

The Miser's Treasure

In one of the meanest houses of the meanest quarter of London, a miser sat poring over a heap of gold and gems. The only furniture the room contained was an old, rickety chair, a small deal table, and an iron pot. The miser sat in his chair; his treasure was spread on the table, and he was gloating over it by farthing rush-light, the only luxury he ever indulged in.

This treasure was vast in amount—much of it consisting of diamonds—which now, many in number, and some of them of large size, glittered before the miser's eager eyes.

The room which the miser occupied was one of several in an old, rickety, building, which contained a number of tenants, some of them as poor in-fact as he was in appearance. Now it happened that about a week before the night we speak of, a burglar had taken up his quarters in an adjoining room, which was only separated from the miser's by a board partition; and in one place in this partition there was a small crack. Coming into his room late one night, the man of crime perceived a faint glimmer of light, and, applying his eye to the crevice, discovered the miser in the act of counting over his treasure. He watched him eagerly till he saw him put it away, but could not see where he hid it. The next day, after the old man had gone, he entered his room with a skeleton key, and made a search for the treasure, but did not succeed in finding it, so carefully was it concealed. Now bent on possessing it, he returned to his own room and nearly cut away a board, low down, large enough to permit him to crawl through, and carefully put it back in its place, determined that the next time the old miser counted his treasure he would be with him.

While, therefore, on the present night, the miser was engaged with his treasure, the burglar very softly removed the cut board, and crept forward as stealthily as a cat till he stopped just behind the man he had come to murder and rob.

“Ah!” groaned the miser at length, beginning to rouse from the fascination which the sight of his treasure had thrown over him, “this really does my soul good; but it's too expensive for me to be looking at it by this costly light. I must say good night to you my lovely gold and glorious diamonds, and you must go back into my strong box, where, as fast as I can, I will add good, honest companions to you; ha! ha! good honest, companions, I assure you!”

At this moment, as if his soul had suddenly received an impression from the evil influence hovering over him, he started, shuddered, and threw his eyes quickly around. It was his last look. Like a tiger springing upon his prey, the robber clutched him by his throat with both hands, and strangled him so quickly that he never uttered a cry.

As soon as he was satisfied that his victim was dead the robber lifted the body, and laid it upon the straw in the attitude of natural repose, seized his ill-acquired treasure, thrust it into different pockets, blew out the light, and crept back into his apartment, carefully replacing the board. Then he drew a long breath, and sat down to consider his situation and altered circumstances. He was now, by one bold, wicked deed, the possessor of a fortune—an amount so vast that he fairly trembled to think about it. What was he to do next? how keep and turn it to account? He was a man of crime—a convict who had only recently returned from transportation—was well known

to the detective police, and was liable to be arrested at any moment. His best plan, he thought, would be to get out of the country as soon as possible; and as it would be dangerous for him to remain where was even till morning, the first thing for him to do was to leave his quarters at once, and get aboard the first vessel he could find going directly out of England.

Day was just breaking as the murderer reached the banks of the Thames, in the quarter of the shipping, and he was abjectly skulking along, actually attracting observation in his efforts to avoid it, when he was startled at hearing a sharp voice sing out:

“Halloo, Flipper Jimmy, when did you get back?”

“Flipper Jimmy,” as he was familiarly called by his acquaintances, looked quickly around, and beheld of all others, the very man who had arrested him prior to his transportation. Had he stopped and spoken to the officer, all would have been well, for he only intended a friendly hail, and to let him know he was still about, and ready to arrest him again, if necessary; but the murderer, with his guilty conscience and vast treasure, was too frightened to act cunning, or even with reason, and he at once bounded away.

“O, ho!” cried the officer; “that’s it, eh!” and he at once bounded after him.

There were very few people astir in this quarter, and the two had a clear run along the quay. Finding the officer gaining on him, and determined not to be captured, the convict suddenly plunged headforemost into the water, with a view of passing under a vessel, and either concealing himself or escaping on the other side. This attempt, however, proved fatal, for his head came in contact with the sharp corner of a half sunk anchor, and was spilt open at once.

The officer now called to his assistance a rough looking man, who had evidently just roused up from a night’s sleep [among] some lumber, and the two soon had the body of the robber on the quay.

“Here’s work for the coroner!” said the officer, as much thinking aloud as addressing the man who assisted him. “I know this fellow for an old burglar, and probably he has some of his thieving about him now.”

With this he thrust his hand into one of the dead man’s pockets, and, to his utter amazement, drew it forth full of gold and diamonds. This was so much more he expected to see, that for nearly a minute he remained as if fascinated with the sight, staring at the jewels, turning them over, looking through them, and really wondering if they could possibly be genuine, totally oblivious the while to the presence of the stranger.

Meantime the latter was not idle. The moment his eye fell upon the treasure, the expression of his dark, ugly features changed to that of an avaricious fiend, and he at once resolved to be himself the possessor. Glancing quickly around, and perceiving no one on the quay, and only here and there one astir on the different vessels in the vicinity, he stepped softly back, picked up a good sized billet of wood, returned, and beat in the skull of the officer at a single blow. The act was seen from a near vessel, and the cry of murder raised; but the second man of crime bent

fiercely over the two dead bodies, and succeeded in getting most of the treasure into his possession before any one came near him. He then started and ran, and, strange as it may seem, eluded his pursuers and effected his escape.

He managed to get at out fifteen miles from London the same day, and, fearful himself of losing his vast treasure, he went into a wood and buried at the foot of a tree, intending to let the most of it remain there till all his plans should be perfected for a voyage to America. He was seen digging there by a farmer, who was watching for game in some bushes near by, and who, after he had gone, went there, uncovered the ground, and found himself overwhelmed with astonishment.

Only the diamonds had been buried there by the robber; and believing them to have been stolen, and that he had as much right to them as the thief, the farmer took them home with him, pondering all the way what he should do with them, whether he should keep them secreted for the present, or go before a magistrate and disclose the whole story. Being undecided, he gradually became mysterious, and resolved to tell his family nothing. He locked the diamonds in a chest in his bedroom, and then loaded his gun with two balls and set it beside the bed.

That night the old farmer became unusually restless, and late in the night he dreamed that a robber was at work at his chest, taking out the diamonds by handfuls. He awoke in a state of great nervous excitement, the perspiration streaming from every pore; and seeing, as he supposed, the robber still at work at his treasure, he jumped up, seized his gun, fired, and shot his own wife through the back. She lived only two hours. She had got up to get some medicine for a sick child, and was bending over the till of his chest where it was kept, when the fatal mistake was made.

He was apprehended for murder; and when his explanation was given, it was considered too improbable for belief. He pointed out the tree where he had found the diamonds. A watch was set, and the second murderer arrested on his return for them. In time the whole facts came out. The farmer was cleared, but the murderer was hung. For want of heirs the treasure went to the crown.

Thus ends the sad tale of beggarly miser's fortune which, directly and indirectly, caused the death of five persons, besides much deep sorrow to many living individuals, and was finally lost, like a drop of water, in the monied ocean of the British government[.]

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