

THE LOST DIAMOND SNUFF BOX.

Author Unknown

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Table of Contents

<u>THE LOST DIAMOND SNUFF BOX</u>	1
<u>Author Unknown</u>	2

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The grand old kingdom of England, in the course of the mossy centuries you can count over its head, has had its times of gloom and depression at dangers that looked near, and its times of shouting and rejoicing over dangers its brave men have driven away quite out of sight again.

One of the deepest seasons of gloom was when the French Emperor, Napoleon, had conquered one country after another, until there was scarcely anything but England left to attack; and one of the proudest times of rejoicing was when the "Iron Duke" Wellington, and the bluff old Prussian, Blucher, met him at Waterloo, defeated his armies and drove him from the field. There were bonfires, and bell-rings then, and from that day onward England loved and cherished every man who had fought at Waterloo—from the "Duke" himself down to the plainest private, every one was a hero and a veteran.

In one of the humblest houses of a proud nobleman's estate, a low, whitewashed cottage, one of these veterans lived not so very many years ago. He had fought by his flag in one of the most gallant regiments until the last hour of the battle, and then had fallen disabled from active service for the rest of his life.

That did not seem to be of so very great consequence though, just now; for peace reigned in the land, and with his wife and two beautiful daughters to love, his battles to think over, and his pension to provide the bread and coffee, the old soldier was as happy as the day was long. It made no difference that the bread and the coffee were both black, and the clothes of the veteran were coarse and seldom new.

"Ho, Peggy!" he used to say to his wife, "my cloak is as fine as the one the 'Iron Duke' wore when they carried me past him just as the French were breaking; and as for the bread, only a veteran knows how the recollection of victory makes everything taste sweet!"

But it seemed as if the old soldier's life was going to prove like his share in that great day at Waterloo—success and victory till the end had nearly come, and then one shot after another striking him with troubles, he could never get over.

The first came in the midst of the beautiful summer days, when the bees droned through the delicious air, the rose-bush was in full bloom, and the old soldier sat in the cottage door reveling in it all. A slow, merciless fever rose up through the soft air—it did not venture near the high ground where the castle stood, but it crept noiselessly into the whitewashed cottage, one night, and the soldier's two daughters were stricken down. This was the beginning of terrible trouble to the veteran of Waterloo. Not that he minded watching, for he was used to standing sentry all night, and as for nursing, he had seen plenty in the hospital; but to see his daughters suffering—that was what he could not bear!

And worst of all, between medicines and necessaries for the sick, the three months' pension was quite used up, and when the old soldier's nursing had pulled through the fierceness of the fever, there was nothing but black bread left in the house—and black bread was almost the same as no bread at all to the dainty appetites the fever had left; and that was what he had to think of, and think of, as he sat in the cottage door.

"Bah!" said the old soldier, with something more like a groan than was ever heard from him while his wounds were being dressed, "I could face all the armies of Napoleon better than this!"

And he sat more and more in the cottage door, as if that could leave the trouble behind; but it stood staring before him, all the same, till it almost shut the rosebush and the bees out of sight. But one morning a tremendous surprise came to him like a flash out of the sky! He heard the sound of galloping troops, and he pricked up his ears, for that always made him think of a cavalry charge.

"Who goes there?" he cried; but without answering his challenge the sound came nearer and nearer, and a lackey in full livery dashed up to the door, and presented him with a note sealed with the blood-red seal of the castle arms. It was an invitation to dine at the castle with a company of noblemen and officers of the army. His lordship, who had also fought at Waterloo, had just learned that a comrade was living on his estate, and made

THE LOST DIAMOND SNUFF BOX.

haste to do him honor, and secure a famous guest for his dinner party.

The old soldier rose up proudly, and gave the lackey a military salute.

"Tell his lordship," he said, "that I shall report myself at headquarters, and present my thanks for the honor he has done me."

The lackey galloped off, and the veteran pushed his chair over with his wooden leg, and clattered across the cottage floor.

