

The Brown Trunk.

THE STORY OF A MURDERED MAN'S VENGEANCE.

Musgrave felt neither remorse nor fear as he bent over Ballentyne's body. The murder had been cogitated so long, every detail leading up to it thought out and planned so minutely, that success came as a matter of course; and the fact that Ballentyne lay dead before him seemed both natural and inevitable.

He took up the empty glass and smelt it, a faint odour of the poison lingered or seemed to mingle with the scent of the spirit. Emptying a little water into it he washed the glass, and poured the contents into one of the flower pots outside the window. Then from the dead man he took the pocket book containing the bank-notes—Ballentyne's half share of the sum they had previously divided. He touched nothing else—it was safest so—but dragging the brown trunk, provided beforehand, beside the body, he raised the lid and, putting his arms about Ballentyne, lifted and dropped him within. There was no difficulty in disposing the limp body in the empty trunk; there was room, indeed, to cram in Ballentyne's hat and the overcoat he had taken off in the room. Musgrave locked and strapped the brown trunk, and the thing was done.

So far so good; Ballentyne had disappeared: his absence from London would puzzle no one but the manager of the Universal; at Musgrave's hotel he was only known as a visitor, pro-

bably no one save the waiter had noticed his entry that day, and the waiter would conclude he had left before his friend's departure. Musgrave unlocked the door and rang the bell; he looked at himself in the glass and saw nothing amiss with his appearance. A waiter entered.

"Get me a cab now, and send up a couple of men to take my luggage down."

The men came, entered the adjacent bedroom for the big travelling trunk, hat box and portmanteau, and carried them, together with the brown trunk, out of the sitting room.

As Musgrave was about to enter the cab the hall porter came hurrying up with an umbrella.

"I beg your pardon, sir; this belongs to your friend. He left it an hour ago when he went to your room."

"I suppose he forgot it when he left," answered Musgrave. "Put it on one side, he's sure to call or send for it."

"Very good, sir."

He had not anticipated Ballentyne leaving an umbrella in the hall, but the natural way the porter accepted his statement that his friend had left the hotel showed how easily suspicion—if it ever arose—could be diverted. Moreover, it was improbable that Ballentyne's absence would ever be notified to the police. He had kept his return a secret from his friends, and no one was awaiting him. No suspicion of foul play was ever likely to arise.

That night Musgrave slept at the Winhush Arms, and drove over the next day to Tollington House. He had written Agnes to say he was coming;

she met him with tears of joy and pride and happiness.

"Harry, dear Harry, you have come back."

"And with a fortune," he laughed. "What does your father say to that, eh?"

"It doesn't make any difference."

"Not to you, darling, but to your father."

But Musgrave learnt that very night how wholly unnecessary the crime had been. The two men were seated alone after dinner and he formally demanded Agnes's hand.

"Three years ago, sir, you told me your daughter's wedding portion was ten thousand pounds, and the man who married her must show pound for pound. I went to Klondyke with five hundred, but now I can exactly meet your stipulation, and therefore—"

"Aye, aye; I must give you Agnes. I saw that a year ago. I thought it only boy and girl nonsense; I was wrong. My little girl's happiness is bound up with you, and if you'd come back penniless it would have been the same. But you were lucky, Harry; you and your partner. And you sold your claims?"

"To a London syndicate. It was only settled two days ago. My share was ten thousand pounds. We dissolved partnership that day."

"And where's your friend now?"

"Don't call him my friend; we were business partners only—never friends. I mean to drop him now, and don't think he'll object." And Musgrave laughed at his own grim joke.

He stayed that night at Tollington

House; they would not let him go, sending to the inn for his portmanteau. He slept ill; he thought of the brown trunk at Winhush, and it worried him. He would know no peace till he had safely disposed of it in the river by the Burling bridge. How plainly Ballentyne's dark, ugly face appeared before him in the night; how recollections of his ill-tempered partner filled his mind to the exclusion of Agnes—dear, white-souled Agnes, for whom he had sinned. If she ever knew! The thought took him by the throat, and he had to seek his spirit-flask to steady his nerves.

