A DEAD RECKONING



T. W. SPEIGHT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Thomas Wilkinson Speight was an English novelist, born in Liverpool in 1830. He was educated at a foundation school in northern England and worked for many years for a railway company. His literary career developed alongside that employment, giving him experience of an increasingly connected industrial society.

He contributed to periodicals including *Household Words*, *All the Year Round* and *Belgravia*. His 1857 article about railway work described the responsibilities of employees and managers. Periodical publication also offered a setting for the shorter fiction that formed part of his extensive output.

Between 1867 and 1912, Speight published approximately fifty works of fiction. His titles included *Under Lock and Key*, *A Secret of the Sea*, *The Mysteries of Heron Dyke* and *A Bootless Crime*. Contemporary reviewers responded particularly to the suspense and sensational incidents of his mystery novels. He died in 1915.

Readers can follow the difference between what a character knows and what the reader has been allowed to see. A withheld explanation may change the meaning of an earlier encounter, while an apparently minor detail can acquire importance later. These changes help sustain curiosity across a long narrative. No portrait is included because a reliable likeness could not be verified in the sources reviewed.

Biographical references: Dickens Journals Online, contributor biography by Anne Lohrli. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

CHAPTER I.

"Aunty, dear, do you know what day this is?"

"If the almanac may be believed, it is the 24th of April."

"Six months ago to-day, Gerald and I were married. I feel as if I had been married for years."

"How dreadful to feel that you are growing old so quickly! I hope all married people don't feel like that."

"You misunderstand me, Aunt Jane. I have been so happy since that evening last year when Gerald whispered something to me in the summer-house, that all my life before I knew him seems as unreal as a dream."

"Such short courtships are positively dreadful. Now, when I was engaged to Captain Singleton"----

A third lady, who had been lounging on a sofa and making-believe to be intent on a novel, gave a loud sneeze and sat bolt upright. She had heard Captain Singleton's name introduced so often of late, that she might be excused for not caring to hear it mentioned again--at least for a little while.

The first speaker, Clara Brooke, was a charming brunette of twenty-two, with sparkling black eyes, a pure olive complexion, and a manner that was at once vivacious and tender. Miss Primby, the second speaker, was a fresh-coloured, well-preserved spinster of---- But no; Miss Primby's age was a secret, which she guarded as a dragon might guard its young, and we have no right to divulge it. She had one of the best hearts in the world, and one of the weakest heads. Everybody smiled at her little foibles, yet everybody liked her. Just now she was busy over some species of delicate embroidery, in which she was an adept. Lady Fanny Dwyer, the third lady, whose inopportune sneeze had for a moment so disconcerted Miss Primby, was a very pretty, worldly-wise, self-possessed young matron, who in age was some six months older than Mrs. Brooke. She and Clara had been bosom friends in their school-days; and notwithstanding the many differences in their characters and dispositions, their liking for each other was still as fresh and unselfish as ever it had been.

The ladies were sitting in a pleasant morning-room at Beechley Towers, Mr. Gerald Brooke's country-house, situated about fourteen miles from London. The room opened on to a veranda by means of long windows, which were wide open this balmy April afternoon. Beyond the veranda was a terrace, from which two flights of broad shallow steps led down to a flower-garden. Outside that lay a well-wooded park, with a wide sweep of sunny champaign enfolding the whole.

Clara Brooke had scarcely heard her aunt's last remark. She was seated at a davenport, turning over some old letters. On the wall in front of her hung a portrait of her husband, painted on ivory. "'My own darling Clara,'" she read to herself from one of the letters; "'it seems an age since I saw you last, and it will seem like an age till I shall have the happiness of seeing you again.' What sweet, sweet letters he used to write to me! What other girl ever had such letters written to her?" She pressed the paper she had been reading to her lips, then refolded it, and put it away and took up another.

"Ah, my dear," remarked Lady Fanny, turning to her friend, "as you remarked just now, you have only been a wife for six short months, and of course everything with you is still *couleur de rose*. But when you have been married as long as Algy and I have, when the commonplace and the prosaic begin to assert themselves, as they do in everything and everywhere, whether you like it or not, then I am sure you will agree that the scheme of married life my husband and I have planned for ourselves has really a good deal to recommend it to all sensible people."

Miss Primby pricked up her ears. "You excite my curiosity, dear Lady Fanny," she said. "I hope you won't refuse to gratify it."

"Why should I?" asked Lady Fan with her merry laugh. "We want converts, Algy and I; and who knows, my dear Miss Primby, but that some day--eh? Well, this is our *modus vivendi*--I believe that's the correct term, but won't be sure. About eighteen months ago--we had then been married a little over a year--Algy and I came to the conclusion that married people ought not to be too constantly together if they wish to keep on good terms with each other. Algy's contention is that half the quarrels and scandals which come out in the newspapers are simply the result of people seeing so much of each other that at last they are impelled by some feeling they can't

resist to have what he calls 'a jolly row,' just to vary the monotony of existence. And then, as he says, one 'row' is sure to lead to another, and so on. When once the match is applied, no one can tell where the conflagration will stop. Now, although ours was a love-match, if ever there was one, we had not run together in harness very long before we made the discovery that in many things our likes and dislikes were opposed. For instance, next to me, I believe Algy loves his yacht; whereas I detest yachting: it seems to me a most stupid way of passing one's time. On the other hand, I delight in going from one country-house to another and visiting each of my friends in turn; while Algy, dear fellow, is always awfully bored in general society, especially wherever a number of our sex happen to be congregated. Thus, it has come to pass that at the present moment he is somewhere in the Mediterranean, while I--well, *je suis ici*. Algy and I never give ourselves time to grow tired of each other; and when we meet after being apart for a month or two, our meetings are 'real nice,' as my friend Miss Peckover from New York would say."

Miss Primby shook her head. "I am afraid, dear Lady Fanny, that your opinions on such matters are very heterodox, and I can only say that I hope Clara will never see fit to adopt them."

"Not much fear of that, Aunt Jane," answered the young wife. "Fancy Gerald and me being separated for a month or six weeks at a time! But it is quite out of the question to fancy anything so absurd."

Lady Fan laughed. "Wait, my dear, wait," was all she said as she turned again to her novel.

Clara Brooke shook her head; she was in nowise convinced.

"Gracious goodness! whatever can that be?" ejaculated Miss Primby with a start.

"Only Gerald and the Baron Von Rosenberg practising at the pistol-range. It is an amusement both of them are fond of."

"An amusement do you call it! I wish they would practise their amusements farther from the house, then.--Heaven preserve us! there they go again. No wonder I have broken my needle."

"It's nothing, Aunt Jane, when you are used to it," responded her niece with a smile.

"Used to it, indeed! I should never get used to it as long as I lived. I have no doubt this is another of the objectionable practices your husband picked up while he was living in foreign parts."

"Seeing that Gerald was brought up in Poland, and that he lived in that country and in Russia from the time he was five years old till he was close on twenty (I think I have told you before that his grandmother was a Polish lady of rank), I have no doubt it was while he was living in those foreign parts, as you call them, that he learnt to be so fond of pistol-practice."

At this moment there came the sound of two pistol-shots in quick succession. Miss Primby started to her feet. "My dear Clara," she exclaimed, "if you don't want my poor nerves to be shattered for life, you won't object to my going to my own room. With plenty of cotton wool in my ears, and my Indian shawl wrapped round my head, I may perhaps---- Dear, dear! now my thimble's gone."

"Why, there's your thimble, aunt, on your finger."

"So it is--so it is, dear. That shows the state of my poor nerves."

"Will you not stay and say good-bye to the Baron?"

"No, my dear; I would rather not. You must make my excuses. Of course, you could not fail to notice how the Baron ogled me at luncheon. He puts me *so* much in mind of poor dear Major Pondicherry. But I never cared greatly for foreigners; besides, he will smell horribly of gunpowder when he comes in.--There again! Not another moment will I stay."

Clara Brooke's face rippled over with suppressed laughter as Miss Primby left the room. Then she turned to her letters again, and tied them up with ribbon. "I have heard that some people burn their love-letters when they get married," she mused. "What strange beings they must be! Nothing in the world would induce me to burn mine. Sweet silent messengers of love, what happy secrets lie hidden in your leaves!" She pressed the letters to her lips, put them away inside the davenport, and locked them up.

Just as she had done this, the pompous tones of Bunce, who filled the joint positions of majordomo and butler at the Towers, became plainly audible. Apparently he was standing outside the side-door and addressing his remarks to someone on the terrace. "Now, the sooner you take your hook the better," the two ladies heard him say.

"We don't want none of your kidney here. This ain't no place for mountebanks--I should think not indeed!" Mr. Bunce in his ire had evidently forgotten the proximity of his mistress.

Clara crossed to one of the windows, and looking out saw, some little distance away, two strange figures slowly crossing the terrace. One was that of a man whose costume of a street tumbler was partly hidden by the long shabby overcoat he wore over it, which was closely buttoned to the chin. Over one shoulder a drum was slung, and in his left hand he carried a set of Pandean pipes. The second figure was that of a boy some eight or nine years old, who had hold of the man's right hand. Under one arm he carried a small roll of faded carpet. In point of dress he was a miniature copy of the elder mountebank, minus the overcoat. His throat was swathed in a dingy white muffler, while his profusion of yellow curls were kept from straying by a fillet round his forehead embroidered with silvered beads.

"Poor creatures," said Clara to herself. "Bunce had no business to speak to them as he did. How dejected they look, and the child seems quite footsore."

At this juncture the man happening to turn his head, caught sight of her. She at once beckoned him to approach.

The mountebank's face lighted up and all signs of dejection vanished in a moment. He had some kind of old cap on his head. This he now removed, and bowed profoundly twice. It was a bow that might have graced a drawing-room. Then he and the boy crossed the terrace towards Mrs. Brooke.

"Fan, I want you; come here," said Clara to her friend.

Lady Fanny rose languidly and crossed to the window.

What struck both the ladies first of all, as the vagrants drew near, was the remarkable beauty of the child. His face at the first glance seemed an almost perfect oval; his complexion, naturally fair and transparent, was now somewhat embrowned by exposure to the sun and wind. He had large eyes of the deepest and tenderest blue, shaded by long golden lashes; while his lips formed a delicate curve such as many a so-called professional beauty might have envied.

"He looks more like a girl than a boy," whispered Lady Fan.

"He looks more like a cherub than either," responded Clara, who was somewhat impulsive both in her likes and dislikes. "It is a face that Millais would love to paint."

The appearance of the man was a great contrast to that of the child, and a casual observer would have said that there was no single point of resemblance between the two. Apparently the former was about forty to forty-five years of age. He had a sallow complexion and a thin aquiline nose; his black locks were long and tangled; while into his quick-glancing black eyes, which appeared to see half-a-dozen things at once, there would leap at times a strange fierce gleam, which seemed to indicate that although the volcano below might give forth few or no signs, its hidden fires were smouldering still. Only when his eyes rested on the boy they would soften and fill with a sort of wistful tenderness; and at such moments the whole expression of his face would change.

"I am extremely sorry," said Mrs. Brooke, "that my servant should have spoken to you just now in the way he did. He had no right to do so, and I shall certainly ask my husband to reprimand him."

"It was nothings, madame, nothings at all," responded the mountebank with a little bow and a smile and a deprecatory motion of his hands. "We are often spoken to like that--Henri and I--we think nothings of it."

"Still, I cannot help feeling greatly annoyed.--Is this pretty boy your son?"

"*Oui*, madame."

"His mother"----

"Alas, madame, she is dead. She die six long years ago. She was English, like madame. Henri has the eyes of *ma pauvre* Marie; and his hair, too, is the same colour as hers."

Although the man spoke with a pronounced foreign accent, his English was fluent, and he rarely seemed at a loss for a word to express his meaning.

"Poor child!" said Mrs. Brooke. "This is a hard life to bring him up to. Surely some other way might be found"---- Then she paused.

The mountebank's white teeth showed themselves in a smile. "Ah no, madame; pardon, but it is not a hard life by no means. Henri likes it, and I like it. In the winter we join some *cirque*, and then

Henri has lessons every day. He is clevare, very clevare--everybody say so. One day Henri will be a great artiste. The world--*tout le monde*--will hear of him. It is I who say it--*moi*." He touched his chest proudly with the tips of his fingers as he ceased speaking. "Would mesdames like to behold?"---- he said a moment later as he brought his drum into position and raised the pipes to his lips.

"Thank you, monsieur; not to-day," answered Clara gravely as she stepped back into the room and rang the bell.

Monsieur looked disappointed. Henri, however, looked anything but disappointed when, two minutes later, the beautiful lady, from whose face he could scarcely take his eyes, heaped his little hands with cakes and fruit till they could hold no more.

"Tell me your name, my pretty one," said Mrs. Brooke, as she stooped and helped him to secure his treasures.

"Henri Picot, madame."

"And have you any pockets, Henri?"

"*Oui*, madame."

A pocket was duly indicated, and into its recesses a certain coin of the realm presently found its way.

Before either Picot or the boy had time to give utterance to a word of thanks, a servant entered the room, and addressing Lady Fan, said: "If you please, my lady, the carriage is waiting; and Miss Primby desires me to tell you that she is ready."

"Good gracious, Clara," said Lady Fan, "I had forgotten all about my promise to accompany your aunt in her call on Mrs. Riversdale. I wish to goodness you could go with us. I dread the ordeal."

"And leave the Baron Von Rosenberg without a word of apology! What would become of my reputation as a hostess? Gerald and he will be here in a few minutes, I don't doubt; and if you like to wait till he is gone"----

"That would never do," interrupted her friend. "You know what a fidget your aunt is when she is kept waiting. You had better come and keep her in good-humour while I am getting my things on.--By-the-bye, where can our singular friends have vanished to?"

Clara looked round. Picot and the boy had disappeared. Neither of the ladies had seen the start the mountebank gave at the mention of Von Rosenberg's name, nor how strangely the expression of his face

changed. Clutching the boy by one wrist, he whispered: "It is time to go. Venez, mon p'tit--vite, vite! The ladies want us no more."

"The man was French, and he seems to have taken the proverbial leave of his countrymen," said Lady Fan with a laugh.

Mrs. Brooke was a little surprised, but said nothing. The two ladies left the room together.

CHAPTER II.

Five minutes might have passed when Gerald Brooke and the Baron Von Rosenberg came sauntering along the terrace, and entered the room through one of the long windows.

In appearance the owner of Beechley Towers was a thoroughgoing Englishman, and no one would have suspected him of having a drop of foreign blood in his veins. He was six-and-twenty years old, tall, fair, and stalwart. His hair, beard, and moustache were of a light reddish brown; he had laughing eyes of the darkest blue, and a mouth that was rarely without a smile. His bearing was that of a well-born, chivalrous, young Englishman. As he came into the room, laughing and talking to the Baron, he looked like a man who had not a care in the world.

The Baron Von Rosenberg was so carefully preserved and so elaborately got up, that one might guess his age at anything between forty and fifty-five. He was tall and thin, with a military uprightness and precision of bearing. He had close-cropped iron-gray hair, and a heavy moustache of the same colour. He spoke excellent English with only the faintest possible accent, but with a certain slowness and an elaboration of each word, which of themselves would have been enough to indicate that he was not "to the manner born."

"I had no idea, my dear Brooke, that you were such a crack shot," remarked the Baron. "I had made up my mind that I should have an easy victory."

"I learned to shoot in Poland, when I was quite a youngster. It is an amusement that has served to while away many idle hours."

"I have a tolerable range at Beaulieu; you must come over and try your skill there."

"I shall be most pleased to do so."

