

Saved by a Pipe

An Innocent Man Saved From the Gallows by Almost a Miracle

In 1853 there resided on the outskirts of Northampton, England, an old gentleman named Shaw. Three years before he came thither from London and purchased the property on which he lived. It was an old farm known as the Moat, and the dwelling at the time of the purchase was much dilapidated. Shaw put masons and carpenters to work and soon rendered the place comfortably habitable. It was a long, two story building, standing in a field three hundred yards from the turnpike. Mr. Shaw brought with him an old man servant and a middle aged Irish woman, who acted as housekeeper, cook, and general servant.

Shaw lived in a very niggardly way, although it was reported that he was wealthy. This rumor gained confirmation from the fact that he put out several large sums of money on mortgage. Those who had been to the Moat on business had also seen the old man seated at his desk with piles of money beside him, and had likewise witnessed the care with which he deposited his hoards in a strong box which was along side the desk. In the room, which he used as an office and a parlor, there was a large bedstead, and the old man slept there every night, assigning as a reason that he was rheumatic and found it painful to climb the stairs.

There was this peculiarity about him, which soon began to be spoke of. Although he was soon discovered to be miserly and very mean in his manner of living, he was, nevertheless, never known to send a beggar away from the door without relief, and to women and children asking for aid he was always particularly generous and even tender in his treatment. On the night of December 17, 1853, there came a miserable, half-starved wretch to his door, imploring assistance. Although it was late, and the old man had closed his house, he directed the beggar to be taken in and warmed and fed. The man was almost helpless from cold and fatigue, and when he had eaten and drank he fell asleep in the large chair before the fire. He slept so soundly that they were unable to arouse him, and Shaw directed them to spread a bed on the coal bunk at the far end of the kitchen and lift the sleeper upon it. This was done and the house keeper wrapped him warmly. Soon afterward the household retired to bed.

Next morning when the housekeeper went into the kitchen she found the tramp gone. The kitchen window was unfastened and slightly opened, and Mrs. Durfy, the housekeeper, felt sure that the man had decamped with something valuable. A second thought, however, reassured her, for she knew there was nothing around worth taking; and, moreover, everything, to the bread in the cupboard, was just as she had left it the evening before.

Mrs. Durfy prepared the breakfast and by that time it was eight o'clock. Read, the man servant, had milked the cow and tended the old horse, and was eating his bread and milk over the kitchen fire. Mrs. Durfy went as usual to call her master to breakfast, but the knock at the door met with no response. She tried the handle and found the door fast. Then she passed out the front door and found the shutters still closed. Examination showed that one of them was unfastened and the window was open. The housekeeper went and roused the servant and the two managed to make an entry into the room. The old man Shaw was found dead in his bed. The bed was in great

disorder and the dead man's throat and face were greatly discolored and swollen. The desk in the corner was open and the trunk lid was raised. On looking inside everything was found in disorder and the thought at once seized the two domestics that the old man had been murdered and robbed.

Who else could the murderer and thief be but the beggar whom they had harbored the night before?

Information was given to the police and officers were put on the track of the tramp. It was found that he had taken the early morning train at Northampton to London, and a description of him was telegraphed along the line. He was arrested and before night returned to Northampton. He wore at the time of his capture a cap, overcoat and gloves belonging to Shaw, and had in his possession one five pound note and change, which, adding his fare, amounted to five pounds more. On the back of the note were the initials of Shaw, and there was procured from the railway clerk another five pound note, which he remembered was given him by the tramp, and it was also indorsed with Shaw's initials.

To the minds of the authorities the thing was sufficiently clear. He had not been so helpless as he pretended to be, but had observed everything around him. The slumber had been assumed, and in the night he had arisen, quitted the house by a window and then displaced a shutter and entered the old man's room. The old man always kept a light burning and the tramp had little difficulty in carrying out his purpose. First he had strangled Shaw and then searched under his pillow as the most likely place to find the key of his valuables. Then he had helped himself and escaped.

It was true that only ten pounds were on him, but then he might have cast the other away, or he might have had an accomplice. In fact, the whole thing might have been planned, and the tramp might be only one of a gang engaged in the nefarious business. At all events there was sufficient evidence to hang the tramp; that was enough for justice.

The tramp, however, had his story to tell. He gave his name as William Oram, and said that he had been working as a weaver in Nottingham up to within two weeks of his visit to Shaw's house. Work became slack, in consequence of which he was discharged, and he was tramping his way to London where he had a brother well-to-do in the liquor business. After sleeping some time on the coal bunk, he said, he awoke, and feeling chill, arose and moved toward the fire. He stumbled over a chair and fell heavily against the thin partition which separated the parlor from the kitchen. Shaw was aroused from sleep, and presently Oram heard him stirring about. He heard the door unlocked, and Shaw came into the kitchen. By this time Oram had squatted down by the fire, and Shaw asked him what he was after. He explained matters, and Shaw then said:

"Well, it's morning and a bright moonlight, and if you've had your rest, you may as well travel on. What's your name?"

