Mysterious Disappearances

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by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

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Our three farms were near together. Mine was a small one; and Deacon Perkins's was a small one; but that belonging to Mr. Pownal was one of the largest and best in the town. The deacon and I lived upon the top of a gentle eminence, his house upon one side of the road, and mine upon the other; while Pownals's buildings stood over upon another eminence an eighth of a mile off. One spring Mr. Pownal received a letter from a brother, who resided in Texas, requesting him to come out there to attend to a matter of important business. At first our neighbor thought it would be impossible for him to go; but upon deliberation he concluded that his interests would be answered by obeying his brother's request. As soon as he had made up his mind to this effect, he set about making arrangements for the care of his farm during his absence. He meant to take his whole family with him; and, at his wife's request, he decided to shut up his house. He called upon the deacon and myself, and, at his own proposition, the following arrangement was made: We—that is, the deacon and I—were to do all the planting and sowing, and the harvest therefrom was to be ours. We were to cut and make the hay for him, and put it into his own barn; and also to take care of his cattle. His sheep—and he had a large flock—we were to shear, and if we chose to dispose of the wool, we might do so. But there is no need of detailing all the items in our arrangement. Suffice it that the whole bargain was greatly to our advantage, and that we accepted the stipulations most cheerfully. Mr. Pownal went away in April, and we took charge of his place from that time.

Isaac Perkins had been my neighbor only a few years, but I learned to esteem him even above many of the older inhabitants. As a neighbor he was kind and obliging; as a friend he had proved himself true and reliable; and as a man and a Christian he stood above reproach. He was one of the deacons of our church; and in that capacity he had seemed to do his duty truly and faithfully. He had enemies—and who has not?—and there had been some hard things said about him; but I had never given any ear to the stories, because I believed the man to be entirely above them.

In due time we commenced work upon Pownal's farm, and I soon found that the deacon was to take the lead. He was the best qualified for it—he was the better farmer—and I gladly allowed him to go ahead. We got the hay in good shape, and stowed it in Pownal's barn. The sheep—nearly two hundred of them—yielded a thousand pounds of wool; and this we put away in one of my empty chambers over the shed. When we harvested the corn and wheat the quantity exceeded our most sanguine expectations; and as I had the most room, and my buildings were most convenient for the purpose, we stored the crops on my premises. When the frost came, and the harvesting had all been done, we took an account of our produce, and found that we had made a grand thing of our contract with Mr. Pownal. Most of the corn and wheat we meant to sell; but the wool we concluded to keep until Pownal came home.

"There's one thing," said I, "that we must look after." The deacon had come over one evening to compare some accounts, and we began to talk about our grain. "I have heard," I went on, "that some of the farmers in town have had things stolen from their premises."

The deacon said he had not heard of any such thing.

"It's so," I told him. "At least, so I have been informed. And I have thought that our garner offered a tempting bait to enterprising thieves. Hadn't I better get some stouter locks to my doors?"

Perkins didn't know exactly what answer to make[.] He smiled at the idea that anyone should think of stealing our grain; and yet he was willing to procure the locks if I would put them on.

"It would be a heavy lug to back off corn and wheat enough to pay for stealing it," he said.

I agreed to that; and yet I reminded him that a man who had the disposition to steal could make pretty good wages if he gained access to our garner. And then I added:

"You forget the wool. A man could take away a good many dollars' worth of that in a night.

The deacon said that he did not think of the wool. On the whole, we had better have the locks put on. He was going to town in a few days, and he would get some good ones.

I think it was the very next day after this that I went up into the loft where the wool was stored to see if everything was right there. It seemed to me that some of the fleeces had been moved; but it did not strike me then that any of them had been taken away. I put up a few loose ones, and opened a window to let a little air in upon them, and then went out. On the following day I went up again, and this time I was startled by noticing that some of the fleeces were missing. Upon the left hand, by themselves, I had put thirty-three fleeces of an extra quality, and of extra weight, and of those thirteen were gone. I asked my boys if they had been into the chamber, and they said they had not. I went over and saw the deacon, and told him what had happened. He went with me to the chamber, and soon assured himself that some of the wool had been removed.

