

My Uncle's Story

How a Murderer Was Discovered by Dreams

Written for The Chicago Tribune

He was an old man—I should say full three score and ten—when I heard him tell this story. Although he has been dead many years, it is fixed so vividly in my mind that I can now call up from memory everything, every circumstance connected with it: the time, the place, the Christmas Eve, the blazing fire, the old man in his easy chair, the old cat Reuben playing at his feet; and even the very words in which he told it. I fancy I could imitate the very tones of his voice.

I have said he was an old man. He was more than that. He was the loveliest, the most amiable, the most enchanting man I ever knew. Let me describe his venerable person. I cannot, with poor, weak, human words, paint the beauties of his mind. He was tall and straight, of graceful and Kingly presence. His hair was white, very white, and flossy, and hung in thin curls to his splendidly-molded shoulders. His eye—Ah! how shall I paint it? Pigment ne'er went on palette that could be made to imitate it—was the tender, loving blue that could look more affection than most mortals are capable of expressing through all the senses. His face was beardless, round and rosy,—a face that a man would not be ashamed to kiss. His mouth was more than splendid, intellectual, clean-cut—such a mouth as a painter would delight to put upon canvas if he could. How shall I give an idea of his mental qualities? His colloquial powers were marvelous—amazing. I do not remember that I have ever in my life met such an enchanting conversationalist. I have sat night after night until midnight listening to him without uttering a word myself. I have sat night after night until midnight listening to him without uttering a word myself. I thought it would be mean and contemptible to say anything. No lover of tragedy ever hung upon the words of Booth, Kemble, or Murdoch with greater delight than I have experienced in listening to this grand old man. His memory was prodigious. He recollected everything he had ever heard or read. He was fond of romance, and his mind was stored with a rich fund of legendary tales.

It was in the year 18—; the time was Christmas Eve. The old man and I were sitting by a blazing fire in the comfortable library of my father's house. A fierce snow-storm was in progress without, and the moist flakes spattered against the windows at times as if they wanted to get in out of the cold; the wind blew hoarsely in the chimney as if it were afflicted with a bad cold. "Uncle," said I, "this is a good night for a story." "Yes, nephew,"—he always called me nephew,—"I have been thinking so as I sat here by this cozy fire. It isn't likely that I will spend Christmas Eve with you many more times; indeed, I am persuaded that this is my last Christmas in the world; my sands are about run out; the old man with the scythe will soon smite me. The story I am going to tell you is one I have never told before. No human being has ever heard it. It is my own. I have clung to it for more than thirty years. It has been part of myself, I have regarded it as part of my being; so firmly has it become imbedded in my soul that I have not forgotten it for a single moment in thirty years. It is a true story. These white locks of mine are my witnesses, for in one short night they changed from midnight black to snowy white." Here my venerable uncle drew his handkerchief, and, as I thought, wiped the gathering tears from his

eyes. He then commenced in a rich voice, somewhat thickened with emotion, and related a story which to me was ineffably thrilling.

“In the year 18—,” said he, “I was manager of the estate of Sir Theodosius B——, who owned a splendid country seat near the City of M——, in England. He was a man of great wealth. Although much of my time was occupied in the care of his immense property, I was not deprived of his delightful companionship. He was a splendid fellow, proud of his wife, fond of good clothes; not aristocratic, but occupying a middle-ground between high pride and low meekness, and very fond of old port. We were associated together I may say almost constantly; in my travels over his estate on business matters he was nearly always with me. We hunted together, fished together, played at piquet and casino, and often ran a game of chess all night. I do not remember any amusement or diversion he was so selfish as to enjoy without my company. The family at Hickory Hall, which was the name of his seat, was not large, consisting of Sir Theodosius and wife, myself the manager, and a few under [servants].

