

Mr. Brisher's Treasure

H. G. Wells

"You can't be too careful who you marry," said Mr. Brisher, and pulled thoughtfully with a fat-wristed hand at the lank moustache, that hides his want of chin.

"That's why—" I ventured.

"Yes," said Mr. Brisher, with a solemn light in his bleary, blue-grey eyes, moving his head expressively and breathing alcohol intimately at me. "There's lots as 'ave 'ad a try at me—many as I could name in this town—but none 'ave done it—none."

I surveyed the flushed countenance, the equatorial expansion, the masterly carelessness of his attire, and heaved a sigh to think that by reason of the unworthiness of women he must needs be the last of his race.

"I was a smart young chap when I was younger," said Mr. Brisher. "I 'ad my work cut out. But I was very careful—very. And I got through..."

He leant over the taproom table and thought visibly on the subject of my trustworthiness. I was relieved at last by his confidence.

"I was engaged once," he said at last, with a reminiscent eye on the shuv-a'penny board.

"So near as that?"

He looked at me. "So near as that. Fact is—" He looked about him, brought his face close to mine, lowered his voice, and fenced off an unsympathetic world with a grimy hand. "If she ain't dead or married to some one else or anything—I'm engaged still. Now." He confirmed this statement with nods and facial contortions. "Still," he said, ending the pantomime, and broke into a reckless smile at my surprise. "Me!"

"Run away," he explained further, with coruscating eyebrows. "Come 'ome."

"That ain't all."

"You'd hardly believe it," he said, "but I found a treasure. Found a regular treasure."

I fancied this was irony, and did not, perhaps, greet it with proper surprise. "Yes," he said, "I found a treasure. And come 'ome. I tell you I could surprise you with things that has happened

to me.” And for some time he was content to repeat that he had found a treasure—and left it.

I made no vulgar clamour for a story, but I became attentive to Mr. Brisher’s bodily needs, and presently I led him back to the deserted lady.

“She was a nice girl,” he said—a little sadly, I thought. “And respectable.”

He raised his eyebrows and tightened his mouth to express extreme respectability—beyond the likes of us elderly men.

“It was a long way from ’ere. Essex, in fact. Near Colchester. It was when I was up in London—in the buildin’ trade. I was a smart young chap then, I can tell you. Slim. ’Ad best clo’es ’s good as anybody. ’At—silk ’at, mind you.” Mr. Brisher’s hand shot above his head towards the infinite to indicate it silk hat of the highest. “Umbrella—nice umbrella with a ’orn ’andle. Savin’s. Very careful I was...”

He was pensive for a little while, thinking, as we must all come to think sooner or later, of the vanished brightness of youth. But he refrained, as one may do in taprooms, from the obvious moral.

“I got to know ’er through a chap what was engaged to ’er sister. She was stopping in London for a bit with an aunt that ’ad a ’am an’ beef shop. This aunt was very particular—they was all very particular people, all ’er people was—and wouldn’t let ’er sister go out with this feller except ’er other sister, my girl that is, went with them. So ’e brought me into it, sort of to ease the crowding. We used to go walks in Battersea Park of a Sunday afternoon. Me in my topper, and ’im in ’is; and the girls—well—stylish. There wasn’t many in Battersea Park ’ad the larf of us. She wasn’t what you’d call pretty, but a nicer girl I never met. I liked ’er from the start and, well—though I say it who shouldn’t—she liked me. You know ’ow it is, I dessay?”

I pretended I did.

“And when this chap married ’er sister—’im and me was great friends—what must ’e do but arst me down to Colchester, close by where She lived. Naturally I was introjuced to ’er people, and well, very soon, her and me was engaged.”

He repeated “engaged.”

“She lived at ’ome with ’er father and mother, quite the lady, in a very nice little ’ouse with a garden—and remarkable respectable people they was. Rich you might call ’em a’most. They owned their own ’ouse—got it out of the Building Society, and cheap because the chap who had it before was a burglar and in prison—and they ’ad a bit of free’old land, and some

cottages and money 'nvested—all nice and tight: they was what you'd call snug and warm. I tell you, I was On. Furniture too. Why! They 'ad a pianner. Jane—'er name was Jane—used to play it Sundays, and very nice she played too. There wasn't 'ardly a 'im toon in the book she couldn't play...

“Many's the evenin' we've met and sung 'ims there, me and 'er and the family.”

“ 'Er father was quite a leadin' man in chapel. You should ha' seen him Sundays, interruptin' the minister and givin' out 'ims. He had gold spectacles, I remember, and used to look over 'em at you while 'e sang 'earty—'e was always great on singing 'earty to the Lord—and when he got out o' toon 'arf the people went after 'im—always. 'E was that sort of man. And to walk be'ind 'im in 'is nice black clo'es—'is 'at was a brimmer—made one regular proud to be engaged to such a father-in-law. And when the summer came I went down there and stopped a fortnight.

