

## *Only a Cent*

by Mary Kyle Dallas

“It was only a cent, you say?”

“Yes, ‘m,” said the old woman, meekly. “Only a cent. ‘Tisnt the value of the money. I’d not have come for *that*; but when little Master Harry took it out of my till, it was a theft all the same as if it had been a dollar.”

“Absurd,” said Mrs. Rose. “The boy is only six years old. He’s a mere baby. There’s another cent. Of course I’m willing to give it to you.”

“I don’t want the cent,” said the old woman, half crying. “What I want is to have him properly punished.”

“You revengeful wretch!” said Mrs. Rose.

“Taint revenge,” said the woman. “It’s love for the child. When my Ann was nursery-maid here I seen a heap of him, and I liked him so much, a pretty dear. Please *do*, ma’am, punish him and learn him not to steal. It’s a mother’s duty, ma’am. ‘Tisnt only poor boys that grow up bad.”

“This is unbearable,” cried Mrs. Rose. “Punish that little fellow for picking up a cent. How did he know to whom it belonged. And *you*—a person like *you*—to talk to *me* of duty. It is *too* preposterous.”

“O do hear me, ma’am,” said the old woman. “‘Twasn’t picking up a cent. I was in my back room and saw through the curtain. He came in tiptoe, watching and peeping, and he slipped around the counter and took the penny from the drawer. Then he knocks, and says he, when I comes: ‘I want a cent’s worth of lemon drops.’ And I took it away and came to tell you; not for the value—“

“Take your cent and go,” said Mrs. Rose. “After the presents I have sent you, and kind as I was to Ann—gave her her wedding dress and a set of china when she married—to go on so about a *paltry penny*. Bridget, open the door. I suppose that Mrs. Jones don’t see it, I’ve requested her to go so often, And after this, Bridget, when I send you for trimmings, there is the new shop to go to. Quite a decent sort of person keeps it. I shall patronize her.”

“It was just because of your kindness, ma’am, that I want Master Harry to be cured of being a thief,” said the old woman. “‘Twasn’t innocent childishness. It was a sort o’ a bad way as if theft was in him,” said the old woman. “Can’t you understand?”

“I understand you are impertinent,” said Mrs. Rose. “Bridget, give that woman her precious cent, and lock the door after her. Here, Harry, pet, come to mamma. When Harry wants a cent, don’t ask anyone but dear papa and mamma.”

And the young mother kissed her darling fondly.

He was a beautiful child, but not a frank looking one, and his mischief always developed itself in secret forays on the cake-box and preserve jars. To be sly was natural for him, and the servants knew this if his mother did not.

Of course he was not punished. Indeed he seemed himself rather a hero than a culprit, and the next opportunity which offered to help himself to that which did not belong to him was seized upon with avidity.

He helped himself to knick-knacks in friends’ houses, and to toys belonging to neighbor’s children. If his mother forgot her purse upon her dressing-table, he rifled it of change.

Generally he contrived to conceal the depredations; and when discovered, friends feared to offend the indulgent parents, and contented themselves with putting portable property out of Master Harry’s reach when they had the pleasure of a visit from that small but troublesome individual.

As for his mother, she thought the child “too cunning to scold,” and only shook her head at him when ten cent pieces dropped from his jacket pockets, or his aunt’s missing bracelet was found in his boot.

“Such things always wear off,” she said. “Children out grow them.”

But they grew with Harry’s growth and strengthened with his strength.

Had the first small sins been punished, had serious talk and reproof been administered, all might have been well; but the unhappy child, while his person was so daintily cared for and his comfort so fondly considered, he was morally as entirely left to himself as any little street beggar.

To be sure, Mrs. Rose taught him to pray; but she never explained to him what that nightly bending of knee meant. To Harry it was a mere repetition of words.

She went to church, and would have been shocked had anyone suggested that she did not know the “Ten Commandments;” but she had never taught her boy that “Thou shalt not steal” was a divine command, either theoretically or practically.

She never did. And so Harry Rose grew up a handsome boy, educated and accomplished, but with no knowledge of his own failings. The family verdict was that Harry was perfect, and he agreed in it fully; and with this opinion went with the highest recommendations into the counting house of X—& W—.

Harry's father was not a rich man, and the boy's salary was sufficient to supply his wardrobe and furnish him with proper recreation. But the boy had tastes which were expensive, and a disposition to dissipation. Always sly, he hid these things from his parents; but he could not manage without money. He had stolen from his parents at home; now in a position of confidence, he was enabled to rob his employers. He began with shillings and ended with a hundred dollars. There detection overtook him. The firm kindly forgave the boy, because of his youth and his parents' grief. Mr. Rose paid the money back, and Harry pretended penitence; and even now he was not reasoned with as a great sinner, but as one who had been very foolish

"So young yet," said Mrs. Rose to her husband. "He really must have forgotten he had no right to it, and then he meant to put it back."

