

Literature.

A STRANGE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

It was a dark, gloomy evening toward the end of November. I had just returned from a long and tiresome journey to attend a dying person in an abode of poverty...

Susan put her hand, rose face in at the door. "Oh, if you please, sir, here's a gentleman as wants to see you on business."

"Of course, I instantly hastened to him; and found a tall, stout, burly man, in a shining black waterproof, and a broad-brimmed hat, unwinding a few lines of woolen comforter from around his neck."

"I haven't a moment to lose," said Mr. Pullingtoft, hastily. "I'm behind time now for an appointment, and I'm particularly wanted to see you, sir, for some time past. So now to business."

"How many years, sir, have you been parson here now?" "Twelve," I replied.

"Ha! Well, I thought it must have been in the olden time it was done." "It was thus he referred to my predecessor."

"Right so far, sir. Now, do you happen to know who Peesbe's uncle is, sir?" "No."

"None other than Mr. Seth Scruby." "Seth Scruby?" I was greatly astonished.

"The parish was the richest farmer in the parish, and owner of much land in it, as well as of another estate, north of Lincoln."

"It is true, continued Mr. Pullingtoft, as if reading the doubt in my face expressed, "through it only came to my knowledge a few months ago, by chance-like, when I asked her what her surname might be."

"Meadows?" says I. "I know that name; it's a splendid name. There was a miserly old farmer there that wouldn't insure, and he was burnt out and ruined."

"That was my grandfather, sir, said Phoebe. "I often heard her speak of it, when I was a very little girl. So this when I came to make inquiries, for I knew Ned Meadows made a runaway match with Jane Scruby—and Jane's father never forgave them. Now, do you see it?"

"But surely, Mr. Pullingtoft, in common humanity, had Mr. Scruby known his niece to be left in poverty, he would have provided for her. Here she has lived, in his own parish, until two years ago; and how is it that old Mrs. Kirby never told me of this?"

"Can't tell," rejoined the burly farmer shaking his comforter, preparatory to putting it on again. "There are some things one can't speak of."

"Lord bless you, it's fact, known to all the country round, that I will never be found, and Seth Scruby being the only son came in for everything. Now, sir, what I ask is this: Could old Scruby's daughter Jane be deprived of her legal share in her father's movables, simply by her brother taking possession of everything?"

"I'll get it for you with great pleasure, and send it by post."

"Ah! but you see, sir, I want to take it back with me. Now, could you get it at once? I stay to-night at Goston, and will call for it to-morrow morning at 6, on my road home, if you would have it ready, and just leave it out. You see, sir, I want to set about it at once."

"I returned to my comfortable seat by the fire, my mind occupied by the tale I had heard, and tried to recall the people he had spoken of; I found them on first coming to the neighborhood."

"I fully entered into Mr. Pullingtoft's view of the case. Surely Jane Meadows had been entitled to her share, and her father, even though he had died with a will; and, if such was the case, then it stood to reason that her only child Phoebe ought in the ordinary course of things to have inherited that share, and that, being so, I could not but contrast the treatment shown in her by a stranger, and the unnatural conduct of the rich uncle, who must often have ridden past the poor child going to school, or wending her forlorn way along the muddy roads. I would get up early in the morning and go over to the church, and copy out the entries of her parents' marriage; and afterward I would call on old Kirby, and see what she had to say."

"The thought of getting up from my warm bed to go in the dark of a raw November morning here so early occurred to me, and I thought, why not go to-night? Better to get it done with, and have it ready to put into Mr. Pullingtoft's hand the first thing in the morning."

"With a little groping, I reached the church door. I felt a great trouble in opening it. Firstly, the key would not turn, as the lock was rusty. Then I had to push the door with all my strength, when I had turned the key, and although I knew it was only a counter draught, yet it seemed for all the world like some one pushing against me at the other side."