"Ho, Peggy!" he cried, "did I not say that luck comes and trouble flies if you only face the enemy long enough? This is the beginning of good things, I tell you! A hero of Waterloo, and fit to dine with lords and generals, will certainly have other good fortune coming to him, till he can keep his wife and daughters like princesses. Just wait a bit and you shall see!" and he turned hastily away, for his heart came up in his throat so that he could not speak.

All the rest of that day he sat in the door, brushing and darning and polishing his stained uniform. It had lain abandoned on the shelf for many a year, but before night every button was shining like gold, the scarlet cloth was almost fresh once more, and the old soldier, wrapped in his faithful cloak, was making his way joyfully across the heathery moors to the castle quite at the other side.

But when he had fairly reached it, and the servant had shown him into the drawing-room, his heart almost failed him for a moment. Such splendor he had never seen before—a thousandth part would have bought health and happiness for the dear ones he had left with only his brave goodbye and a fresh rose-bud to comfort them!

However, what with the beautiful ladies of the castle gathering round him to ask questions about the battle, and with a seat near his lordship's right hand at dinner, he soon plucked up again, and began to realize how delightful everything was. But that was the very thing that almost spoiled the whole again, for when he saw his plate covered with luxuries and delicacies more than he could possibly eat, the thought of the black bread he had left at the cottage brought the tears rushing to his eyes.

But, "Tut!" he said to himself in great dismay, "what an ungrateful poltroon his lordship will think he has brought here!" and he managed to brush them off while no one was looking.

It was delicious, though, in spite of everything, and after a while the wine began to flow—that warmed his very heart—and then he heard his lordship calling to a servant to bring him something from his private desk, saying:

"Gentlemen, I am about to show you the proudest treasure I possess. This diamond snuff-box was presented to me by the stout old Blucher himself, in remembrance of service I was able to perform at Waterloo. Not that I was a whit worthier of it than the brave fellows under my command—understand that!"

How the diamonds glistened and gleamed as the box was passed from hand to hand! As if the thickest cluster of stars you ever saw, could shine out in the midst of a yellow sunset sky, and the colors of the rainbow could twinkle through them at the same time! It was superb, but then that was nothing compared to the glory of receiving it from Blucher!

Then there was more wine and story-telling, and at last some asked to look at the snuff-box again.

"Has any one the snuff-box at present?" asked his lordship, rather anxiously, for as he turned to reach it no snuff-box was to be seen.

No one said "yes," for everyone was sure he had passed it to his neighbor, and they searched up and down the table with consternation in their faces, for the snuff-box could not have disappeared without hands, but to say so was to touch the honor of gentlemen and soldiers.

At last one of the most famous officers rose from his seat:

"My lord, he said, "a very unlucky accident must have occurred here. Some one of us must have slipped the box into his pocket unconsciously, mistaking it for his own. I will take the lead in searching mine, if the rest of the company will follow!"

"Agreed!" said the rest, and each guest in turn went to the bottom of one pocket after another, but still no snuff-box, and the distress of the company increased. The old soldier's turn came last, and with it came the surprise. With burning cheeks and arms folded closely across his breast he stood up and confronted the company like a stag at bay.

"No!" he exclaimed, "no one shall search my pockets! Would you doubt the honor of a soldier?"

"But we have all done so," said the rest, "and every one knows it is the merest accident at the most." But the

THE LOST DIAMOND SNUFF BOX.

old soldier only held his arms the tighter, while the color grew deeper in his face. In his perplexity his lordship thought of another expedient.

"We will try another way, gentlemen," he said, "I will order a basket of bran to be brought, and propose that each one in turn shall thrust his hand into the bran. No one shall look on, and if we find the box at last, no one can guess whose hand placed it there."

It was quickly done, and hand after hand was thrust in, until at last came the old soldier's turn once more. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Then, at last the indignation of the company broke forth.

"A soldier, and a hero of Waterloo, and willing to be a thief!" and with their distress about the affair, and his lordship's grief at his loss, the evening was entirely spoiled.

Meantime the old soldier, with his faithful cloak wrapped closely round him once more, was fighting his way through the sharp winds and over the moors again. But a battle against something a thousand times sharper and colder was going on in his breast.