“Sir Theodosius was not a man of the world. He loved home. He loved his dogs, his books, and his pictures,—he was a *dilettant*, and had a large collection of articles of *vitru*,—and the quietness of home life better than the hollow social life of the great city. He was an amateur astronomer, and had fitted up a small observatory, which was a source of great pleasure to us. To London he never went more than once a year. Visitors rarely came to the Hall, so you see we had a quiet household. Sir The’ was sometimes seized with fits of sadness and melancholy, and would lock himself in his library for two or three days. Aside from this he was very jolly and companionable. These spells of sadness, I learned, were occasioned by a tragic circumstance connected with his marriage. He had been a Colonel in the English army, and was stationed in India. One day, he and Maj. Banks fell into an unfortunate quarrel in a drunken carouse, and a duel was the consequence. Banks was killed, and Sir The’, filled with remorse, threw up his commission and came home. He remained in seclusion for some years. I believe he thought at one time of taking holy orders. Upon the death of his father he succeeded to his estate, and, learning the whereabouts of the widow of Banks, who was living in poverty, sought her, confessed his crime, sued for her hand, and they were finally married. Notwithstanding he was the murderer of her husband, I do not think a couple ever lived more happily. He lavished upon her all the affections of his soul, and his only object in life seemed to be to render her happy.

“I had been at Hickory Hill I suppose ten years, when a tragedy, surpassing anything in horror I have ever known, occurred. Sir The’ had one of his spells of melancholy, and had been secluded for a day or two; one evening he sent for me to come to the library and engage in a game of chess. He had been reading Don Quixote, and was laughing heartily about that gentleman’s adventure, with the wind-mills. We commenced the game, he having the white men and I the black. Warily and slowly we both moved, but we were not prevented by interest in the game from being quite jolly, and I remember distinctly that we drank four bottles of old port. When the clock in the great hall struck 1, I was checkmated. I ought to have had the game, for I had robbed him of his queen and two rooks, but he checkmated me with his king’s knight. He slept alone in a room adjoining the library.

“I awoke late the following morning and was astonished to hear cried, and sobs and loud lamentations in the servants’ hall. I quickly arose and went to ascertain the cause. On entering

the hall I found the wife of Sir The' lying in a swoon; the servants were all pale as the ghost of Death, and speechless with horror, and half-dead with fear. After a while they commenced moaning and wringing their hands, and looking toward heaven. 'What means this, in Heaven's name?' I inquired. 'Oh! Oh! Oh! Murder! Murder! Murder!' they answered in chorus, and all pointed toward Sir Theo's sleeping-apartment. I rushed into his room in the wildest excitement, and there a scene met my gaze the most horrible, the most dreadful, the most frightful, the most fearful, the most awful and blood-curdling that ever human eye looked upon. Upon the bed lay the severed head of Sir The', the mouth open, the eyes staring glassily and ghastly:

Staring full ghastly like a strangled man,

and the hair bristling with horror: a pool of clotted gore was in the centre of the bed. Where was the rest of the body? It was not in the room; it was not in the house; it could not be found anywhere; all that could be found of poor Sir The' was that ghastly, horrible head. We buried it away tenderly out of sight, and then sought for the remainder of the body, and the murderer. In the night following this blood-freezing tragedy these hairs of mine became white as you now see them. It was certain he was murdered; at least I thought so. We found neither body nor murderer; no trace or clew could we find to the perpetrator of the foul deed; there was not a solitary circumstance pointing to any one as the guilty party. No expense was spared; the best detective talent was exhausted, and not a shadow of evidence against any person was discovered. For five years the murderer was hunted for ceaselessly, and was not found. Sir The's wife, at last despairing of ever bringing the guilty wretch to justice, went into a convent and left me in charge of the estate. You may suppose that I brooded over this crime and sought to reveal its mystery. It was my study. I thought of it night and day. I reasoned upon it. I invented theories; I pried into motives. I examined into the character of every person within 10 miles of the Hall, and their relations with Sir The', but I could find no one likely to be the murderer. I visited every jail in England. I had read that criminals when about to be executed would often confess to committing other crimes than those for which they had been convicted. Whenever I heard of an execution I went to the doomed man. I exhorted him, entreated him to confess that he murdered Sir The'. I would tell him of the awfulness of his situation, of the mystery that hung over the fate of Sir The', and beg him, as he was about to go before his God, to tell the truth. None knew anything about it. I remember one miserable wretch who had chopped his grandmother to pieces for 20 shillings. I ascertained he was steeped in crime, and I supposed he might be the guilty man. I talked with him for two days and begged him if he knew anything to tell it, but I elicited nothing concerning poor Sir The's death. I went to Australia among the transported criminals, and remained a year, using all my ingenuity to discover something, but I failed there. I came home in despair. I concluded the mystery would never be solved. Then I was seized with a new idea—you know how persons will grasp at anything to clear up a mystery. I thought of suicide. Could it be possible that Sir The' had killed himself; no, that could not be; a man could not cut off his own head, and conceal his body; the body you remember was not found—no trace of it had been discovered. That theory was absurd. Had his wife killed him? No, no, that was impossible; no woman ever loved a man better, and there was no motive. Had any of the servants killed him? I put myself in the way of watching them. I observed every movement, every look, every action. I would talk to them about Sir The'. I would tell them how noble, how kind, how affectionate and loving a master he had been; and how cruel, inhuman, barbarous, savage, ferocious, brutal, and bloody-minded must have been the person who could take the life of so amiable a man. I thought

