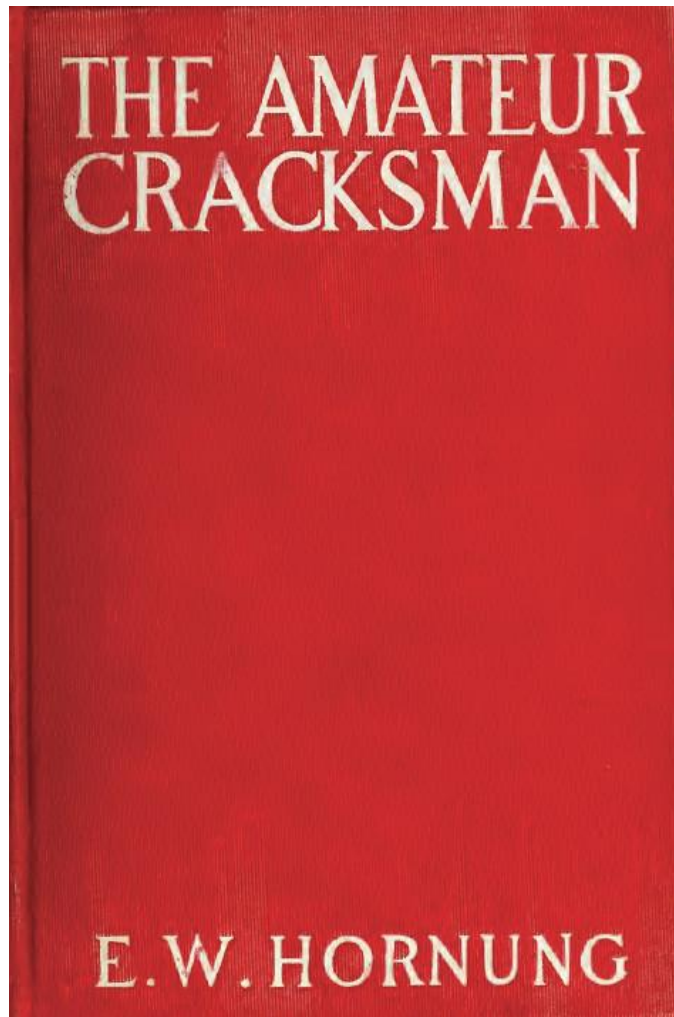


BOOK DISCUSSION KIT



The Amateur Cracksman

by E. W. Hornung

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Summary

Arthur Raffles is a prominent member of London society, and a national sporting hero. As a cricketer he regularly represents England, using this as a cover to commit burglaries, primarily stealing valuable jewelry. He is assisted by his friend, the younger, idealistic Bunny Manders. Both are constantly under the surveillance of Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard who is always thwarted in his attempts to catch Raffles.

Author Information

Ernest William ("Willie") Hornung was born June 7, 1866 in Middlesbrough, England. The youngest child of a Hungarian immigrant, Hornung was educated at Uppingham School, well-known for its pioneering curriculum and predominance in cricket. Though he spent most of his life in England and France, in 1884-1886 he lived at Mossgiel Station, Australia where he worked as a tutor. While he was only there a short time, nearly all of his works contain references to Australia.



On September 27, 1893, Hornung married Constance ("Connie") Doyle, sister of Hornung's close friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Hornung worked as a newspaper journalist, publishing poetry on the side. His first novel, *A Bride from the Bush*, was set in Australia and published in 1890.

Following the death of his son during World War One, at the Second Battle of Ypres, Hornung volunteered with the YMCA, which sent civilians out in the field, often along the front lines, to support the soldiers through canteens and other morale-boosting activities. In this capacity he served in the trenches in France, leading to the publication of *Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front* after the end of the war.

Hornung died in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France on March 22, 1921. His last collection of tales, *Old Offenders and a Few Old Scores*, was published two years later. He wrote more than 30 novels and short story collections throughout his career, as well as his war poetry. However, he is best known for the character of A. J. Raffles, the gentleman thief, who first appeared in *Cassell's Magazine* in 1898.

Selected titles by this author:

- *A Bride from the Bush* (1890)
- *Under Two Skies* (1892)
- *The Cricket on the Green* (1895)
- *Dead Men Tell No Tales* (1897)
- *The Shadow of the Rope* (1902)
- *Witching Hill* (1913)
- *Wooden Cross* (1918)
- *Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front* (1919)
- *Old Offenders and a Few Old Scores* (1923)

About the Novel

The first Raffles stories were published in *Cassell's Magazine* in 1898. They were collected and published the following year as *The Amateur Cracksman*. Later stories were collected into two more volumes, with the canon being polished off by a full-length novel, *Mr. Justice Raffles*.

Hornung began writing Raffles' adventures about five years after his friend and brother-in-law, Arthur Conan Doyle, killed his popular hero, Sherlock Holmes. The stories were obviously modeled on Holmes, with the sidekick of Bunny Manders playing the documentarian role of Dr. Watson, and featuring a bumbling Scotland Yard inspector. In Hornung's tales however, the hero was the master criminal, rather than the master detective.

