

AN OLD HACKNEY GHOST STORY.

A SCRAP OF FORGOTTEN HISTORY.

By Mrs. G. L. BANKS, Author of "God's Providence House," "The Manchester Man," "More than Coronets," etc.



It happened nearly a century ago.

At that time the long, low, unattractive old parish church of St. John yet cumbered the earth, or the parishioners thought so, for they were all agog to sweep it out of existence and set a bright, brand-new temple in its place, where they might worship more at ease if not more devoutly.

It mattered not that their ancestors for countless generations had been baptised, married, buried in or around the old pile, or that it had been built in the days when Christianity was a truth to live and die for; there was a rage for Italian architecture in the land, and the venerable church, because it was wrinkled with age, was denounced as "cramped," "crazy," "dilapidated," "ruinous," "tottering to decay," "utterly unfit to represent the devotion of the parish."

How true were these assertions the stout old buttressed tower remains to show after a century of wear and weather, though ruthless hands were laid on nave and chancel, rending arch and masonry, flinging away the hallowed stones for meaner uses, and hiding away its monumental glories in a darksome tombhouse like a Mahomedan mausoleum; and would have done away with the grey, weather-beaten tower likewise, but for a sapient architectural oversight.

Yet just a century ago the church was still standing, serenely unconscious of the conspiracy on foot against its very existence.

And, overlooking the ancient graveyard—a long, narrow slip, trending towards Homerton, and flanked by field and marsh—stood also a goodly red-brick house, with an embayed front, sobering down into the mellow tint befitting its forty years of age, and the artistic proclivities of its owner's family.

Those proclivities could not then be very strongly developed, for Mr. Varey's eldest son, John, was but a boy of eleven, drawing pictures with ruddle on doors and walls, and on the slabs that lay around so temptingly. His brother, Aurelius, was only just breeched, and the great artist Ready-mul's future wife merely a little girl in white frock and red shoes, who skipped about the familiar churchyard in strange contrast and indifference to the grey stones under her feet or the story they told. But this five year old child had an elder sister of nine, and it is of this Miss Varey I have a historic somewhat to relate.

We must, however, suffer eight years to slip by, and convert the schoolgirl into a sentimental miss of seventeen, whilst the plot against the old church is drawing to a crisis.

Changes have come in the interim. Mr. Varey lies under the shade of a high brick wall in the churchyard. His son Aurelius has gone to live with a scientific uncle; John, brush in hand, is boldly painting landscapes with experimental water-colours; and Elsie, the widowed mother's eldest girl, is going listlessly about her household business, or sitting at her tambour-frame, or her harpsichord, dreaming and shaping her dreams into verse, to the perplexity and anxiety of her domestic mother.

To seek the immediate inspiration of this poetic languor, we must follow the young lady, as slim and genteel as a plain, narrow-skirted, muslin frock, with an apology for a bodice, could make her, on a bright summer day, along the path north of the long-bodied church, and between the iron posts that guarded the entrance into Church Street,* and along the raised footpath, past the lych-gate and the rectory, on an errand to one of the quaint old shops beyond the brook.

This brook, now covered up and lost to sight—and topography—made the circuit of Hackney proper in a sort of horseshoe curve from Clapton to Homerton, crossing Church Street at the depression at the foot of the hill (now overshadowed by a railway arch), where it lay in a broad pool fordable by horsemen and vehicles. For the accommodation of pedestrians there had been provided on the western side a narrow bridge of brick with two absurdly small arches, and on the eastern a wooden footbridge with a handrail supplemented by posts and chains for a distance beyond.

These bridges were long, narrow, and low, merely level with the raised side-walks.

The traffic in the streets was not great, people then were seldom in a hurry, and as Miss Varey reached the rather ricketty wooden footbridge, her eye was attracted to a fine bay horse and a finer rider coming leisurely on towards the ford, then swollen by a thunder-storm the previous day.

The attraction was mutual.

Either the flutter of her thin azure scarf, or the ribbons in her flat straw hat, or the dark locks floating over her shoulders, caught his attention, he could never tell which; but their eyes met as the horse began to splash through the water.

For a moment he lost his self-command, and nearly lost his seat, for the horse stumbled where the stream was deepest, and whilst he was off his guard almost pitched him over its head. Instinctively he drew the animal up with a jerk, settling himself more firmly in his saddle, nowise disconcerted by the involuntary exclamation of alarm that broke from the fair damsel on the footbridge.

In her sudden fright she had changed colour and stood stock-still for the moment, watching horse and rider.

A few paces carried the stranger across the ford. He turned in his saddle, took off his tall, dandified beaver, and bowed low in acknowledgment, then rode up the hill at a canter towards Clapton.

She knew not whether she was more vexed or pleased. She was annoyed to think she had made herself conspicuous by a cry. But

again she argued, how could she avoid it when he was so nearly pitched head foremost into the stream? And how could she help wondering who the graceful stranger could be?