to make the guilty one betray himself, but it was not so. Whenever I talked to them about the unfortunate Sir The', they would cry as if their hearts would break.

“The murderer has a heavy conscience, and though he may hide his secret in his waking hours, I have heard of criminals who made know the burden of their guilty souls in sleep. Many a night at midnight I have gone to the bedside of each servant and listened to the murmuring lips of sleep that might solve the mystery. Once I heard old Margaret, the housekeeper, cry out in a mournful tone, ‘Poor The’! poor The’! Oh, the bloody head! Oh, the bloody head!’ It sounded like a requiem through the silent mansion, and sent a violent shiver all over me. I knew she was innocent, for she had nursed her master when he was a baby and loved him tenderly. I was satisfied the servants were guiltless. I must start a new theory. Did I murder him myself? No, I certainly did not. I had read of somnambulists who had committed strange freaks and frightful deeds. Could it be that I, in a somnambulistic state, had gone to Sir The’s room, cut off his head and concealed his body? No, no, the thought was too horrible. It could not be; there would be some evidence of it.

“I was not at the end of theories. I could not make anything out of the case; ‘twas a horrible secret,—that was all. Just now I was filled with a desire to find the body. How was it possible for the murderer to conceal it without leaving a trace? I searched the entire estate in every nook and cranny. I dug up acres and acres of ground. I dragged all the streams, examined every well and hollow tree and log; no spot within a circuit of 15 miles where it might be concealed was left unsearched. All search was vain, nothing was found. What more could I do? I was worn out, tired, exhausted; the strain upon my mind had affected the body. I fell sick and lay for many weeks, I know not how long now, at death’s door. I thought I was dying once; the room was dark, my sight was failing; shadowy forms flitted to and fro before me; strange whispers were ringing in my ears. Far away I thought I could hear the bells of the city of the New Jerusalem ringing, heralding my coming; then I thought the bells ceased, and Sir The’ came and dragged me by the hair across a great sea of ice to the country of death. I did not die, but rallied, was convalescent many weeks, and finally recovered.

“During my convalescence I had seven remarkable dreams. I know nothing about the theory of dreams, or what they may import. I leave that to augurs, soothsayers, and astrologers. Some say that they are but a reproduction of our waking thoughts, but I know I have often had dreams that had not the slightest connection with my ideas of daytime. It is a singular fact that dreams have very often foretold or foreshadowed death, calamities, and future events, and revealed the secrets of the past. I was still thinking and brooding over the terrible taking off of poor Sir The’, and wondering whether the mystery ever would be revealed. This was my first dream.

“First Dream: I thought I had been convicted of murder, and was to be hung, and strange, too, I was to be executed at midnight. All preparations had been made. As the clock tolled 12, two priests dressed in black velvet robes came to my cell; the last rites of the Church were administered; I made my confession, and was led forth to die. A crowd hungry for my blood awaited me. Their faces looked unnaturally pale and ghastly by the light of the flickering lamps. I was led to the drop, the warrant was read, the rope adjusted, a last prayer uttered; the crowd sent up a fiendish cheer, and I was about to be launched into eternity,—when, horror of horrors! the headless body of a man strode through the murderous company; walked up the steps to the