"I have also a small collection of *curios*, chiefly in the way of arms and armour, picked up in the course of my travels, which it may amuse you to look over."

"Your telling me that," answered Gerald, "reminds me that I have in my possession one article which, as I believe you are a connoisseur in such matters, you may be interested in examining."

As he spoke he crossed to a cabinet, and opening the glass doors, he brought out a pistol, the barrel and lock of which were chased and damascened in gold, and the stock ornamented with trophies and scrolls in silver inlay and repoussé work. "It was given me when I was in India by a certain Nawab to whom I had rendered some slight service," said Gerald as he handed the pistol to the Baron. "It doesn't seem much of a curiosity to look at; but I am told that in its way it is almost unique."

"I can readily believe that," answered the Baron, as he examined the weapon minutely through his gold-rimmed glasses. "I have never seen anything quite like it, although I have seen many curious pistols in my time. I myself have two or three in my collection on which I set some little store. I call to mind, however, that a certain friend of mine in London, who is even more *entêté* in such matters than I am, owns a weapon somewhat similar to this, inlaid with arabesque work in brass and silver, which he has always looked upon as being of Spanish, or at least of Moorish workmanship.--Now, my dear Mr. Brooke, I am going to ask you the favour of lending me this treasure for a few days. I go to London tomorrow, and while there, I should like to show it to my friend, so as to enable him to compare it with the one in his possession. He would be delighted, I know, and"----

"My dear Baron, not another word," cried Gerald. "Take the thing, and keep it as long as you like. I value it only as a memento of some pleasant days spent many thousands of miles from here. My servant shall carry it across to Beaulieu in the course of the evening."

"A thousand thanks; but I value the weapon too highly to trust it into the hands of a servant. I will return it personally in the course of a few days." So saying, the Baron, with a nod and a smile, dropped the pistol into the pocket of his loose morning coat.

"But madame your wife," he said presently; "may I not hope to have the pleasure of seeing her again before I take my leave?"

Gerald crossed the room, and was on the point of ringing the bell, when Mrs. Brooke entered.

The Baron's heels came together as he bent his head. "I was just about to take my leave, madame," he said. "I am overjoyed to have the felicity of seeing you again before doing so."

There was something too high-flown about this for Clara's simple tastes, and her cheek flushed a little as she answered: "I hope you have enjoyed your pistol-practice, Baron."

"Greatly. I assure you that Mr. Brooke is an adept with the weapon--very much so indeed. I must really beg of him to give me a few lessons."

Gerald laughed.

"As a diplomatist by profession, Baron, you are doubtless a proficient in the art of flattery," said Mrs. Brooke.

"A mere tyro, dear madame. Sincerity is the badge of all our tribe, as every one knows."

At this they all laughed a little.

"But now I must positively say adieu."

"By which road do you return to Beaulieu, Baron?" inquired Gerald.

"The afternoon is so fine and the distance so short, that I purpose walking back through the park."

"Then, with your permission, I will walk with you as far as the corner of the wood."

"Need I say that I shall be charmed?"

Mrs. Brooke gave the Baron her hand. He bent low over it. For once the ramrod in his back found that it had a hinge in it.

"You will not be gone long?" said Clara to her husband.

"Not more than half an hour.--We will go this way, Baron, if you please."

"Are all diplomatists like the Baron Von Rosenberg, I wonder?" mused Mrs. Brooke. "If so, I am glad Gerald is not one. His politeness is so excessive that it makes one doubt whether there is anything genuine at the back of it. And then the cold-blooded way in which he looks you through out of his frosty eyes! Could any woman ever learn to love a man like the Baron? I am quite sure that I could not."

She seated herself at the piano, and had been playing for a few minutes when she was startled by the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside. She turned her head and next moment started to her

feet "George! You!" she exclaimed; and as she did so, the colour fled from her cheeks and her hand went up quickly to her heart.

At Mrs. Brooke's exclamation, a tall, thin, olive-complexioned young man, with black eyes and hair and a small silky moustache, advanced into the room. He was handsome as far as features went; just now, however, his expression was anything but a pleasant one. A something that was at once furtive and cruel lurked in the corners of his eyes, and although his thin lips were curved into a smile, it was a smile that had neither mirth nor good-nature in it. A small gash in his upper lip, the result of an accident in youth, through which one of his teeth gleamed sharp and white, did not add to the attractiveness of his appearance. In one hand he carried a riding-whip, and in the other a pair of buckskin gloves.

"Good afternoon, Clara," he said with a careless nod as he deposited his hat, gloves, and whip on the side-table.

"You quite startled me," said Mrs. Brooke as she went forward and gave him her hand.

"You expected any one rather than me--of course. As I was riding along the old familiar road, I saw your husband, in company with some other man, walking down the avenue. In the hope that I might perhaps find you alone, I rode on to the *Beechley Arms*, left my horse there, entered the park by the side-entrance that you and I know so well, and here I am."

"I am very glad to see you."--Mr. George Crofton shrugged his shoulders.--"Why have you not called before now? Gerald has often wondered why we have seen nothing of you since our return from abroad."

"How kind, how thoughtful, of my dear cousin Gerald!" This was said with an unmistakable sneer.

"George!"

"You are not like yourself to-day."

"Look you, Clara--if you expect me to come here like an everyday visitor, to congratulate you on your marriage, you are mistaken. How is it possible for me to congratulate you?--and if I were to say that I wished you much happiness, it would be--well--a lie!"

"This from you!"

He drew a step nearer, flinging out his clenched hand with a quick passionate gesture. "Listen, Clara. You and I have known each other from childhood. As boy and girl we played together; when we grew older we walked and rode out together; and after you left school we met at balls, at parties, at picnics, and if a week passed without our seeing each other we thought that something must have happened. During all those years I loved you--ay, as no other man will ever love you--and you, being of the sex you are, could not fail to see it. But your father was poor, while I was entirely dependent on my uncle; so time went on, and I hesitated to speak. But a day came when I could keep silence no longer; I told you everything, and--you rejected me. If I had been wild and reckless before, I became ten times more wild and reckless then. If before that day I had offended my uncle, I offended him beyond all hope of forgiveness afterwards. But before I spoke to you, my irresistible cousin had appeared on the scene and had made your acquaintance. Your woman's wit told you that his star was in the ascendant, while mine was sinking. Pshaw! what need for another word. It is barely eighteen months since you and he first met, and now you are the mistress of Beechley Towers, while I am--what I am!"

It was with very varied emotions that Mrs. Brooke listened to this passionate outburst. When it came to an end she said in her iciest tones: "Was it to tell me this that you came here to-day?"

"It was."

"Then you had much better have stayed away. You do not know how deeply you have grieved me."

"I have told you nothing but the bitter truth."

"The truth, perhaps, as seen through your own distorted vision. From childhood you were to me as a dear playmate and friend, and as a friend I have regarded you till to-day."

"A friend! Something more than friendship was needed by me."

"That something would never have been yours."

"I will not believe it. Had not a rival crossed my path--a rival who wormed his way into my uncle's affections, who ousted me from the position that ought to have been mine, who is master here to-day where I ought to be master--had he never appeared, a love so strong and deep as mine must have prevailed in the end!"

"Never, George Crofton, as far as I am concerned! You deceive yourself utterly. You"---- She came to a sudden pause. A servant had entered, carrying a card on a salver. Mrs. Brooke took the card and read, "M. Paul Karovsky.--I never remember hearing the name before," she remarked to herself. Then aloud to the servant: "Where is the gentleman?"

"In the small drawing-room, ma'am. He said that he wanted to see Mr. Brooke on particular business."

"Your master is out at present; but I will see Monsieur Karovsky myself."

Turning to Crofton as soon as the servant had left the room, she said: "You will excuse me for a few moments, will you not? Gerald will be back in a little while, and I do so wish you would stay and meet him. George"--offering him her hand with a sudden gracious impulse--"let this afternoon be blotted from the memory of both of us. You will never say such foolish things to me again, will you?"

He took her proffered hand sullenly enough. "I have said my say," he muttered with averted eyes; with that he dropped her fingers and turned away.

A pained expression flitted across her face as she looked at him. "You will wait here till I come back, will you not?" she said; and then, without waiting for an answer, she quitted the room.

With his hands behind his back and his eyes bent on the ground, George Crofton paced the room once or twice in silence. Then he said, speaking aloud, as he had a trick of doing when alone: "It is a lie to say she would never have learned to love me! She may try to deceive herself by saying so; but she cannot deceive me. Had not my smooth-tongued cousin come between us, she would have been mine. I had no rival but him. Not only has he robbed me of the woman I loved, but of this old house and all this fair domain, which would all have been my own, had he not come between my uncle and me, and made the old man's bitterness against me bitterer still.

"Oh," he exclaimed bitterly, "I have every reason for loving my dear cousin Gerald!"

Presently he caught sight of the miniature of his cousin where it hung above the davenport. "His likeness!" he exclaimed. "The original is not enough for her; she must have this to gaze on when he

is not by." He took the miniature off the nail on which it hung and scanned it frowningly. "To think that only this man's life stands between me and fortune--only this one life!" he said. "Were Gerald Brooke to die without heirs, I--even I, his graceless scamp of a cousin--would come into possession of Beechley Towers and six thousand a year! Only this one life!" He let the miniature drop on the hearth, and then ground it to fragments savagely under his heel. "If I could but serve the original as I serve this!" he muttered.

The sound of the shutting of a distant door startled him. He pressed his hands to his forehead for a moment, as though awaking from a confused dream; then he sighed deeply and took up his hat, gloves, and whip. "Adieu, Clara; but we shall meet again," he said aloud. With that he put on his hat and buttoned his coat and walked slowly out by the way he had come.

Two minutes later Mrs. Brooke re-entered the room. She looked round in surprise. "George gone?" she said to herself. "Why did he not wait and see Gerald?" She crossed to the window and looked out. "Yes; there he goes striding through the grass, and evidently not in the most amiable of humours. How strangely he has altered during the last three or four years; how different he is now from what he used to be when we were playmates together! If he had but some profession--something to occupy his mind--he would be far happier than he is. But George is not one to love work of any kind." With that Clara looked at her watch and dismissed Mr. Crofton from her thoughts. "I wish Gerald were back. What can that strange Monsieur Karovsky want with him? What can be the business of importance that has brought him here? I feel as if some misfortune were impending. Such happiness as mine is too perfect to last."

She was crossing the room in search of a book, when her eye was attracted by the fragments of the miniature on the hearth. She was on her knees in a moment. "What is this?" she cried. "Gerald's likeness, and trodden under foot! This is George's doing. Oh, cruel, cruel! What a mean and paltry revenge! It is the portrait Gerald gave me before we were married. I could never like another as I liked this one. Oh, how mean! Gerald must not know--at least not for the present." Tears of mingled anger and sorrow stood in her eyes as she picked up the fragments and locked them away in her desk. She had scarcely accomplished this when she heard her husband's footsteps.

She hastily brushed her tears away and turned to greet him with a smile. "And this is what you call being half-an-hour away!" she said as he drew her to him and kissed her.

"Von Rosenberg and I were busy talking. We had got halfway through the wood before I called to mind where I was." He sat down and fanned himself with his soft felt hat. "He tells me," went on Gerald, "that he has taken Beaulieu for twelve months--furnished, of course--so that we are likely to be neighbours for some time to come."

"He must find English country-life very tame and unexciting after being used to Berlin and St Petersburg."

"You may add, to Paris also. Some years ago he was attached to the German Embassy there."

"To live as he is now living must seem like exile to such a man."

"I am afraid it is little better. But the whisper goes that he is really exiled for a time--that he has contrived in some way to incur the displeasure of the powers that be, and that leave has been given him to travel for the benefit of his health."

"Poor Baron! Let us hope that his eclipse will only be a temporary one.--By-the-bye, there has been some one else to see you while you have been out."

"And they call this the seclusion of the country!"

"Some Russian or Polish acquaintance whom you probably met when abroad."

"Ah! His name?"

"Monsieur Karovsky."

Gerald Brooke drew in his breath with a gasp. "Karovsky--and here!"

"He says that he has important business to see you upon.

"He is one of the few men whose faces I hoped never to see again. Where is he?" There was trouble in his eyes, trouble in his voice, as he asked the question.

"When I told him that you were out, he said that, with my permission, he would smoke a cigarette in the grounds while awaiting your return. What a strange, almost sinister-looking man he is! How I wish he had stayed away!"

Her husband did not reply; he looked as if he had not heard what she said.

Next moment Mrs. Brooke started to her feet. "There he is. There is Monsieur Karovsky," she cried.

And there, indeed, he was, standing just outside the open window smoking a cigarette. Perceiving that he was seen, he flung away his cigarette, stepped slowly into the room, removed his hat, and bowed.

CHAPTER III.

When George Crofton informed Mrs. Brooke that it was while riding along the road outside the park palings he had seen her husband leaving the house, he stated no more than the truth; but one little point he had not seen fit to mention--that he himself was not alone at the time. When he had recovered from his momentary surprise at seeing his cousin, he had said to his companion--an extremely handsome young person in a riding-habit that fitted her like a glove: "Let us put the pace on a bit, Steph. I've just remembered that there's a call I ought to make while I'm in this neighbourhood."

A few minutes later they pulled up at the *Beechley Arms*, a country tavern only a few hundred yards distant from the back entrance to the park. Here Mr. Crofton had been well known in days gone by; and by the time he had dismounted and had assisted his companion to alight, the buxom landlady, all smiles and cap-ribbons, had come to the door to greet him.

"Why, Master George, it's never you sure-ly," she said. "It seems like old times come back to see you come riding up just as you used to do."

"Then you have not quite forgotten me, Mrs. Purvis," he said, as he shook hands with the landlady with that air of easy affability which he knew so well how to assume. "I don't wish to flatter you, but, on my honour, you look younger every time I see you."

The landlady smirked and blushed, and said: "Get along with you, do, sir;" and then led the way to her best parlour, an old-fashioned, low-ceilinged room, with a diamond-paned window and a broad, cushioned window-seat.

George ordered some sherry and biscuits to be brought; and as soon as the landlady had left the room, he said to his companion: "I shall have to leave you for half-an-hour, Steph, to make the call I spoke of just now; I shall be sure not to be gone longer. You won't mind, will you?"

Mademoiselle Stephanie made a little *moue*. "I suppose you will go whether I mind or not;" she said.

"I *must* go," he replied. "It is a matter of extreme importance."

"In that case there is nothing more to be said," she answered with a shrug. A moment later she added: "Only, remember, if you are away much longer than half-an-hour, Tartar and I will go back home by ourselves, and leave you to follow at your leisure."

George Crofton laughed. "Never fear, *carissima*; I won't fail to be back to time. Besides, our dinner will be waiting for us three miles farther on. Did I tell you that I had ordered it by telegraph before leaving town?"

"There's one thing neither you nor I must forget," she answered, "and that is, that I'm due at the *cirque* at nine o'clock to the minute. Signor Ventelli never forgives any one who is not there to time."

At this juncture Mrs. Purvis came in with the wine and biscuits. George hastily swallowed a couple of glasses of sherry; and then, after giving a few instructions with regard to the horses, and reiterating his promise not to be gone more than half an hour, he went.