And soon Harry was in another situation.

The story of his crime had not been made public, and again he was trusted; and now he seemed trustworthy. Years went by, he grew to be a man and married. He was placed in the most confidential position in the house. Vast sums of money passed through his hands. He was respected, admired and beloved, not for a brief space of time but for ten long years. Then a man of thirty, with the responsibilities of father and husband. Harry Rose was one day missing from his place of business and from his home.

That he had been foully dealt with was the first belief of all who knew of his disappearance, and the excitement and sympathy was intense. But in a few days the truth was discovered. Harry Rose was a defaulter to an immense amount. He had committed a robbery, which stood almost alone in the annals of the history of crime. And this was only the climax of a course of deceit and depredation commenced with his first year in the establishment.

He escaped. His plans had been artfully laid, and the money was about his person.

Detectives were sent upon his track in vain; and in a foreign land he lavished his ill-gotten wealth in riotous living, while his parents and his young wife suffered all the agonies of shame and grief, and his name was a disgrace to the son who had just learned to lisp it.

But successful as he had been, Providence did not forget his crime. His riches took to themselves wings. He lost large sums at gambling tables and in bad company. He became poor; and still in terror of the arm of justice, and with a mind enfeebled by dissipation, he found it impossible to retrieve his fortunes. From the town where he had dwelt in luxury he wandered away almost a beggar, and in his middle life, for very want of bread, shipped as a common sailor on board a vessel which stood in need of hands.

In that vessel he found a Portuguese sailor—a wild fellow, without common prudence—who, putting a sailor's trust in everyone, openly informed his mates that he had in a belt around his waist a large sum of money, which was to be given to his mother on his return home. He had great pride in the gift, and in the good opinion his family would have of him when he made it, and chattered of it frequently. Alas the wretched man who listened was one to whom gold is a temptation not to be resisted.

He dreamt of that leather belt which held the treasure at night and thought of it all day. At last, as they lay in an American port, the fiend's whispers grew too strong for him. He lifted his gray head from his hammock and peeped into that of the Portuguese. There lay the black curls over the bronzed brow, and the great white teeth glittered in the open mouth, and the black lashes veiled the bright eyes.

He was sound asleep, and it would be so easy to unbuckle the belt; or to cut it off—that would be more quickly done.

And the old man let himself out of his hammock and crept to the side of the Portuguese. He drew his knife and cut away a portion of the belt where the money jingled, and had thrust it in his breast, when the young man awoke and grappled with him.

The Portuguese was young, but unarmed and bewildered by the surprise of the moment, and that sharp knife was in the hand of Harry Rose.

“The money!—my mother's money—give it back!” cried the youth.

But Harry Rose could not give up the money. He lifted his knife and drove it into the poor fellow's breast and fled.

He found a boat and rowed himself to the shore, and set the boat adrift, and struck through the city streets seeking for a place to hide himself. But those on the ship had been alarmed. They found the Portuguese dead in his hammock, with this belt, his precious belt, of which he had talked so much, cut away, and the strange sailor missing. He was pursued and captured with the money about him, and blood stains on his clothes.

And in the city where he was born, and where yet his old, old mother dwelt, he met the fate of the murderer. And before he died he made full confession of all his crimes.

There are people who go to see men hung. Those who gratified that horrible curiosity that day heard the gray-haired man upon the gallows speak these words:

“I am about to die, and I die justly; but if there is a parent here I want to tell that parent that my father and mother who loved me so might have saved me from this awful and shameful end. I had the propensity to steal in me. Everyone had some propensity to crime stronger than the rest; but I might have been cured.

“I began by stealing a cent from an old woman's toy-shop till. If I had been punished *then* I believe I never should have stolen again; but it was made light of, and I went on and here I am. But with my last breath I want to ask you all to watch your children, and no matter how slight a crime seems in one of them, to weed it out with all your strength, that it may not bring them to my end at last.”

And then the black cap was put on, and Harry Rose looked on the world no more.

And his is not the only instance which warns us from what small beginnings great crimes spring.

The thief of only a cent may end in burglary or highway robbery; the lisper of a white lie may come to forget truth and honor utterly; and the little fist ready with baby blows, grown large and strong in manhood, may commit murder.

Weed your children's hearts even as you would your garden beds, or rank things will grow there apace and choke the flowers.

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