drop, cut the rope about my neck, and bid me fly. I seemed possessed of wings, and swiftly rose above the devilish throng, and flew away into a country graveyard, and lit upon a tomb. As I sat there, fluttering with joy over my deliverance, my deliverer came walking through the graveyard among the monuments, and on, my blood ran cold when I recognized him. It was Sir The'. He was dressed in the same clothes we wore the night of the murder. On came the headless man over the graves, and at last sat beside me on the tomb. He sat for a moment and sighed, and then threw his arms around me affectionately, murmuring, 'Oh Gerald! Oh, Gerald!' I sat for a while speechless, and then he said, 'Gerald, I have this night saved you from death. Do for me what I command you. Go to the Linden tree near the grave of old Reginald, and you will find a stone; dig down there six feet, and you will find my bones, and a ring with the name of my murderer engraved upon it. Hunt down the murderer, and see that my death is avenged.' He then vanished. In attempting to fly away, I awoke in a clammy sweat.

“Second Dream: I was on a wild, barren desert. I was starving to death; for days I had nothing to eat or drink. I was rapidly wasting away. I was a mere skeleton. I tottered along upon the hot sands beneath a blazing sun. I felt my wasted cheeks and sunken eyes; I looked upon my withered limbs and skinny hands, and the bones protruding through my shriveled integument, and cursed God. I shrieked. I yelled madly for water. I pulled out my hair. I tore the tattered rags from my body, and, waving them in the air, laughed a demonical laugh. I peered forward into the endless hell of sand. Joy! joy! there is water ahead. Ah! the deceptive mirage drew me on. I thought I saw a beautiful lake filled with shining water. I rushed forward with renewed hope. On, on I went, my parched lips cracking, but the lake receded and finally was gone. I fell down to die—when again I saw the headless Sir The' coming over the plain towards me. He came and gave me a golden cup filled with cold water, of which I drank eagerly, and I thought it restored me to perfect health. 'Oh, Gerald, Gerald,' said Sir The', 'I have saved you again. Do as I command you. Go to the Linden tree near old Reginald's grave, and there you will find a stone; dig down 6 feet and you will find my bones, and a ring with the name of the murderer engraved upon it. Hunt down the murderer, and see that my death is avenged.' Again he vanished, and I awoke weak and terrified.

“Third Dream: I was in Paris. Fifty thousand faces looked un pityingly upon me, as I was hurried through the streets upon a tumbrel to the guillotine. I was to be beheaded; for what crime I did not know. In every street I saw huge banners hanging out of buildings, all bearing the legend, 'Blood, Blood. The Republic Wants Blood!' I noticed a great building whereon was a sign reading, 'Blood For Sale, 3 Sous the Pint!' I perceived a great throng of men, women, and little children going in at one door of this structure and coming out at another; as they came out I saw them all licking blood from their lips. The assembled thousands hooted and jeered at me; the driver of the tumbrel ever and anon struck me with a stick; the gamins came about and spit upon me. Presently we came to the guillotine; the fatal axe was sharp and glittering. A priest in holy robes came, and I was shriven, and received absolution. I confessed my guilt, but of what crime I did not know; two men placed my neck in the block; the rope was pulled, and the axe with lightning speed fell and severed my head from my body. The blood spurted prodigiously. What a strange conceit it was, but I thought I stood by a spectator, and saw all this, saw myself beheaded. When my head flew off, I thought I exclaimed with the rest, 'God pity him!' Presently an official took up my head and was about to put it into a little red bag, when again my guardian angel, Sir The' came upon the scene; he jerked the head from the official, and clapped it on my

poor body lying by the block, and I was instantly reanimated. The scene suddenly changed, and I was far away from Paris out in the green fields. I sat down to rest beneath a beautiful tree, and suddenly Sir The' came and sat by me. He affectionately embraced me and said, 'Again I have saved you; why have you not done as I commanded you?' and he looked sadly and reproachfully upon me. He had his head this time, but it seemed in the haste of putting it on he had put the wrong side in front. I put out my hand to fix his head, and he was gone. Just then a fierce lion came roaring towards me, and I jumped from my bed in terror.

