

Guilt and Death.

"Tell us a story, Uncle Alick?"

The request came from my little golden haired niece, sitting on my knee, on Christmas night.

I was staying at Christmas time with my only sister in England, and we were sitting round the large log fire, talking about all sorts of Christmas reminiscences, of relations and friends dead, some married, and various other memories, which always crowd round one at Christmastide, more especially to one who, like myself, had been away from the old country some years, and had spent Christmas in the delightful cold of Canada, in the heat of Egypt and other parts of the globe.

"You ought to have had some rum experiences, travelling about as you have," chimed in the gruff voice of my brother-in-law.

It was quite true what my brother-in-law said, I have had some "rum experiences," so, after thinking a bit, I told them the following peculiar one, the effect of which, though time has somewhat dimmed it, will, I think, always remain with me till my dying day.

I.

"You remember," I said, "that October I started for Canada, I daresay? Well, I won't trouble you with my experiences of the voyage, because I suppose that they were like what other people's generally are, but I never told you about a young fellow, named Willie Hewson, who was on board.

Willie was a big, strapping fellow, tall, and very good looking, and, like myself, came out to Canada to see if he could not better himself. We at once became great chums, more especially as I had been able to render some slight service (as I thought) to him. He was ridiculously grateful, and thought far too much of it, more especially when he said to me one day:

"No, Alick, old boy; whatever you may think of it, I will always stick to you through life, and after it, too."

I told him that sticking to me after life was an affection I did not care for, and would rather be without. I remembered what he said, only too well in the aftertime, however.

However, I am digressing, and must go on with my little tale.

We in due course arrived in Montreal, and, after a little time, settled down in a nice boarding-house there. It is needless to mention the exact spot, but it was not far from Victoria Square.

We were very comfortable, and there were some nice people staying in the house, who made us feel very much at home. One of these I must mention, as he has a great deal to do with my story. His name was Victor Grant. He was very tall, dark, with a sallow complexion, and very deep-set eyes, and, I must add, from the very first moment I set my eyes on him, I took an instinctive dislike to him. Willie, on the other hand, seemed rather to like him, or was fascinated by him.

Victor Grant certainly had plenty to say for himself, seemed to have travelled a great deal, could sing well, acted very creditably in some private theatricals we got up, and one evening surprised us all with some experiments in mesmerism. He tried his experiments on me, but with very partial success, though I felt the whole time that there was something very uncanny about the man. The effect upon Willie was very different. He sent him to sleep, and seemed to make him do anything he pleased, and, as Willie told me afterward when we were in our bedroom:

"Alick, old boy, I wish I had never seen Grant. He can do anything with me, and, if he chooses, can have me quite under his will."

Victor Grant made himself very friendly with Willie. Myself he seemed to dislike, and I can assure you the feeling was quite reciprocal.

He was in the habit of coming into our bedroom (for we slept in the same room), a very cheerful room, with French windows opening on to a balcony, from which steps descended to the garden; and one night, I well remember, he came

in, just as we were going to bed. Willie had just taken off his money belt, which he had on. Victor Grant noticed it and asked him if he always slept with it.

"Yes," said Will. "I think it is safer under my pillow."

I did not think much of the circumstance at the time, though I felt annoyed, as I did not trust Victor in the least.

II.

Things went on in an ordinary sort of way for a week or two longer, until winter came and the first fall of snow as well. Willie and I went to business every day and were very happy together, until an extraordinary event happened.

Willie and myself had gone up to our bedroom and he had thrown himself on his bed and said he would read a bit before undressing. I soon fell fast asleep, and, no doubt, slept for some time, when I thought I was half awake, with my face toward the window, and, looking through the window, fancied I saw a pair of hands making passes or signs. The next thing I saw, in my dream, was Willie very restless in his bed (for he had gone to sleep whilst reading), then slowly get up, like one walking in his sleep, and go to the French windows, slowly open them, and go along the balcony after the hands.

I remember no more, but suppose I must have slept. I woke up in the morning, with a confused idea of the dream, and looked at Willie's bed. Great heavens! he was not there. The window was open, the snow falling very fast, and Will was gone. Then my vivid dream came back to me. "Whose hands were those I had seen at the window?" A sudden thought struck me. Could they have been Victor Grant's trying to mesmerize Will for some purpose of his own? I may here mention that Victor Grant's room was next ours and opened on the same balcony. So without losing a minute I went there and knocked at his door. He sleepily said:

"Come in," and I went in.

"Have you seen Will?" I said, watching him closely.

