

*The Mysterious Robberies*  
*A Detective's Story*  
By Emerson Bennett

While sitting alone in my London office once one dull, dark, drizzly October afternoon, indulging in the luxury of a quiet smoke, the door opened in a timid, hesitating manner, and an old, wrinkled, gray-headed, gray-bearded man, poorly and shabbily dressed, shuffled in, and, throwing the glance of what was still a keen, restless, suspicious black eye over my person, said, in a subdued and what sounded like a humble tone, that he had called to see Mr. George Larkin.

“That is my name, sir,” returned I; “pray step forward and take a seat.”

The old man seemed to hesitate a moment, eyed me sharply, glanced warily about the apartment, and then observed, as he walked forward and sat down near me:

“I hope we are alone, Mr. Larkin, for my business concerns only our own two selves.”

“We are quite alone, sir, as you see,”

“But sometimes, I am told,” he continued hesitatingly, “these kinds of places—I beg your pardon! I mean no offence to you—sometimes, I say, I am told, these places are contrived for secret listeners.”

“But I have assured you, sir,” I replied, rather coldly, “that we are alone here, and if you doubt my word, perhaps you had better carry your secret, whatever it is, away with you.”

“Well, well,” he rejoined, somewhat hastily, “never mind,—I will take your word—I will trust you. And I have good authority for doing so, too!” he added, partly soliloquizing and partly addressing me. “You see, Mr. Larkin. As there is to be confidence between us, it is more than fair to tell you that I have been to a magistrate, asking for a trusty and secret police agent, of superior cunning and intelligence, and that Mr. George Larkin was named as the individual on whom I could rely in every particular.”

“I am much obliged to the magistrate, whoever he is, for his good opinion and recommendation,” I answered with a slight bow. “And now, sir, if you are satisfied, I am prepared to hear your communication.”

Again the old man hesitated, and eyed me keenly, and turned somewhat pale at the thought of what he was about to divulge; but, at last, as if pressed by necessity, he seemed to put his scruples aside, and said:

“Mr. Larkin, I am an old man, as you see, and perhaps a rather eccentric one, as you may discover. Old as I am, I am alone in the world, having neither wife nor child, and only some distant relations, who do not care for me, nor I for them. Poor as I look, and as everybody believed me, (here he glanced his keen eyes suspiciously around him, leaned forward, and whispered in my ear,) I have gold—much gold—gold enough to—to—Well, no matter.”

I looked at the old man as he paused, and I said, while debating in my own mind whether he was sane or a monomaniac:

“Well, sir, what has this gold to do with me?”

“Let me confess to you,” he pursued, “since I have resolved to trust you, what I have never told to mortal ear, that I love gold—adore gold—worship gold—and that I am what the world, if it knew, would call a miser.”

“Then you are to be pitied!” said I.

He fastened upon me a strange, startled, searching look, as if he doubted the sincerity of my words, the sentiment of which was beyond his comprehension, it being impossible for him to understand how a miser, a man having actual heaps of gold, could be in any degree a subject of pity.

“Yes,” he resumed at length, “I never saw any human being I liked as well as myself; but gold, silver, money, the coin of the realm, of all realms, I like better.”

“Well,” returned I, now pretty convinced that the old man was not in his right mind, “I do not see what this has to do with me.”

“Ay, ay, I am coming to that, Mr. Larkin—I am coming to that. You see, being alone in the world, and loving nothing but my gold, I naturally live alone with my gold. Years ago—a great many years ago, you see—I bought an old, tumble-down house, on the outskirts of town. Heavens! what a price I had to pay for it, too!—two hundred pounds, Mr. Larkin—actually two hundred pounds, sir—for that house and a bit of land—and all in hard gold, too—ah, me. Well, as I was saying, I bought the house, and then went to work myself, and with my own hands, that I might not pay out any more money and have anybody know my secret, I constructed a safe—a fire-proof safe—and then had an iron door made for it, with a bank-lock that no one could open without the key and secret of him who had locked it. This done, I sold all the property that I had inherited, converted it into gold, put the gold into leather bags, (another exquisite luxury!) and secretly deposited them in my safe. Since then I have dressed like a beggar, and lived alone with my gold, the sight of which has given me hours of rapture, and the jingle of which has filled my ears with a delight which I cannot express.”

“Well, sir—well, sir,” continued the old man, fairly trembling at the thought, “I now come to the painful business which has brought me here! Ah me! Ah me! I wonder it has not driven me mad! For years, Mr. Larkin—for years, sir—I lived alone with my gold, and kept my own secret, and nobody found me out; but of late, sir, (Heaven be merciful?) I have been robbed—robbed, sir—of my gold—of my gold, Mr. Larkin.”

“Then I suppose you are now a poor man?” said I. “How was your house broken into? Give me the most minute particulars—for it is often by the merest trifles that we detectives are able to get the clue that leads to the greatest results.”

“Ah! there it is, sir—there is the mystery!” groaned the old man. “You are mistaken, Mr. Larkin, in supposing that I am literally a poor man, or that my house has been *broken* into at all, so far as I can discover. No, sir—no! The money has been taken—and yet nothing has been disturbed. My doors and windows, which I have always bolted as well as locked, I have never found unbolted or unlocked, which must have been the case if anyone had come in that way. And then my safe is found just as I leave it, and the key fastened to my body by its iron chain. The first bag of gold I missed, (O Lord be merciful!) was about two months ago, and I could not believe it was gone till I had counted the remaining bags over and over, perhaps fifty times. Then I tried to believe I had taken it out myself, and mislaid it, and I spent two days in searching the whole house—every nook and cranny—every likely and unlikely place. Well, sir, a week went along, and another bag was missing. Horrible mystery. Since that I have lost three more—the last one last night—and human nature can endure no more! Oh, sir! Find out the thief, and restore me my missing gold, and I will—will—worship you, sir!”