At all events she had seen just so much of him as served to impress his form and features on her memory; certainly whenever she trod the old wooden footbridge.

And it was not allowed to pass away from her memory. It so chanced that whether she went shopping for her mother in Church Street, or with her sister by her side for a summer ramble under the trees along the Clapton road, so sure was she to see the mounted stranger at intervals of three or four weeks; and whether he passed or they met, or he stood talking to mine host of the Old King's Head, so surely he took off his hat and bowed in recognition.

It became embarrassing, and ere long her colour rose when thus saluted.

"Who is that gentleman?" asked her sister.

"I don't know, my dear."

"Not know, when he always bows to you?"

This elicited an explanation, and the ejaculation—"Oh, how romantic!" from the younger.

Romantic it had become. Not only did the handsome horseman cross her path, but he haunted her dreams, and filled her poetic mind with vague imaginings and causeless melancholy.

He stole into her verses as "the stranger;" and in her poetic reveries she indulged at once her newly born desire for solitude and moonlight, strolling at eventide on the path before their own bay windows, her feet on the gravel keeping pace with the measured feet of "ode" or "lyric."

At that time an ancient spring of soft water, never frozen in the severest weather, adjoined the churchyard and Morning Lane. It was enclosed within four walls with a doorway entrance, and was in great repute for tea-making and culinary purposes. This caused considerable traffic along the footpath, which ran south of the graveyard between Hackney and Homerton, and was entered from Church Street by three broad, flat steps and the lych-gate.

It so happened that about this time a rumour gained ground that the churchyard was haunted. A spectre all in white was seen to glide to and fro under the very windows of Mr. Varey's abode, and various speculations were afloat concerning the portent.

No maid was found hardy enough to carry her water-can to the church-well after dusk, after one girl had dropped her pail in affright and run shrieking home without it.

Even men, having occasion to take the short cut, would linger at the lych-gate, or the posts at the other end, until they were joined by others, and gained courage to cross by companionship.

At times the spectral figure appeared seated on a low tomb, close to the grave of a woman who had been smitten down as by a judgment whilst adjuring God to strike her dead if she told a lie.

Then it was said the perjured woman's soul could not rest, but was condemned to walk the earth in testimony of her great sin.

Some incredulous persons betook themselves to the long walk to satisfy themselves. But the ghost was erratic, and seldom visible except when the moon was shining. And they

* Mare Street.

maintained that the ghost was nothing but moonshine.

The Vareys heard of it, and laughed. They saw nothing but themselves, and were not to be scared by numskulls.

The autumn leaves yellowed and fell in golden showers; winter came with its wind and rain and driving showers of sleet and snow.

And then the stranger was seen by Miss Varey in long drab overcoat and top boots, and still he raised his hat with graceful courtesy.

The ground was white with snow one February day, when the young lady, equipped in a small scarlet cloak with the hood drawn over her head, and with pattens on her feet, left the "London House," opposite to the church gates, carrying a small parcel of drapery she had purchased there.

In order to gain the opposite side, she was compelled to walk down the hill to the steps near the ford, and after crossing the cartway ascend the corresponding steps to the side walk. It was rather risky for pattened feet, especially in snowy or frosty weather, but she went and returned without a slip. She had passed the rectory, and was about to plant her foot on the first step at the lych-gate, when who should come riding noiselessly down hill but the unknown, and put her all in a flutter with the mere wave of his hat.

The slightest step awry was apt to twist pattens, and the feet within them. Elsie, surprised out of her composure, must have set down her foot incautiously. The patten slipped and she with it.

Before she could recover herself, the stranger was off his horse and by her side.

"I trust, madam, you have sustained no injury," he cried in some concern, as he raised her from the slippery ground.

"I—I—fear I have twisted my ankle," she stammered out; adding, "Oh dear, how shall I manage to get home?" as she found that but for his support she would again have fallen.

By this time a lad from the "London House," by dint of jumping into the roadway and scrambling out of it, had reached the spot, and answered the gentleman's solicitous inquiry respecting the young lady's abode.

"Miss Varey only lives at the red house overlooking the churchyard, Mr. Anderson," said he, giving more information than was asked for.

"Well, my lad, just loosen the pattens

that have done the mischief, and hold my horse whilst I help Miss Varey home."

The lad knelt down in the snow, and released the girl's small feet, but her supporter felt her wince as the twisted ankle was freed from the hard patten straps.

She tried to be brave, but could not use her foot.

"Pray do not attempt too much, Miss Varey. You must suffer me to bear you up," said Mr. Anderson, using her name as if he had not then learnt it for the first time; and as if only half sorry for the mishap which privileged him to put his strange arm around her as a genuine support, and at the same time gave a long desired introduction.