"I lighted my candle, which burned dimly, and had a perceptible halo round it, and proceeded to unlock the safe where the registers were kept. Scarcely however, had I placed my foot on the step, when I was unexpectedly started by a noise in the body of the church through which I had just walked that sounded like the violent banging of a door. Thinking I might have left the church door ajar, I took up the candle and retraced my steps to secure it. But I found it fast. As I walked slowly back up the middle aisle, I looked at the pew-drawers on each side, which were open more or less, just as the congregation had left them on the previous Sunday. Yes; all were open save one—that one, which was immediately in front of the reading desk, and it was fast closed. But there was nothing strange in this, as the family had not paid one of their visits to Coryton lately, and the pew had been many Sundays unoccupied."

"I next went round the side aisles, where some pews had been converted into open sittings; but the doors of all these pews were likewise open. That of the Scrubys was the one exception. I was rather puzzled as to what had produced the noise, unless perhaps it had been the door of Scruby's pew that had so suddenly closed. I must also add that my nerves were somewhat unstrung by the coincidence."

"Taking out the heavy black volume of the marriage register, I laid it before me on the table; and, after some little time, found the entry I sought—Yes, there it was, plainly enough—Edwards, Thomas, aged 23, son of John Meadows, farmer, of Spalding; and Jane Scruby, 21, of this parish, etc. Two witnesses, Thomas Kirby, Henry Kirby, and signed by James Wilcock, vicar—my predecessor."

"Procuring pen and ink, I carefully copied out the entry; then, replacing the volume, I relocked the safe, and, as I was in my pocket, and was preparing to quit the vestry, when suddenly, without the slightest warning or preparatory noise of any description, without the door of the church door was sharply banged to with a great noise. This time I was certain, from the direction that it was the church door. I at once turned round, and observed in passing Scruby's pew that the door which was before shut was now open! I was therefore now certain that some one had been in the church, and that I had the church door as fast as I could, I shaded the candle with my hand and looked out, but could see nothing, and the night was too stormy for one to hear footsteps outside."

"I cannot describe the weird, agitated feeling that took possession of me as I re-entered the church. If some one had really seen in the church, and I was inclined to believe, what had been his object? Could it have been robbery or some other form of sacrilege? or had my life been in danger, and I had been taken by surprise, and for a few minutes was obliged to sit down in the nearest pew. It was with a feeling of great relief that I got outside, locking the door, and, as I ran, I felt as if I could through the churchyard. In a few minutes I was once more in my study, leaving over the blazing coals, and, as I sat, I felt as if I had been awakened from some unpleasant dream."

"It was long before daylight on the following morning, when I heard the trap of punctual Mr. Pullingtoft rattling over the street, and I knew that the certificate I had obtained the night before was put into his hand."

"For the rest of the week I heard nothing of Mr. Pullingtoft; but, to my surprise, the wealthy farmer, with his wife and eldest son, took their accustomed places in their family pew on Sunday morning. Mr. Scruby, a hard, proud man, was the farmer's second wife. His family consisted of three sons, the children of his first wife—an amiable and gentle creature, who died young, and was broken by her husband's tyranny and harshness. The eldest son, Walter, was endowed with all his mother's generosity and kindness of heart. Of the two younger sons, I know less, as they were at school at a distance, and I had only occasionally seen them."

"Before the day was over I learned that Mr. Scruby had returned from his week to Coryton to stay till after Christmas; hence his unexpected appearance at church. In the course of the following day I received a letter from Mr. Pullingtoft, informing me that on proceeding to Mr. Scruby's house, near Lincoln, on the previous Saturday, he had found that the family had gone to Coryton; and as I was in possession of all the facts of the case, asking me to call on Mr. Scruby, for the purpose of stating the whole story of his niece, Phoebe Meadows; and on the result of his reply would depend whether or not the case should be placed in a lawyer's hands. This, of course, I was willing to do; indeed, it appeared natural enough that it should be my place to open the subject on my accounts. Therefore on the following morning I repaired to Coryton."

"A large carriage drove leading from the lodge gates, led to the house. The house itself was square, compact, and comfortable, surrounded by large flower-gardens and green-houses; while beyond were the orchard and outbuildings of the farm. Before I gained the hall door it was opened for me; and young Walter came running out, to welcome me with bright face and being in a fine handsome youth, the personification of health and good-temper. In his open, cordial frankness, he linked his arm in mine, leading me by the handsome entrance hall into the dining room."

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