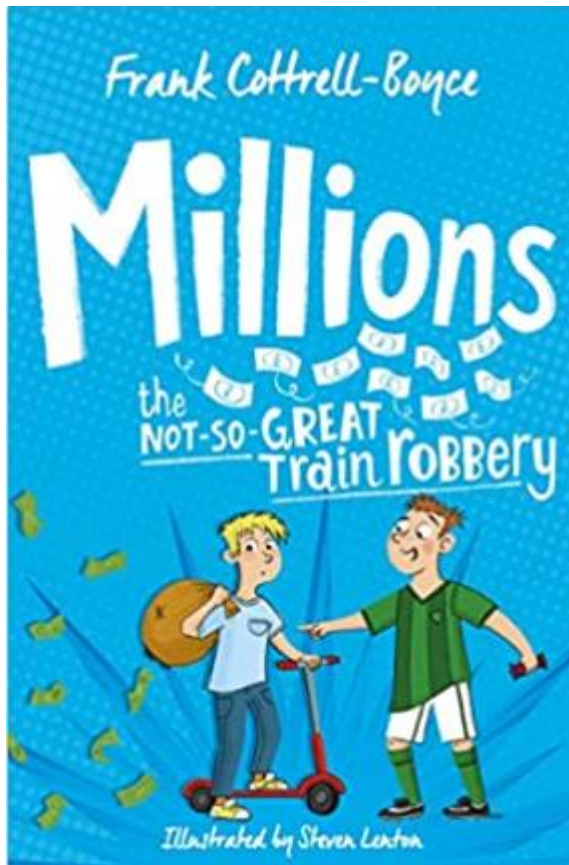




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For the record, this wasn't the first time in history that money fell down out of the sky. For instance, in Turkey, in the second century, if a girl was getting married her father had to give the husband some money called a dowry. There were three girls who just didn't have any money, so their father was going to sell their honour, which you could do in those days. Anyway, one night St Nicholas of Myra climbed up on the roof, dropped three bags of money down the chimney – one for each girl – and so saved their honour. He started being saintly when very young. For instance, he refused to breastfeed every Friday because he was fasting.

As I watched, a little scrap of darkness seemed to get free of the big darkness and come rolling through the air towards me. It crashed into the front end of the hermitage, smashing the boxes flat and letting even more cold air in. It squatted on the flattened cardboard like a big leathery toad.

I went over and touched it. It was a bag. It had come apart along the zip and its insides were spilling out. And its insides were money. It wasn't a vision or a visitation as such. I suppose you could call it a sign. A big loud sign. It was money. Banknotes. Piles and piles of them. Thousands and thousands of pounds. Millions, even.

He's the patron saint of sailors, pawnbrokers, unmarried girls, children (because of a bizarre incident with some boys who were trapped in a pickle barrel) and people who sell perfume. Now he's Santa Claus as well. He's probably the most successful saint.

When the bag of money landed in front of me, it put me in mind of St Nicholas straight away. I could have asked him for guidance. Or I could have asked St Matthew, who is the patron saint of money. Or I could have called the police. Or my dad.

Personally, I ran across the field shouting, 'Anthony! Anthony! Come and look at this!' I was that excited, you see.

I'm not sure now that it was the best idea.

When I got to the house, it was still dark but there was a light on in the kitchen and I could see Anthony making toast. I tapped on the window. He jumped in fright, but then he saw who it was and let me in.

'What are you doing out there? You're freezing. Where've you been? Have you been out all night?'

My teeth were still chattering. I said, 'I've found . . . I've found . . .'

'What?'

'Come and look.'

Anthony put his coat on. He could tell I was excited, but he wasn't that convinced. 'This had better be something that other people can see.'

This reminded me of what the woman had said at Huskisson House. What if you could see things that weren't there? What if it wasn't as optical as I thought it was? But when we got to the hermitage, the bag was there. I pointed to it.

Anthony said, 'What?'

'You know when you tell people Mum is dead and they give you stuff?'

He nodded.

'Well, I told God.'

I pulled back the box and Anthony saw it – a big bag stuffed with money. His face glowed. He says now that it's still the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. He was so happy just then.

'And it's from God, you reckon?'

I nodded.

'Well, he really wanted to cheer us up.'

It needed the two of us to carry the money back across the field towards the house. Think of that. More money than we could carry. I wanted to spread it all out on the dining table so Dad would

see it when he got home and be of good cheer, but Anthony said we mustn't tell Dad about it.

'Why not?'

'Tax.'

I had to ask him what tax was.

'If Dad knew about it, he'd have to tell the government, and if they knew about it, they'd want to tax it. At 40 per cent – that's nearly half of it. We should just hide it and go to school.'

But we couldn't. We had to know how much was there. We tipped the money on to the table.

'Anyway,' Anthony said, 'if God had wanted Dad to have this, he would've sent him a cheque in the post.'

It was hard to argue with that.

I started to help him count. At first we just tried to count all the tenners using our ten times table, but we lost track of which ones we'd counted. The room seemed to be filling up with notes. Then Anthony had the idea of counting them into piles of a hundred, and then counting the hundreds. But even that was no good. After ten minutes the whole floor was tiled with wads of money. We couldn't find anywhere to sit, let alone count. So then we tried making them into piles of a thousand. There were 229 piles of a thousand. Plus 370 pounds

change. That's 229,370 pounds. Or twenty-two million, 937 thousand pence.

