

Chapter 5 - The rich old man (Part 1), March 1923



OLD Mr. Carney lived in a beautiful house on the hill, just beyond Dalys. He was very rich. The children of the neighbourhood told many tales of his fabulous wealth; of his gold plates and cups and dishes; of an iron room packed with sovereigns, packed and sealed, with just a little, secret opening, through which the gold coins poured on his touching, in a certain mysterious manner, a certain spot in a certain panel of the room. The children always passed his gates slowly, with indrawn breath and wide, wondering eyes. 'Twas said he had a gold bed and gold tables and (but he never used it) a gold motor car, and that his daughter had turned to gold at his touch, and was kept in a glass case in the hall, where anyone who went in might see her - or her form in gold. But, then, nobody knew anybody who had been in the hall! In short, he was a modern Midas, but whether he had ass's ears no one knew. The Dalys strongly suspected that he had, for long ago they had heard Mother say to Father that everything Mr. Carney touched turned to gold, and Father say to Mother that Mr. Carney was a modern Midas, "ass's ears and all."

Teddy and the Twins often lay in wait at the big gates to prove the truth of Father's assertion, but Mr. Carney whirled by in a motor (not the gold one), and did not appear to have any ears at all. Teddy did catch a glimpse of an old gentleman very like Mr. Carney when he went to the city one day with Uncle Michael, and Teddy said that he wore a bandage round his head to conceal his secret; but whether this was imagination on Teddy's part, or whether he saw some other old gentleman suffering from ear-ache, had never rightly been proved.

Father was seated in his canvas deck-chair, smoking contentedly. It was a bright afternoon; the sun seemed loth to go to bed; he lingered like a naughty child begging for just another few minutes, and just another few... And then, when he really consented to go, he went so slowly, and turned to look back over his shoulder so often, that it was bright long after the usual time.

Mother was doing a little mending - a little of the lot of mending that was always in her basket. There was always mending and darning to be done at Dalys; knees and toes will work their way through socks and stockings, and when there are three boys in the house who prefer

sliding down railings to walking down steps, and "slithering" down trees to descending in the manner they went up them - well, there is a deal of patching to be done.

Father was tired but happy; his eyes half-closed with the restful feeling of being at home, after a day well spent in working for his dear ones. The garden sent up a hundred scents to Heaven; the birds sang their even-song in the camphor trees. Up on the hill the big, white house lay bathed in a soft golden light.

"There's that old Carney," Father said, his eyes attracted to the big house, "with all his money. Pity he wouldn't do some good with it".

"Perhaps he does - by stealth," Mother kindly made answer.

"Humph! He gives a few pounds to the church at Christmas and Easter. What's the good of hoarding money? He has no children, either, I believe. I suppose relatives he has rarely seen, and cannot care for, will profit at his death. If I had his money," he took out his pipe to smile, "I'd scatter it. I'd make it help me in the next world as well as in this."

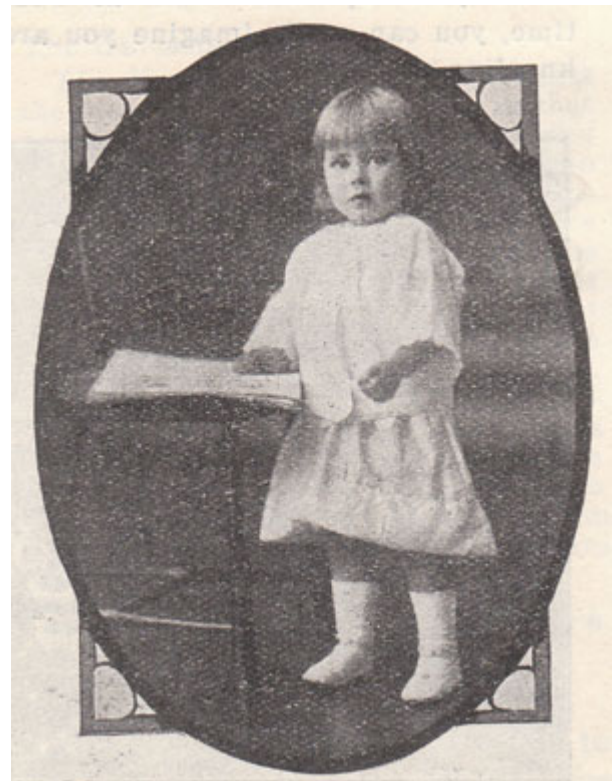
"Pity you haven't a fortune," Mother smiled.

"Well, I have," Father returned proudly. "But it's not the same kind as old Carney's." His eyes fondly looked at Mother and at the children, scattered about the verandahs and gardens.

