

A CRIMEAN SNOWSTORM.

"Good night, Hal; don't keep Will up too long, or he won't be able to hit a haystack to-morrow.

It was my wife who spoke. My cousin Hal and I were setting down to a comfortable smoke in my den, and her warning voice fell on unheeding ears. Hal, a big bronzed athlete, with gray hair round a youngish face, was spending a short holiday at my place in the country, and this night was likely to be the last he and I would have to ourselves, for already the golden leaves had fluttered down from the trees, and on the morrow guests would fill the coverts with the rattle of smooth-bores and wake the echoes in the old house with their merriment. Hal had only just returned from Kimberly, free from the troubles of impecuniosity for the rest of his natural life, but not, I thought, so bright and cheery as he should have been. The smile I used to know so well in those honest blue eyes was never in them now, save for courtesy's sake. So I prepared to elicit from him, if possible, the cause of the change. To my surprise he cut me short at once: "No, old fellow, you aren't to do any of the talking to-night; that's my part of the business; you prepare to listen." And then after a moment he deliberately filled his pipe, got up and turned the key in the poor, and began again with: "Will, do I look like a chap to commit a murder! No, you needn't answer, I know what you would say; but for all that you are wrong—I did almost commit one once, and I am going to tell you all about it."

Hal and I had been school companions, and though I was his senior by a year or two, he had been the hero of my school days, and had retained his influence in our after life.

Together we had grown up at his mother's knee, and when our relations told us that the little store our fathers had left us would not allow any longer stay at school, and hinted that we had better be up and doing, Hal and I had together elected to try for clerkships in the Indo-European Telegraph Service. The pay was not very great, but on the foreign stations it was enough to live on; the work (eight hours out of every twenty-four) was not repulsive in itself, and the service gave us an opportunity of visiting strange lands.

Those were pleasant days at Kertch in spite of our poverty. I think one might do worse than live there over again. But at the end of two years we had tired of them, and a telegram received on 24th of December informing me of the death of a relative, which freed me forever from the service of "dot and dash," was eagerly welcomed. There was no such luck for all that when I left Kertch he determined to seek employment elsewhere.

Hear the story from his own lips: "You remember, Will, that Christmas Eve ten years ago, after you had got your lawyer's telegram, how, when the first burst of excitement had subsided, the dullness of the snow-buried town palled upon us, and to think of passing our time in the ordinary way, loafing in the billiard room of the English Club, or hanging on behind sledges in the 'Rue Woronzoff,' of those fair occupants we were heartily sick long since, seemed out of the question? It was four o'clock already, and the evening was fast closing in. Our thoughts had gone back to the firelit homes of old England in the twilight hour, and even the absence of an open grate and its flickering flames had become a grievance to us. There was nothing to do, out of doors, nothing to do within, but pine for the time when we might escape from Kertch and its ennui. Every book had been read and reread, and even the poor pleasures of constructing fancy landscapes from the frost work on the window panes had been tried and found a failure, for the bitter intensity of the cold had swallowed up all the delicate tracery of the earlier frosts in one solid sheet of ice. It was then that you proposed that mad shooting party which so nearly cost you your life—how nearly I think you have never yet guessed.

"No one but a brace of mad Englishmen would have dreamed of such a thing, but we revelled in that epithet in those days, loved hardships for their own sake, and were too young and tough to come to much grief.

"So Paramon, our henchman, was called from his slumbers in a sheepskin on top of the kitchen *pechka*, and sent grumbling out into the night to order our *troika*, and though the thermometer stood at 8° Fahrenheit, and Michael Maximovitch the Postmaster, did all he dared to thwart our purpose, yet in a little over an hour the lumbering open cart was at the door, with its shaggy ponies and Tartar *yemshik*. The broad silent streets, ill-paved, half lighted, were buried in snow and sparkling with frost; the sky above was a deep, strong violet color, looking 'bright as fire and keen as ice,' and the stars so near that you could almost see the red flames leaping in them. Here and there under the white faced houses a *storoz* (watchman) cowered in a doorway, so muffled up his sheepskins as hardly to retain a human outline. Except for his staff against the wall, signals to the world that some one was on guard in spite of the weather, not a sound was to be heard. Even the dogs of Kertch were silent for once.

"Outside the town was set our sledge-bells going, and their merry clatter and the keen air stirred the life within us, woke a spirit of defiance to the silence that brooded round us, and for a while the chorus of 'The Red White, and Blue' woke the witch hare from her nest in the snowdrift as we sped past.