For a while we just looked at it. Then Anthony picked up a thousand pounds and put it crossways on top of another thousand. Then he picked up another and put it crossways on top of that. Then I picked up a pile and put that on top of the other three. Then Anthony. Then me, and on and on, building a tower of cash. We got it almost as tall as me before it fell over. Then we both started laughing.

That was the first time we played Cash Jenga. We played it every night for the next week. The highest we ever got was Anthony's eyebrows. But that first time was the best, when it just sort of invented itself out of our excitement.

Cash Jenga is a great game if you can afford it.

We were late for school, but somehow it didn't matter. Whenever we saw each other in the playground or in the corridor, we just grinned. Having a secret is like having a pair of wings tucked in under your blazer. I gave Barry my Pringles (barbecue flavour) without being asked. I just handed them to him while we were lining up at the end of Small Play. I said, 'Enjoy.' He looked a bit surprised.

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On the way home, we stopped at the shop and Anthony bought a bottle of Sunny Delight the size of an oxygen tank. He saw me looking at it and said to the man, 'Make it a double.'

While the man was getting my bottle, a girl from Anthony's class – the one with the nice corn rows in her hair – came in and Anthony said, 'Make it three and have something for yourself.' And he gave a tenner to the man and the bottle to the girl. Just as he was handing it to her, Barry came in and went, 'Ooooohooo, you love her! You bought her Sunny Delight.'

'Why shouldn't I buy her Sunny Delight?'

'Why shouldn't you buy *me* Sunny Delight?'

'All right, then, I will.'

So he bought another bottle. By which time, Barry's mate Kaloo was there saying, 'You only bought that cos you're scared of Barry.'

So Anthony bought a fifth bottle and gave that to Kaloo.

By now people were piling in to see what was going on. Kaloo went, 'The new kid's sucking up to us. Buying us Sunny Delight.'

'I'm not sucking up to anyone,' said Anthony, and he proved it by buying everyone a bottle. Twenty-three bottles of Sunny Delight and a box

of Walker's prawn cocktail. Not a packet, a box. One of the big boxes you get from the wholesaler.

'Spending money like it's going out of fashion,' said the shopkeeper.

'It is going out of fashion,' said Anthony.

Outside, on the pavement, everyone scrummed hungrily round the Walker's box. A couple of them left their bikes sprawled on the pavement. Anthony shouted, 'Who wants to lend us a bike?'

A couple of lads stood up and looked at him.

'Tenner,' offered Anthony.

The bike owners clambered over each other to get to us first. In the end, we went for Terry Keegan's Raleigh Max and Franny Amoo's Pavement Shark. Payment was on collection of the bikes from our house, before five, which is when Dad was due home.

It was good to be able to get nice stuff without having to go on about dead people. Both the Pavement Shark and the Raleigh Max have excellent suspension, so we rolled home over the back field, by the railway. Anthony talked about all the things we could get – bikes of our own, quad bikes even, new trainers, new tops, mobiles, Beyblades. All the things that Dad said were a waste of money – sea monkeys, or the X-Box, or the Gamecube, or extra channels or X-ray specs.

‘They don’t work. You only see skeletons.’

‘Skeletons are good.’

And when we got home, instead of turning the oven on, we called Pizza Reaction and ordered pizzas. I asked for one with extra cheese and extra pepperoni. While we were waiting we played Cash Jenga, which I won.

Then Anthony thought of real-money Monopoly. ‘It’ll be brilliant,’ he said. ‘I’ll be banker.’ But we’d only just got the board set up when Mr Pizza Reaction came up on his moped.

As we opened the door, Dad was just pulling into the car port. ‘What the hell is going on?’ he asked, as he headed for the house.

‘We’ve ordered pizzas instead of cooking. We thought it would be excellent.’

‘Where did you get the money?’

‘I’ve got money,’ said Anthony.

‘What, from your birthday and stuff?’

‘Stuff, yeah. It’s sterling, so we have to spend it before € Day anyway. We ordered one for you.’

‘What kind of one?’

‘Seafood with extra anchovies.’

Anthony opened the box and steam curled out like candle smoke and the smell of cooked cheese and damp bread filled the room.

‘Nice. That is very, very nice of you.’ Dad just stared at the pizza for the longest time, saying nothing.

‘Is it the wrong kind?’ I asked.

He suddenly marched into the kitchen, blew his nose and came back saying, ‘It’s the right kind. It’s just the right kind. It’s very much the right kind.’

I said, ‘Cardboard boxes are definitely better than the polystyrene ones. The polystyrene ones make them go rubbery, I think.’

‘Yes, they do,’ said Dad. His eyes were so shiny that I thought for a minute he was going to cry. Obviously people don’t cry about pizza. ‘You’re very good lads,’ he said. And then he picked up the biggest slice of pizza I’d ever seen, folded it over and put the end in his mouth. He looked like a gorilla gargoyle and we all laughed.

I said, ‘Who invented pizza?’ I didn’t really want to know. I just thought Dad might like to talk about general knowledge, the way he used to. I remember him reading a whole book on the history of the potato.

‘Pizza,’ he said, ‘was invented in Naples. It was originally just a herby bread which market traders used to sell to poor people. When Queen Margherita came to visit Naples in 1889, she really

took to it, so she got the most famous pizza maker – Raffaele Esposito – to make one specially for her. It was his idea to put basil, tomato and mozzarella on top. Green basil, red tomatoes and white cheese, you see, colours of the Italian flag. And that's why it's called Pizza Margherita.'

We all cleared up and that was a great day.