

The Stolen Bullion.

COMPLETE SHORT STORY.

Mr Henry Thornton, managing director of the Eclipse Shipping Company, sat impatiently at his desk in his comfortable but quietly furnished office in Liverpool.

He looked the picture of misery. The deep lines which contracted his massive forehead, and the continual rubbing of his hands through his dishevelled iron-grey hair, spoke only too plainly of great mental agitation.

Starting in the Eclipse Shipping Company 30 years ago, he had by dogged pluck and perseverance, risen to his present envied position, but now he had to acknowledge himself beaten.

For a month past a series of daring burglaries had taken place on their largest Atlantic liner, Stalwart, which defied even a man of Mr Thornton's ingenuity to penetrate.

A slight tap sounded on the door, and, in response to the manager's "Come in," a well-built smartly dressed young man of about twenty-five entered the room.

"Good morning, sir," he said briskly. The manager removed his pince-nez.

"Good morning, Strong," he replied, "I want to speak to you on a matter of grave importance to the firm, and therefore, I must ask for your word of honour not to repeat our conversation to any other member of the staff."

The young man nodded acquiescence.

"I understand, Strong," continued the manager, "that you have just returned to the firm after serving over four years in the army on the intelligence staff, and, therefore, I thought that I couldn't do better than appeal to you for your advice on a matter which is seriously menacing the firm's good name."

"As no doubt you know," went on the manager quickly, "the Stalwart is our largest and most up-to-date liner, and, the last three trips this vessel has made, the specie-room has in some remarkable manner, which has defied all our experts, been successfully burgled."

"It is in the hope that you may be able to throw some new light on the mystery, that I have asked you here."

"I thank you sir, for your confidence," replied the young man, "but I must ask for further details. Can you tell me whether the whole of the contents have been taken on these occasions?"

"No, that's the peculiar part of it, but altogether articles and bullion to the value of two hundred thousand pounds have been stolen."

The young man whistled softly through his teeth.

"When does the Stalwart set sail again for New York?" he asked.

"To-morrow!"

"Well, could you give me a berth on the boat?"

"Most decidedly. In fact, I thought of suggesting very much, the same thing myself. Could you undertake a purser's job?"

"H'm, it's doubtful, but I'll try. That would suit me much better, as I could then get in direct touch with all the passengers and crew."

"Splendid!" ejaculated the manager. "I'll arrange everything with Mr Drake, the present purser, and you can talk things over with him."

Mr Thornton lifted himself slowly from his chair, and laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I am very glad, Strong," he added, "that you have consented to make the trip as we have just been commissioned to deliver a consignment of diamonds of intrinsic value to a New York millionaire, and just now the newspapers are giving us a hot time. Therefore, I fervently trust that you will be able to clear up the mystery, and if you are successful, you may be sure that the firm will recognise your services."

"I will do my best, sir," replied the young man, straightening his broad shoulders. "I cannot say more."

The manager held out his hand, and his face brightened as the young man gripped it warmly.

"Thank you, Strong," he said, "I wish you success. Now," he added, as he opened the door, "if you will come along with me, I'll introduce you to Mr Drake, and he'll show you over the boat."

With that the two men left the room.

Precisely at eleven o'clock the Stalwart eased her moorings and drifted majestically away from the cosmopolitan crowd on the quay.

Soon she was making full steam ahead for Fishguard, where she would pick up the mails and a few more passengers before commencing her voyage across the vast Atlantic.

Many and arduous are the duties of a purser on a large Atlantic liner like the Stalwart, and Peter Strong soon found what a difficult and thankless task he had undertaken.

But after the first two days he began to settle down, and although he was still kept very busy, he managed to spare a few minutes every day during which time he would pay a hurried visit to the specie room to assure himself that the diamonds were still safely under lock and key.

And so the days passed wearily on without anything happening, and Peter Strong began to get a little despondent.

"I wonder," he murmured as he emerged from his office on the morning of the sixth day, "whether the thief I am looking for is aboard this vessel? I hardly think he can be, unless—"

He paused, thinking deeply, then with a slight shrug of his shoulders he walked on muttering to himself.

"No, it is impossible for anyone to have scented the real purpose of my trip."

"Well!" he added as he turned down a passage which led to the specie-room, "if he is not aboard I can at least find consolation in the fact that I have carried the diamonds safely to their destination."

By this time Strong had reached the specie-room, and, after fumbling for a moment inside his waistcoat, extracted a curiously shaped key which he was wearing next to his skin, and which was suspended from his neck by means of a thin cord.

He paused in front of the door and looked round.

The passage was quite clear.

Everybody was either up on deck or busy packing in their cabins.

