

Willie Gordon

OR,

THE MYSTERIOUS TELEGRAM.

A TALE OF OTAGO.

BY ALEXANDER STUART.

CHAPTER I.

A REMARKABLE DREAM.



HORTLY after the opening of a telegraph office at Clutha Ferry, Otago, in the summer of 1867-68, I received the first telegram I ever had in my life. (We called it a telegraphic message in those days; the word telegram had either not been invented, or was unknown to us down at the Clutha.) I have had hundreds of telegrams and a few cablegrams since then, but the message I refer to, besides being the first, was also the strangest and most mysterious I ever received. I have the document still in my possession. Here it is, pasted on a piece of white silk with a black border—the only moment I have of an old friend and shipmate, whose memory is still very dear to me. It is signed 'William Gordon.' Poor Willie Gordon! What a fine, strapping, healthy, ruddy-faced, whole-hearted young fellow he was! The message shows on the face of it that it was sent from Oamaru on February 20th, 1868. It was delivered to me on the same day in the afternoon, and early next morning I was a passenger by the coach from Clutha Ferry to Dunedin.

The first time I spoke to Willie Gordon, or rather the first time he spoke to me, was somewhere in the Bay of Biscay a few days before Christmas, 1865. We were then steerage passengers together on board the ship *Resolute*, Captain Wallace, bound from the Clyde to Port Chalmers, New Zealand. We had very rough weather in the Bay, and I was dreadfully sea-sick. I was sitting on a coil of rope or a tarpaulin on the deck, feeling very miserable, when a cheery voice accosted me and asked me how I was getting on. I answered that I was progressing very badly indeed.

'Well,' said the voice, 'you must cheer up, you know.' I looked up as if I did not cheer up, and saw that the speaker was Willie Gordon. I knew him by name and sight, but had not spoken to him before. He sat down beside me, and tried his best to make me feel better, and succeeded.

I had seen Willie Gordon come on board at Greenock before we sailed, accompanied by a man and woman and a young girl who I conjectured were probably his father, mother, and sister. I afterwards learned that my surmise was correct. They had come on board to bid him farewell, and they stayed with him till the ship was ready to leave the wharf.

I heard Willie Gordon at the time address his sister as Annie. I noticed that she was very beautiful, or at least I thought her so. She appeared to be very fond of her brother, and shed tears at parting with him. When she left the ship I think I was as sorry as her brother could possibly be. I had hoped, on seeing her first, that she might be a fellow passenger, but I was disappointed. I had to wait several years and undergo some strange and sad experiences ere Annie Gordon and myself sailed together to New Zealand at the beginning of our voyage together on the ocean of life.

From the day that he first spoke to me on the Bay of Biscay Willie and myself became sworn comrades and fast friends. He was twenty-one at the time and I twenty-two—glorious period of life when (after getting better of *mal de mer*, of course) we seem to tread on air and are full of hope and joy and eager expectation of some great good future that we think will soon be ours!

My new friend and myself soon made the pleasing discovery that we belonged to adjoining parishes in Perthshire, and that our homes were not twenty miles apart. We also found that, although previous to our meeting on board ship we were ignorant of each other's existence, yet we possessed numerous friends and acquaintances in common, and talking over old scenes, old times, and mutual friends, helped to wile away many a weary hour on the long three months' voyage to New Zealand.

We were both fond of reading, and as we had each a number of good books, we were able to exchange them and get through a great amount of instructive and miscellaneous reading on the voyage. Among the books we read and discussed were the works of Burns, Byron, Scott, Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Longfellow, Macaulay—besides biographies, travels, histories, etc.

We were only two poor lads from two moorland farms in Perthshire, but we probably knew more than many of the young swells from the colleges going out in the cabin first-class to make their fortunes in New Zealand with kid gloves on. Poor deluded beggars, what a sad awakening from their dreams of easily-acquired greatness was in store for many of them!

It is not my intention to describe the voyage to New Zealand twenty-six years ago. It was so very different from what it is at the present day that a description of it would no doubt be interesting and amusing, but if I ever write one I will postpone it for some future narrative.

The ship *Resolute* arrived safely at Port Chalmers on March 20th, 1864. Her passengers are now scattered all over New Zealand; many of them are dead. One of them who came out a poor steerage passenger, is now partner and manager of the largest wholesale business in the colony, whose operations in New Zealand alone must amount in value to at least a million sterling every year. And he came from a Scotch moorland farm, and got all the education he

ever got in a country parish school. I do not think the parish schools in Scotland can be easily improved on, if they are still as good as they were in my time.