“Now, you know there was a sort of 'itch,” said Mr. Brisher. “We wanted to marry, me and Jane did, and get things settled. But 'e said I 'ad to get a proper position first. Consequently there was a 'itch. Consequently, when I went down there, I was anxious to show that I was a good useful sort of chap like. Show I could do pretty nearly everything like. See?”

I made a sympathetic noise.

“And down at the bottom of their garden was a bit of wild part like. So I says to 'im, ‘Why don't you 'ave a rockery 'ere?’ I says. ‘It 'ud look nice.’”

“‘Too much expense,’ he says.”

“‘Not a penny,’ says I. ‘I'm a dab at rockeries. Lemme make you one.’ You see, I'd 'elped my brother make a rockery in the deer garden be'ind 'is tap, so I knew 'ow to do it to rights. ‘Lemme make you one,’ I says. ‘It's 'olidays, but I'm that sort of chap, I 'ate doing nothing,’ I says. ‘I'll make you one to rights.’ And the long and the short of it was, he said I might.”

“And that's 'ow I come on the treasure.”

“What treasure?” I asked.

“Why!” said Mr. Brisher, “The treasure I'm telling you about, what's the reason why I never married.”

“What—! A treasure—dug up?”

“Yes—buried wealth—treasure trove. Come out of the ground. What I kept on saying—

regular treasure..." He looked at me with unusual disrespect.

"It wasn't more than a foot deep, not the top of it," he said. "I'd 'ardly got thirsty like, before I come on the corner."

"Go on," I said. "I didn't understand."

"Why! Directly I 'it the box I knew it was treasure. A sort of instinct told me. Something seemed to shout inside of me—'Now's your chance—lie low.' It's lucky I knew the laws of treasure trove or I'd 'ave been shoutin' there and then. I dare say you know—?"

"Crown bags it," I said, "all but one per cent. Go on. It's a shame. What did you do?"

"Uncovered the top of the box. There wasn't anybody in the garden or about like. Jane was 'elping 'er mother do the 'ouse. I was excited—I tell you. I tried the lock and then gave a whack at the hinges. Open it came. Silver coins—full! Shining. It made me tremble to see 'em. And jest then—I'm blessed if the dustman didn't come round the back of the 'ouse. It pretty nearly gave me 'eart disease to think what a fool I was to 'ave that money showing. And directly after I 'eard the chap next door—'e was 'olidaying, too—I 'eard him watering 'is beans. If only 'e'd looked over the fence!"

"What did you do?"

"Kicked the lid on again and covered it up like a shot, and went on digging about a yard away from it—like mad. And my face, so to speak, was laughing on its own account till I 'ad it 'id. I tell you I was regular scared like at my luck. I jest thought that it 'ad to be kep' close and that was all. 'Treasure,' I kep' whisperin' to myself, 'Treasure' and 'undreds of pounds, 'undreds, 'undreds of pounds.' Whispering to myself like, and digging like blazes. It seemed to me the box was regular sticking out and showing, like your legs do under the sheets in bed, and I went and put all the earth I'd got out of my 'ole for the rockery slap on top of it. I was in a sweat. And in the midst of it all, out toddles 'er father. 'E didn't say anything to me, jest stood behind me and stared, but Jane tole me afterwards when 'e went indoors, 'e says, 'That there jackanapes of yours, Jane—' he always called me a jackanapes some'ow—'knows 'ow to put 'is back into it after all.' Seemed quite impressed by it, 'e did."

"How long was the box?" I asked, suddenly.

"'Ow long?" said Mr. Brisher.

"Yes—in length?"

"Oh! 'Bout so—by so." Mr. Brisher indicated a moderate-sized trunk.

“Full?” said I.

“Full up of silver coins—’arf-crowns, I believe.”

“Why!” I cried. “That would mean—hundreds of pounds.”

“Thousands,” said Mr. Brisher, in a sort of sad calm. “I calc’lated it out.”

“But how did they get there?”

“All I know is what I found. What I thought at the time was this. The chap who’d owned the ’ouse before ’er father ’d been a regular slap-up burglar. What you’d call a ’igh-class criminal. Used to drive ’is trap—like Peace did.” Mr. Brisher meditated on the difficulties of narration and embarked on a complicated parenthesis. “I don’t know if I told you it’d been a burglar’s ’ouse before it was my girl’s father’s, and I knew ’e’d robbed a mail train once, I did know that. It seemed to me—”

“That’s very likely,” I said. “But what did you do?”

