



The Mildenhall Treasure by Roald Dahl

ABOUT THE STORY

The *Mildenhall Treasure* is Roald Dahl's non-fiction account of the discovery of a large amount of Roman silver in a field in Suffolk, in the east of England. In the story, a farm worker, Gordon Butcher, is working in a field when he unexpectedly discovers the silver. Unsure about what to do, he goes to tell his boss, Sydney Ford, who quickly realises the true value of the treasure and has his own ideas about it. Roald Dahl researched the story by talking to Butcher; after publication of the story he sent half of the money he received for it to Butcher.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roald Dahl was a British writer born in 1916 in Wales to Norwegian parents. He is most famous as a writer of children's books, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *James and the Giant Peach* and *The BFG*. However he also wrote short stories, such as *Tales of the Unexpected*; film scripts, such as the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*; a number of collections of poems, such as *Revoltin' Rhymes*; and non-fiction, for example *The Mildenhall Treasure*. He was not just a writer – he also worked as a fighter pilot during the Second World War, and as a diplomat and intelligence officer after the war. He died in 1990 at the age of 74.

[Butcher, a farm worker, has been hired by a man called Ford to plough the field of a man named Rolfe]

There was a slight jolt, the wooden peg broke, and the tractor left the plough behind. Butcher stopped, dismounted, and walked back to the plough to see what it had struck. It was surprising for this to have happened here, on field land. There should be no oak trees underneath the soil in this place.

He knelt down beside the plough and began to scoop the soil away around the point of the ploughshare. The lower tip of the share was twelve inches down. There was a lot of soil to be scooped up. He dug his gloved fingers into the earth and scooped it out with both hands. Six inches down ... eight inches ... ten inches ... twelve. He slid his fingers along the blade of the ploughshare until they reached the forward point of it. The soil was loose and crumbly, and it kept falling back into the hole he was digging. He could not therefore see the twelve-inch-deep point of the share. He could only feel it. And now he could feel that the point was indeed lodged against something solid. He scooped away more earth. He enlarged the hole. It was necessary to see clearly what sort of an obstacle he had struck. If it was fairly small, then perhaps he could dig it out with his hands and get on with the job. If it was a tree trunk, he would have to go back to Ford's and fetch a spade.

'Come on,' he said aloud. 'I'll have you out of there, you rotten old thing.' And suddenly, as the gloved fingers scraped away a final handful of black earth, he caught sight of the curved rim of something flat, like the rim of a huge thick plate, sticking up out of the soil. He rubbed the rim with his fingers, and he rubbed again. Then all at once, the rim gave off a greenish glint, and Gordon Butcher bent

his head closer and closer still, peering down into the little hole he had dug with his hands. For one last time, he rubbed the rim clean with his fingers, and in a flash of light, he saw clearly the unmistakable blue-green crust of ancient buried metal, and his heart stood still.

It should be explained here that farmers in this part of Suffolk, and particularly in the Mildenhall area, have for years been turning up ancient objects from the soil. Flint arrowheads from very long ago have been found in considerable numbers, but more interesting than that, Roman pottery and Roman implements have also been found. It is known that the Romans favoured this part of the country during their occupation of Britain, and all local farmers are therefore well aware of the possibility of finding something interesting during a day's work. And so there was a kind of permanent awareness among Mildenhall people of the presence of treasure underneath the earth of their land.

Gordon Butcher's reaction, as soon as he saw the rim of that enormous plate, was a curious one. He immediately drew away. Then he got to his feet and turned his back on what he had just seen. He paused only long enough to switch off the engine of his tractor before he walked off fast in the direction of the road.