I smiled at the idea of getting a miser’s worship in return for my trouble of detecting a mysterious thief and restoring the owner a large amount of gold, and I said, facetiously:

“Unquestionably what you offer is very valuable in your estimation, but neither a miser’s blessing nor curse will pass current for rent, food, or clothing. No, Mr.—”

“Brandish—Stephen Brandish.”

“No, Mr. Brandish, if I undertake this business of detecting the secret thief, and getting back your money, or any portion of it, I must be paid in gold—gold, sir—for I, too, like gold—though for what it will buy, and not to worship.”

For a long time we could not agree upon terms; but at last, having got that matter settled to my satisfaction, I entered with great zest into the penetration and unravelment of what was really a very wonderful mystery. That night, after dark, I made my appearance at the miser’s house, and, being admitted and the door secured, I began my inspection of the premises. I went up to the roof and down to the cellar, searching minutely all the walls, floors and ceilings, for some possible place where a thief might enter or secrete himself. The house was an old, crazy structure, sure enough; but I found nothing to give me a clue to the mystery. The doors and windows were all bolted on the inside, and the bolts, I assured myself by a close examination, were all sound and in good order. In the cellar was a well, from which the old man drew what water he used, and I satisfied myself there was nothing suspicious about that. Then I went round the walls, and tried every stone of any size, to see if it might be removed; but all were fast and solid. At last I came to the money-safe, which was curiously built in the ground, with the iron door upward, like that of a scuttle, and which was effectively concealed by scattering dirt over it.

“I must see the inside of this!” said I; “there may possibly be an excavation underneath.”

“Oh, sir,” returned the old miser, trembling at the thought of exposing his riches, “you will not take advantage of an old man! you will not betray me! you will promise this—you will swear it!”

I might have got offended at this question of my honesty from another; but I took into consideration the peculiarities, the idiosyncrasies, of the afflicted miser, and readily promised all he required, even going as far as to take an oath of secrecy. At last, after much hesitation and demurring, he ventured to expose the interior of the safe to my gaze. It contained twenty-five heavy bags of gold, with a large amount of silver thrown in loosely; but the bottom, sides, and all parts of it, save the iron door, were composed of thick granite, perfectly cemented, and had never been disturbed since being put together.

My inspection of the premises was now completed, but without gaining the slightest clue to the mystery of the robberies. I could discover no place where anyone could have entered, and there was certainly no one now concealed in the house. I questioned the miser as to who had visited him; but he positively declared that, myself excepted, I was the only one permitted to cross his threshold since taking up his solitary abode there. I was at a stand—I knew not what to suggest. Had but one bag been missing—or had he only been robbed once—the matter would have seemed susceptible of some rational solution; but to be robbed five several times, at irregular intervals, and the thief to be so forbearing as to take only a small portion each time, and then withal leave no trace, save the loss, of his having been there,—this it was that puzzled and perplexed me exceedingly. I finally went away, at a late hour, promising to give the matter my serious consideration, and the old man agreeing to communicate with me immediately on the occurrence of anything new.

Three days after he again appeared, in a half-distracted state, and declared that, during the night previous, he had been robbed of another bag of gold. Again I repaired to his house, and made another thorough search, going from cellar to roof and from roof to cellar, examining everything, even to his old, rotten straw bed, but only to end as wise as I began. I made him open his safe again, and saw with my own eyes that only twenty-four bags remained; and I knew from his appearance that the missing money was really lost, since it was not possible for anyone to counterfeit such wretched grief and terror as his countenance, language and manner expressed. The money was gone; but who was the thief? and by what mystery had he made his entrance and exit, and opened and closed the safe.

In a few days the miser was robbed again; and, in spite of all I could do, he continued to be robbed, at longer or shorter periods, for several months—until, in fact, only ten bags of gold remained. By this time he was wasted almost to a skeleton through grief at his loss, and I had become so nervous and superstitious that I looked to see a ghost every time I visited the dwelling. What could it mean? I had spent days and nights in the house—had arranged matters so that I could come and go as I pleased, at all hours, secretly and openly—and yet, though I had used this freedom, and been almost constant spy upon the premises, I had failed to detect the slightest clue to the thief. Surely it could not be the work of human hands! and the thought of the supernatural made my blood run cold.

One night I retired to bed, terribly perplexed with this mystery, and, after rolling and tossing about for a long time, I fell asleep, and dreamed I was in the miser's house, on the watch, and that I saw him get up, go to the safe, unlock it, take out a bag of gold, drop it in the well, relock his safe, and return to his bed.

“That is it!” I cried, leaping out upon the floor. “I have it now! The wretched man is a sleepwalker, and has all along been robbing himself! Why have I not thought of this before?”

I dressed in haste, and set off, night though it was, to ascertain the truth of my new conjecture. I reached the gloomy house, went in, and found the miser was not in bed. I hurried downstairs, and, by the light of my lantern, beheld him stretched out on the ground, near the well, with a bag of gold in his hand. I spoke to him, but he did not answer. I touched him, but he did not stir. I stooped down, took hold of his wrist, felt his pulse, and started up in horror.

*He was dead! He had died in the act of robbing himself! By the false god he had set up, the God of Heaven had destroyed him.*

But the mystery was solved, my dream had revealed the truth, and the missing bags of gold were all found at the bottom of the well. The whole was taken possession of by the authorities, and I received my just due for services rendered.

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