The tramp told him, whereupon Shaw said:

"That was my wife's name before I married her. Where did you come from?"

The tramp said his father came from Dowling, in Kent, and Shaw exclaimed:

“Why, my wife had an uncle there.”

Further conversation followed, and it appeared pretty clear that the tramp’s father was none other than Shaw’s dead wife’s brother.

Shaw gave the man an old overcoat, hat and gloves, and two five pound notes, bidding him write when he reached London and let him know how he fared. Then, finding the key removed from the back door, Shaw lifted the kitchen window and said:

“There, jump through, and turn to your left. Then you can’t miss your road.”

This was considered altogether too improbable; nevertheless, inquiry showed that Shaw’s wife’s maiden name was Oram, that the tramp had worked in Nottingham and that his brother kept an inn on the Waterloo Road, London. But what could be the object of Shaw’s sending the man off in the middle of the night, and after he had discovered, too, that he was a relative?

The accused man’s brother employed counsel, and every effort was used to establish his innocence. Among other things, a reward was offered for any Bank of England notes bearing Shaw’s initials on the back, as it was ascertained that it was his custom so to mark all notes that came into his possession. But the person in whose keeping the plunder was had himself discovered the tell-tale initials and was too cautious to put them into circulation, where they would be likely to be detected, or, what is more profitable, had carefully altered the letters, for none of them were ever found. But light was to be shed on the crime from another direction. An expert London detective was employed by the prisoner’s counsel to investigate the matter, and his first inquiries were as to whether any suspicious persons had been seen around the neighborhood previous to the murder. A toll keeper between the Town and the Moat farm deposed that at about eight o’clock that evening two men passed in a dog cart, but he could give no description of them, as it was dark at the time. These men, however, had not passed the next toll gate, which was five miles distant, until four o’clock in the morning, and, though the most diligent inquiry was made, their whereabouts from eight o’clock to four could not be ascertained. The dog cart, it was found, was hired in Northampton, and returned by a youth the next day. After much patient search this lad was found at a village twelve miles distant, and from him a fuller account of the two men was obtained. One of them was clean shaved and wore a [gig] cap. The other had side whiskers, and smoked a meerschaum pipe with a snake’s head for a bowl. While going out of the dog cart at the inn in the village, the pipe fell to the ground and was broken. The man gave the fractured pipe head to the boy and put the other piece in his pocket, remarking that the mouthpiece was still good.

The two men, it was found, walked over the field to the railroad station two miles off, and there the station master remembered that they took tickets for Birmingham. Twelve hours after the discovery the police of the town were on the lookout for the two men. They were believed to be two of a gang who made Cheshire’s, on Navigation street, their headquarters, and one of them was set down as a notorious convict known as the Major. This man was tracked to a house along

with a man known as Cornish Jake. Here they were kept under surveillance until near daylight, when they quitted the place and took a cab in New Street.

The officers, watching them, followed and saw them safely lodged in a house on the Bromwich road, kept by a sporting man named Nat. Welsh. An extra force of police was obtained, and the house was entered. The Major and Cornish Jake were taken in bed, and a search of the room they brought to light the stem and mouthpiece of the broken meerschaum pipe. The officer who discovered it slipped it into his pocket, and the men were unaware of its having been taken.

They sought to establish an alibi but were held for trial. When their case came on they were confident of an acquittal, as they had witnesses to swear that both were together in Cheshire's, in Birmingham, at the time the crime was perpetrated. Though the lad at the village inn swore to their identity, yet their case was so strong as to render an escape probable, when the incident of the broken pipe was put in evidence. The head in the possession of the boy fitted the stem found in the Major's room precisely, and that settled the matter. They were convicted and sentenced to be hanged. Up to the last moment they maintained their innocence; but after their execution Big Pol delivered up to the police a large part of the plunder, admitting that the two men had placed it in her charge, but disavowing any knowledge of the murder.

The impression was that the men had got information from their Pals of Shaw's habits and wealth, and had thereupon planned and executed the crime; that they were around the house at the time of the tramp's departure, saw what was going on in the kitchen, and entered by the window by which the tramp quitted the house. Before the old man had time to fairly enter his room they sprung on him, and he fled to the bed to protect his keys, which were under the pillows. His chances in the grasp of one of his powerful assailants was small, and they quickly dispatched him. Then they locked the doors to pursue their work in safety. Having secured the booty, they determined to quit by the room window as affording an easier and readier way of escape.

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