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THE HAPPINESS OF BEING RICH.

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CHAPTER II. (Continued.)

Mother Smet remained below and listened awhile to the noise that her husband made with his sabre, hewing and thrusting at the rats in the attic.

She remained some time lost in contemplation of the happiness of being rich; a sweet smile illumined her countenance.

At last she heard the stairs creak beneath the heavy tread of her husband; she looked up in astonishment, for she saw no light on the staircase.

'Is your lamp gone out?' she asked. The scowwreger stalked down the stairs in silence and came close to her with unsteady steps.

His wife uttered a cry of terror; then she sprang up, and exclaimed—'Good heavens! what has come over you?—What have you seen?—a thief?—a ghost?'

'Silence! silence!—let me fetch my breath,' murmured the chimney-sweeper, with hushed and stifled voice.

'But what has happened, then?' shouted his wife; 'you make me feel more dead than alive.'

'Silence, I say! speak softer, Trees,' mumbled her husband, as if paralyzed by fear.—'Don't let anybody hear us.'

He came closer to her, stooped his head over her shoulder, and whispered—'Trees, Trees dear, your dream is come true—a treasure—such a great treasure.'

'Oh, poor, unhappy Smet,' shrieked his wife in alarm; 'he has lost his senses.'

'No, no; don't make any noise, or we are lost,' said her excited husband, imploringly.

'But speak out, then, for goodness' sake, what has happened?'

'I have found a treasure, exactly as you dreamed.'

'A lump of gold?'

'No, a bag of money—all silver and gold!—Come, take the lamp; I'll let you see it.'

His wife now grew pale in her turn, and trembled with astonishment. Now she began to believe that he was in earnest, and amid all her emotion a warm smile played about her lips.

'O, Smet, don't deceive me; if it isn't true, I shall die of vexation.'

'Hold your tongue, I tell you,' muttered the scowwreger between his teeth, as he went up the stairs; 'you will betray us.'

'But how came you to find it?' asked his wife, with hushed voice.

Master Smet stood still, as though he wished to gratify the curiosity of his helpmate before showing her the treasure.

'You heard well enough, Trees,' said he, 'how I struck about on the floor with my sabre. When I got up stairs there wasn't a rat to be seen, but those blows of mine made two jump out of a corner; they ran between my legs, and disappeared close to the centre-beam on which the roof is supported. I went up to the place with my lamp, but I found no opening nor crevice. After I had hunted in every hole and corner I went back to the great beam, for I couldn't conceive where the two rats had gone to.—Though I didn't see any hole, or crack even, in the beam, I struck it with my sabre—I don't know why, exactly. It sounded so hollow and made such a strange noise that I struck it harder and harder, thinking that the rats had taken up their abode inside. All of a sudden a little square plank started from the beam; and plump I down came something on my foot, so heavy that I was going to cry out with pain.'

'A lump of gold?'

'No, not exactly; a bag of money. It burst in falling, and all sorts of gold and silver coins rolled about the floor. I felt as if I had a good blow from a hammer; the lamp fell out of my hand, I shook all over, and I was obliged to hold by the wall to come down stairs. Everything seemed to be turning round and round before my eyes; I felt like a drunken man. Now come, walk on the tips of your toes; and when you speak, lower your voice as much as you can.'

When they reached the attic, the chimney-sweeper led his wife towards the centre-beam, and let the light of the lamp fall on a large linen bag which lay on the ground, with pieces of money all around it.

Dame Smet fell on her knees with a suppressed cry of joy, tore the bag open still farther, buried her hands in the pieces of money, remained a short time sunk in silent amazement, and then sprang to her feet. She raised her hand

above her head, ran round and round the attic, and danced and jumped, and at last shouted, with a loud cry—'Oh, oh, I am bursting! I shall split! Let me speak a bit. Oh, blessed heavens! we are now rich—rich as Jews.'

'Full of terror, the scowwreger seized his wife violently by the arm, with one hand, laid the other on her mouth, and growled angrily, and with a threatening voice—'You stupid, thoughtless fool. Be quiet, or I'll pinch your arm black and blue. Do you want the neighbors to know all about it?'

'Good heavens!' groaned his wife, quite terrified; 'what is the matter now? You are making a face as if you would kill me outright.—How money alters a man! All the five-and-twenty years we have been married, I never saw your eyes glare like that!'

The chimney-sweeper seemed surprised at his own vehemence; he let go her arm, and continued more calmly—'No, no, Trees, I don't mean it; but I beg you, talk more softly, and don't make any noise. Tell me, where shall we put all this money?'

'Well, let us put it down stairs in the great chest, and lock it up.'

'And suppose thieves were to come?'

'Why should they take it into their heads to come just now? The chest has stood there these hundred years.'

'Yes; but you can't be sure about it.'

'You must put it somewhere, anyhow.'