Mademoiselle Stephanie Lagrange was a very pretty woman--a fact of which she was perfectly cognisant, as most pretty women are. She had a profusion of light silky hair, and large steel-gray eyes that were lacking neither in fire nor audacity. Her lips were thin and rather finely curved; but her chin was almost too massive to be in proportion with the rest of her features. Her figure was well-nigh perfect; and as she was a splendid horsewoman, she never appeared in the Row without having a hundred pair of eyes focused on her, and a hundred tongues asking eagerly who she was. In case the reader should put the same question, it may be as well to state that Mademoiselle Lagrange was a prominent member of the celebrated Ventelli Circus troupe, on whose posters and placards she was designated in large letters as "Queen of the Haute Ecole." Whether Mademoiselle Lagrange was of French or English extraction was a moot-point with several of those who knew her best, seeing that she spoke both languages equally well. Some there were who averred that she spoke English with a slight French accent, and French with a slight English accent; but be that as it may, no one knew from her own lips where she was born or of what nationality her parents had been.

As soon as she was left alone, Stephanie took off her hat and veil and seated herself on the window seat, from whence she could look

into a strip of old-fashioned garden at the back of the tavern. As she nibbled at a biscuit and sipped her sherry--Steph was by no means averse to a glass of good wine--she soliloquised, half aloud: "Why has my good friend George left me and who is the person he has gone to see?--Eh bien, cher monsieur, there appear to be certain secrets in your life of which I know nothing. It must be my business to find out what they are. I like to have secrets of my own, but I don't like other people to have secrets from me."

At this point, in came bustling Mrs. Purvis, ostensibly to inquire whether the lady was in need of anything, but in reality to satisfy in some measure the cravings of her curiosity. She found Mademoiselle Stephanie by no means disinclined for a little gossip; only, when she came to think over the interview afterwards, she discovered that it was she who had answered all the young lady's questions, but that the young lady had answered few or none of hers.

Yes; she had known Master George from quite a boy, Mrs. Purvis went on to say, gratified at finding a listener so ready to her hand. He had been brought up at the Towers--the great house in the park there--and everybody thought he would be his uncle's heir. But as he grew up he fell into bad ways, and all sorts of tales were told about his extravagance and dissipation; and no doubt he was made out to be far worse than he really was. At length the old gentleman turned him out of doors, and made a fresh will in favour of his other nephew, Mr. Gerald Brooke--he who now lives at the Towers--while Master George had to content himself with a legacy of five thousand pounds. And then there was Miss Danby--the late vicar's daughter--whom everybody thought Master George would marry; but she, too, turned against him, and married his cousin, so that he lost both his inheritance and his wife.

"And does this lady whom Mr. Crofton was to have married live at the place you call the Towers?" asked Stephanie.

"Certainly, miss. She is mistress there; and a very beautiful lady she is."

"It is her whom he has gone to see," said Stephanie to herself. "He pretends that he loves me, but he cannot forget her.--So this is your secret, *cher* George! I shall know how to make use of it when the time conies."

Suddenly she started and half rose from her seat. Her eyes had been caught by something outside the window. She turned quickly on Mrs. Purvis. "That child--where does he come from? Who is he?"

The landlady's gaze followed hers through the window. "Do you mean that little fellow on the grass plat who is throwing crumbs to the birds? He's a mountebank's son, as you may see by his dress. His father is having some bread-and-cheese in the kitchen. What a shame it is that such a dear little mite should have to earn his living by turning head over heels in the streets."

For several moments Stephanie stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the child. Then, without turning her head, she said: "Thank you. I require nothing more at present. When I do, I will ring." The tones in which the words were spoken conveyed more than the words themselves. Mrs. Purvis bridled like a peacock, shook her cap-ribbons, and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her with unnecessary violence.

There were two doors to the room, one by which the landlady had made her exit, and another which led into the garden. This second door Stephanie now opened, and at the sound the boy raised his eyes. She beckoned to him, and he came forward. It may be that he had visions of more fruit and sugared biscuits.

Stephanie drew him a little way into the room, and going down on one knee, she passed an arm round his waist. It was evident that she was full of suppressed emotion. The conversation that ensued was carried on in French.

"Tell me your name, *cheri*."

"Henri Picot, mademoiselle."

She had known what the answer would be; but for a moment or two her lips blanched, while she murmured something the boy could not hear.

"And your father?" she said at last.

"He is here, indoors. Poor papa was tired; he is resting himself."

"Does your papa treat you kindly, Henri?"

The boy stared at her. "Papa always treats me kindly.--Why should he not?"

"And your mamma?" said Stephanie with bated breath.

Henri shook his head. "I have no mamma," he answered with a ring of childish pathos in his voice. "She has gone a long, long journey, and no one knows when she will come back. Papa does not like me to talk about her--it makes him so sad. But sometimes I see her in my sleep, and then she looks beautiful, and smiles at me. Some day, perhaps, she will come back to papa and me."

She kissed him passionately, to the boy's wonderment. Then with a half-sob in her voice, she said: "But you have a sister, have you not?"

Henri's large eyes grew larger. "No; I have no sister," he answered with a shake of his head.

"But you had one once, had you not? Does your papa never speak of her?"

"No; never. I had a mamma, but I never had a sister."

For a moment or two Stephanie buried her face on the child's shoulder. What thoughts, what memories of the past, rushed through her brain as she did so? "Cast off and forgotten!" was the mournful cry wrung from her heart.

Suddenly a voice outside was heard calling, "Henri, Henri, où es tu?" followed by a note or two on the pipes and a tap on the drum.

"Papa is calling me; I must go," said the boy.

Stephanie started to her feet, and lifting him in her arms, kissed him wildly again and again. Then setting him down, she pressed some money into his hand and turned away without another word. Henri darted off.

"He is gone--gone--and perhaps I shall never see him again!" She sank on her knees and buried her face in the cushions of the window-seat. Her whole frame shook with the sobs that would no longer be suppressed.

Five minutes later George Crofton entered the room. For a few seconds he paused in utter amazement; then going forward, he laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Steph," he said, "Steph--why, what's amiss?" As he spoke his eyes rested for a moment on Picot and Henri, who were crossing the grass-plat hand in hand.

CHAPTER IV.

"Pardon. I hope I do not intrude?" said M. Karovsky, addressing himself to Mrs. Brooke with the suave assurance of a thorough man of the world. "I saw through the window that Mr. Brooke had returned, and as my time here is limited--*me voici*." Then advancing a few steps and holding out his hand to Gerald, he added: "It is five years, *mon ami*, since we last met. Confess now, I am one of the last men in the world whom you thought to see here?"

"You are indeed, Karovsky," responded Gerald as he shook his visitor's proffered hand, but with no great show of cordiality.--"Have you been long in England?"

"Not long. I am a bird of passage. I come and go, and obey the orders that are given me. That is all."

"My wife, Mrs. Brooke. But you have seen her already.--Clara, Monsieur Karovsky is a gentleman whose acquaintance I had the honour of making during the time I was living abroad."

"May we hope to have the pleasure of Monsieur Karovsky's company to dinner?" asked Clara in her most gracious manner, while at the same time hoping in her heart that the invitation would not be accepted.

"*Merci*, madame," responded the Russian, for such he was. "I should be delighted, if the occasion admitted of it; but, as I said before, my time is limited. I must leave London by the night-mail. I am due in Paris at ten o'clock tomorrow."

"For the present, then, I must ask you to excuse me," said Clara.

Karovsky hastened to open the door for her, and bowed low as she swept out of the room.

"That man is the bearer of ill news, and Gerald knows it," was the young wife's unspoken thought as she left the two together.

M. Karovsky was a tall, well-built man, to all appearance some few years over thirty in point of age. His short black hair was parted carefully down the middle; his black eyes were at once piercing and brilliant; he had a long and rather thin face, a longish nose, a mobile and flexible mouth, and a particularly fine arrangement of teeth. He wore neither beard nor moustache, and his complexion had the faint

yellow tint of antique ivory. He was not especially handsome; but there was something striking and out of the common in his appearance, so that people who were introduced to him casually in society wanted to know more about him. An enigma is not without its attractions for many people, and Karovsky had the air of being one whether he was so in reality or not. He was a born linguist, as so many of his countrymen are, and spoke the chief European languages with almost equal fluency and equal purity of accent.

"Fortune has been kind to you, my friend, in finding for you so charming a wife," he said, as he lounged across the room with his hands in his pockets, after closing the door behind Mrs. Brooke. "But Fortune has been kind to you in more ways than one."

"Karovsky, you have something to tell me," said Brooke a little grimly. "You did not come here to pay compliments, nor without a motive. But will you not be seated?"

Karovsky drew up a chair. "As you say--I am not here without a motive," he remarked. Then, with a quick expressive gesture, which was altogether un-English, he added: "Ah, bah! I feel like a bird of ill-omen that has winged its way into Paradise with a message from the nether world."

"Whatever your message may be, pray do not hesitate to deliver it."

But apparently the Russian did hesitate. He got up, crossed the room to one of the windows, looked out for half a minute, then went back and resumed his seat. "Eight years have come and gone, Gerald Brooke," he began in an impressive tone, "since you allied yourself by some of the most solemn oaths possible for a man to take to that Sacred Cause to which I also have the honour of being affiliated."

"Do you think that I have forgotten! At that time I was an impetuous and enthusiastic boy of eighteen, with no knowledge of the world save what I had gathered from books, and with a head that was full of wild, vague dreams of Liberty and Universal Brotherhood."

"The fact of your becoming one of Us is the best of all proofs that the cause of Liberty at that time was dear to your heart."

"But when as a boy I joined the Cause, I was ignorant of much I have learned since that time."

"The world does not stand still. One naturally knows more to-day than one did eight years ago."

"Karovsky, I know this--that the Cause, which, when I joined it, I believed to be so pure in its aims, so lofty in its ideas, so all-embracing in its philanthropy, has, since that time, been stained by crimes which make me shudder when I think of them--has dragged its colours through shambles reeking with the blood of those who have fallen victims to its blind and ferocious notions of revenge."

"Pardon. But can it be possible that I am listening to one who, only eight short years ago, was saturated with philanthropic ideas which seemed expansive enough to include the whole human race--one whose great longing was that every man should be free and happy?--Ah, yes, you are the same--only time and the world have contrived to spoil you, as they spoil so many others. In those days you were poor; now you are rich. Then you had no fixed home; you were a wanderer from city to city; your future was clouded and uncertain. Now, you are the wealthy Mr. Brooke--a pillar of your country: this grand old mansion and all the broad acres, for I know not how far around it, are yours. You are married to one whom you love, and who loves you in return. Away, then, with the wild notions of our hot youth!"

"Karovsky, you wrong me. My love of my fellows is as ardent as ever it was. My---- But why prolong a discussion that could serve no good end? You have a message for me?"

"I have." The man was evidently ill at ease. He rose, crossed to the chimney-piece, took up one or two curios and examined them through his eyeglass, then went back and resumed his seat. "Gerald Brooke," he continued, "eight years ago, on a certain winter evening, in a certain underground room in Warsaw, and before some half-dozen men whose faces you were not permitted to see, you, of your own free-will, took the solemn oaths which affiliated you to that great Cause for the furtherance of which thousands of others have given their fortunes, their lives, their all. From that day till this you have been a passive brother of the Society; nothing has been demanded at your hands; and you might almost be excused if the events of that winter night had come at length to seem to you little more than a half-remembered dream. That you have not been called

upon before now is no proof that you have been overlooked or forgotten, but simply that your services have not been required. Other instruments were at hand to do the work that was needed to be done. But at length the day has come to you, Gerald Brooke, as it comes to most men who live and wait."

Gerald had changed colour more than once during the foregoing speech. "What is it that I am called upon to do?" he asked in a voice that was scarcely raised above a whisper.

"You are aware that when an individual is needed to carry out any of the secret decrees of the Supreme Tribunal, that individual is drawn for by lot?"

"And my name"----

"Has been so drawn."

The light faded out of Gerald Brooke's eyes; a death-like pallor crept over his face; lie could scarcely command his voice as for the second time he asked: "What is it that I am called upon to do?"

"The Supreme Tribunal have decreed that a certain individual shall suffer the penalty of death. You are the person drawn by lot to carry out the sentence."

"They would make an assassin of me?--Never!"

"You are bound by your oath to carry out the behests of the Tribunal, be they what they may."

"No oath can bind a man to become a murderer."

"One of the chief conditions attached to your oath is that of blind and unquestioning obedience."

"Karovsky, this is monstrous."

"I am sorry that things have fallen out as they have, *mon ami*; but such being the case, there is no help for it."

"I--Gerald Brooke--whose ancestors fought at Cressy, to sink to the level of a common assassin? Never!"

"Pardon. Might it not be as well, before you express your determination in such emphatic terms, to consider what would be the consequence of a refusal on your part to comply with the instructions of which I have the misfortune to be the bearer?--Mrs. Brooke is very young to be left a widow."

"Karovsky!"

"Pardon. But that is what it means. Any affiliated member who may be so ill-advised as to refuse to carry out the decrees of the Tribunal renders himself liable to the extreme penalty; and so surely as you, Gerald Brooke, are now a living man, so surely, in a few short weeks, should you persist in your refusal, will your wife be left a widow."

"This is horrible--most horrible!"

"Obedience, blind and unquestioning, the utter abnegation of your individuality to the will of your superiors, is the first great rule of the Propaganda to which you and I have the honour to belong. But all this you knew, or ought to have known, long ago."

"Obedience carried to the verge of murder is obedience no longer--it becomes a crime. However you may put it, assassination remains assassination still."

"Pardon. We recognise no such term in our vocabulary."

"Karovsky, had you been called upon to do this deed"----

"I should have done it. For if there be one man in the world, Brooke, whom I have cause to hate more than another, that man is Baron Otto von Rosenberg!"

"Von Rosenberg!"

"Pardon. Did I not mention the name before? But he is the man."

For a moment or two Gerald could not speak. "It is but half an hour since I parted from him," he contrived to say at last.--"Karovsky, I feel as if I were entangled in some horrible nightmare--as if I were being suffocated in the folds of some monstrous Python."

"It is a feeling that will wear itself out in the course of a little while. I remember---- But that matters not."

"But Von Rosenberg is not a Russian; he is a German ex-diplomatist. What can such a man as he have done to incur so terrible a vengeance?"

"Listen. Four years ago, when attached to the Embassy at St Petersburg, certain secrets were divulged to him, after he had pledged his sacred word of honour that no use whatever should be made of the information so acquired. Wretch that he was! Von Rosenberg turned, traitor, and revealed everything to those in power. In the dead of night, a certain house in which a secret

printing press was at work was surrounded by the police. Two of the inmates were shot down while attempting to escape. The rest were made prisoners, among them being three women and a boy of seventeen--my brother. Two of those arrested died in prison, or were never heard of more; the rest were condemned to the mines. On the road, my brother and one of the women sank and died, killed by the dreadful hardships they had to undergo; the rest are now rotting away their lives in the silver mines, forgotten by all but the dear ones they left behind.--You now know the reason why the Baron Otto von Rosenberg has been sentenced to death. The vengeance of the Supreme Tribunal may be slow, but it is very sure."

There was silence for a few moments, then Gerald said: "All this may be as you say; but I tell you again, Karovsky, that mine shall not be the hand to strike the blow."

"Then you seal your own death-warrant"

"So be it. Life at such a price would not be worth having. 'Death before Dishonour' is the motto of our house. Dishonour shall never come to it through me."

Gerald rose and walked to the window. His face was pale, his eyes were full of trouble; what he had said had been lacking neither in dignity nor pathos.

The Russian's cold glance followed him, not without admiration. "English to the backbone," he muttered under his breath. "It was a blunder ever to allow such a man to become one of Us." Then he looked at his watch, and started to find it was so late. "I can stay no longer--I must go," he said aloud. "But remember my last warning words." He took up his hat and moved slowly towards the window.

"Karovsky, for the last time I solemnly declare that this man's death shall not lie at my door!" Gerald sank into a chair, let his elbows rest on the table, and buried his face between his hands.