"A thief!" he was saying over and over to himself, "me, who fought close to the side of the 'Iron Duke'! And yet, can I look one of them in the face and tell him he lies?"

The walk that had been gone over so merrily was a terrible one to retrace, and when the cottage was reached, instead of the pride and good luck the poor invalids had been watching for, a gloom deadlier than the fever followed him in. He sat in the doorway as he used, but sometimes he hung his head on his breast, and sometimes started up and walked proudly about, crying—

"Peggy! I say no one shall call me a thief! I am a soldier of the Iron Duke!"

But they did call him a thief, though, for a very strange thing, after his lordship had sorrowfully ordered the cottage and little garden spot to be searched no box was found, and the gloom and the mystery grew deeper together.

Good nursing could not balance against trouble like this; the beautiful daughters faded and died, the house was too gloomy to stay inside, and if he escaped to the door, he had to hear the passers say—

"There sits the soldier who stole the Blucher diamonds from his host!"

And as if this was not enough, one day the sound of hoofs was heard again, and a rider in uniform clattered up to the door saying:

"Comrade, I am sent to tell you that your pension is stopped! His Majesty cannot count a thief any longer a soldier of his!"

After this the old soldier hardly held up his head at all, and his hair, that had kept black as a coal all these years, turned white as the moors when the winter snows lay on them.

"Though that is all the same, Peggy," he used to say, "for it is winter all the year round with me! If I could only die as the old year does! That would be the thing!"

But long and merciless as the winter is, spring does come at last, if we can but live and fight our way through the storms and cold.

One night a cry of fire roused all the country-side. All but the old soldier. He heard them say the castle was burning, but what was that to him? Nothing could burn away the remembrance that he had once been called a thief within its walls! But the next morning he heard a step—not a horse's hoof this time, but a strong man walking hastily towards him.

"Where is the veteran of Waterloo?" asked his lordship's voice, and when the old soldier stepped forward, he threw his arms about his neck with tears and sobs.

"Comrade," he said, "come up to the castle! The snuff-box is found, and I want you to stand in the very room where it was lost while I tell everyone what a great and sorrowful wrong a brave and honest soldier has suffered at my hands!"

It did not take many words to explain. In the first alarm of fire the butler had rushed to the plate-closet to save the silver.

"Those goblets from the high shelf! Quick!" he said, to the footman who was helping him, and with the haste about the goblets something else came tumbling down.

"The lost diamond snuff-box!" cried the butler. "That stupid fellow I dismissed the day it disappeared, must have put it there and forgotten all about it!"

THE LOST DIAMOND SNUFF BOX.

The fire was soon extinguished, but not a wink of sleep could his lordship get until he could make reparation for the pitiful mistake about the box; and once more the old soldier made his way across the moors, even the wooden leg stepping proudly as he went along, though now and then, as the old feeling came over him, his white head would droop for a moment again.

The servants stood aside respectfully as he entered the castle, and they and the other guests of that unlucky day gathered round him while his lordship told them how the box had been found and how he could not rest until forgiven by the brave hero he had so unjustly suspected of wrong.

"And now," said the company, "will you not tell us one thing more? Why did you refuse to empty your pockets, as all the rest were willing to do?"

"Because," said the old soldier sorrowfully, "because I WAS a thief, and I could not bear that anyone should discover it! All whom I loved best in the world were lying sick at home, starving for want of the delicacies I could not provide, and I felt as if my heart would break to see my plate heaped with luxuries while they had not so much as a taste! I thought a mouthful of what I did not need might save them, and when no one was looking I slipped some choice bits from my plate between two pieces of bread and made way with them into my pocket. I could not let them be discovered for a soldier is too proud to beg, but oh, my lord, he can bear being called a thief all his life better than he can dine sumptuously while there is only black bread at home for the sick and weak whom he loves!"

Tears came streaming from the old soldier's listeners by this time, and each vied with the other in heaping honors and gifts in place of the disgrace suffered so long; but all that was powerless to make up for the past.

Two good lessons may be learned from the story: Never believe any one guilty who is not really proved to be so. Never let false shame keep you from confessing the truth, whether trifling or of importance.