'Suppose you hide it under our bed, in the straw?'

'Oh, one can see you are not used to money, Smet. Do you think rich people hide their money in their beds? Put it in the chest, I tell you. If you find a better place to-morrow, it will be time enough to change our minds.'

Taking the second lamp from the floor, the chimney-sweeper said—'Trees, you take the money in your apron.—I will go down and lock the door, that nobody may take us by surprise; and take care you don't let the money chink as you carry it.'

While his wife was descending the stairs with a heavy freight of gold, Master Smet locked the door, and drew the night-bolt; then he went to the window, to the trap-door of the cellar, and the back door, and tried all the bolts and bars. Meanwhile his wife had locked all the treasure in the greatest chest, and she was already seated at the table, staring into the air with heaving bosom, and lingering on the sweet contemplation of her wealth.

Her husband came close to her, stretched out his hand, and said, with a stern voice—'The key.'

'The key?' exclaimed Dame Smet, in laughing amazement. 'It hasn't come to that in our old days—that you should keep the keys. I have kept them in all honor these five-and-twenty years. You would like, maybe, to squander the money in your scowwreger club; but stop a bit—I keep the money-box.'

Master Smet shook his head impatiently.

'No,' growled he; 'it is to hinder you from wasting all the money. When we had but little, it didn't seem worth while to save; but now I'll take care that we'll leave by something for the time when we are old and infirm, else we may fall into poverty and misery before we die.'

'Well, well, Smet, my lad, money doesn't do you any good,' said the Dame, with an angry, taunting voice. 'You talk like an old miser; you make a face like an undertaker.'

'Come, Trees, give me the key.'

'The key? If I have to fight for it tooth and nail, I won't give it up.'

'Won't you take anything out of the chest without my consent?'

'Well, that is to say, I won't go extravagantly to work; but that I shan't buy a few new clothes, and change my old ear-rings that I have worn so long for a rather better pair—are we not man and wife? If I were to listen to you, we should be poorer than we were before. If you don't get some enjoyment out of your money, you had better paint a quantity of ten-crown pieces on the wall; you would have the look of them all the same, and less trouble with them.'

'You don't understand me, Trees. If you go now all at once and let out that we have plenty of money, by wearing clothes which are beyond our station in life, the neighbors will begin to gossip about it, and ask how we came it.'

'Well, and what matter if they do? The money belongs to me; my forefathers have lived in this house more than a hundred years. Besides, there was no money forthcoming after my father's sudden death—he hadn't time to say where he had hidden it. And what harm would it be if everybody knew that I had found my inheritance?'

'What harm, you senseless thing! If the thieves came to know that we have so much money, they would break into the house, steal the treasure, and murder us, perhaps.'

'How timid the sight of this money has made you. I shouldn't know you again, Smet.'

'Yes; and then consider that people wouldn't so easily believe us if we said that we had found the money. God grant that we may not have the police on our shoulders; they may think it is stolen money. Then they would carry off the treasure to the police office, till the matter was properly inquired into. If the law once lays its hand on it, get it out again if you can. Alas, alas! we should be eased of our treasure, and perhaps die in misery, after all.'

'Indeed,' said the dame, anxiously, 'I think you are right.'

'O Trees, Trees dear, do be a little prudent for once; be a little more reserved, and don't tell anybody that we have become rich.'

'Yes—if only I can be silent,' grumbled his wife, and she shrugged her shoulders. 'I learned to talk from my mother, and she didn't let her tongue grow stiff for want of using.'

'Good heavens! 'tis very unlucky.'

'If every rich man were like you, it would be unlucky indeed. But can't we let the neighbors know that we have had a legacy? I have talked long enough about it, I'm sure.'

A smile overspread the face of the chimney-sweeper, and his eyes sparkled with joyful surprise. He remained awhile in great meditation, and then said—'That we have had a legacy—but then people would know that we have plenty of money in the house.'

'Well?'

'And the thieves?'

'Oh, you have lost your wits.'

'No; what do you think we will say? that we shall soon get a legacy—that we have had tidings of your uncle in Holland?'

'Of my aunt—that will be better; and if I buy a bit of new clothes, or any little trifle, people will only think that we are using a little of our legacy beforehand.'

'Well, you see, that will do; nobody will know that there is any money in the house, and everybody will allow that you are of a good family. But, Trees, you will be reasonable now, won't you, and spare our money a little?'

'Come, now, our money—you mean my money. I won't do more than our position requires.'

'And we will tell Pauw the same story, or perhaps the lad might take a whim in his head and turn spendthrift.'

'There—I hear him coming,' exclaimed the dame; 'make haste and unbolt the door, or he will ask what is going on.'

The chimney-sweeper sprang up, unlocked the door, and sat down again with a calm countenance at the table, as if nothing at all had happened.

