

The Sunken Treasure

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Picture to yourselves a handsome, old-fashioned room, with a large, open cupboard at one end, in which is displayed a magnificent gold cup, with some other splendid articles of gold and silver plate. In another part of the room, opposite to a tall looking-glass, stands our beloved chair, newly polished, and adorned with a gorgeous cushion of crimson velvet, tufted with gold.

In the chair sits a man of strong and sturdy frame, whose face has been roughened by northern tempests and blackened by the burning sun of the West Indies. He wears an immense periwig, flowing down over his shoulders. His coat has a wide embroidery of golden foliage; and his waistcoat, likewise, is all flowered over and bedizened with gold. His red, rough hands, which have done many a good day's work with the hammer and adze, are half covered by the delicate lace ruffles at his wrists. On a table lies his silver-hilted sword; and in the corner of the room stands his gold-headed cane, made of a beautifully polished West India wood. Somewhat such an aspect as this did Phips present when he sat in Grandfather's chair after the king had appointed him Governor of Massachusetts.

But Sir William Phips had not always worn a gold-embroidered coat, nor always sat so much at his ease as he did in Grandfather's chair. He was a poor man's son, and was born in the province of Maine, where in his boyhood he used to tend sheep upon the hills. Until he had grown to be a man, he did not even know how to read and write. Tired of tending sheep, he apprenticed himself to a ship-carpenter, and spent about four years in hewing the crooked limbs of oak trees into knees for vessels.

In 1673, when he was twenty-two years old, he came to Boston, and soon afterwards was married to a widow lady, who had property enough to set him up in business. It was not long before he lost all the money that he had acquired by his marriage, and became a poor man again. Still, he was not discouraged. He often told his wife that he should be very rich, and would build a "fair brick house" in the Green Lane of Boston.

Several years passed away; and Phips had not yet gained the riches which he promised to himself. During this time he had begun to follow the sea for a living. In the year 1684 he happened to hear of a Spanish ship which had been cast away near Porto de la Plata. She had now lain for fifty years beneath the waves. This old ship had been laden with immense wealth; and nobody had thought of the possibility of recovering any part of it from the deep sea which was rolling and tossing it about. But though it was now an old story, Phips resolved that the sunken treasure should again be brought to light.

He went to London and obtained admittance to King James. He told the king of the vast wealth that was lying at the bottom of the sea. King James listened with attention, and thought this a fine opportunity to fill his treasury with Spanish gold. He appointed William Phips to be captain of a vessel, called the *Rose Algier*, carrying eighteen guns and ninety-five men. So now he was Captain Phips of the English navy.

The captain sailed from England and cruised for two years in the West Indies, trying to find the wrecked Spanish ship. But the sea is so wide and deep that it is no easy matter to discover the exact spot where a sunken vessel lies. The prospect of success seemed very small, and most people thought that Phips was as far from having money enough to build a "fair brick house" as he was while he

tended sheep.

The seamen became discouraged, and gave up all hope of making their fortunes by discovering the Spanish wreck. They wanted Phips to turn pirate. There was a much better prospect of growing rich by plundering vessels which still sailed in the sea than by seeking for a ship that had lain beneath the waves full half a century. They broke out in open mutiny, but were finally mastered by Phips, and compelled to obey his orders. It would have been dangerous to continue much longer at sea with such a crew of mutinous sailors; and the ship was unseaworthy. So Phips judged it best to return to England.

Before leaving the West Indies, he met with an old Spaniard who remembered the wreck of the Spanish ship, and gave him directions how to find the very spot. It was on a reef of rocks, a few leagues from Porto de la Plata.

On his arrival in England Phips solicited the king to let him have another vessel and send him back again to the West Indies. But King James refused to have anything more to do with the affair. Phips might never have been able to renew the search if the Duke of Albemarle and some other noblemen had not lent their assistance.

They fitted out a ship, and he sailed from England, and arrived safely at La Plata, where he took an adze and assisted his men to build a large boat.

The boat was intended for going closer to the rocks than a large vessel could safely venture. When it was finished, the captain sent several men in it to examine the spot where the Spanish ship was said to have been wrecked. They were accompanied by some Indians, who were skillful divers, and could go down a great way into the depths of the sea.

The boat's crew proceeded to the reef of rocks, and gazed down into the transparent water. Nothing could they see more valuable than a curious sea shrub growing beneath the water, in a crevice of the reef of rocks. It flaunted to and fro with the swell and reflux of the waves, and looked as bright and beautiful as if its leaves were gold.

"We won't go back empty-handed," cried an English sailor; and then he spoke to one of the Indian divers. "Dive down and bring me that pretty sea shrub there. That's the only treasure we shall find!"

Down plunged the diver, and soon rose dripping from the water, holding the sea shrub in his hand. But he had learned some news at the bottom of the sea. "There are some ship's guns," said he, the moment he had drawn breath, "some great cannon, among the rocks, near where the shrub was growing."

No sooner had he spoken than the English sailors knew that they had found the spot where the Spanish galleon had been wrecked, so many years before. The other Indian divers plunged over the boat's side and swam headlong down, groping among the rocks and sunken cannon. In a few moments one of them rose above the water with a heavy lump of silver in his arms. That single lump was worth more than a thousand dollars. The sailors took it into the boat, and then rowed back as speedily as they could, being in haste to inform Captain Phips of their good luck.

But, confidently as the captain had hoped to find the Spanish wreck, yet, now that it was really found, the news seemed too good to be true. He could not believe it till the sailors showed him the lump of silver. "Thanks be to God!" then cries Phips. "We shall every man of us make our fortunes!"

Hereupon the captain and all the crew set to work, with iron rakes and great hooks and lines, fishing for gold and silver at the bottom of the sea. Up came the treasures in abundance. Now they beheld a table of solid silver, once the property of an old Spanish grandee. Now they found an altar vessel, which had been destined as a gift to some Catholic church. Now they drew up a golden cup, fit for the King of Spain to drink his wine out of. Now their rakes were loaded with masses of silver bullion. There were also precious stones among the treasure, glittering and sparkling, so that it is a wonder how their radiance could have been concealed.

After a day or two they discovered another part of the wreck where they found a great many bags of silver dollars. But nobody could have guessed that these were money-bags. By remaining so long in the salt-water they had become covered over with a crust which had the appearance of stone, so that it was necessary to break them in pieces with hammers and axes. When this was done, a stream of silver dollars gushed out upon the deck of the vessel.

The whole value of the recovered treasure, plate, bullion, precious stones, and all, was estimated at more than two millions of dollars. It was dangerous even to look at such a vast amount of wealth. A captain, who had assisted Phips in the enterprise, lost his reason at the sight of it. He died two years afterward, still raving about the treasures that lie at the bottom of the sea.

Phips and his men continued to fish up plate, bullion, and dollars, as plentifully as ever, till their provisions grew short. Then, as they could not feed upon gold and silver any more than old King Midas could, they found it necessary to go in search of food. Phips returned to England, arriving there in 1687, and was received with great joy by the Albemarle and other English lords who had fitted out the vessel. Well they might rejoice; for they took the greater part of the treasures to themselves.

The captain's share, however, was enough to make him comfortable for the rest of his days. It also enabled him to fulfill his promise to his wife, by building a "fair brick house" in the Green Lane of Boston. The Duke of Albemarle sent Mrs. Phips a magnificent gold cup, worth at least five thousand dollars. Before Captain Phips left London, King James made him a knight; so that, instead of the obscure ship-carpenter who had formerly dwelt among them, the inhabitants of Boston welcomed him on his return as the rich and famous Sir William Phips.

Source:

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