"You didn't sleep well," said Agnes, as they walked in the garden before breakfast.

"How do you know that?"

"Because my room is under yours. I heard you walking to and fro. How much older you look, Harry; and there's two lines on your forehead. I'm cross with you, too; you are going away to-day, and won't be back till to-morrow."

"I'm not leaving till late in the afternoon, dear, and I'll be back to-morrow. I must go to town—and then, when I come back, all my business worries will be over. I'll have nothing to think of, dream of, but you."

Resolutely, while in Agnes's presence, he cast care from him; yet even then he felt that happiness was fleeting, that conscience was stinging. He drove from the house, her kisses on his lips, and the black spectre of care loomed over him.

"I have to drive to Burling railway station to catch the express for Birmingham," he told the manager of the "Arms." Let me have a dog cart to drive there, and I'll put it up at Burling and drive back again to-morrow."

"Better let me send a man with you, sir; and we can send and fetch you to-morrow."

"No, no; I've a fancy to drive myself to-night, I tell you."

The manager knew Musgrave and gave way; it was only a small matter, and if it pleased the guest to drive alone, there was no reason to say him nay. So about six o'clock he started on his seven mile drive, with the brown trunk and a portmanteau in the back of the cart. It was turning dark, and the ostler lighted the lamps as Musgrave took his seat; then the vehicle at a rapid pace left the inn and the tiny town of Winhush behind. He drove rapidly, though there was plenty of time, and that which he had to do on the way would take no time.

Half an hour later he drew rein on Burling bridge; there was never much traffic on this road, and, screened by the darkness, he had no fear of being observed. He sat a moment listening; there was no sound but the river, the tide eddying strongly around the pillars.

"Now for it," Musgrave jumped down, tied the horse to the iron railing, and, opening the back of the vehicle, took the brown trunk on his broad shoulders. He meant to do the thing thoroughly; therefore, to make sure the trunk fell in mid-stream, he put it down and looked over the railing. Nothing was passing underneath; the waters heekened for their thing.

Musgrave raised the trunk on the parapet, and then hesitated, a morbid desire to see it fall possessed him; then he would be sure all was well. He put a leg over, still balancing the trunk.

Acutely conscious of all around, he knew he was alone; no footfall of either man or beast came from the road.

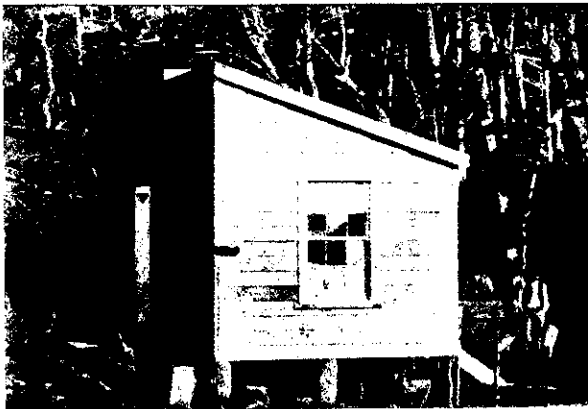
"I'm going to drop you, partner, and I don't think you'll object, you snarfed, close-fisted Scotchman, I'm rid of you at last. Ah!"

One hand was thrust through the leather handle, the better to hold it, one grasped the parapet; and as he cried "at last," the end came in different fashion to that planned.

He must involuntarily have shaken the heavy trunk, it slid towards him, overwhelming him. He strove to cast his hand free; it was impossible to hold on with his left hand, he did it for a minute and a half, Ballentyne, though dead, would not be denied.

There was a shriek in the night air, and then a splash, and the dark waters closed upon dead man and living—for ever.

The Metamorphosis of a Settler's Home, Hokianga.



HOW IT LOOKED AT FIRST.



Photos. by Dawes.

HOW IT LOOKS AFTER A LITTLE ENERGY, TIME AND MONEY HAVE BEEN SPENT ON IT.