“Sweated,” said Mr. Brisher. “Regular run orf me. All that morning,” said Mr. Brisher, “I was at it, pretending to make that rockery and wondering what I should do. I’d ’ave told ’er father p’r’aps, only I was doubtful of ’is honesty—I was afraid ’e might rob me of it like, and give it up to the authorities—and besides, considering I was marrying into the family, I thought it would be nicer like if it came through me. Put me on a better footing, so to speak. Well, I ’ad three days before me left of my ’olidays, so there wasn’t no ’urry, so I covered it up and went on digging, and tried to puzzle out ’ow I was to make sure of it. Only I couldn’t.

“I thought,” said Mr. Brisher, “and I thought. Once I got regular doubtful whether I’d seen it or not, and went down to it and ’ad it uncovered again, just as ’er ma came out to ’ang up a bit of washin’ she’d done. Jumps again! Afterwards I was just thinking I’d ’ave another go at it, when Jane comes to tell me dinner was ready. ‘You’ll want it,’ she said, ‘seeing all the ’ole you’ve dug.’

“I was in a regular daze all dinner, wondering whether that chap next door wasn’t over the fence and filling ’is pockets. But in the afternoon I got easier in my mind—it seemed to me it must ’ave been there so long it was pretty sure to stop a bit longer—and I tried to get up a bit of a discussion to dror out the old man and see what ’e thought of treasure trove.”

Mr. Brisher paused, and affected amusement at the memory.

“The old man was a scorcher,” he said; “a regular scorcher.”

“What!” said I; “did he—?”

“It was like this,” explained Mr. Brisher, laying a friendly hand on my arm and breathing into my face to calm me. “Just to dror ’im out, I told a story of a chap I said I knew—pretendin’, you know—who’d found a sovring in a novercoat ’e’d borrowed. I said ’e stuck to it, but I said I wasn’t sure whether that was right or not. And then the old man began. Lor’! ’E did let me ’ave it!” Mr. Brisher affected an insincere amusement. “ ’E was, well—what you might call a rare ’and at snacks. Said that was the sort of friend ’e’d naturally expect me to ’ave. Said ’e’d naturally expect that from the friend of a out-of-work loafer who took up with daughters who didn’t belong to ’im. There! I couldn’t tell you ’arf ’e said. ’E went on most outrageous. I stood up to ’im about it, just to dror ’im out. ‘Wouldn’t you stick to a ’arf-sov’, not if you found it in the street?’ I says. ‘Certainly not,’ ’e says; ‘certainly I wouldn’t.’ ‘What! Not if you found it as a sort of treasure?’ ‘Young man,’ ’e says, ‘there’s ’i’er ’thority than mine—Render unto Caesar—’ what is it? Yes. Well, he fetched up that. A rare ’and at ’itting you over the ’ed with the Bible, was the old man. And so he went on. ’E got to such snacks about me at last I couldn’t stand it. I’d promised Jane not to answer ’im back, but it got a bit too thick. I—I give it ’im...”

Mr. Brisher, by means of enigmatical facework, tried to make me think he had had the best of that argument, but I knew better.

“I went out in a ’uff at last. But not before I was pretty sure I ’ad to lift that treasure by myself. The only thing that kep’ me up was thinking, ’ow I’d take it out of ’im when I ’ad the cash...”

There was a lengthy pause.

“Now, you’d ’ardly believe it, but all them three days I never ’ad a chance at the blessed treasure, never got out not even a ’arf-crown. There was always a Somethink—always.”

“ ’Stonishing thing it isn’t thought of more,” said Mr. Brisher. “Finding treasure’s no great shakes. It’s gettin’ it. I don’t suppose I slep’ a wink any of those nights, thinking where I was to take it, what I was to do with it, ’ow I was to explain it. It made me regular ill. And days I was that dull, it made Jane regular ’uffy. ’You ain’t the same chap you was in London,’ she says, several times. I tried to lay it on ’er father and ’is snacks, but bless you, she knew better. What must she ’ave but that I’d got another girl on my mind! Said I wasn’t True. Well, we had a bit of a row. But I was that set on the Treasure, I didn’t seem to mind a bit Anything she said.

“Well, at last I got a sort of plan. I was always a bit good at planning, though carrying out

isn't so much in my line. I thought it all out and settled on a plan. First, I was going to take all my pockets full of these 'ere 'arf-crowns—see—? And afterwards—as I shall tell.

“Well, I got to that state I couldn't think of getting at the Treasure again in the daytime, so I waited until the night before I had to go, and then, when everything was still, up I gets and slips down to the back door, meaning to get my pockets full. What must I do in the scullery but fall over a pail! Up gets 'er father with a gun—'e was a light sleeper was 'er father, and very suspicious—and there was me: 'ad to explain I'd come down to the pump for a drink because my water-bottle was bad. 'E didn't let me off a snack or two over that bit, you lay a bob.”

“And you mean to say—” I began.

