upon it."

There was a sense of motion, a very slight jar, and Robert, without moving from his seat, was conscious that the room had vanished, and that a large arched oaken door stood in the place which it had occupied.

"That is the kitchen door," said Raffles Haw. "I have my kitchen at the top of the house. I cannot tolerate the smell of cooking. We have come up eighty feet in a very few seconds. Now I press again and here we are in my room once more."

Robert McIntyre stared about him in astonishment.

"The wonders of science are greater than those of magic," he remarked.

"Yes, it is a pretty little mechanism. Now we try the horizontal. I press the 'Dining' knob and here we are, you see. Step towards the door, and you will find it open in front of you."

Robert did as he was bid, and found himself with his companion in a large and lofty room, while the lift, the instant that it was freed from their weight, flashed back to its original position. With his feet sinking into the soft rich carpet, as though he were ankle-deep in some mossy bank, he stared about him at the great pictures which lined the walls.

"Surely, surely, I see Raphael's touch there," he cried, pointing up at the one which faced him.

"Yes, it is a Raphael, and I believe one of his best. I had a very exciting bid for it with the French Government. They wanted it for the Louvre, but of course at an auction the longest purse must win."

"And this 'Arrest of Catiline' must be a Rubens. One cannot mistake his splendid men and his infamous women."

"Yes, it is a Rubens. The other two are a Velasquez and a Teniers, fair specimens of the Spanish and of the Dutch schools. I have only old masters here. The moderns are in the billiard-room. The furniture here is a little curious. In fact, I fancy that it is unique. It is made of ebony and narwhals' horns. You see that the legs of everything are of spiral ivory, both the table and the chairs. It cost the upholsterer some little pains, for the supply of these things is a strictly limited one. Curiously enough, the Chinese Emperor had given a large order for narwhals' horns to repair some ancient pagoda, which was fenced in with them, but I outbid him in the market, and his celestial highness has had to wait. There is a lift here in the corner, but we do not need it. Pray step through this door. This is the billiard-room," he continued as they advanced into the adjoining room. "You see I have a few recent pictures of merit upon the walls. Here is a Corot, two Meissoniers, a Bouguereau, a Millais, an Orchardson, and two Alma-Tademas. It seems to me to be a pity to hang pictures over these walls of carved oak. Look at those birds hopping and singing in the branches. They really seem to move and twitter, don't they?"

"They are perfect. I never saw such exquisite work. But why do you call it a billiard-room, Mr. Haw? I do not see any board."

"Oh, a board is such a clumsy uncompromising piece of furniture. It is always in the way unless you actually need to use it. In this case the board is covered by that square of polished maple which you see let into the floor. Now I put my foot upon this motor. You see!" As he spoke, the central portion of the flooring flew up, and a most beautiful tortoise-shell-plated billiard-table rose up to its proper position. He pressed a second spring, and a bagatelle-table appeared in the same fashion. "You may have card-tables or what you will by setting the levers in motion," he remarked. "But all this is very trifling. Perhaps we may find something in the museum which may be of more interest to you."

He led the way into another chamber, which was furnished in antique style, with hangings of the rarest and richest tapestry. The floor was a mosaic of coloured marbles, scattered over with mats of costly fur. There was little furniture, but a number of Louis Quatorze cabinets of ebony and silver with delicately-painted plaques were ranged round the apartment.

"It is perhaps hardly fair to dignify it by the name of a museum," said Raffles Haw. "It consists merely of a few elegant trifles which I have picked up here and there. Gems are my strongest point. I fancy that there, perhaps, I might challenge comparison with any private collector in the world. I lock them up, for even the best servants may be tempted."

He took a silver key from his watch chain, and began to unlock and draw out the drawers. A cry of wonder and of admiration burst from Robert McIntyre, as his eyes rested upon case after case filled with the most magnificent stones. The deep still red of the rubies, the clear scintillating green of the emeralds, the hard glitter of the diamonds, the many shifting shades of beryls, of amethysts, of onyxes, of cats'-eyes, of opals, of agates, of cornelians seemed to fill the whole chamber with a vague twinkling, many-coloured light. Long slabs of the beautiful blue lapis lazuli, magnificent bloodstones, specimens of pink and red and white coral, long strings of lustrous pearls, all these were tossed out by their owner as a careless schoolboy might pour marbles from his bag.

"This isn't bad," he said, holding up a great glowing yellow mass as large as his own head. "It is really a very fine piece of amber. It was forwarded to me by my agent at the Baltic. Twenty-eight

pounds, it weighs. I never heard of so fine a one. I have no very large brilliants – there were no very large ones in the market – but my average is good. Pretty toys, are they not?" He picked up a double handful of emeralds from a drawer, and then let them trickle slowly back into the heap.

"Good heavens!" cried Robert, as he gazed from case to case. "It is an immense fortune in itself. Surely a hundred thousand pounds would hardly buy so splendid a collection."

"I don't think that you would do for a valuer of precious stones," said Raffles Haw, laughing. "Why, the contents of that one little drawer of brilliants could not be bought for the sum which you name. I have a memo. here of what I have expended up to date on my collection, though I have agents at work who will probably make very considerable additions to it within the next few weeks. As matters stand, however, I have spent – let me see-pearls one forty thousand; emeralds, seven fifty; rubies, eight forty; brilliants, nine twenty; onyxes – I have several very nice onyxes-two thirty. Other gems, carbuncles, agates – hum! Yes, it figures out at just over four million seven hundred and forty thousand. I dare say that we may say five millions, for I have not counted the odd money."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.