"I have nothing more to say," remarked the Russian. He stepped through the window, his hat in his hand, and then turned.

At that moment the door opened, and Mrs. Brooke, on the point of entering the room, paused suddenly as her eyes took in the scene before her. "Gerald!" she exclaimed in a frightened voice, and then her gaze travelled from her husband to Karovsky. The latter, with his eyes still resting on the bowed figure at the table, pronounced in low

clear accents the one word, "Remember!" Then he bowed low to Mrs. Brooke, and next moment was gone.

CHAPTER V.

Ten weeks, had come and gone since the memorable visit of M. Karovsky to the master of Beechley Towers. It was a pleasant evening towards the end of June. There had been a heavy shower a little while ago; but since then the clouds had broken, and the sun was now drawing westward in a blaze of glory. In the same pleasant morning-room in which we first made their acquaintance, Mrs. Brooke and her aunt, Miss Primby, were now sitting. The latter was dozing in an easy-chair with a novel on her lap, the former was seated at the piano playing some plaintive air in a minor key. The glad light, the light of a happiness that knew no cloud, which shone from her eyes when we saw her first, dwelt there no longer. She looked pale, anxious, and *distraits*, like one who is a prey to some hidden trouble. She had spoken no more than the truth when she said that her happiness was too perfect to last.

As the last sad note died away under her fingers she turned from the instrument. "I cannot play--I cannot work--I cannot do anything," she murmured under her breath.

At this juncture Miss Primby awoke. "My dear Clara, what a pity you did not keep on playing," she said. "I was in the midst of a most lovely dream. I thought I was about to be married; my wreath and veil had been sent home, and I was just about to try them on; when you stopped playing and I awoke."

"If I were to go on playing, aunt, do you think that you could finish your dream?"

"No, my dear, it's gone, and the chances are that it will never return," said the spinster with a sigh.

Clara crossed the room, and sat down on a low chair near the window, whence she could catch the first glimpse of her husband as he came round the clump of evergreens at the corner of the terrace.

"I wish you would not mope so much, and would try not to look quite so miserable," said her aunt presently.

"How can I help feeling miserable, when I know that Gerald has some unhappy secret on his mind, of which he tells me nothing. He has been a changed man ever since the visit of M. Karovsky. He

cannot eat, he cannot rest; night and day he wanders about the house and grounds, like a man walking in his sleep."

"Bad signs, very, my dear. Married men have no right to have secrets from their wives."

"If he would but confide in me! If he would but tell me what the secret trouble is that is slowly eating away his life!"

"I remember that when the Dean of Rathdrum leaned over the back of my chair, and whispered 'My darling Jane, I'"----

"Here comes Gerald!" cried Mrs. Brooke. She started to her feet, while a glad light leapt into her eyes, and ran out on the terrace to meet him. "What a time you have been away!" she said, as he stooped and kissed her. "And your hair and clothes are quite wet."

"It is nothing," he answered. "I was caught in a shower in the wood."

"Poor fellow! He certainly does look very haggard and dejected," remarked Miss Primby to herself.

"Have you been far?" asked Clara.

"Only as far as Beaulieu."

"You called on the baron, of course."

"No. I changed my mind at the last moment."

"The first bell will ring in a few minutes."

"I have one important letter to write before I dress."

"Then aunt and I will leave you. You will not be long? I am so afraid of your taking cold. Come, aunt."

"Nothing brings on rheumatism sooner than damp clothes," remarked Miss Primby sententiously, as she folded down a leaf of her novel, and tucked the volume under her arm.

Then the ladies went and Gerald was left alone. He looked a dozen years older than he had looked ten weeks previously. All the light and gladness had died out of his face; he had the air of a man who was weighed down by some trouble almost heavier than he could bear. "She is afraid of my taking cold," he said to himself, with a bitter smile as his wife closed the door. "Poor darling! if I were to take cold and have a fever and die, it would be the best thing that could happen either to her or me." He began to pace the room slowly, his hands behind him, and his eyes bent on the ground.

"Nearly three months have passed since Karovsky's visit, and nothing has yet been done. Only two more weeks are left me. Coward that I am, to have kept putting off from day to day doing that which I ought to have done long ago. Even this very afternoon, when I reached Beaulieu, I had not the courage to go in and confront Von Rosenberg. My heart failed me, and I turned back. If I have begun one letter to him I have begun a dozen, only to burn or tear them up unfinished; but now there is no time for further delay. I will warn him that if he wishes to save his life he must leave here immediately, and seek some asylum where his enemies will be powerless to harm him. Shall I vaguely hint at some shadowy danger that impends over him? or shall I tell him in plain terms why and by whom the death sentence has been recorded against him? Shall I write to him anonymously, or shall I sign the letter with my name? Better tell him everything and put my name to the letter; he can then act on the information in whatever way he may deem best. In doing this, as Karovsky said, I shall be sealing my own doom. Well, better that, better anything than the only other alternative."

He halted by one of the windows, and stood gazing out at all the pleasant features of the landscape he had learned to know and love so well. "It seems hard to die so young, and with so much about me to make life happy," he sadly mused. "I think I could meet my fate on the battle-field without a murmur--but to be murdered in cold blood--to be the mark for some stealthy assassin! Poor Clara! poor darling! what will you do when I am gone?" He sighed deeply as he turned from the window. His eyes were dim with tears.

Presently he seated himself at the davenport, and drew pen and paper towards him. "No more delays; this very night the baron shall be told. But how shall I begin? in what terms shall I word my warning?" He sat and mused for a minute or two, biting the end of his pen as he did so. Then he dipped the pen into the inkstand and began to write: "My dear Baron, from information which has reached me, the accuracy of which I cannot doubt, I am grieved to have to inform you that your life is in great and immediate peril. You have been sentenced to death by the Chiefs of one of those Secret Societies of the existence of which you are doubtless aware. Your only chance of safety lies in immediate flight."

"What shall I say next?" asked Gerald of himself. "Shall I tell him that"----

But at this juncture the door was opened, and Mrs. Brooke came hurriedly into the room. "O Gerald, such terrible news!" she exclaimed, breathlessly.

Gerald turned his letter face downward on the blotting-pad. "Terrible news, Clara?" he said in a tone of studied indifference. "Has your aunt's spaniel over-eaten itself and"----

"Gerald, don't!" she cried in a pained voice. "Baron von Rosenberg is dead--murdered in his own house leas than an hour ago!"

Gerald rose slowly from his chair as if drawn upward by some invisible force. The sudden pallor that blanched his face frightened his wife. She sprang forward and laid a hand on his arm. He shook it off almost roughly. "Tell me again what you told me just now," he said in a voice which Clara scarcely recognised as that of her husband.

She told him again. "Murdered! Von Rosenberg! Impossible!"

"Dixon brought the news; he has just ridden up from King's Harold."

Gerald sank into his seat again. His eyes were fixed on vacancy. For a few moments he looked as if his brain had been paralysed.

Miss Primby came bustling in. "Oh, my dear Clara, can it be possible that this dreadful--dreadful news is true?"

"Only too true, I am afraid, aunt."

"Poor Baron! Poor dear man! What a shocking end! I never knew a man with more charming manners. Cut off in the flower of his age, as one may say."

"Perhaps, dear, you would like to see Dixon and question him," said Clara to her husband.

He simply nodded. Mrs. Brooke rang the bell and Dixon the groom entered. "You had better tell your master all you know about this frightful tragedy."

The man cleared his throat. Gerald stared at him with eyes that seemed to see far beyond him--far beyond the room in which they were. "I had been down to King's Harold, sir," began Dixon, "to see Thompson, the farrier, about the chestnut mare, and was riding

back, when just as I got to the Beaulieu lodge-gates I see the dog-cart come out with Mr. Pringle the baron's man in it, along with Dr. King, and another gent as was a stranger to me. Seeing the doctor there, and that Mr. Pringle looked very white and scared like, I pulls up. 'Anything amiss, Mr. Pringle?' says I, with a jerk of my thumb towards the house, as the dog-cart passed me. But he only stared at me and shook his head solemn like and drove on without a word. Then I turns to the lodge-keeper's wife and sees that she has her apron over her head, and is crying. 'Anything serous amiss, mum?' says I. 'I don't know what you calls serous, young man,' says she, 'but my poor master, the baron, was found murdered in the little shally in the garden only half an hour since--shot through the heart by some blood-thirsty villain.' I didn't wait to hear more, sir, but made all the haste I could home."

No word spoke Gerald. The man looked at him curiously, almost doubting whether his master had heard a word of what he had said.

"Thank you, Dixon; that will do," said Mrs. Brooke. The man carried a finger to his forehead and made his exit.

"Poor dear baron!" remarked Miss Primby for the second time. "There was something very fascinating in his smile."

"Clara, tell me," said Gerald presently. "Am I in truth awake, or have I only dreamt that Von Rosenberg is dead?"

"How strangely you talk, dear. I am afraid you are ill."

"There you are mistaken. I am well--excellently well. But tell me this: ought I to feel glad, or ought I to feel sorry? On my life, I don't know which I ought to feel!"

"Glad? O Gerald!"

"Ah; I had forgotten. You don't know."

"You no longer confide in me as you used to do."

He took no notice of the remark. "Let the Dead Past bury its dead," he said aloud, but speaking exactly as he might have done had he been alone. "No need to send this now," he muttered in a lower tone as he took up his unfinished letter. "If I had but sent it a week ago, would Von Rosenberg be still alive? Who can say?" Crossing to the chimney-piece, he lighted a match and with it set fire to the letter, holding it by one corner as he did so. When it had burnt itself half away he began to whistle under his breath.

"O Gerald!" said his wife in a grieved voice.

"I had forgotten. Pardon--as Karovsky would say."

"I am grieved to say so, dear, but his brain seems slightly affected;" whispered Miss Primby to her niece. "If I were you I would call in Dr. Preston."

Before Clara could reply Bunce came in with a lighted lamp half turned down. He left the curtains undrawn, for a soft yellow glow still lingered over field and woodland.

As soon as he had left the room Mrs. Brooke crossed to the couch on which her husband had seated himself, and taking one of his hands in hers, said: "Dearest, you must not let this affair, shocking though it be, prey too much on your mind. It is not as if you had lost an old and valued friend. Baron von Rosenberg was but an acquaintance--a man whose name even you had never heard six months ago."

His only reply was to softly stroke the hand that was holding one of his.

Clara waited a little and then she said: "Will you not come and dress for dinner?"

He rose abruptly. "Dress for dinner!" he exclaimed with a strange discordant laugh. "How the comedy and tragedy of life jostle each other! Grim death claps on the mask of Momus and tries to persuade us that he is a merry gentleman. Here a white cravat, a dress coat, the pleasant jingle of knives and forks. There, a pool of blood, a cold and rigid form, a ghastly face with blank staring eyes that seem appealing to heaven for vengeance. Yes, let us go and dress for dinner; for, in truth, you and I ought to rejoice and make merry to-night--if you only knew why."

"Gerald, you frighten me."

"Nay, sweet one, I would not do that;" he answered as he drew her to him and kissed her. "I am in a strange humour to-night. I hardly know myself. I could laugh and I could sing, and yet--and yet--poor Von Rosenberg!" He turned away with a sigh.

At this moment in came Mr. Bunce again. "If you please, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Brooke, "here's a strange young pusson come running to the Towers all in a hurry, who says she must see you without a minute's delay."

The "strange young pusson" had followed close on his heels. "Yes, mum, without a minute's delay," she contrived to gasp out, and then she stood panting, unable to articulate another word. She was breathless with running.

"Well, if ever!" exclaimed the scandalised Bunce, turning sharply on her. "Why, you ain't even wiped your shoes."

"That will do, Bunce, thank you," said Mrs. Brooke with quiet dignity.

Bunce sniffed and tried to screw up his nose further than nature had done already. "Sich muck!" was his comment to himself as he left the room.

The person to whom this depreciatory epithet was applied was a girl of some sixteen or seventeen summers, Margery Shook by name, who was dressed in a coarse but clean bib and apron, a short cotton frock considerably the worse for wear, gray worsted stockings, thick shoes, and a quilted sun-bonnet, from under the flap of which her nut-brown hair made its escape in tangled elf-like locks. Her bright hazel eyes had in them more of the expression of some half-tamed animal than that of an ordinary human being. Her features, though by no means uncomely, were somewhat heavily moulded and did not respond readily to emotional expression. For the rest, she was a well-grown strongly-built girl, and when she laughed her teeth flashed upon you like a surprise.

Margery's laugh, if laugh it could be called, was perhaps the most singular thing about her. It was witch-like, weird, uncanny; it never extended to her eyes; it broke out at the most inopportune moments; to have been awoke by it in the dead of night, and not to have known whence it emanated, might have shaken the nerves of the strongest man.

Margery was an orphan, and until she was sixteen years old, had been brought up on a canal barge. It was her boast that she could drive a horse or steer a barge as well as any man between London and the Midlands. But there came a day when the girl could no longer either drive or handle the rudder. Ague had got her in its merciless grip. The barge-man for whom she worked landed her at King's Harold with instructions to a relative of his to pass her on to the workhouse. But before this could be done Mrs. Brooke had found

out the sick girl. She was placed in a decent lodging, and the mistress of Beechley Towers paid all expenses till she was thoroughly restored to health. But not only did she do that: she went to see Margery three or four times a week, and eat with her, and talked with her, and read to her, and tried in various ways to let a few rays of light into the girl's darkened mind. Sometimes it happened that Mr. Brooke would call for his wife when she was on these expeditions, on which occasions he would always stay for a few minutes to have a chat with Margery, so that in a little while there was no such gentleman in existence as 'Muster Geril.' But towards Mrs. Brooke her feeling was one of boundless gratitude and devotion; it was like the devotion of a dumb animal rather than that of a rational being. Willingly, gladly would she have laid down her life for her benefactress, had such a sacrifice been required at her hands.

When the girl was thoroughly convalescent it became a question what should be done with her. Clara had extracted a promise from her never to go back to her old life on the canal. About this time it was that the Baron von Rosenberg set up his establishment at Beaulieu. An assistant was required in the laundry; Margery thought she should like the situation, so it was obtained for her.

"Why, Margery, what can be the matter? Why do you want to see me so particularly?" asked Mrs. Brooke.

"It's about him--about Muster Geril," she managed to gasp out. "O mum! the polis is coming, and I've run'd all the way from Bulloo to tell you."

"The what is coming, Margery?"

"The polis, mum," answered the girl with one of her uncanny laughs. Miss Primby, who had never heard anything like it before, gave a little jump and stared at Margery as if she were some strange animal escaped from a menagerie.

"The police, I suppose you mean?" Margery nodded, and began to bite a corner of her apron.

"You must be mistaken, child. What can the police be coming here for?"

"To take Muster Geril."

"To arrest my husband?" Margery nodded again. "What can they want to arrest him for?"

"For murder."

"For murder!" ejaculated both the ladies. There was a moment's breathless pause. Gerald, with one hand on the back of a chair, and one knee resting on the seat, had the impassive air of a man whom nothing more can surprise. He had gone through so much of late that for a time it seemed as if no fresh emotion had power to touch him.

"Great heaven! Margery, what are you talking about?" said Mrs. Brooke with blanched lips.

"They say as how Muster Geril shot the gentleman--the Baron--what was found dead about a hour ago. Not as I believes a word of it," she added with a touch of contempt in her voice. "A pistol set with gold and with funny figures scratched on it, was found not far from the corpus, and they say it belongs to Muster Geril."