“Wait a bit,” said Mr. Brisher. “I say, I'd made my plan. That put the kybosh on one bit, but it didn't 'urt the general scheme not a bit. I went and I finished that rockery next day, as though there wasn't a snack in the world; cemented over the stones, I did, dabbed it green and everythink. I put a dab of green just to show where the box was. They all came and looked at it, and said 'ow nice it was—even 'e was a bit softer like to see it, and all 'e said was, “It's a pity you can't always work like that, then you might get something definite to do,” 'e says.

“‘Yes,’ I says—I couldn't 'elp it—‘I put a lot in that rockery,’ I says, like that. See? ‘I put a lot in that rockery—’ meaning—”

“I see,” said I—for Mr. Brisher is apt to over-elaborate his jokes.

“'E didn't,” said Mr. Brisher. “Not then, anyhow.

“Ar'ever—after all that was over, off I set for London...Orf I set for London.”

Pause.

“On'y I wasn't going to no London,” said Mr. Brisher, with sudden animation, and thrusting his face into mine. “No fear! What do YOU think?

“I didn't go no further than Colchester—not a yard.

“I'd left the spade just where I could find it. I'd got everything planned and right. I 'ired a little trap in Colchester, and pretended I wanted to go to Ipswich and stop the night, and come back next day, and the chap I 'ired it from made me leave two sovrings on it right away, and off I set.

“I didn’t go to no Ipswich neither.

“Midnight the ’orse and trap was ’itched by the little road that ran by the cottage where ’e lived—not sixty yards off, it wasn’t—and I was at it like a good ’un. It was jest the night for such games—overcast—but a trifle too ’ot, and all round the sky there was summer lightning and presently a thunderstorm. Down it came. First big drops in a sort of fizz, then ’ail. I kep’ on. I whacked at it—I didn’t dream the old man would ’ear. I didn’t even trouble to go quiet with the spade, and the thunder and lightning and ’ail seemed to excite me like. I shouldn’t wonder if I was singing. I got so ’ard at it I clean forgot the thunder and the ’orse and trap. I precious soon got the box showing, and started to lift it...”

“Heavy?” I said.

“I couldn’t no more lift it than fly. I was sick. I’d never thought of that I got regular wild—I tell you, I cursed. I got sort of outrageous. I didn’t think of dividing it like for the minute, and even then I couldn’t ’ave took money about loose in a trap. I hoisted one end sort of wild like, and over the whole show went with a tremenjous noise. Perfek smash of silver. And then right on the heels of that, Flash! Lightning like the day! And there was the back door open and the old man coming down the garden with ’is blooming old gun. ’E wasn’t not a ’undred yards away!

“I tell you I was that upset—I didn’t think what I was doing. I never stopped—not even to fill my pockets. I went over the fence like a shot, and ran like one o’clock for the trap, cussing and swearing as I went. I was in a state...

“And will you believe me, when I got to the place where I’d left the ’orse and trap, they’d gone. Orf! When I saw that I ’adn’t a cuss left for it. I jest danced on the grass, and when I’d danced enough I started off to London...I was done.”

Mr. Brisher was pensive for an interval. “I was done,” he repeated, very bitterly.

“Well?” I said.

“That’s all,” said Mr. Brisher.

“You didn’t go back?”

“No fear. I’d ’ad enough of that blooming treasure, any’ow for a bit. Besides, I didn’t know what was done to chaps who tried to collar a treasure trove. I started off for London there and then...”

“And you never went back?”

“Never.”

“But about Jane? Did you write?”

“Three times, fishing like. And no answer. We’d parted in a bit of a ’uff on account of ’er being jealous. So that I couldn’t make out for certain what it meant.

“I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t even know whether the old man knew it was me. I sort of kep’ an eye open on papers to see when he’d give up that treasure to the Crown, as I hadn’t a doubt ’e would, considering ’ow respectable he’d always been.”

“And did he?”

Mr. Brisher pursed his mouth and moved his head slowly from side to side. “Not ’im,” he said.

“Jane was a nice girl,” he said, “a thorough nice girl mind you, if jealous, and there’s no knowing I mightn’t ’ave gone back to ’er after a bit. I thought if ’e didn’t give up the treasure I might ’ave a sort of ’old on ’im...Well, one day I looks as usual under Colchester—and there I saw ’is name. What for, d’yer think?”

I could not guess.

Mr. Brisher’s voice sank to a whisper, and once more he spoke behind his hand. His manner was suddenly suffused with a positive joy. “Issuing counterfeit coins,” he said. “Counterfeit coins!”

“You don’t mean to say—?”

“Yes—It. Bad. Quite a long case they made of it. But they got ’im, though ’e dodged tremenjous. Traced ’is ’aving passed, oh—! Nearly a dozen bad ’arf-crowns.”

“And you didn’t—?”

“No fear. And it didn’t do ’im much good to say it was treasure trove.”