



THE LITTLE SILVER CROSS.

A TRAGEDY OF A CAB.

BY LISTER MAURICE.

Illustrated by E. S. Klemmner.

AMONG the few treasures I possess is a little silver cross.

I keep it, with a lock of my mother's hair, the rose I wore in my buttonhole the evening I proposed to Lilian, a photograph of baby, and the first guinea I ever earned, in a secret drawer in my writing-table.

And while I am accustomed to look occasionally at my other treasures, I rarely undo the tissue paper wrapped round the little silver cross. Yet the little silver cross will be buried with me; not hung round my neck, but clasped in my dead right hand.

It is ten years now since the events occurred in which the little silver cross played so important a part. Ten solid, respectable, prosperous, happy years. So prosperous and happy that it almost needs an unfolding of the tissue paper and a glance at the little silver cross to assure me that what I propose to relate is not a nightmare phantasy of an ordinarily imaginative mind, but a literal, terrible fact.

I have only told the whole of the story to three people as yet—to Lilian, who believes in it as firmly as I do; to Jack Fenwick, who says it is all somethinged non-

sense; and to a clergyman cousin, who advised me to send it to the "Psychical Research."

It was the end of May. London was at its best and brightest, and the season at its height. All the world was young, and Lilian and I were just engaged.

We had



"THE MAN LURCHED FORWARD AND STRETCHED OUT A PAIR OF BONY WHITE HANDS TO SNATCH AT ME."

only parted a few minutes before at the hall door in Sussex Square.

A glorious day had been succeeded by a perfect night. High in the heavens the summer moon held her court, turning even prosaic London into fairyland. Across the square floated the sound of dance music. The lamps of hurrying hansoms flashed hither and thither like fireflies in the shadows. The night was full of life and love and Lilian.

My future father-in-law's cigar was of the best, I had dined wisely and well, and the ticklish question of settlements had been arranged with unexpected cordiality.

Altogether it was a young man on excellent terms with himself and the world in general who emerged into the Bayswater Road as the clocks were striking eleven.

I was bound, in deference to my future prospects, to a political crush in Mayfair, and, having plenty of time, determined to walk and finish my cigar on the way.

I wish I could remember with any exactitude of what I was thinking as I strolled leisurely up towards the Marble Arch. I recollect repulsing a whining beggar at the corner of Hyde Park Gardens; I recall feeling it almost a shame to drown the scent of the lilacs with tobacco smoke; I have an impression I wondered whether it would not be rather a tight fit setting up house on eight hundred a year. But what was precisely in my mind at the moment I reached Hyde Park Street I cannot tell.

At any rate, at Hyde Park Street my progress across the road was arrested by a hansom coming swiftly at right angles towards me. I might, with a rush, have reached the kerb; but I was not in a mood for unnecessary exertion, so I stepped back to allow the cab to pass.

I often wonder how it was that, in the space of a few seconds, I was able to photograph upon my mind, with a precision that the lapse of ten years has wholly failed to dim, all the details of that hansom cab. In the twinkling of an eye I took it all in. I saw the good-looking young driver, in a light sporting coat, with a Gloire de Dijon in his buttonhole, the little restive bay mare, the well-built "Forder" with its nickel fittings—all this I saw, and something more. I saw what the cab contained. There could be no mistake about it. The moon shone full into the

cab, and there was a lamp inside. At first the occupant looked like a heap of black clothes. I could distinguish no form. Then I saw it was a man bareheaded, huddled up in one corner, apparently asleep or drunk, with his head dangling in a strange sort of way on his chest.

As the cab came up to me, the man suddenly jerked up his head, lurched forward, and stretched out a pair of bony white hands as though to snatch at me. I then saw that his throat was cut from ear to ear. He was in evening clothes, and his shirt-front and coat were stained with blood. But his face! I have read of hate, despair, corruption, and hell. All four were stamped upon that fearful countenance, and in gazing upon it, frozen with horror, I seemed to sound their depths. And the awful thing was laughing at me. I swear it laughed. It meant to get at me if it could; for as the cab whirled by it leered at me under the blue silk, lace-trimmed curtains, and one of those horrible bony white hands crept round and almost touched the wheel. The whole thing only lasted a few seconds, and the cab was gone.

I suppose it was unmanly, but the horror of it all utterly broke me down. Spiritless and shaking in every limb, I staggered on to the kerb and cannoned against a young policeman leisurely pursuing his beat, bull's-eye in hand.

Disregarding his paternal "Hold up, governor," I clung to a very impassive blue cloth arm and gasped—

"Stop that cab. There has been a murder, or suicide, or something terrible. A man has nearly cut his head off."

"If there's a man with 'is 'ead off, 'e'll be stopped sharp enough, never fear."