"My Indian pistol which I lent to Von Rosenberg ten weeks ago," said Gerald quietly.

"And now the polis have gone for a warrin to take him up," added the girl.

"A warrant to arrest my husband?"

Again Margery nodded. She was a girl who, as a rule, was sparing of her words.

"I, the murderer of Von Rosenberg!" said Gerald, with a bitter laugh. "Such an accusation would be ridiculous if it were not horrible."

Mrs. Brooke wrung her hands and drew in her breath with a half moan. The blow was so overwhelming, that for a few moments words seemed frozen on her lips.

Gerald turned to the window. "Can the irony of fate go further than this," he said to himself, "that I should be accused of a crime for refusing to commit which my own life was to have paid the penalty!"

In came Bunce once more carrying a card on a salver which he presented to his master.

Gerald took it and read, "Mr. Tom Starkie."

"Says he wants to see you very perticler, sir."

"Into which room have you shown Mr. Starkie?"

"Into the blue room, sir."

"Say that I will be with him in one moment. Come, Clara, come, aunt," he said with a smile, as soon as Bunce had left the room; "let us go and hear what it is so 'perticler' that Mr. Tom has to say to me?"

None of them noticed that Margery had stolen out on to the terrace, and was there waiting and watching with her gaze fixed on a distant point of the high-road where it suddenly curved, before dipping into the valley on its way to the little market town of King's Harold. Twilight still lingered in the west, and Margery's eyes were almost as keen as those of a hawk.

CHAPTER VI.

The Blue Room into which Mr. Tom Starkie had been shown was at the back of the house, and its windows looked into a quaint old-fashioned garden with clipped hedges and shady alleys. In order to reach this room, visitors had to cross the entrance hall, then proceed along a wide corridor which intersected the house, with doors opening on either hand, after which they found themselves in a second hall almost as large as the first. An archway, from which depended a heavy *portièr* divided this hall from the Blue Room. This second hall, which was lighted by a cupola, was hung with a few family portraits, some arms pertaining to various countries and various epochs, together with sundry trophies of the chase.

A broad, shallow, oaken staircase, black with age, led to an upper floor, at the foot of which, on either hand, stood a man in armour with his visor down, grasping in his mailed right hand a lance half as tall again as himself. Tropical plants in tubs were disposed here and there.

Gerald Brooke, pushing aside the *portière*, advanced and shook hands with his visitor. Mrs. Brooke and her aunt had remained behind. It was just possible that Mr. Starkie might have something of a private nature to communicate to Gerald. "Brooke, what's this confounded mess you seem to have got yourself into?" he began, without a word of preface. He was a red-haired, open-faced, good-natured-looking young fellow of three or four and twenty. "Have you heard that Von Rosenberg is dead, and that you are accused of having murdered him?"

"Yes, I have heard," answered the other quietly. "Is that the affair about which you have come to see me?"

Mr. Starkie looked thunderstruck. "As if by Jove! it wasn't enough! But, unfortunately, there's more behind."

Gerald touched the bell. "There is no reason why my wife and her aunt should not hear anything you have to say," he remarked. "They know already of what I am accused."

When the ladies came in, they shook hands with Mr. Starkie. Clara and he had known each other for years.

Gerald having explained the nature of their visitor's errand as far as he knew it, turned to the young man and said: "And now for your narrative, dear boy; we won't interrupt you oftener than is absolutely necessary."

"I'll cut what I've got to say as short as I can," rejoined the other, "because, don't you know, there's no time to lose." He cleared his voice and drew his chair a few inches nearer Gerald. "About three-quarters of an hour ago," he began, "I happened to be with my dad in his office talking over some private matters, when Drumley, our new superintendent of police, was ushered into the room. He horrified both my dad and me by telling us that the Baron von Rosenberg had been found murdered--shot through the heart in the little *châlet* which stands in the grounds about a hundred yards from the house; and he shocked us still more by telling us that he had come to apply to my father, as the nearest J.P., for a warrant authorising the arrest of Mr. Gerald Brooke as being the supposed murderer. As soon as my father could command himself, he demanded to know the nature of the evidence which tended to implicate a gentleman like Mr. Brooke in a crime so heinous. Then Drumley, to whom every credit is due for the smart way in which he has done what he conceived to be his duty, adduced his evidence item by item. Item the first was the finding of a curious pistol, inlaid with gold and ivory, which was picked up a few yards from the *châlet*. It had been recently discharged, and was recognised by some one at Beaulieu as being, or having been, your property."

"There can be no dispute on that point," said Gerald. "The pistol in question is mine. I lent it to the Baron the last time he was here, ten weeks ago. He wanted it for a certain purpose, and promised to return it in the course of four or five days. As it happened, he was summoned by telegram next day to Berlin, and, as you may or may not know, he only returned to Beaulieu yesterday. Hence the reason why my pistol was still in his possession."

"How unfortunate!" answered Starkie. "But perhaps you had some witness, perhaps some one was there at the time who saw you give the pistol to the Baron?"

Gerald considered for a moment. "No," he said; "we were alone--the Baron and I; no one else was in the room when I gave him

the pistol. He would not let me send it over by a servant, but persisted in taking it himself."

"That is more unfortunate still," said the young man. "The next item of evidence was that of two of the Baron's men, who deposed to having seen you making your way through the plantation in the direction of Beaulieu; and to having seen you returning by the same way some twenty minutes or half an hour later, and not many minutes after they had heard the sound of a gun or pistol shot."

"That fact also will admit of no dispute," answered Gerald. "I left home with the intention of calling on the Baron on a matter of importance; but at the last moment I changed my mind and determined to write to him instead. I, too, heard a shot; but as the Baron has a range for pistol-practice in his grounds, I thought nothing of it."

Very glum indeed looked Mr. Starkie. "And now we come to the last item of evidence, which is perhaps the most singular of all. Had you not, a little while ago, a groom in your service of the name of Pedley?"

"I had. About two months ago, I had occasion to discharge him for insolence and insubordination."

"And a few days later he came to you for a character, telling you that he had a chance of getting into the employ of the Baron von Rosenberg?"

"He did; and as I thought he was sorry for his behaviour, I gave him a note to the Baron's man, whose name I don't just now remember."

"The day Pedley came to see you, do you recollect whether you left him alone in the room where the interview between you took place?"

"Now you mention it, I believe I did leave him alone for a couple of minutes while I went into the next room to write the note I had promised him."

"He seems to be a dangerous sort of customer. According to his account, it would appear that during your absence from the room, observing a half-burnt piece of paper in the fender, he took it up and carefully opened it. He had only just time to glance at its contents before you returned; but what he saw was sufficient to induce him to

take the paper away with him so as to enable him to decipher it at his leisure."

"May I ask the nature of the contents of the paper in question?" said Gerald, who had turned a shade or two paler in spite of himself.

"When Pedley heard that you were suspected, he spoke to Drumley, and came along with him to see my father. There he produced the half-burnt piece of paper, the contents of which he stated to be in your writing, though how he should be able to speak so positively on the point is more than I can understand. Anyhow, Brooke, if the document should prove to be in your handwriting, it seems a somewhat singular composition, to say the least of it. I had only time to glance hurriedly over it; but from what I could make out, it appears to be a sort of warning addressed to Von Rosenberg, telling him that his life is in great and imminent danger, and that he has been condemned to death; and then there was something about escaping while there was yet time; but the whole thing was so fragmentary, and here and there there were such gaps in the sequence of the sentences, that I may perhaps scarcely have gathered the right sense of what I read. As there seemed to be no time to lose, I did not wait to hear more, but had my mare saddled at once, and rode straight across country, taking everything as it came, in order that I might be the first to bring you the news, bad as it is, and so put you on your guard."

Gerald grasped his hand. "You are a true friend, Starkie, and I thank you from my heart," he said. Then he added: "I trust you will take my word when I say that, however black the evidence may at present seem against me, I am as innocent of this man's death as you are."

"I believe it, Brooke--with all my heart I believe it!"

"Now for an explanation of the half-burnt letter. That it is in my writing I don't for one moment doubt." Mr. Starkie gave vent to a little whistle under his breath. "It is perfectly true that Von Rosenberg's life was in imminent danger. His enemies were powerful and implacable, and nothing short of his death would satisfy them. He was to be assassinated--murdered in cold blood. In what way I came to know all this I am not at liberty to say. The half-burnt paper picked up by Pedley was a letter of warning to the Baron which I never finished, and afterwards, as I thought, burnt to

ashes. Von Rosenberg was at Berlin at the time, and I knew that the danger which menaced him lay here, and not there. Finally, I decided not to write to him, but to await his return and seek a personal interview. He reached Beaulieu last night, and this afternoon I made up my mind to call upon him. I had nearly reached the house, when, coward that I was, my heart failed me, and I came back determined that, after all, I would break my news by letter. And now it is too late!"

"But," exclaimed the other, "don't you see that what you have just told me, if told in a court of justice, would only serve to make the case seem a hundredfold blacker against you?"

"I can quite understand that," answered Gerald sadly. "Nevertheless, the truth is the truth, and nothing can alter it."

Mr. Starkie looked at his watch. "I have not a moment to lose," he said. "The police may arrive at any minute, and it would never do for them to find that my father's son had been here before them and given you the 'tip.'"

"Oh, Mr. Starkie, what would you advise Gerald to do? What a horrible accusation to have brought against him!" exclaimed Clara.

"It is that, and no mistake; but it is scarcely in my province, Mrs. Brooke, to advise your husband what to do."

"Supposing you were in his place, Mr. Starkie, what would *you* do?"

"Upon my word, I hardly know. On the face of it one must admit that the case looks very black against him, so many bits of circumstantial evidence being piled one on the top of another; but I have no doubt in my own mind that further inquiry will in the course of a few hours go far to substantiate his innocence. In fact, I think it most likely that before this time tomorrow the real murderer will have been arrested."

"Then you would advise?"---- She paused, and looked at him with eyes full of entreaty.

"Well, Mrs. Brooke, I think--mind you, I only say I think--that if I were in Brooke's place would make tracks for a little while.--I beg your pardon," he resumed in some confusion, "what I mean is, that I would be suddenly called from home on business, or pleasure, or what not, so that when the police arrived I should be *non est*. Only, if

you decide to do as I suggest, it must be done without a minute's loss of time. In the course of a day or two or even earlier, the mystery will no doubt be cleared up, and in the meantime Brooke will escape the unpleasantness of being in quod.--I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brooke; I mean in prison."

"You hear, Gerald--you hear!" cried his wife.

Mr. Starkie took Gerald aside and said something to him rapidly in a low voice, to which the other replied by an emphatic shake of his head. "No--no," he said; "I cannot consent to anything of the kind."

"Well, you know best, of course," replied Mr. Tom; "but I think I would if I were you. In any case, I'll not fail to be on the lookout; only, don't forget the directions." Two minutes later he had said his hurried adieus and had ridden rapidly away.

No one spoke till the noise of his horse's hoofs was lost in the distance. A sort of stupor of dismay had settled on the little party. Gerald felt as if he were shut in by a net of steel, which was being slowly drawn round him closer and closer. The mental anguish he had undergone since Karovsky's visit, combined with all the varied and fluctuating emotions of the last few hours, were beginning to tell upon him. It seemed to him as if some hinge in his brain were being gradually loosened--as if the fine line which divides the real from the imaginary and fact front fantasy were in his case being strained to tenuity.

Mrs. Brooke was the first to break the silence. She crossed and sat down by her husband and took one of his hands in hers. "Gerald, dearest, you must fly," she said with a sob in her voice. The eyes he turned on her caused passionate tears to surge from her heart, but with all her might she forced them back.

"Why should an innocent man fly?" he asked.

"You heard what Mr. Starkie said. For a little while it may not be possible for you to prove your innocence, and in the meantime you will escape the ignominy of a jail."

"But if I do not stay and face this vile charge, all the world will believe me guilty."

"No one who knows you can possibly believe that.--O Gerald--husband--my dearest and best--listen to me!"

"Clara, you would make a coward of me."

"Oh, no, no! But consider how strong the evidence is against you. Less than that has brought innocent men to the scaffold before now."

"Come what may, I must stay and face this out."

"Again I say no. A few days, perhaps a few hours even, may bring the real criminal to light. As Mr. Starkie said, you must go on a little journey--a journey where no one can trace you. For my sake, Gerald--for your wife's sake!"

"Oh, my dear boy, do, pray, listen to her," put in Miss Primby, who up to the present had scarcely uttered a word.

"To-morrow will prove my innocence."

"How devoutly I hope so! But can we be sure of it? Days, weeks even, may elapse before the murderer is discovered, and meanwhile what will become of you! Gerald--dear one, think--think!"

"I have thought, Clara. You are asking an impossibility."

"I am asking you to save your life. You must fly--you must hide, but only for a little while, I trust. You must leave me here to help to hunt down the murderer--to fight for you while you are away."

"She speaks the truth, Gerald. Oh, do listen to her!" pleaded Miss Primby with quivering lips.

"Again I say, you would persuade me to act like a coward."

"Let the world call you what it will. While you are in hiding, your life will be safe. Will it be safe if you stay here?"

Before more could be said, Margery burst without ceremony into the room. "O mum, they're coming!" she cried; "the polis is coming! There's five or six of 'em in two gigs."

"It is too late--we are lost!" cried Clara in anguished accents.

"I ran down to the little hill in the park, 'cos it's getting too dark to see very fer,'" continued Margery; "and when I see 'em come round the corner of the road, a quarter of a mile away, I bolted like a hare, and got the old woman at the lodge to lock the gate, and told her not to open it to anybody for her life. It'll take 'em seven or eight minutes longer to drive round by the other gate," concluded Margery with a burst of witch-like laughter.

"Good girl! brave girl!" ejaculated Miss Primby.

"Then there may yet be time," said Clara. She dropped on one knee, and clasping one of her husband's hands, pressed it

passionately to her lips. "O Gerald--if you love me--for my sake!" she cried again.

"You are persuading me to this against my will and against my conscience."

"I am persuading you to save your life, which to me is more than all the world besides."

"Be it as you wish," he answered with a sigh. "I feel as if whatever may happen now cannot greatly matter."

Clara rose, and as she did so, a strange eager light leapt into her eyes. "Come with me--quick, quick!" she exclaimed. "I have thought of a plan. Even now there may be time." Then turning to Miss Primby "You will stay here, aunt, will you not? I shall not be more than a few minutes away."

The spinster nodded; her heart was too full for speech. Then Clara, passing an arm through her husband's, lifted the *portière*, and they went out together.

Margery had already disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

Left alone, Miss Primby mechanically reverted to her embroidery; but it is to be feared that her doing so was little better than a pretence. She bit her underlip very hard to help her in controlling the nervous emotion which she had much ado not to give way to.

True to her promise, Clara was not more than a few minutes away. When she came back she looked paler than before, but her eyes were extraordinarily bright and luminous.

"Is he safe, Clara? Oh, tell me that he is safe!"

"I hope and trust so; more than that I cannot say. The police may arrive at any moment. You must try to look brave and unconcerned, aunty, dear. You need not speak unless you like, but leave everything to me."

"Very well, dear. I know that I shall be too nervous to say a word.--But what are you going to tell the police?"

"I am going to deceive them.--But oh, aunty, aunty, surely in such a cause I shall be forgiven!"

Suddenly Margery's unkempt head was protruded through the archway. "They've come, mum," she said in a stage whisper.--"They've stuck three men in front of the house and two at the back."

Mrs. Brooke nodded, and the head vanished.

"Now, aunt," said Clara, "let us both try to look as if nothing was the matter." So saying she sat down to the piano and began to play a waltz in a minor key.