Like Doyle, Hornung eventually killed his hero. Around the time that public pressure forced Doyle to resurrect Holmes by writing his miraculous escape from certain death, Hornung did the same with Raffles. The character of the stories changed however, as the gentleman thief was transformed into a professional criminal operating from the shadows. Hornung later wrote off Raffles for good, giving the character a hero's death during the Boer War.

The public character of A.J. Raffles was in large part based on George Cecil Ives (1867-1950), an English writer, criminologist, reformer and notable cricket player.

The A. J. Raffles series:

- *The Amateur Cracksman* (1899)
- *The Black Mask* (aka *Raffles: Further Adventures of the Amateur Cracksman*) (1901)
- *A Thief in the Night* (1904)
- *Mr. Justice Raffles* (1909)

If you like this novel, you may also like...

Raffles-related stories by John Kendrick Bangs:

- *Mrs. Raffles: Being the Adventures of an Amateur Crackswoman: Narrated by Bunny*
- *R. Holmes & Co.: Being the Remarkable Adventures of Raffles Holmes, Esq., Detective and Amateur Cracksman by Birth*

The Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle

The Saint stories by Leslie Charteris

Louis Joseph Vance

A note on slang

In the beginning of the book, Bunny comments several times on being Raffles' "fag" when they were in school together. At the time the book was written, the term was British slang for "a junior pupil at a private preparatory school who works and runs errands for a senior pupil." (*New Oxford American Dictionary*)

Historical Overview

The Raffles stories collected in *The Amateur Cracksman*, fall within the latter days of the Golden Age of the British Empire. Britain was the largest Empire on earth at that time, their colonies and interests spanning the globe from Africa, Australia, China and India in the east, to Canada, Central America and the Caribbean in the west. Over of a quarter of the world's population was under British rule. Britain also enjoyed unrivalled control of world trade through her dominant naval presence, growing rich through the products and raw materials shipped from her colonies, such as spices, sugar, timber, and gems. The country was also rapidly industrializing, and developing one of the first truly modern economies. Britain's economic, political and scientific progress was internationally envied, and London, her capitol, was considered one of the world's great metropolises.

Class distinctions were extreme in the Victorian age, and it would not be impossible for a London aristocrat to go through life having never encountered a member of the working class outside of their own servants. Upper class British society and culture influenced the manners, tastes, and fashions of the civilized world, while the lowest classes often lived in conditions unimaginable in even the poorest present day American or British communities. It was largely the stark economic and class divisions in Victorian London that inspired Karl Marx to write *The Communist Manifesto*.

In contrast to Britain's imperial might were a variety of problems that plagued the nation and the city of London in particular. Britain's population, particularly in urban areas such as London, exploded during the Victorian age. By Arthur Conan Doyle's time, the population in London had risen to five million, up from one million only ninety years before. London's rapid expansion and industrialization caused chronic pollution and overcrowding. This, coupled with primitive or non-existent sanitation and sewage infrastructure, little or no public healthcare, and constant food shortages among the poor, caused regular outbreaks of cholera, typhus and other diseases. Housing shortages led to the development of vast slums, known as "Rookeries" because of the large numbers of people forced to occupy single rooms together with no personal space or privacy. Economic conditions forced entire families, including children, to work dangerous jobs for below subsistence wages. Homelessness and even starvation were commonplace, with government officials in the mid 1800's reporting over 30,000 homeless and impoverished children in the city. Many of today's charitable institutions, such as The Salvation Army and The Children's Society originated in Victorian efforts to respond to these issues.

The epidemic squalor and poverty led to an odd paradox amongst the British upper class. On one hand, it became socially popular to champion charitable causes aimed at educating, housing and feeding the poor and underprivileged. On the other hand, fear of being victimized by theft or violence from those same poor and underprivileged became nearly pathological among many upper class Londoners and government officials. This concern led to attempts to modernize and reform law enforcement in London. Previous eras had seen the military called in during times of public unrest, but Victorian era London viewed the lower classes as such a constant threat that reforms were put in place to turn that duty over to the police, who could maintain a more

continuous presence. Efforts aimed at maintaining "public order" among the poor and working classes became common, with new legislation targeting vagrancy, loitering, "suspicious behavior" and the like. Police agencies essentially adopted a policy of attempting to prevent crime by constant observation and harassment of those they deemed most likely to commit them. This had predictable results on the working class attitude towards the police.

During this time of change, Britain was still locked into a rigid class system, enforced by society's strict codes of conduct. The period is characterized by stark cultural contradictions. For example, in a period known for sexual repression, prostitution flourished. Spiritualism, with mediums claiming to communicate with the dead, and phrenology, the art of judging personality based on the bumps on a skull, enjoyed massive popularity. At the same time, scientific discoveries and new mechanical inventions captured the popular imagination, with people beginning to believe that it was possible to travel to the moon or to explore the farthest reaches of our planet.