Mrs. Varey was overwhelmed alike with distress for her daughter's accident (though sprained ankles were almost common as pattens), and with gratitude to the gentleman who had left his horse to bring her home; and who did not leave until he had placed her on a sofa and obtained permission to call again, "for an assurance that the injury was not serious."

He might not have preferred this request so comportedly had not John Varey entered the room, shaken hands with the stranger, and introduced him as a Mr. Anderson whose business brought him into the neighbourhood, and whose acquaintance he had made long before, when sketching the Angler's Rest and other picturesque spots on the River Lea.

But—not serious! The young lady, who had written sentimental verses over the slipping of a stranger's horse at the ford, grew more and more sentimental as weeks went by, now that he was no more a stranger, but a frequent visitor under their roof, bringing books to relieve the monotony of the hours spent on a couch; more especially when he told how from the time they first met at Hackney ford he had carried her image about with him, and had in fact cultivated her brother's acquaintance in hopes to bring about an introduction—a painless one—to her.

It may be she thought their introduction, as it was, a sufficient panacea for its pain. At all events she bore it very patiently, and when later, in the fine spring weather, she was strong enough to resume her moonlight walks in the churchyard, taking her old seat on the elevated slab when tired of strolling, her poetic reveries had a fuller meaning, her verses a warmer tone. Of anything "serious" to others she did not dream.

Once more the slumbering story of the ghost was revived, and silly nursemaids fright-

ened their young charges with tales of its appearance, thus fostering foolish fears and superstitions.

It chanced one evening when the sweet May moon silvered the fresh foliage and shed a weird light on the grey tablets of the dead that Mr. Anderson encountered by the lych-gate a group of shuddering and terrified people, who warned him not to proceed lest he should lose his senses, for the ghost of the perjured woman was sitting there all in white by her grave, and it was not safe to venture.

He listened, asked when and where the dreaded spirit had been seen, laughed, said it was fancy, or that the ghost was warm flesh and blood.

He might as well have argued with the stones. It was in vain he invited any of the crowd to go forward to the haunted spot.

He went on, laughing as he went. The terrific ghost, arrayed in spotless white, advanced to meet him, and in a minute more was clasped in his strong arms, a loving, living woman.

How merrily she laughed at the mystery she had created by her passion for moonlight musings! How readily she accompanied him to the gate to prove her own identity! And how, on her approach, the people fled, all but one or two of the bravest, who themselves were loth to believe the evidence of their eyes and ears.

The scare had become general. The ghost had been seen at intervals by numbers. The contradiction of one or two could not reach the many.

It was not until Miss Varey went away as the wife of Mr. Anderson, and the house of the Vareys was pulled down to make way for the new church, and busy masons destroyed old associations, that confidence was gradually restored and the path to Church-well frequented as of yore.

But the roadway had been levelled, the brook and ford covered up, the wonderful church, for which no steeple had been planned, stood fair to view, the ancient place of worship had been demolished, leaving its time-worn belfry to ring out the old, ring in the new, long years before the Ghost of Hackney Churchyard vanished from the memory of the living.

To me the story was told on the spot by aged lips; no other than those of the ghost-lady's daughter; herself artistic and poetic—a story I repeat as one more proof how such legends may be "well authenticated by eye witnesses," yet be the varied outcomes of ignorance, cowardice, and superstition.

CINDERELLA'S ANCESTOR.

By EMMA BREWER.



IF we desire to trace our well-known fairy tale of Cinderella back to its home and origin, we must turn our steps towards Egypt, that land of wonders, that treasure-house of ancient wisdom and civilisation from which Phœnicians, Greeks, and Romans alike drew their learning and culture.

We must turn back the leaves of the past nearly five thousand years, to a time when Rome and Greece had no existence, when England and Germany were thick tangled forests, the abode

of wild beasts, if we would find the great grandmothers of Cinderella.

Even at so early a period of the world's history Egypt was a highly civilised country, and it is not strange that as new nations gradually spread themselves over the face of the earth they should take the ancient Egyptians as models, and become imbued with their learning and romance; and it is not difficult to imagine that Cinderella, who fascinated us when we were children, and who fascinates us even now, should, although under another name, have fascinated an Egyptian prince nearly five thousand years ago.

This is what she is said to have done, and the account of her doings and sayings—in fact, the story of her life—forms part of the history of ancient Egypt.

The story as here given deals only with one part of our Cinderella, viz., that the girl owes her fortune to the slipper or sandal, the unkind sisters forming no part of it.

There is, however, a separate tale in the ancient records, dealing only with the sisters, which no doubt became grafted on to that of Cinderella.

The story goes that more than four thousand years ago there dwelt in the island of Samos a merchant, with his wife and little daughter Nitakert. He had been very unfortunate in business, and resolved to settle in Egypt in order to redeem his position. What his occupation had been in Samos the record does not state, but in Egypt he opened an inn, such a one as we read of in Genesis, partly a caravanserai and partly a wine-shop.