For two or three years after landing at Dunedin Willie Gordon and myself worked as mates in the diggings together in various places with varying success. On the whole we would have done better working on farms or stations, and we came to the conclusion at last to give up the alluring life of the gold-digger and settle down to something more reliable. Willie ultimately got employment as a stockman on Totara Station, near Oamaru, while I sometime afterwards with the aid of a friend, started a store at Clutha Ferry, a small township about fifty miles to the south of Dunedin. We wrote several letters to each other between the time of our separation and the events I am about to describe, but nothing of any consequence happened until the date mentioned in the beginning of this narrative, when I received the following telegram—

Oamaru, February 20th, 1868. To Mr A. Stuart, Clutha Ferry. Come up to Totara Station, where your presence is urgently required.—WILLIE GORDON.

As a consequence of receiving this message, next morning saw me a passenger on Cobb and Co.'s coach from Clutha Ferry to Dunedin. It is needless to say that the message caused me considerable anxiety, if not alarm. I thought that Willie Gordon must have met with some accident of a serious nature. It must have been something out of the common, I naturally thought, which caused him to summon me such a long distance without any explanation. However, he was my friend, and it was my duty to obey the summons, and I obeyed it without delay. Had I acted otherwise, I should not be worthy the name of friend. As the sequel will show, my presence was urgently required by the sender of the telegram, but how he came to know on the day he sent it that my presence would be needed is a mystery which I have not been able to understand, although I have since got an explanation of it which, however, still leaves the matter nearly as mysterious and wonderful as before.

CHAPTER II.

MANY people still living in Otago and Canterbury will probably remember the summer of 1867-68, and especially the month of February in the latter year. That summer was exceedingly cold, wet, and backward generally, but the week previous to February 20th was especially marked by fearful storms of wind and rain. Before I left the Clutha I heard there had been heavy floods in the Taieri district, and from there right up north as far as Oamaru, Timaru, and even Christchurch.

The day on which I started on my journey, in answer to the message I had received, was a particularly fine one. The sun shone brightly, and the road, although muddy and slippery in some places, was drying up very fast after the rain. A fine fresh breeze had sprung up, and the drive through Lovell's Flat and the Tokomairiro Plain was thoroughly enjoyable. In the afternoon the coach, after passing Waiholo Lake, entered the Taieri Plain. Before crossing the Taieri Bridge we could see that a great part of the level plain was under water. Many of the farm houses and buildings were surrounded on all sides, and boats were seen plying here and there over the fields. The coach road, after crossing the bridge, was in several places a foot or two under water, and the driver had to go slow and feel his way carefully in case of accidents. Fortunately, we found no serious obstacles in getting through, and by and by, when we had passed Adams' Accommodation House, the road began to rise from the plain and climb the lower spurs of Saddle Hill. On our left the flooded plain lay at our feet, and we could see large fields of wheat, oats, and potatoes completely covered with water—the grain lying flat on the soil, and the flood-water flowing mudily over it. Many a poor hard-working Taieri farmer was ruined by that disastrous storm, and never afterwards recovered from its effect.

We arrived safely in Dunedin late in the afternoon, and I went to Wain's Hotel on Manse-street, which was at that time the favourite stopping-place of country settlers when they came to town. Having secured a bedroom, I went downstairs to the dining-room and joined a large company who were sitting down to an excellent spread. Several members of the company there gathered together I could see, were, like myself, from the country, and when I entered the room they were discussing a subject which appeared to create some excitement.

'When did it happen?' one of them asked.

'Last night,' was the answer. 'Sometime between bedtime and early this morning. Old Campbell, the manager, told me when he went to bed the creek was bank high, the rain had stopped, but it still looked very black away at the back towards the hills. The hut was about twenty yards from the creek, and nobody thought there was any danger. The men were all in the hut and in bed before ten o'clock. When Mr Campbell got up early this morning he found the hut swept away, and not a man to be seen, dead or alive.'

'Most extraordinary! What a fearful catastrophe!' said another.

'Where did this happen? Tell me all about it!' I cried rather excitedly, a sudden fear taking possession of me and depriving me of my appetite for dinner.

The name of old Campbell, the manager, I may explain, was familiar to me, for that, I remember, was the name of the manager of Totara Station, and when I heard it mentioned in connection with some dreadful occurrence you may be sure my fears lest some accident had happened to my friend were now awakened with redoubled anxiety.

The narrator looked at me fixedly for a minute or so, probably wondering at my excitement, and then began as follows:—

'The sad event I was telling these gentlemen about when you entered happened last night at a place called Totara, near Oamaru. As you perhaps know, there has been a dreadful storm of thunder, wind, and rain raging up Oamaru way for the past week. There are now half-a-dozen large vessels which were up there loading wool and grain lying high and dry on the beach with their backs broken, all total wrecks. Fortunately there's been no loss of life in connection with them, as the ships were thrown up so high on the beach that the men were able to jump ashore. There has been a sad affair, however, at Totara Station. That station is a few miles on the side of Oamaru, by the side of a little stream or creek, which you

can jump over in most places. There were eight or nine men working on the station, and the hut they lived in was on a flat piece of ground near the creek. The manager's house is behind that again, on a higher part of the estate. When he went to bed last night the creek was full to the banks, but did not overflow on the flat ground where the men's hut was built. The men are supposed to have gone to bed at the usual hour last night. When Mr Campbell got up this morning he found the hut had been swept away during the night, and it is considered a dead certainty that they are all drowned. The strangest part of the affair is that the creek was no bigger this morning than it was last night; but you could see that it had risen tremendously some time in the night, and must have swept down the valley at least twenty feet deep and as wide as a river.'