Angie was in the swing, the Twins taking turns to swing her. Baby Betty and Polly Dollykins were walking amongst the flowers, Baby Bet, pretending she was lost in a very large, gloomy forest, and that she and her poor child were starving. She meant to take shelter in the Bear's House at the foot of the forest path. In real life, the Bear's House was a small room where Father kept his tools.

Mary was reading some old copies of the "Far East," and breaking out into little musical bursts of laughter now and then. Teddy, with Shamie curled up beside him, sat on the step, but his book was unheeded, for Father's words had arrested his attention. His eyes looked up to the white house, which in his fancy, now that the last rays of the sun glorified it, was indeed a house of gold.

All the gold that old man hoarded was wasting, and little children were in want of friends to help them, and how can people help them without money? All that gold wasting, and priests and nuns could not help the little starving souls and starving bodies because of the need of gold. Teddy felt inclined to rush up the hill, force an entrance, compel the secret panel to yield up its secret and disgorge the contents of the room.



But that would be wrong. After all, it was Mr. Carney's house and Mr. Carney's money. Teddy would be locked up, and then Mother and Father and all the family, even Shamie, would die of grief and disgrace.

"Won't do," Teddy decided regretfully.



His thoughts still ran on gold, gold, gold. But Brother Patrick had said prayer is the best gold; it is God's gold, and it buys treasures that earthly gold cannot. Yes, Teddy could pray, they all could, and that was better than gold.

Still –

"I'd like to get some of it; not take it. I'd like him to give it."

Teddy closed his book, and sat so still and thoughtful that anyone who noticed him and knew his usual habits would think him ill.

The sun at last went right into bed and covered his head with clouds: every bit of gold left the big house, and it looked cold and stern, and seemed to fold its arms over its treasure, and to frown down darkly on

Teddy, as if it defied him to get one gold piece.

Mother went in to help Kate in the kitchen; Kate was a servitor of the family, but also a kind of guide, philosopher, and friend. Mary at once put away her papers and quietly followed Mother to help, too.

That night Teddy lay awake in his little bed near the window. The Twins, in their cot across the room, slept soundly. Teddy knelt up in bed to have another look at the house on the hill. One bright light, from a middle window, seemed to glare at him fiercely, like an angry eye; the rest was in darkness.

"I'll get you yet," Teddy threatened the watching eye, He popped out of bed. "I'll pray him into giving some of his money away."

Away up in the big house an old man, in the room where the light was, an old man with a stern face, that, for all its lines, held, a wistful sadness, went carefully through his papers, not knowing that a little boy knelt until his knees were numbed, and his lips tired with swiftly spoken prayers and petitions, storming Heaven to soften his old heart.

Ah, old miser! Beware! It is not burglars you have to fear these days; your bolts and bars may keep them out; your safes and strongroom may defy them; the law may protect you from them.

But what defence have you against the prayers that wing their way to Heaven, the prayers of a little child, asking a Child there to come and knock gently at your old heart, to touch that sealed door, and make it fly open, that the Child may find a shelter there, and that for love of Him you will give freely of your hoarded treasure? Your gold is lying useless while children starve, and there is no one to bring them the Bread of Heaven. Tremble for your gold, old miser! A Child means to steal it! Know that verily and indeed you have ass's ears, because you no more heeded the cry of little souls in darkness than would that poor, stupid animal. Indeed, the ass surpasses you, for did not an ass's breath warm that Little Child who suffered cold on Christmas night, as the children you will not help suffer it to-day? Did not an ass carry the Treasure of the World across the desert, away from the slaughterer of little children? You are a slaughterer of little children. You withhold your gold, and let them perish.

The old man worked on, knowing nothing of Teddy's designs against him.

One afternoon Teddy came home early from school, put his bag of books away, refreshed himself with some cakes Kate had just taken from the oven, and then slipped behind the camphor laurels and scaled the fence. He did not wish the Twins to see him, for he did not want their company just then. Even Shamie was ordered home, and went, slowly and dejectedly, with many a lingering gaze after Teddy's flying feet.

Before the big gates of "Warrumbah" Teddy paused, but only for a moment. "Anyhow," he reflected, "if I do no good, I can find out for certain if he has ass's ears."

Teddy followed the well - kept drive, through lawns and lovely flowerbeds, here between lofty trees, there amongst flowering shrubs. He walked with an assured air, as if he were the heir of the master of "Warrumbah." But, as the way led him round a clump of beautiful palms, his heart gave a jerk, sudden as a Jack-in-the-Box, for there, beside a bed of roses, stood the master himself. He was well wrapped up, although it was a warm evening; his longish hair, his cap well drawn down, completely hid his ears.