"Who could have done it?"

"That's the question."

"I'll get the locks tomorrow."

And on the following day Perkins went to town, and brought home the locks with him. He put them upon the doors, and concluded that our property would now be safe.

Two days after that I had occasion to go up into the loft, and what was my astonishment at beholding a vacant space where the finest wool had been piled. Not a fleece of it was left. The whole of that extra lot—three-and-thirty fleeces—had disappeared. I called my boys up; but they knew nothing of the affair. I made them promise to say nothing of what had happened; and then I went over and saw the deacon. He seemed to be much startled when he heard my statement, and soon went with me to the chamber. It was true. —The wool was gone.

"How is it in the grain chamber?" he asked.

We went to see.

Here was another discovery. One of the wheat boxes had been entirely emptied! Thirty bushels of our best wheat had been carried off! And wither had it gone? We could not imagine. Not the least idea could I form, calculated to throw any light upon the subject; and the deacon professed to be equally at a loss.

"There must be a gang of them," I said; "and they are used to this kind of work."

The deacon suggested that we watch; and accordingly we did so. At the end of a week we relaxed our vigilance, and on the very next night twenty more fleeces of our wool were stolen.

And how was it with the wheat? Another box was empty! The thief, or thieves, must have been at work in the grain chamber at the time we were watching.

I began to be nervous and uneasy. We had already lost grain and wool to the amount of nearly two hundred dollars, and there seemed to be a fair prospect that we should lose more. At this point I resolved to take the work of watching into my own hands. I was satisfied, from what I had seen and heard, that the deacon had slept upon his watch. He was not very well that season, having worked hard through the summer, and I thought it best to let him rest. I kept my own counsel, saying nothing of my purpose, either to my family, or to the deacon; and on the next night I placed myself where I could safely watch the doors of the loft.

It was a moonless night, and most of the stars were clouded. It must have been past midnight, and I think I had allowed to close my eyes—perhaps I had sunk into a drowse—when I was aroused by a sound near the shed; and on looking out I saw a man at work on the lock of the wool chamber—I saw him open the door, and go up. My first impulse was to follow him; but upon second thought I concluded not to. He might be a desperate character, and armed; and, furthermore, if I would convict him, I had better allow him to bring away some of my property, and then follow him. In a little while the man came down, and upon his back he had a load of wool. He closed the door behind him, but did not lock it. He moved away beneath the shadow of the hedge until he had gained the road, when he crossed over into my neighbor's yard. I followed carefully behind him—followed him through the deacon's cart shed into the deacon's barn, where he threw his load down upon the threshing floor. I crawled near enough to watch his motions; and presently he took a small lantern from his breast pocket and opened it, and as the light gleamed out I saw the face of the thief.

Mercy!—what a shock was that! The man before me—the man who had been stealing the wool, and whom I had been thus watching—was Deacon Isaac Perkins!

Fairly gasping for breath I sat back and saw him work. I saw him raise a plank in the floor, and drop the wool down; and then he took up his lantern and came out. He went back to my chamber and got another load—and then another—three loads in all, and as many as ten or a dozen fleeces at a load. Then he locked that door, and next opened the door of the grain chamber, and carried away three bags of wheat. It was three o'clock when he locked up the latter place, and when he

had closed his barn door he retired to his house.

My feelings, as I returned to my own dwelling, were not of the most pleasant kind. I don't know how many things I wished during the rest of the night. I wished that I had never known the deacon; I wished he had never come to live near me; I wished that I had not entered into this business with him; I wished that he had never been kind to me; and I wished that I had not watched him, and thus discovered his secret.

In the morning I went up into the chambers and saw the traces of the thief. What should I do? Could I have given up the whole business at that point, losing all I had worked for in being relieved from the awkward, painful necessity that was upon me, I would have done so unhesitatingly. But no such opportunity was mine. After breakfast I saw the deacon go away in his wagon; and when he had gone, I went down to his barn, and shut myself in. I raised the plank in his floor, and crawled down; and there I found the missing wool and the missing wheat. The latter had been poured down upon some hay-caps which had been spread out in a deeper place beneath the edge of the mow.

