

Amazing Grace (Story 2)

Mal looked nervously over his shoulder as he queued at the bank. He had chosen a branch seven miles from home where it was unlikely he would bump into anyone who knew him. The queue was slow moving; mainly shopkeepers banking the previous day's takings. Who would have thought that would take so long? Overhead, the morning news with subtitles was playing on a TV monitor. The Hatton Cross robbers had been convicted, it seemed. His gaze was drawn to the right where another monitor, linked to the bank's CCTV, showed the bank's queueing customers in sharp detail. Startled, Mal dropped his head and re-adjusted the scarf which swathed his neck.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, though it probably wasn't, it was his turn. He pushed the bulky envelope into the drawer under the window and slid his bank card under the glass.

'For deposit, please,' his voice faltered.

The Bank clerk's eyebrow flickered slightly as she withdrew the generous wad of notes from the envelope and painstakingly counted them. This, too, was a slow process. She made some feeble joke about choking a donkey. Mal wasn't in the mood for laughing. Again, he glanced over his shoulder. An elderly lady at the head of the queue smiled at him. He didn't recognise her but he nodded back, trying to appear casually at ease. The whirr of the clerk's printer caused him to start but immediately she was thrusting a receipt at him.

'Anything else I can do for you today?' she asked pleasantly.

Shaking his head, he mumbled his thanks and soon was outside the bank, breathing deeply to try and control his shaking hands. He had done it. It had been nerve-racking, not just today but every month, and yet it was very easy. Too easy, perhaps. Unlike the Hatton Cross pensioners, however, he would not be caught. They had been too greedy and too impatient. Mal, however, had been patiently misappropriating money from the accounts under his control regularly and in small amounts over the past twenty years. This was his last deposit, so it mattered not that it was a huge one. He now had sufficient in the deposit account – not in his real name, of course – to fund a comfortable retirement; a new life somewhere overseas. He had not quite made his mind up where he would go – some backwater in Ireland, perhaps, where he could buy a Georgian mansion and live very comfortably. Or maybe he would go to Canada, or New Zealand. It would be soon, though, very soon.

The rain had stopped now and the sun emerged from behind a cloud and shone down on him. He took it as a sign – a sign from God that he would get away with it. He deserved to, after so many years of faithful service for such little reward. The elderly lady from the bank queue now appeared on the steps of the bank and paused to poke her umbrella back into her shopper. She smiled at him again and spoke.

'Why, Father Malachy. I didn't expect to see you here, so far from our parish. Do you bank here, too? Nice girls, the bank clerks, aren't they? The red-haired one is my daughter. Well, see you at mass on Sunday. Bye now.'

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His heart sank. He hadn't recognised her but clearly she was one of his flock. Would she remember she had seen him at that bank in that town? Of course she would. When, after his disappearance, his embezzlement was revealed, would she mention to the bishop having seen him here? Would the police be able to trace him via his new account at that bank? Would he be discovered even before he could effect his escape? What would happen to an embezzling priest? He was too old for prison. But he couldn't face an impoverished old age in some dusty home for retired priests. He had joined the priesthood straight from school. He had given his life to the church. He felt he had not had a life of his own. And he wanted to live, and to live well in his twilight years. Yet now he realised his chances of getting away with it were very slim.

He headed over to the church on the corner. He had no idea whose church it was, but it was a house of God. He opened the heavy church door and was relieved to find the place deserted. He slipped into a pew and fell to his knees. He asked God for forgiveness and sought divine intervention to guide him. What should he do? Should he make a run for it, or should he give himself up. No answer came. Dejected, he left. At the station he bought a newspaper while he awaited his train home. The front page carried the story of the Hatton Cross diamond robbers. The prison sentences they had received caused him to catch his breath. 'They would never come out alive,' he thought, 'and nor might I.' He almost ran out of the station.

Returning to the bank, he transferred the entire amount from his account to that of St Thomas's Roman Catholic Church. This time, both of the clerk's eyebrows rose in surprise. The Bishop's brows, too, seemed elevated towards heaven the following week when he called to thank Fr Malachy for the massive injection of cash into the church account. It was hugely generous of Malachy to gift the church his recent lottery win, the Bishop said. Such generosity deserved a fitting acknowledgement, he added. Perhaps, Malachy would like a move to another parish? There was a vacancy in a seaside parish in the Scilly Isles. Perhaps Malachy might like to give it a couple of years and then take retirement on the island? It would be but a small reward for such a large donation, the Bishop beamed.

Once the Bishop had departed, Mal glanced again at the press account of the Hatton Garden robbers. But for the grace of God, he might have been joining them in prison. Instead, he was off to the Scilly Isles. Indeed, God was merciful, and his grace was truly amazing.