Historical Events of 1896-1901

- 1896 Anglo Zanzibar War, the shortest declared war on record. British warships attacked the capital on the morning of August 25th. After a forty minute bombardment and land assault, the Sultan's palace was captured. A new pro-British government was installed by the afternoon.
- 1897 Diamond Jubilee: Queen Victoria celebrates 60 years as reigning monarch of Britain. The occasion is marked with state celebrations and parades
- 1897 George Cecil Ives, the inspiration for Raffles, publishes his first book of poetry entitled *Book of Chains*.
- 1898 The first Raffles stories appear in *Cassell's Magazine*.**
- 1899 The published Raffles stories are collected into the book *The Amateur Cracksmen*.**
- 1899 The second Boer War begins in October. Conflicts between Boers and British colonists lead to British military action in South Africa as Britain attempts to control recently discovered gold and diamond deposits in the area.
- 1901 Queen Victoria dies on January 22nd at 81 years of age.
- 1901 Hornung resurrects Raffles in a sequel, *The Black Mask*.

Countries and areas ruled by the British Empire during the Victorian Age:

Aden (Yemen), Anguilla, Australia, Bahrain, Barbados, Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Bermuda, British East Africa (Kenya), British Guiana (Guyana), British Honduras (Belize), Somaliland, Brunei, Canada, Cayman Islands, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Cook Islands, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Fiji, Gambia, Gibraltar, Gold Coast (Ghana), Grenada, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Montserrat, Newfoundland, New Zealand, Nigeria, North Borneo (Sabah), Nyasaland (Malawi), Oman (United Arab Emirates), Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), St. Helena/Ascension Island, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, South West Africa (Namibia), Sudan, Tanzania,

Trinidad, Uganda, and Zanzibar. Britain also controlled various tiny Polynesian and Caribbean Islands, often used only as water sources or emergency ports for ships.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you like Raffles? Was he a sympathetic character? What about Bunny?
2. What do you think of the relationship between Raffles and Bunny? Are they still in the same roles they had as children at school, or did their relationship change? Are they better off together, or was it a mistake to renew their friendship?
3. Many of Raffles' moral statements appear to contradict each other. He does not hesitate at the idea of murder, yet he is reluctant to abuse his position as a guest and spoil his host's hospitality with a jewel theft. At one point he compares himself favorably with a man in a desperate situation saying, "he's only half gone to the bad; and look at the difference between him and us!" He then follows by later asking Bunny "You don't suppose I prefer foul play to fair, do you?" Does Raffles have a moral code of any kind? Do you believe there is a line he wouldn't cross?
4. Bunny seems to have more trouble settling into a life of crime. He often talks about his guilty heart, and at one point consoles himself that he "had but robbed a robber." Yet, he rarely seems to hesitate to assist Raffles in his next endeavor. Why do you think this is? Bunny himself says "there was never anybody in the world so irresistible as Raffles." Is this the key to Bunny's downfall, or is crime truly in his nature as he implies himself in the last story?
5. In discussing their views on human nature, Raffles believes that it is "a board of checkers; why not reconcile one's self to alternate black and white? Why desire to be all one thing or all the other... For his part, he [Raffles] enjoyed himself on all squares of the board, and liked the light the better for the shade." Do you agree with Raffles, or do you prefer Bunny's more "conventional" view?
6. Raffles believes he is an artist, set apart from the common run of criminal. He compares himself to writers and painters, who do not follow their craft solely for the sake of money. Do you agree with his comparison? Is Raffles different from other criminals?
7. Victorian English society had a rigid class structure. How do issues of class play out in the stories?
8. A. J. Raffles has the manner and outward appearance of a gentleman. Do you believe he is one, or does the appearance only run skin-deep?
9. Raffles has no sympathy for his victims, saying that "these people deserve it and can afford it." What do you think of them? Do you have a better opinion of Raffles because of his choice of victim?
10. In ancient Rome, the Ides of March was a festival day dedicated to the god of war, a day associated with disruption and chaos. It was also the date of Julius Caesar's assassination by his enemies and his best friend Brutus. Is "Ides of March" an appropriate name for the first story? Why or why not?
11. In the final story, Raffles spends every waking moment with Miss Werner, making Bunny jealous. Is he right to feel this way? In his position would you feel the same? Do you believe Bunny's description of Miss Werner is accurate, or is jealousy making him uncharitable?

12. While arguing with Bunny, Raffles says he "might like to draw stumps, start clean, and live happily ever after" by marrying the wealthy Miss Werner. Do you think he would have? Could he leave his criminal ways behind? He claimed to be engaged to marry Miss Werner, do you think he actually was or was it all a clever ruse to position himself by the rail? Would he have gone through with such a marriage?
13. What do you think of Inspector Mackenzie? What about the rest of the police force? In the Sherlock Holmes stories, published around the same time period, the police are often portrayed as bumbling and incompetent. Does Hornung give you the same impression of Scotland Yard?
14. Were you glad to see Raffles and Bunny caught? Did they get what they deserved?
15. Do you think Raffles survived his plunge into the sea? If so, what will he do next?