Presently in came Bunce, looking very white and scared, carrying a salver with a card on it.

Mrs. Brooke took the card and read aloud: "'Mr. J. Drumley, Superintendent of Police.'--What can he want here at this hour of the evening?" she said.--"You had better show him in, Bunce." And with that she resumed her playing.

She ceased playing, however, when the *portière* was pushed aside and two men came forward, one a little in advance of the other.

As Mrs. Brooke rose and confronted them, the first man made a stiff military bow, while the second carried a couple of fingers to his forehead.

"To what may I attribute the honour of this visit?" asked Clara in her most gracious tones.

Both the men were evidently disconcerted. This pale beautiful apparition with its great shining eyes was something they had not expected to meet.

"You are Mrs. Brooke, I suppose, ma'am?" said the first man after an awkward pause.

Clara smiled assent.

"I am Superintendent Drumley of the King's Harold police, and this is one of my sergeants. But our business is with Mr. Brooke, and not with you, ma'am."

"Quite so. But I hope your errand is not an unpleasant one?"

"I am sorry to say it is a very unpleasant one."

"May I ask the nature of it?"

"If you will excuse me, ma'am, I would rather not enter into particulars--at least not just now. As I said before, our business is with Mr. Brooke. May I ask whether he is at home?"

"He is not at home," answered Clara. "It is a pity you did not arrive a little earlier." She consulted her watch. "My husband left home about five-and-twenty minutes ago. His intention was to walk across the fields to Woodberry Station and catch the up-train to London."

The two men stared at each other for a moment or two and then began to talk in eager whispers. Clara, who was close by the piano, turned over a leaf of music and struck a chord or two in an absent-minded way.

In rushed Margery, panting once more, and to all appearance breathless. She made-believe not to see the two constables. "O mum," she cried, "what do you think? He let me carry his bag all the way through the park, and at the gate he gave me a bright new sixpence. I wanted to carry it to the station; but he wouldn't let me. I wish he had--he'd got more'n a mile to walk. But a new silver sixpence! O crumbs!" Margery ended with one of her most eldritch and uncanny laughs. The sergeant of police, who was rather a

nervous man, jumped in his shoes; he had never heard anything like it before.

For a moment Mrs. Brooke stared at the girl in blank astonishment; then a look flashed from Margery's eyes into hers and she understood.

"Of whom are you speaking, girl?" asked Drumley sternly.

"O lor! I didn't see you, sir.--Why, who should I be speaking of but Muster Geril?"

"She refers to my husband, Mr. Gerald Brooke," remarked Clara.

The two men retired down the room a little way and talked together in low tones. "I ain't so sure that this is anything more than a clever dodge," said Drumley, "and that the gent we want isn't still somewhere about. However, you had better take Tomlinson with you and drive as hard as you can to Woodberry Station. The London train will be gone before you get there; but you can set the telegraph to work and make whatever inquiries you may think necessary. You've got the description?"--The sergeant nodded.--"Of course you've got to bear in mind that he may be disguised. Do the best you can, and then hurry back.--Send Simcox to me. I'll have the house thoroughly searched while you are away."

The man saluted and went; and presently Simcox appeared in his stead.

Drumley drew a little nearer Mrs. Brooke. "Without wishing in the least, ma'am, to doubt what you have told me about Mr. Brooke's departure," he said, "I consider it my duty to search the premises."

The piece of music Clara was holding fell to the ground. "To search the premises!" she exclaimed as she stooped to pick it up. She deliberately replaced the music on the piano before she spoke again. Then turning to Drumley with her most dignified air, she said: "You forget, sir, that you have not yet enlightened me as to the nature of your business at Beechley Towers."

"It is my painful duty to inform you, ma'am, that the Baron von Rosenberg was murdered this afternoon in his own grounds at Beaulieu."

"Murdered! The Baron von Rosenberg!" exclaimed both the ladies in a breath.

"O aunty, that was a capital bit of make-believe on your part!" thought Clara to herself. Then, after a pause, to Drumley: "We are excessively shocked, sir, at your tidings. The Baron was a visitor at the Towers, and was highly esteemed both by my husband and myself. Still, you must excuse me for saying that I fail to see in what way this dreadful tragedy connects itself with Mr. Brooke."

"It's a very disagreeable thing for me to have to break it to you, ma'am; but the fact is that Mr. Brooke is suspected of having shot the Baron. The evidence against him is very strong, and--and, in fact, I hold a warrant for his arrest."

"A warrant--for--the arrest of--my husband! You must be dreaming--or--or"---

"Not at all, ma'am. As I said before, the evidence against Mr. Brooke--circumstantial, of course--is very strong. If you would like to see the document"----

"I will take your word for it.--My husband the murderer of the Baron von Rosenberg! Impossible! There is some incomprehensible mistake somewhere."

"I hope so, with all my heart," answered the superintendent drily. "Still, I have my duty to perform."

"Of course. I don't blame you for one moment; I only say there is a grievous mistake somewhere. You wish to go over the house--I think that is what I understood you to imply?"

"By your leave, ma'am."

Without another word Mrs. Brooke rang the bell; then, crossing the room, with her own hands she drew aside the *portière* that shrouded the archway and fastened it back by means of a silver chain. The hall beyond was now lighted up by three or four lamps which shed a chastened radiance over the scene. More lamps lighted up the gallery. The portraits of the dead and gone Croftons, male and female, seemed to have retired further into the solitude of their frames, as though the lamplight were distasteful to them. The leaves of the tropical plants massed here and there shone glossy green; in that softened sheen the helmets and cuirasses of the men-at-arms who kept watch and ward at the foot of the staircase gleamed like burnished silver.

"Bunce," said Mrs. Brooke, when that functionary responded to the summons, "you will be good enough to take a light and show these gentlemen over the whole of the house. You will allow them to enter every room without exception that they may wish to examine. Nothing must be kept back from them." She made a little bow to Mr. Drumley, as dismissing him and his companion, and then composedly re-entered the room.

"Hang me, if I ain't half inclined to think she's humbugging me, after all!" said Mr. Drumley to himself as he followed the majordomo.

Oh, the slow exquisite torture of the half-hour that followed, which seemed, indeed, to lengthen itself out to several hours. To this day, Clara never thinks of it without a shudder. From where she was seated she could see straight across the hall to the staircase beyond; no one could go up or come down without her cognisance.

"Clara, dear, I had no idea you had half so much nerve," said Miss Primby in a whisper.

"Don't speak to me, aunty, please," she whispered back, "or I shall break down." Then to herself: "Will this torture never come to an end!"

It did come to an end by-and-by. Mr. Drumley and his man, preceded by Bunce, came slowly down the staircase. They were met in the hall by two other men who had searched the ground-floor and cellars. It was evident that in both cases their perquisition had been unsuccessful.

A minute or two later in marched the sergeant. His journey to the station had been equally fruitless of results, except in so far as setting the telegraph to work was concerned.

Mrs. Brooke went forward to the group where they stood in the centre of the hall. "Well?" she said interrogatively and with a faint smile. "Have you succeeded in finding Mr. Brooke?"

"No, ma'am; I am bound to say that we have not."

"I hope you have not forgotten what I told you when you first asked for him," was the quiet reply. "But can I not offer you a little refreshment after your arduous duties?"

Mr. Drumley laughed the laugh of discomfiture. "I think not, Mrs. Brooke--much obliged to you, all the same.--Come, lads; it's no use

wasting our time here any longer.--Mrs. Brooke, ma'am, I had a very disagreeable duty to perform; I trust you will bear me out in saying that I have tried to carry it out with as little annoyance to you as possible."

"You have been most considerate, Mr. Drumley, and my thanks are due to you."

A minute later the men were gone. Then Mrs. Brooke rang the bell and ordered all the lamps in the hall except one to be extinguished: that one but served, as it were, to make the darkness visible. No sooner was this done and the servant gone, than Margery once more put in an appearance.

"They're gone, mum, every man-jack of 'em; and ain't Muster Drummle in a rare wax 'cos he couldn't find Muster Geril!"

Scarcely had the girl finished speaking, when one of the men in armour at the foot of the staircase stepped down from his pedestal and came slowly forward. Margery fell back with a cry of terror, for not even she had been in the secret.

But Clara, rushing to her husband, pushed up his visor and clasped him in her arms. "Saved! saved!" she cried in a voice choked with the emotion she could no longer restrain.

"For a little while, my darling, perchance only for a little while," was the mournful response.

CHAPTER VIII.

We are at Linden Villa, a pretty little detached house, standing in its own grounds, in one of the north-western suburbs of London, and the time is the morning of the day after the murder of the Baron von Rosenberg. Two people are seated at breakfast--George Crofton and his wife Stephanie. For, Mr. Crofton's protestations and objurgations notwithstanding at the interview between himself and Clara Brooke, he had thought fit within a month after that date to make an offer of his hand and heart to Mademoiselle Stephanie Lagrange, an offer which had been duly accepted. And, in truth, the ex-queen of the *Haute Ecole* was a far more suitable wife for a man like George Crofton than Clara Brooke could possibly have been.

Mr. Crofton presented a somewhat seedy appearance this morning; there was a worn look about his eyes, and his hand was scarcely as steady as it might have been. His breakfast consisted or a tumbler of brandy-and-soda and a rusk: it was his usual matutinal repast. Mrs. Crofton, who was one of those persons who are always blessed with a hearty appetite, having disposed of her cutlet and her egg, was now leaning back in an easy-chair, feeding a green and gold parakeet with tiny lumps of sugar, and sipping at her chocolate between times. She was attired in a loose morning wrapper of quilted pale blue satin, with a quantity of soft lace round her throat, and looked exceedingly handsome.

"Steph, I think I have told you before," said Mr. Crofton in a grumbling tone, "that I don't care to have any of your old circus acquaintances calling upon you here. I thought you had broken off the connection for good when you became my wife."

"Que voulez-vous, cher enfant?" answered Steph without the least trace of temper. "You introduce me to no society; you scarcely ever take me anywhere; four or five times a week you don't get home till past midnight--this morning it was three o'clock when you crept upstairs as quietly as a burglar. What would you have?"

George Crofton moved uneasily in his chair, but did not reply. "Besides," resumed his wife, "it was only dear old Euphrosyne Smith who came to see me. She looks eighteen when she is on the *corde*, but she's thirty-four if she's a day. I've known her for five years, and

many a little kindness she has done me. And then, although, of course, I shall never want to go back to the old life, I must say that I like to hear about it now and again and to know how everybody is getting on. Can you wonder at it, now that you leave me so much alone?"

"For all that, Steph, I wish you would break off the connection." Then, after a pause: "I know that of late I have seemed to neglect you a little; but if I have done so, it has been as much for your sake as my own."

"Ah, yes, I know: cards, cards, always cards."

"What would you have?--as a certain person sometimes says. I know a little about cards; I know nothing about anything else that will bring grist to the mill. I bought my experience in the dearest of all schools, and if I try to profit by it, who shall blame me?"

"Which means, that you are teaching others to buy their experience in the same way."

"Why not?" he answered with a laugh. "It is a law of the universe that one set of creatures shall prey on another. *I* was very nice picking for the kites once on a time; now I am a kite myself. The law of metempsychosis in such cases is a very curious one."

"I don't know what you mean when you make use of such outlandish words," said Stephanie with a pout.

"So much the better; learned women are an abomination."

At this juncture a servant brought in the morning papers. Crofton seized one of them, a sporting journal, and pushed the other across the table. He was deep in the mysteries of the latest odds, when a low cry from his wife caused him to glance sharply at her. "What's up now, Steph?" he asked. "It would be a libel to say you had touched the rouge-pot this morning, because there isn't a bit of colour in your cheeks."

"What is the name of that place in the country where your uncle used to live?" she asked.

"Beechley Towers."

"And the name of that cousin to whom your uncle left his property?"

"Gerald Brooke--confound him!--But why do you ask?"

For sole reply she handed him the newspaper, marking a certain passage with her finger as she did so. If Mrs. Crofton was startled by something which caught her eye in the paper, her feelings were as nothing in comparison with those of her husband as his keen glance took in the purport of the paragraph in question. It was, in fact, little more than a paragraph in the form of a brief telegram, forwarded at a late hour by a country correspondent.

What the public were told in the telegram was that the Baron von Rosenberg had been found in his own grounds, shot through the heart, about seven o'clock in the evening; that strong circumstantial evidence pointed to the supposition that Mr. Gerald Brooke, a near neighbour of the Baron, was the murderer; that he had disappeared immediately after the perpetration of the crime, and that, although he was still at large, the police had little doubt they would succeed in arresting him in the course of the next few hours.

For a little while, speech seemed powerless to express a tithe of what George Crofton felt when the words of the telegram had burned themselves into his brain. What a sea of conflicting emotions surged round his heart as his mind drank in the full purport of the message and all the possibilities therein implied! What a vista of the future it opened out!

"A little rouge, *mon cher*, would improve *your* complexion," said his wife at length, who had been watching him curiously out of her half-veiled eyes. "If one were to judge by your looks, you might have committed the crime yourself."

Her words served to rouse him. "Stephanie, the day of my revenge is dawning at last!" He ground out the words between his set teeth. "This Gerald Brooke--this well-beloved cousin of mine--is the man who came between my uncle and me and defrauded me out of my inheritance."

"And the man who robbed you of the woman you loved, whom you hoped one day to make your wife."

"How do you know that?" he gasped. "I never said a syllable to you about it."

"It matters not how I know it, so long as I do know it," she answered, looking him steadily in the face as she did so, and beginning to tap her teeth with her long pointed nails.

"Well, whoever told you, told you no more than the truth. I did love Clara Danby, and I hoped to make her my wife. But all that was past and gone long; before I met you."

She did not reply, but only went on tapping her teeth the more.

"Putting aside my own feelings towards Brooke," went on Crofton presently, "who has done me all the harm that one man could possibly do to another, don't you see that if he should be arrested and found guilty of this crime, what a vast difference it would make in your fortunes and mine?"

"Expliquez-vous, s'il vous plait."

"Should Gerald Brooke die without issue, by the terms of my uncle's will Beechley Towers and all the estates pertaining to it, including a rent-roll of close on six thousand a year, come absolutely to me--to me--comprenez-vous? Ah, what a sweet revenge mine will be!"

"Yes; I should think it would be rather nice to live at a grand place like Beechley Towers and have an income of six thousand a year," answered Mrs. Crofton quietly. "So, if this cousin of yours is really guilty, let us hope for our own sakes that he will be duly caught and hanged."

Crofton turned to the table, and having poured out nearly half a tumbler of brandy, he drank it off at a draught. Excitement had so far unnerved him that the glass rattled against his teeth as he drank.

"But what could possibly induce a man in Mr. Brooke's position to commit such a crime?" asked Stephanie presently.

"That's more than we know at present; we must wait for further particulars.--By the way, I wonder who and what the murdered man was? The Baron von Rosenberg they call him. I never heard the name before."

"*I* knew the Baron von Rosenberg some years ago--in Paris," answered Stephanie with just a trace of heightened colour in her cheeks. "He was a man between forty and fifty years old, and said to be very rich.--I never liked him. Indeed, I may say that I had every reason to hate him. And now he's dead! C'est bien--c'est très bien."

Her husband was only half heeding her. "Stephanie," he said, "I never hated any one as I hate that man. Should the evidence at the inquest, which will no doubt be held in the course of to-day, go to

prove, or go far to prove, that Brooke is the assassin, and should the police not succeed in arresting him in the course of the next forty-eight hours, do you know what I have made up my mind to do?"

"How is it possible that I should know?"