"No. Why should I? Isn't he up?"

"No, he isn't, and what's more, I believe you mesmerized him out of our room, and now, perhaps, you will tell me where he is?" I said, angrily. I was sorry afterward that I spoke so, for it put me at a disadvantage.

"May I ask why you make such a serious assertion?" he said, coolly. "Do you really give me credit for having such mesmeric power that I could get your friend out of bed and out of the room? Tush! you talk like a child, and do not know what you are saying."

If there is any one thing more irritating than another, it is to be told by a man of your own age that you are acting like a child, however true it is—in fact, if it is true, it makes it all the harder to bear. In this particular case the remark had the effect of making me bounce out of the room, slamming the door.

When I got to my own room I cogitated, and came to the conclusion that I had not gained much by my interview.

I looked at Willie's bed and saw that it was only ruffled and had not been slept in; the lamp had burned itself out, and the book was on the floor, all pointing to the fact that he had gone to sleep while he had been reading.

I went out on the balcony and saw the staircase at the end, which Willie could easily have gone down, but the snow was lying so thick that I could not tell whether he had gone that way or not.

III.

To cut a long story short, I waited throughout that day, and many days afterward, but Willie never came back. I wrote to his people at home, as I thought that possibly he might have gone to the old country. I caused every enquiry to be made in Canada, but could get no clue as to his whereabouts.

Within a week of Will's disappearance Victor Grant left us, and as I had nothing but the barest suspicion against him, nothing could be done.

He told the people in the house that he was going West to make his fortune.

I must say that during all this time I missed Willie dreadfully. Christmas had just passed, and I could not but help thinking that the poor boy would have enjoyed himself immensely in the winter sports. I myself entered thoroughly into them, and went to many snowshoe tramps over the Mountain.

One evening we started on the tramp, but before we got to our destination I, being new to the sport, felt tired and determined to return.

"Which is the nearest way home, boys," I said. "Across the Pines," they shouted "take the first turn to the left."

I waited a short time to see them all going away, and watched them till I lost sight of them entirely, and then set off home. I had not been in that part of the Mountain before, and I thought that in the moonlight it looked very beautiful. I walked on till I came to the darkness of the pines, and as luck would have it a cloud crossed the moon and made it very dark indeed all round.

Just at this moment I seemed to notice a figure in front of me. The first thought that struck me was that I should have a companion to walk home with, so I got nearer to it. The figure still kept on walking a steady pace in front of me, in fact it seemed to glide. I got nearer, and then I noticed it left no footmarks in the snow.

I am naturally of a courageous nature, but this startled me, and I felt ashamed of myself that I saw anything at all. I put my hand in front of my eyes, and told myself that I was a fool—and it seemed to have no effect whatever; whenever I stopped, that stopped, beads of perspiration stood out on my forehead, and I thought that I would turn back, when the figure moved and turned its face, and a very sad face it was.

It was the face of Willie Hewson!

The figure then waved one of its arms slowly, as if beckoning me to follow, and in a short time it stopped, pointed first to its breast and then to the ground.

I suppose I must have lost consciousness, for I remember no more until some rather rough handling woke me up. It proved to be my friends of the Snowshoe Club returning who had found me lying on the path.

I told one of them what I had seen; he said it was very strange, and made at the same time some rather opprobrious remarks about "rye whisky and cold air not agreeing," etc., very funny indeed, but not agreeable.

However, I thought the events of the evening well over and came to the conclusion that Willie Hewson had been murdered, by whom I did not know, but I could not help feeling that his spirit had come to tell me.

The next day I went up the Mountain with a man and a shovel, and dug at a spot the figure pointed to, and finally came across a body which I had little doubt in recognizing as the body of my poor friend, and close by I found a knife with a red stain on it, and on the haft were the initials of Victor Grant.

IV.

A year or so passed away, and the events never faded from my memory. It seemed to me an undoubted fact that Victor Grant had killed poor Will, and no doubt had killed him for his money, but the man was gone, who could tell where, and could neither hear or find any trace of him.

I often thought about the apparition I had seen, and when an opportunity came to me to leave Montreal, I must say I welcomed it with pleasure; the memories of my dear friend, his awful death in the snow, and his appearing to me afterwards, had produced such an effect upon my nerves that when my medical adviser suggested change of scene, I willingly accepted his advice and went travelling.

I will not weary you with my travels, as they can have but little interest to you except for one event which happened to me.

I had arrived at a little western town, where I had to stop till next day to make railway connection; and finding the best hotel in the place, had