'And do you think all the men were drowned?' I asked, taking out my telegram and looking at it with great anxiety.

'Well, all I can tell you,' he said, 'is this. I saw Mr Campbell at Otepopo this morning, and he told me about it, and he said some of the bodies had been found. When I saw him he was in a state of great excitement, and had no time to enter into particulars.'

'Did he tell you any of the names of those who were drowned?' I asked.

'Well, I dare say he did, now that you mention it, but I did not know any of them, and I don't recollect who they were.'

'I have a friend working on that station,' I said. 'His name is Gordon.'

'The 's one of the names Mr Campbell mentioned to me,' said the traveller. 'I remember now distinctly that Gordon was one of the names.'

This information distressed and shocked me terribly. The food I was trying to eat stuck in my throat, and I had to rise from the table and go outside to think over what I had heard.

CHAPTER III.

THERE was no evening paper published in Dunedin at the time I refer to, or if there was I did not know of its existence. I knew the office of the Otago *Daily Times*, however, in Princess-street, and thither I went in search of fresh information about the Totara disaster. I found the office open, and a crowd of people standing about the pavement, some of them with slips of paper which they were reading. I entered the office and saw a few extras on the counter, and took one up and began reading it. The account of the occurrence at Totara, published as an extra, was substantially the same as I had heard from the traveller at the hotel. The news was telegraphed from Oamaru, and was very brief, but to me at least it was terribly distressing. The names of eight men who were supposed to be drowned were given, and amongst them was that of William Gordon. It also gave the names of those whose bodies had been recovered, but his name was not among them.

On inquiry at the office I ascertained that no farther particulars had been received.

I went back to the hotel very sad and sick at heart, with my worst fears confirmed.

After what I heard from the traveller at the dinner table and read for myself in the *Times* extra, I scarcely dared to hope that some mistake had been made, and that instead of being drowned my friend was really alive and waiting for my coming. The telegram certainly showed that he had been in Oamaru the day before the catastrophe, and this fact in consideration raised my spirits considerably, and gave me at last a slender hope that he had not gone back to Totara that night, and had escaped the disaster. If that was so, he must have wanted me in Oamaru for some urgent purpose unknown to me. At the same time in this supposition it was very strange that his name should appear on the list of those who were lost, as he must have heard of the affair very early that morning in Oamaru, and would naturally have hurried back to the station to see what had happened to his late companions. If he had done so he would have been one of the first to give information concerning those who slept in the hut that night, and this consideration made it all the more difficult for me to understand how his name could have been included with those of the victims. Again I thought, if he was really drowned in such a sudden and extraordinary manner, how passing strange that he should have sent me an urgent message the day before the sad event, asking me to come and see him.

I was brooding over this matter in the commercial room when I heard a coach drive to the door. I looked out, and saw that it was the Oamaru coach, an hour behind time. I went outside and saw a man coming off the coach whose face was familiar to me. As soon as I saw him properly I knew him to be the late Mr Reid, of the since then extensively-known firm of Reid and Gray. At that time he was in business at Oamaru. About a year previously Willie Gordon and I had passed through that town on horseback on our way back from the Hokitika diggings. We had walked overland to Christchurch, where we bought a couple of horses and saddles for the rest of our journey. When we came to Oamaru we stopped a day or two to look about us, and while there we had our horses shod at Mr Reid's. We had several times visited his place afterwards to have a chat with him about our affairs, and this eventually led to Willie Gordon getting employment on Totara Station.

As soon as I saw Mr Reid and recollected who he was, I rushed up to him and said:

'Mr Reid, I am glad to see you. You remember me, don't you?'

'I do,' he said. 'I remember you well. I was thinking about you to-day coming down in the coach. You have heard the bad news, I can see.'

'Yes,' I said; 'I heard there was a fearful affair happened at Totara, but I do not know the particulars. You remember my old mate Gordon, who was with me last year. Is it true that he is drowned?'

'I'm afraid it's too true,' said Mr Reid. 'When we came through his body had not been found, but there can be no doubt he was lost with the others.'

'Well,' I said, 'I cannot understand it. I got an urgent message by telegraph from him yesterday asking me to come up. He must have been then in Oamaru, and I was beginning to hope he had not gone back to the station last night.'

'I saw him in Oamaru yesterday,' said Mr Reid, 'about dinner-time, but I did not speak to him. I saw him go into the bank, and after that into the telegraph office. In the