I now went home and opened the subject to my wife. At first she would not believe me. She could not comprehend it. She was a member of the church, and she believed the deacon to be a Christian. But when I told her just what I had seen, and had explained to her all the circumstances, she was pained beyond measure.

"For the wool and the grain I care nothing," I cried. "If giving up every pound and bushel of wool and grain would shut this terrible conviction out of my mind, I would give them up readily."

And my wife joined me fully. She felt as badly as I did. She asked me if I could not put off the exposure for a while.

"Let us wait," she said. "Something may turn up."

I told her I was willing to wait. At any rate, I would wait awhile, and see how matters went on. That evening the deacon came over, and asked me if any more of our property was missing. I wondered how he could ask that question so coolly. I told him that more of the wool and more of the wheat were missing. The look of surprise which he put on, and the words which he spoke, were well chosen. They seemed the very reflection of innocence. He said he couldn't possibly understand it. It astounded him. We must take some effective measures to detect the robbers. And yet, on that very night, Deacon Perkins came to the chambers again—came and went, creeping in and out like a ghost—and bore off more of the wool and more of the wheat. He came to see me the next day, and talked as though nothing had happened out of the way between him and me. Surely, thought I, his impudence is great!

While I was still wondering what I had better do in the premises, an old friend from a distant town called to visit me. This friend was a physician, named Shubrick, who had been a schoolmate of mine in boyhood, and with whom I had kept up a friendly correspondence. He was a reliable man, and stood at the head of his profession in his own region of the country. He

arrived in the evening, and on the afternoon of the following day he went over to the deacon's, where he spent some two hours or more.

"You are acquainted with Deacon Perkins," I said to him, after tea.

"Of course I am," replied the doctor. "He lived my very next neighbor for several years."

"How did you like him?" I asked.

"Like him?" repeated Shubrick, looking up as though there was something in my tone which meant more than a simple question. "How could I help liking him. He's one of the best men I ever knew."

I was not prepared then, in the presence of my wife and children, to speak freely upon my neighbor's character; so I smiled, as though I approved what had been said.

"By the way," said the doctor, breaking off from another subject at a later hour in the evening,

"Deacon Perkins don't look so well as I had hoped to find him."

"He has worked pretty hard," I remarked.

"Yes," added Shubrick; "and he should have known better. He has been warned against overwork. I wonder if his old malady has returned upon him."

"What malady?" I asked.

"Sleep walking."

"WHAT?"

"SLEEP WALKING. He used to be one of the most remarkable somnambulists that I ever heard of. While he lived near me I have known him to get up at night; harness his horse; ride away ten miles to an old mill that he owned; return; put up his horse; and go to bed again, without the least idea of what he was doing."

"That is strange," I said.

"Aye," returned the doctor, "and he did stranger things than that. One time it was told in town that a house had been broken into, and all the silver stolen. One morning, not long after, Mrs. Perkins found all her silver missing—all her silver, and most of her plated ware. She supposed it had been stolen, and the deacon advertised it. A few nights afterwards it was discovered that the deacon himself had lugged the silver off, and hidden it beneath the barn floor. The ideas of burglars had vivified his dreams, and he had got up in his sleep, and put his silver away in a place of safety; and it might have laid there till the barn rotted down had it not been discovered by accident."

My wife came and placed her hand upon my shoulder.

"O," she cried, "aren't you glad you waited? I felt sure something would turn up."

Of course I was glad.

Dr. Shubrick asked what we alluded to.

I told him the story of the wool and the corn.

"You had a conversation about burglars before any of the property was missed?" he said.

"Yes," I answered. "We had heard of some robberies in town, and the deacon and I had consulted touching the safety of our own property."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the doctor. It was all plain now.

Aye—and when we had caught the deacon in one of his nocturnal visits, and had surprised him in the very act of stowing our wool away under his barn floor; and when we had witnessed his own blank astonishment—we all laughed.

And I know that no one laughed with more genuine relief than I did; for I had now found that my kind-hearted neighbor, instead of seeking to defraud me by stealing my property, had been, even in his sleep, seeking to hide it where thieves and robbers could not find it.

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