"I have made up my mind not to trust to what the regular police may or may not be able to do in this matter, but to employ a private detective on my own account. I happen to be acquainted with a man who is nothing less than a sleuth-hound in such a case as this. He has succeeded more than once when Scotland Yard has failed ignominiously. His services I shall secure; and if it cost me the last sovereign I have in the world, I will do all that man can do to bring Gerald Brooke to the bar of justice."

He spoke with a concentrated malignity of purpose such as he had never exhibited in his wife's presence before. There was an eager, cruel gleam in his eyes, like that of some carnivorous animal which scents its prey from afar. He set his teeth hard when he had done speaking, so that the gash in his lip showed with startling distinctness, and lent to his features an unmistakably wolfish expression.

Stephanie looked at him and wondered. She had flattered herself, as many wives do, that she had read and thoroughly understood her husband; but in this man there were evidently smouldering volcanic forces which might burst into activity at any moment, chained tempests of rage and ferocity which might not always be kept in check, the existence of which she had never suspected before. From that day forward, although her husband knew it not, she regarded him with somewhat different eyes.

He rose abruptly and rang the bell. "Let a hansom be fetched at once," he said to the servant.

"For what purpose do you require a hansom?" asked his wife.

"To drive me to the terminus. I shall go down to King's Harold by the first train. I want to hear for myself the evidence at the inquest on the Baron von Rosenberg."

CHAPTER IX.

Gerald Brooke bade farewell to his wife, and quitted Beechley Towers about an hour after midnight. There was no moon; but the clouds had dispersed after the rain, and the stars shone brightly. His object was to make his way to Penrhyn Court, the seat of Sir John Starkie, the justice of the peace who had signed the warrant for his arrest. It seemed like walking into the lion's den; but it was probably the wisest thing he could have done under the circumstances. Penrhyn Court was one of the last places in the world where anybody would think of looking for him. Mr. Tom Starkie had offered to find a secure hiding-place for him for the time being; and after he had once consented to yield to his wife's entreaties and keep out of the way for the present, while awaiting the course of events, it seemed to him that he could not do better than accept his friend's offer. For one thing, he would be on the spot, should anything turn up necessitating his immediate presence; for another, he would be able to communicate with his wife without risk, through the medium of kind-hearted Tom.

Over the parting of husband and wife we need not linger; but it was with a sad heart that Gerald quitted the threshold of the pleasant home where, but such a little time ago, he had looked forward to spending many happy years.

Skirting coppice and hedgerow, and keeping as much as possible in the black shade of the tree; he sped swiftly on his way. The distance from the Towers to the Court was about three miles as the crow flies; and almost as straight as the crow flies went Gerald, taking hedge and ditch and stone wall on his way, and allowing no obstacle to turn him from his course. Once, as he was on the point of emerging from a coppice of nut-trees, he came upon two keepers, armed with guns, who were crossing a meadow not many yards away, evidently on the lookout for poachers. He shrank back on his footsteps as silent as a shadow, and waited for fully ten minutes before he ventured to proceed. Again, at a point where it was necessary for him to cross the high-road, he had a narrow escape from coming face to face with a mounted constable who was riding leisurely along on his solitary round. He had just time to sink back

into the hedge-bottom and lie there as motionless as a log till the danger was past.

Mr. Tom Starkie had described the position of his rooms to Gerald, so that the latter had no difficulty in making his way to them. He was to be guided by a lighted window the blind of which showed a transverse bar of a darker shade. As soon as he found this window, Gerald gave utterance to a low whistle. The light was at once withdrawn, as a token that his signal had been heard; and two minutes later he found himself safely in his friend's rooms.

So far all had gone well; but only the preliminary step had been taken as yet. Not a soul in Penrhyn Court but Tom himself must know or even suspect the presence there of Gerald Brooke. But Tom had thought of all this when he first urged his friend to come to the Court, and had in his mind's eye a certain safe hiding-place, known to him and his father alone, where Gerald could lie by and await the course of events. The hiding-place in question was known as "The Priest's Hole," and was an integral part of the oldest portion of the house. A sliding panel in the library, held in its place by a concealed spring, gave admission to a narrow passage built in the thickness of one of the outer walls, down from which access was obtained, by means of a steep flight of steps, to two small chambers hollowed out of the very foundations of the house. These rooms were shut out from all daylight, the walls were unplastered, and the floors of hard dry earth. In the larger of the two was a small fireplace, but without any grate in it, the chimney of which opened into one of the main stacks of the Court. In one corner was a tressel bedstead of black worm-eaten oak, which would seem to indicate that the place had not been without an occasional occupant in days gone by.

The first two hours after Gerald's arrival were spent by Tom in victualling and furnishing this place of refuge. Having encased his feet in a pair of list slippers, his first visit was to the larder, where he requisitioned bread, cheese, butter, tea, coffee, sardines, and sundry other comestibles, greatly to the perplexity of the worthy cook when she came to look over her stores next morning. His next raid had for its objects candles, matches, and crockery. Then came a folding-chair and a spirit-lamp from his own rooms; and so on till he possessed himself of as many articles as he required. Tom took immense delight in these stealthy raids during the small-hours of the

morning; and more than once he was compelled to come to a stand with his arms full of things and indulge in a silent laugh, which shook him from head to foot, when he thought of worthy Sir John asleep, and of what his feelings would have been could he have seen how his first-born was just then occupied.

The June sun was high above the horizon before Tom's preparations were completed. It was time for Gerald to vanish like a ghost at cockcrow. The two friends shook hands and parted for a little while; but when Gerald heard the click of the sliding panel as it was pushed back into its place, and when he had shut the door at the bottom of the stairs and had glanced once again round the dismal dungeon that was to be his home for he knew not how long a time to come, he felt as if he were buried alive and should never see daylight again. His heart sank lower, if that were possible, than it had sunk before, and for a few moments he felt as if his fortitude must give way. But this mood was not of long duration; he buoyed himself up with the thought that another day was already here, and that in a few hours more his innocence would doubtless be proved. Presently he lay down on his pallet, utterly worn out in body and mind, and five minutes later was fast asleep.

Of Gerald Brooke's life during the next few weeks it is not needful to speak in detail; indeed, each day that came was so much a repetition of the one that had gone before it, that there would be but little to record. Tom rarely ventured to visit his friend till after his father and the rest of the household had retired for the night. It was a joyful sound to Gerald when he heard the click of the panel and knew that for two or three hours to come he should be a free man. Then through the silent shut-up house the two men would steal like burglars to Tom's room. Once there, they felt safe; for the rest of the family and the servants slept in different wings of the rambling old house. On nights when there was no moon, or when it was overcast, the two friends paced a certain pleached alley of the lower garden for an hour at a time; it was the only exercise Gerald was able to obtain. After that they sat and smoked and talked in Tom's room till the clock struck three, which was the signal for Gerald's return to his dungeon. Twice each week Mr. Starkie rode over to the Towers, acting the part of postman between husband and wife, in addition to that of general purveyor of news.

So day after day passed without bringing the murderer of Von Rosenberg to light or tending in anyway to weaken the force of the circumstantial evidence accumulated against Gerald. It seemed, indeed, as if the police had made up their minds that Mr. Brooke, and he alone, must be the guilty man, directing all their efforts towards his capture, and listening with incredulous ears to such persons as suggested that, after all, it was just possible he might not be the individual they wanted.

"If he isn't guilty, why don't he show up? Why has he gone and hid himself where nobody can find him?" was Mr. Drumley's invariable rejoinder, when any such suggestions happened to be ventilated in his presence. Such questions were difficult to answer.

Many a time during those weeks of slow torture, as he sat brooding in his underground chamber by the dismal light of a couple of candles, did Gerald wish with all his heart that he had not yielded to his wife's entreaties, but had stayed, and braved the thing out to the bitter end.

Clara, meanwhile, was doing all that it was possible for a woman, circumstanced as she was, to do. When a week had passed and nothing tending to prove her husband's innocence had been brought to light, she did that which Mr. George Crofton proposed doing, that is to say, she engaged the services of an experienced private detective. The man came, listened respectfully to all she had to say, and promised that his best endeavours should be at her service; but after his visit, day succeeded day without bringing any ray of comfort to the young wife's aching heart. Could it be possible, she sometimes asked herself, a little later on, that this astute individual, while to all appearance falling in with her views, really believed in her husband's guilt as strongly as Mr. Drumley did, and while quite willing to humour her and spend her money, was in his heart impressed with the futility of looking elsewhere for the criminal It was a weary time, full of heartache in the present, and with a future that began to loom more darkly as day followed day in slow and sad procession.

By-and-by there came a certain night when Tom Starkie met his guest with a very long and gloomy visage. His news was quickly told. His father had suddenly made up his mind to start at once for one of the German spas, and insisted upon Tom's accompanying him. "And

if I go, my dear Brooke--and I'm afraid I can't get out of it--what's to become of you?"

"I must flit," answered Gerald with a shrug; "there's no help for it." He almost hailed the prospect as a relief, so unutterably weary was he becoming of the terrible monotony of his present mode of life; but the question of course was, Whither was he to go? At length, after the two men had smoked some half-dozen pipes each, a happy thought came to Gerald. He called to mind that he had another friend on whose secrecy and good faith he could rely, and who, he felt sure, would befriend him in his present strait, if it were in anyway possible for him to do so. The name of the friend in question was Roger Chamfrey.

A few hours later, Tom Starkie set out for London in search of Mr. Chamfrey, whom he fortunately found at his club. The latter had of course read everything that had appeared in the newspapers respecting Von Rosenberg's mysterious death, and Tom found him to be as firm a believer in Gerald's innocence as he himself was.

"I've got the very thing to suit poor Brooke," he said. "The situation of second-keeper is vacant on a certain moor which I rent in a wild and lonely part of Yorkshire and Brooke will be as safe there as he would be in the heart of Africa. I will give him a letter to Timley the head-keeper, who is a very decent sort of fellow, so worded that Brooke shall receive every possible consideration while yet ostensibly filling the part of assistant-keeper. What's more easy than to hint that our friend is a young gentleman of position who has quarrelled with his family, but that in the course of a little time he will come into a large property?" And Mr. Chamfrey laughed.

So the letter in question was written and given to Mr. Starkie, together with many kind messages for Gerald.

Four days later, Gerald reached his new refuge in safety. What means he adopted to escape recognition by the way, and by what circuitous routes he travelled, need not be specified here. It was indeed a wild and desolate tract of country in which he found himself; but in that fact lay his safety. Timley received him kindly; and when he had read and digested his employer's letter, he at once proceeded to turn himself and his wife out of the best bedroom in his cottage, and allotted the same to his new assistant, greatly to the surprise and disgust of his better-half, until he had pacified her by a

few sentences whispered in her ear, after which she became all smiles and graciousness, and seemed as if she could not do enough to make Mr. Davis' comfortable. When they were alone, or when no one was within earshot, Timley invariably addressed Gerald as "Sir."

The free open-air life he now led did much towards improving Gerald's health and spirits. Once a week he wrote to his wife, and once a week he received a long letter in return. His letters to her were addressed under an assumed name to be left till called for at the post-office of a little town some dozen miles from the Towers. From this place they were fetched by Margery, who made the journey by rail, and who at the same time dropped a return letter into the box addressed to "Mr. Davis" the keeper.

So time went on till the 12th of August came round, about which date Timley had notice that in the course of the following week his master would arrive accompanied by a number of friends. At the last minute, however, Mr. Chamfrey was detained by important business, and his friends arrived without him. All was now bustle and excitement, and Gerald found quite enough to do. The first and second days' shooting passed off admirably. The weather was perfect, birds were plentiful, and everybody was in high good-humour. Gerald acted his part to perfection--at least Timley told him so. All fear of recognition by any of the visitors had passed away, and on the third morning after their arrival he caught himself humming an air from *Lucia* while cleaning the barrel of his gun outside the cottage door. Hearing a footstep on the garden path, he turned his head quickly, and found himself confronted by a man who had been in his own service only some eight or nine months previously. The two stood staring at each other for a few moments in silence. It was at once evident to Gerald that, despite the change in his appearance, he was recognised. Before either had spoken a word Timley came out of the cottage. Then the man delivered his message, which was from one of the visitors at the Lodge in whose service he now was. Then, after another stare at Gerald, who still went on cleaning his gun, the man turned and went.

Twelve hours later, Gerald Brooke--clean-shaven except for a small moustache which was dyed black, and with a black wig over his own closely cropped hair--was flying southward in the night express. Mr. Starkie, who had returned from the Continent by this time, and

to whom he had telegraphed under an assumed name, previously agreed on, met him at the London terminus. The conference between the two friends was a long one. It resulted in Gerald coming to the decision that he would take up his abode in London itself, at least for some time to come, as being, all things considered, as safe a hiding-place as any for a man circumstanced as he was. It was, besides, becoming requisite that some decision should be arrived at with regard to matters at the Towers. Clara was still there; but although she had cut down the household expenses to the lowest possible limits, her supply of ready-money was dwindling away; and when that was gone, where was more to come from? With Gerald's disappearance his income had disappeared too. It was an impossibility for him to draw a cheque, or receive a shilling of rent from any of his tenants, while matters with him remained as they were. Then, again, Clara's long separation from her husband, and the many weeks of anxiety she had undergone, were wearing away both her health and her spirits. "Only let let us be together again, darling--that is all I crave," she wrote to her husband. "Two little rooms in some back street will seem like a palace if only you are with me."

Thus it fell out that on a certain afternoon about a week after Gerald's arrival in London, two ladies, both of them closely veiled, who had been hunting for apartments all morning, and were utterly disheartened and tired out by their want of success, stood for a few moments gazing into a pastry-cook's window in Tottenham Court Road. As she did so, the younger lady raised her veil. Next instant she was startled by hearing some one say in French: "O papa, papa, here is the beautiful lady who gave me the cakes and fruit at that grand house in the country!"

Clara dropped her veil and turned. She recognised the little speaker at once, although he no longer wore his mountebank's dress. There, too, was Picot himself, who had come to a stand a few yards away while he lighted a cigarette.

Tired and anxious though she was, Clara would not go without speaking to the boy. "So you have not forgotten me, Henri," she said, "nor the cakes either? Would you not like some more cakes to-day?"

For answer he lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it.

When Mrs. Brooke and Henri came out of the shop they found Miss Primby and M. Picot deep in conversation. The mountebank was dressed quite smartly to-day, and had a flower in his button-hole. As Miss Primby said to her niece afterwards: "Although the poor man may be nothing but a tumbler, he is the essence of gallantry and politeness."

After a few words had passed between Clara and Picot, some impulse--she could never afterwards have told whence it originated--prompted her to say to him: "My aunt and I are in London to-day on rather a peculiar errand. We are here to find apartments for--for some dear friends of ours who a little time ago were rich, but who are now very poor. We have been going about all morning, but cannot succeed in finding what we require. It is just possible, monsieur, that you with your knowledge of London may be able to assist us."

"I am entirely at madame's service," answered Picot as he raised his hat for a moment. "Is it furnished apartments that madame requires?"

"Yes--four or five furnished rooms at a moderate rent, and, if possible, not more than a mile from where we are now."

Picot considered for a moment or two, then he said: "I remind myself of a place that will, I think, suit madame. The landlord is a compatriot of my own; he is honest man; he will not cheat his lodgers. If madame would like to see the apartments"----

"By all means, if you recommend them, monsieur."

"Then I will give madame the address." He tore a leaf out of his pocket-book, pencilled down a couple of lines, and handed the paper to Mrs. Brooke with an elaborate bow. At Clara's request he then hailed a passing cab; then both the ladies, having kissed Henri and shaken hands with Picot, were driven away.