"I'll just go inside and take those precious stones into my safe keeping," observed Peter, as he inserted the key in the lock.

He turned it sharply three times, and with a slight pressure the massive steel door swung inwards.

Stepping inside, he closed the door and carefully locked it.

The specie-room was a small one about fifteen feet square, and was strongly encased with thick steel.

Switching on the electric light, Peter gazed across to where he had previously placed the small case of diamonds.

"Great Scott," he muttered hoarsely, as he stood staring in front of him.

The diamonds had disappeared!

Then, as if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses he rushed blindly across the room, and commenced a hurried search of the shelf, but the diamonds seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"Well, this is the absolute limit!" exclaimed Peter scratching his head thoughtfully. "I'm certain the thief did not enter by the door, for I took the precaution before we sailed of having a lock fixed which I will defy the smartest cracksmen in the world to pick, and as for the key, I'm positive that a duplicate doesn't exist, for this one—he tapped his chest significantly—"hasn't left my person since I received it from the locksmith's."

He looked round the massive steel walls of the specie-room.

"If the thief did not come in by that door, how on earth did he enter?"

This was the question which kept running through the young man's mind.

"Well, it's no use standing here wasting precious moments," he muttered to himself. "Within eight hours we shall arrive at New York, and I must during that short period place the thief in irons."

He smiled ironically. The task seemed a stupendous one, but he set to work in a calm, cool, and methodical manner.

Carefully he examined the pigeon-hole in which the diamonds had lain before their sudden and mysterious disappearance.

For fully thirty minutes he worked silently and diligently, but still his efforts were not rewarded with even a slight clue.

Time was very precious, and with a sigh, narrowly approaching despair, he directed his attention to the back of the pigeon-hole, which also formed part of the wall of the specie-room.

Here the light was rather weak and Strong was forced to use his electric torch.

"Ah, that's better!" he murmured, as he began to examine the steel wall. "A little more light improves matters."

Suddenly his face flushed with excitement as he leaned forward to make a closer examination.

"Hullo, what's this?" he exclaimed aloud.

A thin, straight line was just discernible running down the wall at the back of the pigeon-hole.

With the aid of a powerful microscope he closely inspected it, but to his surprise, did not discover any foot-prints.

"H'm! That's peculiar!" observed Peter, rubbing his chin thoughtfully between his forefinger and thumb. "I wonder what is on the other side of this wall?" he added. "I'll make inquiries."

Fortune favoured Peter, for directly he left the specie-room, he ran full tilt into the chief steward.

"Good!" exclaimed Strong, catching hold of his coat sleeve. "Just the man I'm looking for."

The chief steward's face fell immediately. Evidently he expected some extra duties.

"Oh, it's all right, Manning," said Peter quickly. "I only want you to enlighten me on one or two facts."

The chief steward nodded.

"I want to know," continued Peter, "what is on the other side of the specie-room?"

"One of the second-class cabins."

"Do you know who occupies it?"

"Er—let me see," replied the chief steward, striking a thoughtful attitude and drumming his fingers against his forehead. "Ah, I know, Mr Turnbull!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Mr Turnbull," echoed Peter.

"Yes, I remember the gentleman's name particularly, because this is the third time in succession he has travelled by this boat, and I am not likely to forget the shindy he kicked up on his first trip."

The chief steward emphasised his words by venomously ejecting a plug of tobacco which he had been chewing.

"Ho, this is getting interesting!" murmured Peter to himself. "And what was that about?" he asked aloud.

"Why, the old humbug would persist in having that room, although I explained that it was the smallest and the most uncomfortable of the second-class cabins. After considerable trouble I arranged it for him, and then, as if in thanks for my kindness, he complains to me about his bedroom steward, and asked if Hawkins could attend him instead. Well, purser, you know as well as I do that it is part and parcel of our business to make ourselves agreeable."

He paused as though expecting Peter to make some remark, but as no retort was forthcoming he continued:

"Of course, I sanctioned it, and ever since then the obstreperous Mr Turnbull has been satisfied, for I've had no further complaints."

"Has Mr Turnbull always occupied that room on the three occasions he has travelled by this boat?"

"Oh, yes!"

Peter Strong made as if to walk away, but he turned suddenly and flung over his shoulder:

"By the way, Manning, who is Hawkins? Is he smart at his work?"

Peter asked these questions nonchalantly, so as not to arouse the chief steward's suspicions.

"Oh, yes," replied Mainnfig. "In fact, he is the smartest carpenter on my staff."

"Is that so, observed Strong, with a slight tilt of his eyebrows. "Thanks!"

With that the two men parted.

"Excellent!" muttered Peter as the chief steward disappeared down the passage. "The information I've just received puts a new light on the affair. I think I will continue my investigations in Mr Turnbull's cabin."