"Fourth Dream: I was upon the ocean,—the vast deep; the ship was in a storm, a fearful storm. I thought the winds had destroyed all the cities of the world, and were now about to blow the ocean dry; the waves were miles high; I went upon the deck; the winds seized me and hurled me into the air, and as they caught me I sent out a wild wail upon the fierce blast, but no one heard it. The demoniac blast whirled me along for hundreds of miles, until I thought I should be blown round the globe. At last I fell with a dull thud into the sea. Down, down, down I sunk for hundreds of miles into the briny waters. At last I struck the bottom. Here I came upon a scene of enchanting beauty; the bottom of the sea was carpeted in loveliness; beautiful plants, grasses, flowers, and roses of the rarest colors ever seen, sprang up on every side. Millions of shells were at my feet, of every size, and shape, and every hue; green shells, blue shells, orange shells, red and white, and shells of the most wonderful prismatic colors. The treasures of the deep I saw. Piles of shining gold and silver I saw, as I walked along, on every hand; far in front of me I could see them in the dim perspective. I came upon the skeleton of a young girl; a ring was upon her finger inscribed, 'From my mother;' all the flesh had left her bones except the scalp, from which hung her golden hair, that waved back and forth from the motion of the waters. Where her lovely eyes had once been, two golden sovereigns lay glittering in mockery. I saw many thousands of skeletons. All at once it seemed the moon fell on the face of the deep, and lighted the bottom of the sea, and I saw in the distance a hundred ruined cities, heaps of bones, and many wrecked ships filled with [ghostly] mariners. The scene changed, and I was struck by a heavy current of water, and borne along with furious speed towards a mighty dragon, with immense fiery eyes, and prodigious mouth, filled with horrible teeth. It was about to swallow me, when a hand grasped my hair and I was pulled up, up, up for many miles through the water. Again the scene changed, and I was sitting on the edge of a great precipice. Sir The' came and rebuked me for going upon the water, and said 'O Gerald, Gerald, four times have I saved you, and you have not been to the Linden tree.' I fell from the precipice and awoke in agony.

"Fifth Dream: I was taken captive by savages. They had their war-dance and grand council, and it was decided I should die at the stake. The fires were kindled about me, and the glare lit up the sombre woods. They cut off my ears and nose, and shot powder into my poor body. Soon the flesh was all burned off my bones, and after a little while my miserable skeleton fell down among the coals and I was soon nothing but a little heap of ashes. I had the singular idea that I stood by and saw this done, and cried like a child. The savages went away, and I saw Sir The' come and pour some water on my ashes, and I was instantly alive again. Again he told me of the Linden tree, and seemed sad, melancholy, and wretched because I had not done as he commanded. The scene changed, and Sir The' and I were in a great castle, and he was trying to show me the room in which he was murdered.

“Sixth Dream: I was in a great river of blood, and many swimmers were in my company. We were swimming toward a great city of white houses. When we started the blood was thin and warm like water; it was very red, and looked like a sea of fire. As we neared the city the blood became thicker and more difficult to swim in. Many I often saw sink to rise no more, and as I often looked back I saw men struggling along with faces smeared with blood and looking very horrible; some drank of the crimson tide to slake their thirst. There was great cursing and fighting, and many were drowned to get the front. Coming near the city, I saw seated in a temple a lovely virgin, dressed in a flaming red robe; in one hand she held a shining shield which bore upon it the inscription, ‘The Temple of Fame.’ Ever and anon she smiled bewitchingly upon us, and pointed toward a pile of crowns and wreaths at her side. We were now very near the city, and all at once the blood in the vast river congealed. I heard many shrieks, and saw hundreds go down and choke and suffocate in the mushy deep. A few of us were plunging, writhing, and clawing in the miry gore to gain the shore. At last all were gone but two,—myself and another; he gained the city, but fell dead as he entered the streets. I sank down exhausted into the fetid slush, and gave up to die. While I was sinking down, down, down into the crimson deep, my preserver came again and dragged me to the shore. The scene changed, and I was sitting upon the bank by a lovely lily; the great river was dry, and I observed that the bottom was filled with innumerable skeletons. I had not looked upon this vast grave-yard long, when millions of widows and little orphan children came and stood by the river-side. Sorrowfully they looked upon the heaps of bones, and then began to weep and mourn and shriek appallingly. In a little while I beheld with astonishment that the river was filled with tears. The widows and orphans were gone, and in the distance I perceived a white ship with the word ‘Peace’ written upon it, sailing down slowly. I looked toward the city of ‘Fame,’ and was surprised to see that the river of tears had overflowed and washed it away. The scene changed, and I thought that I was Sir The’, that I had cut off my head and concealed my body in a volcano in the moon. I flew to that orb to get it, and there met Sir The’. He reproached me for not obeying his command, and said ‘Oh, Gerald, Gerald! six times have I saved you and you have not yet been at the Linden tree.’

