

MR. BRISHER'S TREASURE

By H. G. Wells

Illustrated by Don Wilson



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

"That's who," I ventured.

"Yes," said Mr. Brisher, with a solemn light in his bleary blue-gray 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 leaned 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 fancy 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 clamor 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 little girl," he said—a little sadly, I thought. "And respectable."

If she ain't dead or married to some one else or anything—I'm engaged still."

THE finding of buried treasure always has a romantic touch, but here is one with an entirely new angle. You will like it.

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—good as anybody. 'At—silk 'at, mind you." Mr. Brisher's hand shot above his head to indicate a silk hat of the highest. "Umbrella—nice umbrella, with a 'orn 'andle. Savin's. Very careful, I was. * * *

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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 her 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, 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 introduced 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 cheaper 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 invested, 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 leading man in chapel. You should ha' seen 'm 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 'early—'e was always great on singin' 'early to the Lord—and when 'e was out of 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—'s '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

rockeries. Lemme make you one? You see, I'd 'elped my brother make a rockery in the beer 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 thirst 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 'd 'ave been shoutin' there and then. I daresay you know—"

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CROWN bags it," I said, "all but 1 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 'inges. 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—'eard him waterin' '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 kept whisperin' to myself, 'Treasure,' and 'undreds and 'undreds of pounds, 'undreds and 'undreds of pounds.' Whisperin' to myself like, and diggin' like blazes. It seemed to me the box was regular sticking out and showing, like your



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 day at

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. He