He walked down the passage, and paused in front of a dark-stained door.

"Ah, this is the one! I wonder if he is in." He rapped loudly on the door with his knuckles, and waited, but silence prevailed. He knocked again, still no answer.

"That settles it," he muttered. "The old boy is evidently up on deck. I must examine that room, so here goes."

With the aid of a skeleton key, Peter Strong soon had the door open, and peered cautiously inside.

The room was meagrely, but neatly furnished. Stepping inside, Peter closed the door and locked it; then he proceeded to measure the position where the tampered plate of the specie-room would back on to Mr Turnbull's cabin.

This done he next examined the panelling, but everything was above suspicion.

"Well," muttered Peter, as he produced a hammer and chisel from his coat pocket, "nothing venture nothing have."

As the last words fell from his lips the chisel commenced its deadly work on the

panelling, and large splinters of wood fell before the sharp instrument.

In a few minutes Peter had hacked away the woodwork, and leaned forward to survey the result of his labour.

"H'm!" he exclaimed. "Just what I imagined. It is a back door into the specie-room. But how on earth did he manage it? This was never done with a drill."

He leaned forward into the hole, and examined the plate.

The original plate had been ingeniously melted out with oxyhydrogen flame, and a false one shipped in its place.

"That's very clever work, indeed, Mr Turnbull," muttered Peter, to himself as he rose to his feet. "But it needed an assistant with an expert knowledge of carpentering to refix the panelling so skillfully. That explains the reason for the old scoundrel complaining about his bedroom steward, and asking for the services of Hawkins. It was—"

He stopped abruptly in his reflections, for footsteps could be heard coming along the passage. Hastily and silently Peter Strong ran across the room and placed a large divan chair in front of the hole he had just made.

The footsteps paused outside the door, and Peter looked round for a place of concealment as he heard a key being inserted in the lock.

To be discovered now would mean the ruin of all his plans.

The door was being opened, and muffled voices were plainly audible.

He must hide, but where—where?

Quickly he glanced round the room, and just managed to secret himself behind the divan as two men entered.

Peter ventured to take a surreptitious peep at his visitors.

The first man was a short, fleshy, overdressed individual, on whose chubby hands several diamonds flashed ostentatiously.

Immediately behind him followed another man, slightly taller, and dressed in the uniform of a bedroom steward.

The two men seated themselves at a small table directly opposite to where Peter lay concealed.

"Now, Hawkins," began the overdressed individual, placing a small case on the table, "how are we going to pass these diamonds through the customs?"

"Why not try the same method that we used before," suggested Hawkins.

"What! You mean the hollow crutches, and place the diamonds inside?"

"Yes."

"H'm! I'm afraid it can't be done. You see, I haven't time to trip up accidentally and hurt my leg sufficiently to need the use of crutches. Besides, it's risky to use the same method twice."

"There is no need to put yourself to such inconvenience, Mr Turnbull," said a quiet voice. "I can manage to pass them through the customs quite easily!"

With loud exclamations of astonishment the two men turned swiftly in their seats and gazed down the muzzle of a revolver which Peter had levelled at them over the top of the divan.

"The purser!" cried the bedroom steward hoarsely, and his limbs shook as if suffering from ague; but his companion swiftly regained his self-composure.

"Who gave you permission to enter my cabin?" he said sternly.

Peter Strong laughed.

"You were not in when I called so I entered without it."

As he spoke he pulled the divan aside without taking his eyes off the man.

"And this," he added, indicating the large hole in the panelling, "is the result of my visit."

Like a tiger at bay Turnbull sat fidgeting in his chair, his eyes gleaming, his lips twitching, and his short hair bristling with anger.

"Come! I can't stand looking at your ugly face any longer, Mr Turnbull, put up your hands!"

With a curse the man obeyed.

"Now, you miserable dupe," exclaimed Peter, flinging the steward, who by this time had almost fainted with fright, a pair of handcuffs, "just slip those bracelets on your confederate's wrists, and sharp's the word!"

The steward was too terrified to disobey, and a few seconds later he had securely handcuffed his companion.

Stepping across to the table, Peter placed the case of diamonds in his pocket, and then escorted the two men to another room, where they were put safely under lock and key.

Three weeks later the two men were deported to England, where Turnbull received a long term of imprisonment, which is likely to keep him out of mischief for many a long year. But, Hawkins, owing to the fact that he turned King's evidence, received a much lighter sentence.

Although Peter Strong was not able to account for all the articles and bullion stolen by Turnbull, he recovered best part of it, and he was very well satisfied with the fat cheque he received from Mr Thornton in payment for his services.

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