“Seventh Dream: I was in a church yard; the clock tolled 12, and the graves were instantly opened, and grinning skeletons stalked forth, and dragged with them the cerements of the tomb. A venerable gentleman seated himself upon a tomb, and began to fiddle a lively dirge upon an unearthly fiddle; forming in groups the company of bones began to dance; they skipped and hopped, and stood on their heads, and gyrated, and rattled about in a fearful manner for an hour. The dance ceasing, two old men commenced a boxing match, and one broke the other’s jaw. Then the whole crowd began drinking wine out of skulls, and soon were all drunk and staggering on their thin legs. Discovering me, they rushed about me, and leered, and laughed, and shrieked, and struck me with their bony fingers, and put their eyeless sockets near my face, and made their teeth chatter until I thought I should die of fear. All at once they all cried out: ‘Kill him, Kill him,’ and an old woman seized her shin bone and beat me to death. I was coffined, the ghostly congregation sang a requiem, and old preacher made some remarks upon the virtues of the deceased, and they were about to lower me into the grave, when my coffin was violently torn open, and I was carried off by seven robbers; they skinned me alive, and put my skinless body into a great cannon and fired me towards the sun. I flew and flew and flew through the airless void towards the glowing orb, for years and years, until I thought I was an old man with white hair. At last I entered the sun, and in an instant my body was consumed to ashes, which fell through it and were caught by the winds and blown to the four corners of the universe. I thought

I was forever lost. The scene changed. My spirit was near a beautiful city, at a golden gate weeping and saying, 'My poor body, my poor body!' As I stood in tears, I saw Sir The' coming towards the gate, and his hand was full of ashes; he blew his breath upon it, and in a twinkling was changed in to my body. I was overjoyed to get my body back again, and embraced Sir The' fervently. He said 'Oh, Gerald, Gerald, the seventh and last time I have saved you, and you have not yet been near the Linden tree.'

"You can well suppose that these seven singular dreams had a powerful effect upon me. Did they mean anything? Were they the ideas of a diseased and disordered brain? Could it be that Providence was about to reveal they mystery? I asked myself these questions. I resolved to dig as directed at the Linden tree; it was a mile from the mansion. One night at 9 o'clock I went with mattock and spade. The stone was easily found, and I commenced digging. At midnight I was down four feet. Every time I threw out the dirt, my shovel would ring out a doleful sound like I have often heard when filling graves. The moon came out, and an owl commenced hooting on a distant tree. I dug on, filled with an unknown dread, the sweat oozing from my pallid brow. When 2 o'clock came my task was done. I was down six feet, and there before me in the pale moonlight I saw—" here the old man covered his eyes with his hands, as if to shut out some horrid vision, and his sides shook.

"'You saw,' said I, springing to my feet in the intensity of my excitement, 'you saw the grinning skull of Sir The,' and found the ring?'"

"'No, no,' said the old man. 'I found nothing; it was the great disappointment of my life. Sir The' was not murdered.'

"How do you know?"

"'He never lived,' said the old man.

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"And you were not the manager of his estate?"

"No!"

"And he didn't marry the widow Banks?"

"No!"

"And his head wasn't cut off?"

"No!"

"And you never dreamed these dreams?"

“No!”

“And all you have been telling me is a myth?”

“Yes!”

“Well, if you were not my uncle,’ said I, ‘I would say you were a d—d old liar!’

“My son,’ replied the veteran, laughing heartily, ‘let us compromise on a bottle of old port.’
And we did, and drank it and went to bed.”

HENRY VINCENT

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