I did not gainsay this unanswerable remark, but allowed myself to be propped against the pediment of a Corinthian door column and carefully inspected with the bull's-eye. The dazzling operation over, the young policeman looked carefully up and down the road. Then he fumbled in the pocket of his tunic and produced a flat glass bottle.

"You've 'ad a turn," he said. "Take a pull at this. It's all right as long as the sergeant doesn't come along."

I gulped down the fiery draught, murmured my thanks, and began searching in every pocket but the right one for the inevitable half-crown. With admirable tact and averted countenance my blue-coated

friend filled in the awkward pause with a thrilling narrative of the "turn" he had received on witnessing the perishing of an elderly female, "fourteen stun if she was an ounce," under the wheels of a Starch Green 'bus a month after he had joined the force. The half-crown produced symptoms of a still further flood of reminiscences, but by that time I had recovered.

I refused an offer to be "seen off" the beat, and pursued my way, not to the political crush, but to the club and Jack Fenwick, whose cheery scepticism and breezy chaff eventually succeeded in making bed and sleep possible.

Next day I feverishly but vainly hunted through the morning and evening papers for "Horrible Tragedy in a Cab," "Shocking Cab Mystery," or even "Melancholy Suicide in a Public Conveyance." I could discover no trace of anything of the sort.

On the day following, and the succeeding days, my search was equally fruitless. At the end of a week I inquired at Scotland Yard. No occurrence of the kind had been reported.

Gradually the immediate horror of the mysterious experience began to fade from my mind. I gave up thinking of it always and everywhere. I ceased to dream every night of that ghastly, wagging head and those bony white hands.

At last I almost brought myself to believe that I had been the victim either of an inexplicable hallucination or some grim practical joke. It was some time, however, before I cared to venture alone in aansom, especially by night. Even this nervousness eventually wore off, and by the time the season waned and my wedding day drew near, I had all but forgotten the whole matter.

It was some three weeks before our

wedding, a stifling July night, with thunder in the air. Lilian and I had been sitting under the awning on the balcony, talking very seriously. Lilian always took the right view of life, and from the first seemed to lead me by the hand to a spiritual standpoint natural to her, but without her as inaccessible to me as the mountains in the moon.

It was a curious conversation. It began with the design of our new drawing-room carpet; it ended with the warfare of the human soul with the powers of evil. As

usual, Lilian's views were as definite as mine were vague. I do not know how far she converted me, but I know I rose to go, loving her more than ever, and with an indefinable sense of peace and protection that comforted me.



" 'YOU WON'T LAUGH AT ME, FRANK, IF I ASK YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME?' SAID LILIAN."

Somehow or other, I needed comfort. Perhaps it was the sultry heat and coming storm that depressed me; but as we stood for a minute or two side by side, gazing silently out over the dark, square garden, with the thunder growling in the distance, I felt eerie and apprehensive.

"I must go, dear," I said at last.

As we turned to enter the drawing-room, Lilian hesitated.

"You won't laugh at me, Frank, if I ask you to do something for me?"

"Is there anything in the world I would not do for you?"

Lilian laughed rather nervously.

"Well, it's nothing very serious, only I was afraid you might think it silly. I have a little silver cross here. It was given me by Berthe, my old French nurse, when she was dying. It belonged to her sister, who was a nun somewhere in Spain.

Berthe prized it above every-

thing in the world.

She asked me to keep it for her sake, and to give it to no one unless to my husband. I

"Till I die."

Then we went through the drawing-room, down the stairs, and into the hall.

"Cab, sir?"

"Yes." And while Blinker whistled, Lilian and I said good-night.

"Where to, sir?"

"The Cholmondeley Club."

Glancing up at the smart young driver, I seemed to recognise him.

At that moment there was a bright flash of lightning

and a long, threatening roll of thunder. The little bay mare made a jump forward in the shafts.

Lilian, standing on the steps, looked frightened.

"I hope the storm won't come on before you get to the club."

"Oh, no. It is miles off yet. Now run in." I laughed cheerily. Lilian did not run in, but came quickly down the steps.

"You've got the little cross, Frank?"

I took the cross out of

"LILIAN CAME DOWN THE STEPS. 'YOU'VE GOT THE CROSS?' SHE SAID. I TOOK IT OUT OF MY POCKET AND HELD IT UP."

my waistcoat pocket and held it up. Lilian smiled and kissed her hand. The next moment the cab plunged into the sultry darkness. I sat in a corner in deep thought, the rays of the lamp behind me falling on the little silver cross which I still held in my hand. Why were the features and dress of the driver so familiar to me? Why did that familiarity

have been wanting to give it to you, Frank, for a long time; but I—I thought you might think me sentimental and foolish. Somehow I feel to-night that I ought to ask you to take it and keep it for my sake."

Lilian's voice faltered, and there was a pause.