"But soon the frost laid its finger on our lips and glued them together with icy bonds. Our mustaches whitened and stiffened, and our eyelashes froze to our lids, until we were glad to nestle into our wraps and be silent.

"The lights of the town were soon out of sight; the stars, too had disappeared, and again the ceaseless, silent snow fell around all.

"Away to the west over the low rolling steppeland lay Sebastopol and our English dead, among them your father and mine, buried as English officers are best buried, 'deep with their men.' The ruined city round which they fought, standing in ruins still its empty window frames and doorless passages gazing blankly over the frozen sea and low snow-clad hills, is the most desolate sight upon earth. Could it be that the dead lying there to-night were at peace? Had they no longing as I had, to hear the happy Christmas bells of home ring out across the snow? Full as the earth and water is of life, crowded with myriad forms of sentient beings, it seemed hard to believe that the broad expanse above and around us was peopled only by the feathery snowflakes. To me it seemed that the graveyards of the Crimea had given up their dead, their voices were on every wind that sighed, and before I reached the post station I had almost persuaded myself that I could distinguished their forms in the storm. For nearly three hours we toiled over that fifteen versts Twice with a sudden plunge that steppe and took our breath away, and sent us rolling from the frozen truss that formed our seat, we dived headlong into drifts above the horses' withers. With many a curse and many a caressing word did the *yemshik*, by our help, extricate his half buried team, and at last through a rift in the whirling flakes we saw the gaunt black and white post that marked the station at which our journey for the night ended. If anything could have astonished stolid Pavel, the German Jew who managed the station, the arrival of travelers on such a night would have done it. As it was instead of that best welcome which one hopes for at an inn, we were near being turned away. Had he something good for supper? 'Nichevo' (nothing) warm to drink? 'Nichevo.' Was there plenty of game? Still 'Nichevo,' and so to every question until you might fancy 'Nichevo' was the only word in the Russian language, as thanks to its many various meanings, it almost might be. That was a dreary night we passed at Sultanovka. The bitter cold seemed to take shape and size, and torture and grip us with the personal malice of a living foe. The wooden beds groaned and thawed slowly as we lay upon them, until great beads of moisture stood at every crevice in the woodwork. Outside, the spirits of wind and storm were abroad to meet old Christmas on his way from the frozen North, with nothing more than the one dim light of the station, gleams

out over the waste like the Cyclops' eye, to watch them.

"It was early dawn when, with heads racked by the pain caused by the stifling fumes of the charcoal stove and by want of rest, we sallied out with our guns into the icy freshness of the new day.

"As the morning broke, the wind went down, and the drift, resetting on the steppe, gave us a clear view all round. From time to time as we came with noiseless tread into some sheltered balkan, a puff of snow would fly up into the air, and a form scarcely less white than its surroundings would hurry away, across the waste, or dye it with its crimson life-blood.

"Here and there we came to tiny pools where, on the frozen surface, groups of teal or duck were sitting with ruffled plumes, longing for the liquid element, which seemed for the nonce to have vanished from the earth altogether.

"By noon our game sacks had grown heavy, and we turned our heads toward home, satisfied that Christmas on the steppes was a little less cheerless than Christmas in the town.

"With our return our troubles began. The traitor wind that for a while had sunk to rest now rose like a giant refreshed whirling the fine snow in powder from its resting places, and blinding the eyes that sought the homeward way.

"Hour after hour we plodded on in the ever-increasing darkness of drifted snow, nothing visible above or around save the opaque veil that hid the world from our eyes.

"Wilder and wilder grew the wind, catching your light form in his rough embrace, and whirling you in a staggering dance over the snow. I see you now almost as plainly as I saw you then, in my mind's eye, at one moment wrapped and buried in your *bourka*, the next shot out from it, all legs and arms, as if it would have been torn from your shoulders by the wayward giant.

"Go home, go home,' the wind seemed ever whistling in our ears, but the blinding snow mocked the good advice.

"For you rest seemed near, but such rest as curdled the blood to think of. Weakened by want of sleep, wearied by heavy toil the grip of the icy wind had got hold upon your heart, and that dread drowsiness—sure prelude, if yielded to, to the everlasting sleep—seemed fast growing upon you, numbing your energies, and making life appear a boon not half so much to be desired as the soft, cold couch in the drift at your feet. Twice your weak knees failed, and you sank, how softly into the snow. Twice I returned and dragged you from your self-elected shroud, supporting and driving you forward in spite of your supplications and reproaches.

"But my own strength was waning, my courage failing, in the hard and bitter battle with the merciless cold.

"There were devils abroad that day, Will, in the darkness of the snowstorm.