Outside the door, in the street, resounded the ditty—'Scowwreger's gay, who lives in A. B., Companions so jolly, And frolic and folly—'

and Pauw came singing and capering into the room.

Coming up to the table, he said, in a sprightly tone of voice, and talking very fast—'Oh, oh, how we have laughed! If I had missed such a bit of fun, I should cry out, for my mouth is sore with laughing. Only think, they have made me captain of the birdcatchers' club.'

'Come, come, don't make so much noise about it,' grumbled his father.

'Oh, 't isn't about that, father,' joyously exclaimed Pauw. 'You know, father, we had laid by some money to get a new flag made for our club? The fine painter in the Winkel street—him they call Rubens, because he wears a broad hat and moustaches—well, now, he was to paint a great owl on the flag. Oh, oh, that was a clever notion. This evening, while we were sitting having a chat, all of a sudden he brought the new flag. We all jumped up, full of curiosity. Piet Kruls rolled the flag open; we looked at one another, and then we all burst out into such a terrible fit of laughter that three or four of us fell down on the ground, and the others were forced to hold their sides. But there was one who cut a very sour face, and this was the smith. Now guess what was painted on the flag?'

'Oh, always at your childish pranks,' said his mother. 'What should there be on it?—why, an owl, I suppose.'

'Yes, yes, an owl with a head as big as a child's of eight years old; but the fun of it was, that the owl and the smith were as much alike as two drops of water. There was such a laughing and such a row. The smith wanted to drag out the painter by the hair of his head—the innkeeper wanted to turn the smith out of doors;—we wanted to make it all up; three pint stroups

There are at Antwerp clubs among the lower classes, the members of which lay by a little money regularly, in order to go bird-catching in the autumn with an owl.

were broken and two hats crushed—at last, all ended in a good hearty laugh, for Rubens promised to alter the owl. But what has come to you? You are not listening to me. Father is looking so solemn, and you, too, mother. You are not ill, I hope?'

'It is no time for jesting now,' answered Dame Smet in a very serious tone of voice: 'Pauw, my lad, I want to tell you something; we are going to have a legacy.'

'Again?' shouted the youth, with mocking unbelief.

'This time it is true enough.'

'I know this song well of old. Of course, from my aunt in Holland?'

'Yes, from my aunt in Holland.'

'Come, come, mother, you have grown a little wiser now. It isn't true, father, is it?'

'It seems that it is true enough this time,' answered Master Smet, with a confirmatory nod of his head.

'Ah, well,' cried Pauw, laughing, 'then I bespeak a new pair of breeches and a dozen shirt-collars when the legacy comes.'

Both his parents held their peace, and looked grave and solemn. Pauw looked from one to the other in amazement, and grumbled; 'But, mother—but, father—you sit there quite in the dumps about the good news; tell me what you have heard.'

'I have a headache,' answered his father;—'talking worries me. I will tell you to-morrow what we have reason to expect.'

'And 'tis my aunt's legacy, which has been coming ever since—long before I came into the world?'

'Yes, yes; let us be quiet about it now.'

Pauw shook his head doubtfully, and thought in himself—'Something has turned up that they won't tell me. People who get legacies look more merry about it. Perhaps they have had some words; but I won't bother myself about that.'

He took the second lamp, lighted it, and then said—'To-morrow I must get up early, at four o'clock, to go and sweep three chimneys at the Chateau van Banst. It is a good two hours' walk from here—so good night.'

'Pauw,' said his mother with a significant pride in her voice, 'we are no longer scowwreger—and when you go out to-morrow put on your Sunday clothes; do you hear?'

'Look now, mother; don't take it ill,' said the lad with a smile, 'but that is going rather too far.'

'And, anyhow, my lady's servant has been to say that you are not to go to the chateau to-morrow.'

'That's quite another thing. Then I shall get a good long sleep. To-morrow the legacy will be flown away up the chimney, just like the other times. Good night, mother; a pleasant sleep, father.'

He went up stairs with light and merry step, and hummed quite audibly as he went—'Scowwreger's gay, who lives in A. B., Companions so jolly, All frolic and folly—'

Master Smet and his wife remained sitting below at least two hours longer. Whatever efforts the dame made to induce her husband to betake himself to rest, it seemed that he could not make up his mind to leave the place where his treasure lay. He had already tried all the doors and bolts over and over again, when at struck midnight. Then, after one more anxious and protracted scrutiny, he followed his wife up the stairs; and still, as he went up, he turned his eyes, ten times at least, to the chest which contained the riches.

The nerves of the chimney-sweeper were so much shaken by the finding of the treasure, that the poor man, exhausted and tired as he was, could not close his eyes. He turned from side to side, stretched himself out and yawned, then twisted his limbs about, and moaned with long respirations. His heart beat violently and irregularly; every now and then felt as if a stream of ice-cold water were being poured down his back.