"Frank,"—it was Lilian's voice again—"you will keep it?"



suggest something ominous and unpleasant? There was a memory at the back of my mind, so to speak, that was roused, and that I knew was just about to assert itself—a memory I was conscious I should tremble to face. I looked out into the darkness—a fidgety little bay mare. My eyes wandered round the cab—blue silk, lace-trimmed curtains. No, no! It was not that! It could not be! God have mercy upon me—it *was*! I had seen the smart young driver, the fidgety bay mare, the blue silk curtains before, and I remembered when and where.

I cannot pretend to describe the sensation which seized me at that awful moment. I can only liken it to an icy hand laid upon my heart, stopping the flow of blood through my veins. All power of movement left me. I could stir neither hand nor foot, nor could I utter sound or cry. And yet I was quite conscious.

I remember perfectly, as we were passing through Hyde Park Square, seeing a soldier talking to a servant girl at the corner, and at one of the houses the footman was standing on the steps whistling for a cab.

Yet all the time my heart was an icicle, and I was motionless as a block of stone.

It was as we entered Hyde Park Street that I was roused—roused completely; for though I still sat quiet as a statue, every nerve in my body was alert and thrilling. It was so gentle at first, that awakening—more like a caress than anything else. But I knew that a supreme moment in my life had come, when I felt that arm stealing gently round my neck.

I was in the right-hand corner of the cab. The arm came round over my right shoulder. It was then I saw the hand—a bony white hand—creeping stealthily up to my throat. I know I gave a horrible sort of screech.

The next moment I was locked in a fierce death struggle with the man, or devil, or whatever it was, who was trying to strangle me. Oh, the agony of that fearful fight! Shall I ever forget the awful head, the rattling breath, the sickening smell of the blood with which I was deluged!

Twice I tore those long, cruel fingers from my throat. Twice I hurled the hideous thing off me. At last I began to get exhausted. There was a good deal of lightning and thunder, and the cab seemed to be going at a fearful rate, and swaying from side to side.

Then the creature came at me again. It got me fairly by the throat that time. I

could hear it
gibbering as
it forced me
back on
to the



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seat. I tried to call out. I could make no sound. At last, with a supreme effort, I wrenched the creature's hands away once more. At that moment there was a brilliant flash of lightning, an appalling explosion of thunder, and I was pitched forward into some abyss of darkness and, thank God, of peace.

The next thing I remember was Jack Fenwick's cheery voice saying—
"It's all right. The dear old chap is

coming round!" and I awoke to find myself in bed, with ice on my head, in a strange room.

Jack was grinning at me from ear to ear, with his eyes full of tears, at the foot of the bed; Lilian was kneeling by the side, white and scared, but trying to smile; while a benevolent-looking grey-haired individual was standing by the mantelpiece pouring out something into a medicine glass.

In a day or two I was well enough to be told what had happened, and in less than a week I was able to be taken from the doctor's house to Sussex Square. It appeared that the mare had been frightened by the lightning, had bolted, smashed the cab to smithereens, and thrown me into the road. The driver had been killed on the spot, while I had been picked up, suffering from nothing worse than a slight concussion of the brain.

Curiously enough, Jack was walking down the Bayswater Road when the smash occurred, and was one of the first to haul me out of the *débris* and have me carried into the neighbouring doctor's house. My own recollection was for some time an entire blank.

All I could remember at first was saying good night to Lilian in Sussex Square. Gradually, however, my memory stole back. First I recalled the poor young driver in the sporting coat. Lilian was looking after his wife and baby. He had only been married a year. Then I recollected the restive bay mare, then the blue silk curtains with lace trimmings, and then—

It was early morning when it all came back to me. All day I longed for Jack's usual visit. At last he came. We were alone. Lilian was writing the wedding

invitations in the drawing-room. After several false starts I summoned up courage to say—

"How soon did you recognise me on that night, Jack?"

"A minute or two before the mare made for the railings. I had to jump out of the way pretty sharp to save myself, I can tell you. She came at the railings like a shot out of a gun. If she had had Old Nick behind her she could not have done worse. I never saw such a thing in my life—as I told the coroner."

"What—what was I doing?"

"Behaving like a brick—sitting as still as a statue. Your face was very white, it is true, but you were not moving an eyelid. If you had lost your head and tried to jump out you would have been killed on the spot."

"Did you see anybody or anything in the cab with me?"

Jack looked at me rather apprehensively.

"You must not talk too much, old chap; you are still weak, remember. No, there was no one in the cab with you."

"But," I insisted, "did you notice nothing curious about the cab or me?"

"Nothing whatever. I tell you you were sitting as still as Nelson's Monument. There was nothing odd about the cab or you, except—well, that seemed strange: when we got you to the doctor's we found you had something clenched in your hand. It was some time before we could get your hand open, and when we did we found it was—"

Jack paused.

"What?"

"Well, I see you have it on the table beside you: that little silver cross."