He did not know precisely what impulse caused him to stop digging and walk away. He will tell you that the only thing he can remember about those first few seconds was the whiff of danger that came to him from that little patch of greenish blue. The moment he touched it with his fingers, something electric went through his body, and there came to him a powerful premonition that this was a thing that could destroy the peace and happiness of many people.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

jolt (line 3): a sudden movement

plough (line 4): a farm machine that turns over the soil

dismounted (line 4): got off

ploughshare (line 9): the part of a plough that cuts into the earth

rotten (line 26): very bad

glint (line 31): a small flash of light

flint arrowhead (line 40): the tip of an arrow, made of stone

implement (line 42): a tool or other piece of equipment

impulse (line 55): a sudden desire to do something

whiff (line 58): a faint smell; a whiff of something other than a smell is something that is faintly detected

premonition (line 61): a feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen



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Before reading

- 1 You are going to read an extract from a short story by Roald Dahl. In pairs, brainstorm what you know about him.
- 2 Roald Dahl didn't just write short stories – he also wrote novels, film scripts, poems and non-fiction. Can you name any of his works in each of these categories? Read *About the author* and see if any of your ideas from 1 and 2 are mentioned.
- 3 You are going to read a story called *The Mildenhall Treasure*. What do you think the treasure might be? Discuss your ideas in the same pairs.

While reading

- 1 Read the extract quickly. What is the treasure? Was it what you predicted in *Before reading* 3?
- 2 Read the extract again. Decide if these statements are True (T) or False (F). Find evidence in the text to support your answer.
 - 1 Butcher initially assumes that he has hit an oak tree. T / F
 - 2 The thing he has hit is very deep in the earth. T / F
 - 3 When he digs the object out, he realises immediately what it is. T / F
 - 4 At that time it was unusual for farmers to discover things buried in the fields in that area. T / F
 - 5 Butcher reacts predictably to the discovery. T / F
 - 6 Butcher does not know why he walked away after discovering the treasure. T / F
- 3 Read the extract again and answer these questions.
 - 1 When Butcher realises what the treasure is, his 'heart stood still'. What does this phrase mean? Why do you think he reacts like this?
 - 2 Read the fourth paragraph (*It should be explained ...*). Why do you think the author has included this information at this point in the extract?
 - 3 In the last paragraph, it mentions the 'whiff of danger' that came to Butcher from the treasure. What do you think that is?
 - 4 The final line mentions a premonition that could 'destroy the peace and happiness of many people'. What do you think that is? What do you think will happen when people know about the discovery?

- 4a Throughout the extract the author uses many different words and phrases to describe the treasure. What are they? Why does he use them?

- 4b Read the part where Butcher digs up the treasure (lines 8–36). Underline the different verbs and phrases that describe the action of digging. Why do you think the author uses so many different ways to describe digging? What image does this help to create about the treasure?

- 5a Read the whole extract again. How would you describe the mood of the extract?

- 5b Now focus on some of the linguistic devices the author uses to create the mood. Find examples of the following:

- use of short sentences to build suspense
- noun clause as subject for emphasis
- inversion for emphasis
- words and phrases to describe things happening suddenly.

After reading

- 1 Work in groups and discuss these questions.

- 1 When Butcher discovers the treasure, he shows an unusual reaction and walks away. Why do you think this is? Where do you think he is going?
- 2 Read this extract from later in the story.

How often is a piece of Roman silver discovered in the world?
Almost never anymore.
And have pieces as large as this ever been unearthed before?
Ford wasn't sure, but he very much doubted it.
Worth millions it must be.
His breath, coming fast, was making little white clouds in the freezing atmosphere.

What does Ford realise about the treasure when he sees it? Why do you think his breath is 'coming fast'? What do you think he is planning to do?

- 3 Read *About the story*. Why do you think Dahl gave half of the money to Butcher?
- 4 What kind of a man do you think Ford is? What about Butcher?
- 2 You are going to role-play the conversation between Butcher and Ford following the discovery of the treasure. Work in groups of four. Two of you are Butcher, and two of you are Ford. Based on what you have read of the two men and your discussion in *After reading 1*, brainstorm some ideas of things you might say and do. When you have finished, divide into character pairs and role-play the conversation.