"Nothing less could have whispered in my ear that your life was all that stood between me and wealth and freedom from a life I loathed—your life, which you yourself prayed me to let you lay down, as a burden too heavy for you to bear; your life, which, perhaps, in spite of all my efforts, I could never save, and which might cost me my own.

"At last, when I was well nigh spent, you slid from my grasp, and, afraid to look at you again, I let the devil have his way, and left you. The tempter had succeeded, and I, the heir—I your more than brother—I left you to the sleep of death, went onward alone to safety, and (fool that I was) I thought to happiness.

"Oh, on through the storm I struggled. The white curtain had closed forever over you, and I dared not look behind. On, and on, but still no sign of the station, and at last the moan of waves told me the awful truth. I had wandered far from my course, and now nothing remained but to lie down and die. Not side by side with you as I should have done, not at rest in innocence as you had done, but haunted and tortured even to my last death throbs by the devil to whom I had yielded. For a time I lay down, and listened to the voices of the waves, mingled with the cries of some sea gulls, those mariners' mourners whose even, undulating flight no storm seems ever to dis-

turb. Then I rose and staggered on again. To me no dreamy death drew near.

"I no longer sought to save my life, nay, could I have chosen I should now have preferred death by your side to escape without you. But it was too late. To look for you now would have been vain. I neither knew where I had left you nor where the inn lay. As I plodded mechanically forward, staggering heavily at every step, I caught a glimpse of what seemed to me a distant figure in the snow. Huge and indistinct, at first I could not make out its outline, until a sudden rift in the storm revealed to me two other wayfarers battling like myself with the elements. Madly plunging forward, I tried to overtake them, but the more I struggled the deeper I sank in the drifts which now engulfed me, sometimes almost to the waist. Before I could reach them the white curtain of the storm swept between us, and I was again alone. From time to time it seemed to me that I caught sight of them always just beyond my reach. Despair took hold of me. I felt I was going mad. With all my strength I tried to call aloud, but the wind drowned my voice. I was like one trying to cry out in a dream, and then I think I prayed.

"Again the curtain parted for a moment and I saw my fellow-wanderers; two weary figures in long gray cloaks like those Russian soldiers wear, one of them almost carrying the other in his arms. But slowly as they seemed to toil along they were still to fast for my most frantic endeavors to overtake them, nor did they ever turn their faces toward me. Again and again I lost sight of them, and then my agony of mind bordered on insanity. Once as I followed close behind them they disappeared so entirely that, fearing to lose them altogether, I bent over the spot to find their tracks, preferring to feel my way along their footsteps rather than be left utterly without guidance in that wilderness in vain. Behind me my own tracks were scored deep and plain upon the snow, but they were the only ones, and before me all lay smooth and unbroken. Their footsteps left no track.

"Once again the figures reappeared, again I followed them, for how long we shall never know; but it seemed to me in my agony as if, like the Wandering Jew, centuries rolled up beneath my weary feet. At last the two paused, one of them had slipped from the other's grip, and that other stood bending over his companion. With one supreme effort I plunged forward until I was almost within arm's length of them, and then—the snow held me!

"Strive as I would to lift my feet, they clung to the cruel snow; snow; that instead of being light as feathers or sea foam, was now heavy as lead or the burden of an unrepented crime.

"My lips froze and my powers of speech congealed.

"My heart stood still on the very brink of breaking. I felt one word would save me. I could not say it.

"Cold as the Christmas wind on the steppeland was a colder breath swept over me, as I stood before those silent gray forms which seemed to grow vast and vague in the dancing snow wreaths.

"In some other life, at some other time, I had known these two before. As I gazed, the wind rose louder, wilder than before, and as it tore furiously across the dreary waste it caught the cloak that shrouded the standing figure's face, and as it blew back for one moment I recognized my own father. Not the face I had known as a child-bright and brave, but terribly wan and sad.

"Do we indeed desire the dead
Should still be near us at our side;
Is there no baseness we would hide;
No inner villainess that we dread?"

"Alas! the sorrow in those awful eyes answered the question for me. My cup of bitterness was full indeed. Given over to death, traitor to my brother, without hope either here or hereafter, I stood a 'yet warm corpse' before my judge, and that judge the one who in this life I had loved with all a child's heart, with all a boy's hero worship. In mercy the cold wind crept into my heart and stilled its beating. The figures wavered in the storm, grew dim, and then were blotted out. I thought I heard the death-rattle in my own throat, saw my own dead face looking up at me from the snow, still with an awful stillness, but not of peace, set