It happened at length that he wandered off into a light doze; but at the moment when a man is passing from waking to sleeping life, his nerves are most quick and sensitive. The scowwreger could not pass this moment; every time the coming slumber broke the chain of his musings, he sprang up in his bed and listened with terror to some noise he fancied he had heard;—and, indeed, the rats in the attic were rushing up and down, racing nerrily one after another, or fighting, with loud squeaking and crying just as if they were still in the house of a poor man, whose slumbers are peaceful and sound, beyond reach of disturbances.

It might be that he had at length, after long twisting and turning, got fairly off, for he snored very loud. Gradually his breathing became oppressed, and assumed a tone expressive of suffer-

ing, as though master Smet were tormented by unseemly spirits. The sweat of anguish stood in beads on his forehead; all his limbs were violently contracted.

Suddenly the struggling words broke forth from his constricted breast, and he shouted, in a tone of distress—'No, no, it isn't true; I have no money. Oh, oh, let me go; let me go.'

His wife, roused from her sleep, seized her husband by the arm, gave him a vigorous shake, and exclaimed—'Eh, Smet, what are you up to now? Is the nightmare astride of you? or are you out of your mind?'

The husband stared in horror all round the dusky room, and groaned and shuddered: 'Oh, dear, dear, where am I? I thought I was dead! Is that you, Trees?'

'Why, who on earth should it be? 'Tis all your snoring. You lie there wriggling and twisting like an eel on a gridiron. 'Tis easy enough to see that you are not used to money. It doesn't hinder me from sleeping, though I am so uncommonly glad; but, you see, I am of a good family.'

'Oh, Trees,' moaned Master Smet, wiping the cold, clammy perspiration from his forehead,—'oh, Trees, what I have suffered is not to be described! Only fancy: I was scarcely asleep, when something came all of a sudden and sat upon my chest, and I felt as if it was trying to crush in my heart with its knees. It had its claws fastened in my neck, and squeezed my throat all up together. I couldn't make out at first what it was; but it was like a wild beast, with long black hair, and it had a great knife in its paw. It wanted to make me tell where the money was; and because I wouldn't, it gripped my throat, and was going to stick the knife into my heart. I felt I was dying; then my eyes seemed to open, and I screamed with terror when I saw what it was. Oh, Trees, I tremble now only to think of it; it was a thief, a murderer.'

'Come, come, leave off your boyish tricks,' said his wife, jestingly. 'Why will you lie with your arm under your head? 'Tis that gives you the nightmare. 'Tis very late; just try to go to sleep, and don't disturb me any more. Now, a good rest to you.'

In a few minutes Dame Smet was fast asleep again.

The luckless scowwreger was not so fortunate. He made no effort to fall asleep again, for his fright had taken away all inclination to rest.—For full half an hour he lay, with his eyes wide open, staring at darkness, and dreaming, though broad awake, of policemen and of thieves, so that at length he jumped out of bed and dressed, without making any noise.

Then he went, creeping along on the tips of his toes, to the place where he knew that a table stood, and felt over it with his hand, searching for something. A sigh of glad surprise escaped him when he discovered his wife's pocket. He took out the key of the chest, and went down the stairs with slow and cautious steps.

When he reached the room below, he lighted a little lamp, went to the chest, opened it, gazed a while upon the money with an ecstatic smile, then locked the chest again, and sat down with his head in his hands and his elbows upon the table.

After a little silence, he began musing aloud: 'Ha, there it lies all safe. Ha, to be rich—to have money—what a bliss! But, after all, it brings care and trouble with it, and it breaks one's night, somehow. My wife has such grand notions; she wants to live in a big house, to wear rich clothes, to buy gold and diamonds!—Pauw is young; he'll want to play the young gentleman, and spend a good deal; and so they'll make my poor money out a pretty figure. It will melt away like snow in the sunshine—and at last—yes, at last—I shall have to lie upon straw in my old age, and perhaps go a begging for my daily bread.'

'This thought filled him with alarm; he pressed his hands forcibly against his head, and remained a moment, staring with a pale and bloodless face, into vacancy. Then he continued:—'Oh, what a misfortune to have a wife who can't keep her tongue still in her head! Early to-morrow morning, by day-break at least, she will be running about her neighbors, and gossiping and boasting that she is going to have a legacy. Thousands won't be enough for her;—she'll talk of millions. Everybody will be full of it; all over the city people will be talking of the scowwreger who has so suddenly become rich. The thieves will be lurking about our house, and then one of these fine nights they will be making off with the treasure. I shall be poor again poor again. Oh, what anxiety and misery a rich man has to bear!'

After a little pause, he continued his musings: 'It is odd. I was as lively as a fish in the water; men called me Jan-Grap, because I was so full of fun. I knew nothing of sorrow or