Henri, as he stood gazing after the cab, said to his father: "Are the angels as beautiful as that lady, papa?"

"That is more than I can say, *mon p'tit*," replied the mountebank with a laugh. "When I have seen an angel, I shall be able to tell thee."

CHAPTER X.

In less than a week after her interview with Picot, Mrs. Brooke, her husband, and Miss Primby were settled in their new home. The rooms recommended by the Frenchman had proved more to Clara's liking than any she had seen elsewhere, and she at once engaged them. The furniture and fittings were to a great extent after the cheap and tawdry style so much affected by the inferior class of French lodging-house keepers; but as the whole place was pervaded by an air of cleanliness, such little *désagréments* as existed in other respects Clara was prepared to overlook.

No. 5 Pymm's Buildings was one of a row of half-a-dozen houses similar to itself in size and outward aspect, situated in a quiet court abutting on a main thoroughfare in the busy and populous district of Soho. All the houses in Pymm's Buildings accommodated a more or less numerous tribe of lodgers, the lower floors being generally arranged in suites of rooms for the convenience of families, while the top floors were usually divided into separate sleeping apartments. And it was in this place and amid such sordid surroundings that the whilom owner of Beechley Towers hoped to find for a little time a secure shelter from the hue and cry of the ten thousand hounds of policedom, each and all of whom were doing their utmost to run him to earth. His idea had been to bury himself in the heart of some densely populated district where one man is but as a grain of sand among ten thousand others, and in so far it may be surmised that he had been successful.

When Mrs. Brooke quitted Beechley Towers secretly and by night to join her husband in London, Margery, faithful Margery, was the only one who was made aware of her departure. The girl pleaded so hard to be allowed to accompany her, that at last Clara was fain to make her a promise that she would send for her as soon as she was settled in her new home. Thus it fell out that Margery was now here, and her mistress found the value of her services in a score different ways. For instance, Margery did all the marketing, and did it for little more than half what it had cost before her arrival. Poor simple-minded Clara, who believed everybody to be as honest as herself, had been imposed upon at every turn; but the shopman or

peripatetic vendor who succeeded in "besting" Margery, as she termed it, must have been very wide-awake indeed. The girl would haggle for half an hour over a penny, and her powers of vituperation always rose to the level of the occasion.

What was Mrs. Brooke's surprise about the third day after her arrival at Pymm's Buildings, as she was on her way downstairs, to encounter M. Picot on his way up! Then it came out that the mountebank rented a room at the top of the house which he looked upon as a permanent home, and occupied as such when his avocations did not take him elsewhere. Had Mrs. Brooke been aware of this fact at the time, she might perhaps have hesitated before deciding to take the rooms. And yet, somehow, she had an instinctive feeling of trust in the mountebank--the same sort of trust, although in a lesser degree, that she had in Margery; and after the first tremor of alarm which shot through her when she encountered him on the staircase, she never felt a moment's doubt that her secret, or as much of it as he might know or suspect, was safe in his keeping. It became, of course, necessary to explain to him that it was she and her husband, and not any one else, whose fortunes had changed so woefully. But Picot was one of the most incurious of mortals outside the range of his own affairs. He only remembered Clara as "la belle madame" who had kissed his boy and spoken kindly to him and had laden him with gifts, and about whom Henri often spoke when his father and he were alone. He had never thought of asking any one what her name was; and even now, when he understood from Clara how terribly the circumstances of herself and her husband were changed, he expressed neither curiosity nor surprise in the matter. He was *vraiment désolé*--he was heart-broken to think that such should be the case; but that was all. He did indeed, a little later, ask the landlord the name of his new lodgers; and when he was told that they were known as Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, he repeated the name to himself two or three times over, so as to impress it on his memory, and then went contentedly on his way.

The furnished lodgings rented by Mr. and Mrs. "Stewart" comprised three rooms on the first floor and two on the second. As it chanced, the rooms on the ground-floor were at present untenanted. The sitting-room had two windows and was a tolerably sized apartment In it, about eight o'clock on a certain autumn evening,

were seated Miss Primby and Margery. The former, as usual, was engaged on some kind of delicate embroidery; while the latter was trying her hand at a little plain sewing, the result being that on an average she pricked her finger once every three or four minutes. But, indeed, the girl was somewhat nervous this evening, or what she herself would have termed "in a pucker." She had had the ill-fortune to break a cup while washing up the tea-things.

"O mum, do you think Mrs. Stewart will let me stay when I tell her? She won't turn me away, will she?"

"Why, of course not, Margery. It was an accident; it cannot be helped."

"Oh, thank you for saying that, mum. Sometimes my fingers seem as if they were all thumbs, and I lets everything drop. But I wants no wages, mum, and I ain't a big eater--leastways, I think not; and I'll eat less than ever now, so as to help to pay for the cup. A crust o' bread and drippin', a few cold taters, and the teapot after everybody else has done with it--that'll do me."

"You must not talk like that, Margery; your mistress would not like it."

"Oh, but you don't know how sorry I am, mum. Mariar--her on the boat--always used to say as I was a great awk'ard lout of a girl; and she was about right there."

The two went on with their work for a little while in silence, and then Margery said: "You'll excuse me, mum, for saying so, but I've often wondered why such a nice lady as you never got married."

The spinster could not help bridling a little. "Married! How absurd of you, Margery," she exclaimed. "From what I have seen of married life, I'm sure I am far better off as I am." Then, as if by way of afterthought: "Not but what I have had several most eligible offers at various times."

"Lor! mum, didn't it make you feel all-overish-like when they went flop on their knees and asked you to marry 'em?"

"Gentlemen don't often go on their knees nowadays. Still, I have had them do that to me more than once. I remember that when Mr. Tubbins, the eminent brewer, did so, he was so very stout that he could not get up again without assistance."

"My! I'd have stuck a pin into him; that would have made him jump," cried the girl with her strange laugh.

At this juncture the door opened and Mrs. Brooke came in. She was plainly dressed in black, and was closely veiled. Since Margery's arrival she rarely ventured out of doors till dusk, and then only when she wanted to do a little shopping such as the girl could not do for her. Any one who had not seen her since that April evening when M. Karovsky's ill-omened shadow first darkened the terrace at Beechley Towers, might have been excused for failing to recognise her again. It was not merely that she looked older by more years than the months which had elapsed since that day--anguish, anxiety, and the dread which never ceased to haunt her of what the next hour might bring forth, had marked their cruel lines on her features in a way that Time's gentle if inexorable graver never does when left to labour alone. The clear dancing light had died out of her eyes long ago; they looked larger and shone with a deeper and more intense lustre than in the days gone by; but a sudden knock at the door, an unusual footfall on the stairs, or the voices of strange men talking in the court below, would fill them on a sudden with a sort of startled terror, just as the eyes of a deer may fill when first it hears the baying of the far-away hounds.

She took off her bonnet with an air of weariness and sat down. "Has not Gerald returned yet?" she said to her aunt "What can have become of him?"

"The evening is so fine that he has probably gone for a longer walk than ordinary."

"It makes me wretched when he stays out longer than usual. And yet, poor fellow! what a life is his. To be shut up in one miserable room from morning till night; never to venture out till after dark, and then only with the haunting dread, that he may be recognised and arrested at any moment! How will it all end?" She sighed and went into the other room. Presently she returned, and a few moments later a knock at the door made every one start. Margery hastened to open it. Outside stood Picot carrying a bunch of flowers. "Bon soir, madame," he said, addressing himself to Clara with a low bow, and then favouring Miss Primby with another.

"Bon soir, Monsieur Picot. Entrez, s'il vous plait."

"Merci, madame," lie answered as he advanced into the room. "I have here a petit bouquet--a few flowers--which Henri has sent for madame, if she will have the bonté to accept them."

"I shall be charmed to do so," answered Clara as she took the flowers. "How fresh and sweet they smell! I am much obliged to Henri, and to you also, monsieur."--The mountebank made another low sweeping bow.--"I hope that Henri is quite well?"

"Parfaitement bien, madame."

"The first time he has a holiday, he must come and take tea with me; I will not forget to have a nice cake for the occasion."

"He will be enchanté, madame.--Ah! if madame could see him on the trapeze--could but see him jumpez from one bar to another--it is splendid, magnifique!"

"I think I would rather not see Henri go through any of his performances, monsieur."

"Mais, madame!" with an expressive shrug; "there is no danger, nothings to be afraid of. Oh, the grand artiste that Henri will be one day! He is twice so clevare as I was at his age. He will be what you call in England great man--big fellow."

"I am very glad to hear it. Meanwhile, you will not forget that he is to come some afternoon and take tea with me."

"Ah, madame, he talk about you every day.--But I go now. I hope that monsieur your husband finds himself quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you, monsieur."

With that the mountebank made his adieus and bowed himself out.

It here becomes needful to explain that just then Henri was engaged at a certain hippodrome as one of a troupe of juvenile acrobats who, under the pseudonym of "les frères Donati," and under the tuition of a celebrated "Professor," were performing a number of well-nigh incredible feats before crowded and enthusiastic houses.

"Ain't he polite!" said Margery as Picot closed the door. "But what a pity the poor man talks such a lot of gibberish."

"What can have become of Gerald?" said Clara for the second time, as she went to the window and drawing aside the curtain

peered into the darkness. "I never knew him to be so late before. I cannot help feeling dreadfully uneasy." Then turning to Margery, she said: "Here is a list of things I want you to fetch from the grocer's in Medwin Street. Do you think you can find your way in the dark?"

"Why, of course, mum. I never gets lost, I don't." Half a minute later she ran downstairs, whistling as she went.

The minutes dragged themselves slowly away, and Clara was working herself into a fever of apprehension, when a well-known footfall on the stairs caused a cry of gladness to burst from her lips. "At last!" she exclaimed as she started to her feet and hurried to the door. "How glad I am that you are safely back," she added, as her husband entered the room. "You were away so long that I grew quite frightened."

"The evening was so pleasant, that I extended my walk farther than I intended. I must be a caged bird now for the next four-and-twenty hours. Heigh-ho!"

"Will you not have something to eat?"

"Thanks; nothing at present," he answered as he proceeded to lay aside his slouched hat, his overcoat, and the muffler which had shrouded the lower part of his face. Then he took up a book and sat down in an easy-chair near the fire.

His wife's eyes brimmed with tears as they rested on him. "My poor boy!" she said softly to herself. "This life is killing him. When, oh, when will it end!" She sat down to her needlework.

Miss Primby was the first to break the silence. "Do you know, my dear," she said to her niece, "that Monsieur Picot puts me greatly in mind of the Count de Bonnechose, a French nobleman who once made me an offer of marriage. He used to speak just the same delightful broken English--and then he had such great black eyes, which seemed to pierce right through you, and the loveliest waxed moustaches; so that when he clasped his hands and turned up his eyes till nothing but the whites of them were visible, and murmured 'Mon ange,' and called me his 'beautiful Engleesh mees,' can you wonder that my heart used to thrill responsively?"

Clara could not repress a smile. "I am by no means sure that I should have cared to call that count my uncle."

"It was a mercy that I sent him about his business. He turned out to be no nobleman at all, but only a hairdresser's assistant whose father had left him a little money. But certainly he had remarkably fine eyes."

Again there was a brief space of silence. This time it was broken by a knock which sounded all the more startling because no one had heard the faintest sound of footsteps on the stairs. All three started to their feet and looked at each other. Then, at a sign from Clara, Miss Primby crossed to the door and opened it.

Framed by the doorway and shone upon by the lamplight from within, they beheld the black-clothed figure, the statuesque, colourless face and the inscrutable eyes of M. Karovsky.

"Karovsky--you!" cried Gerald as he sprang forward.

"Yes, I--why not?" said the Russian with a smile, as he raised his hat and came forward.--"Ladies, your servant." Then to Gerald: "You stare at me, mon ami, as if I had just come back from Hades. But this is scarcely the hand of a *revenant*, if I may be allowed an opinion in the matter."

"It seems incredible that you should have found me out in this place," answered Gerald as the two shook hands.

"Incredible? Peuh! I had need to see you; and I am here."

"Will you not be seated?"

As Karovsky drew up a chair, Clara made a sign to her aunt, and the two ladies passed out through the folding-doors into the room beyond.

"Pardon," said the Russian as he glanced around, "but this place seems scarcely a fit home either for madame or yourself."

"You know that I am in hiding; you doubtless also know that a large reward is offered for my capture?"--The other nodded.--"While such is the case, it is impossible for me to touch a penny of my income. My wife's aunt has lost her property by a bank failure. We are very poor, Karovsky; but there are worse ills in life than poverty."

"Part of my errand to-night is to tell you that I have instructions to place certain funds at your disposal. You can leave this place tomorrow, if it please you so to do."

"Thanks, Karovsky; but I cannot accept a penny of the money you offer me."

"How! Not accept! But this is folly."

"It may seem so to you; but that does not alter the matter."

"It is unaccountable," said the Russian with a lifting of his black eyebrows. "But why remain in these wretched apartments? Why not go abroad--on the Continent--to America--anywhere? The world is wide, and there are places where you would be far safer than here."

"I doubt it One reason why I am here is because I believe this spot--in the heart of one of the most populous quarters of London--to be as safe a hiding-place as any I could find. My other reason is that were I to go abroad, I feel as if I should be throwing away my last faint hope of ever being able to prove my innocence to the world."

Karovsky stared at him in wide-eyed amazement. "How! Your"----

"My innocence of the murder of Baron von Rosenberg."

"Pardon; I fail to comprehend."

"When we parted last, I told you clearly and emphatically that, let the consequences to myself be whatever they might, mine should not be the hand to strike the fatal blow; but when you left me, you evidently did so in the belief that in a little while I should change my mind, and that of the two alternatives you had placed before me, I should choose the one which you yourself would in all probability have chosen had you been in my place. Time went on, and, within the period you had prescribed, Von Rosenberg was found dead, shot through the heart. Such being the case, it was perhaps a not unnatural conclusion for you to arrive at that it was I, Gerald Brooke, who was the assassin.--But I ask you, Karovsky, to believe in the truth of what I am now going to tell you. I had no more to do with the death of Von Rosenberg than you yourself had."

"Est-il possible!" exclaimed the Russian in a voice scarcely raised above a whisper. For a few moments he sat staring silently at Gerald; then he went on: "Not often am I astonished at anything I hear; but you, Gerald Brooke, have astonished me to-night The evidence against you seemed so conclusive, that I never doubted Von Rosenberg fell by your hand. Yet more than once I said to myself:'What an imbecile Brook must have been to leave behind him such a condemnatory piece of evidence as the weapon with which he

did the deed!'--But who, then, was the individual who so kindly spared you a necessity so painful?"

"That I know no more than you do."

"C'est un vrai mystère."

"From day to day I live in hope that the real criminal will be discovered and brought to justice; but with each day that passes that hope grows fainter within me."

"I know not what to say.--When I remember the past, and when I look round and think that this is now the home of you and madame"----He spread out his hands with a gesture more expressive than words.

Before more could be said, there came a peculiar knock at the door--three taps in quick succession, followed by a fourth after a longer interval. At the sound, Clara and Miss Primby emerged from the other room.

"That summons is intended for me," said Karovsky quickly as he rose and opened the door.

Then those inside saw that a man, a stranger, was standing on the landing, who seemed to retire further into the shade the moment the light fell on him. He said something rapidly in a low voice to Karovsky, to which the latter replied in the same language. Then the Russian gave a nod as of dismissal, and closing the door, turned and confronted Gerald with a grave face and distended eyes. "That man is one of *us*," he said. "When I entered the house, I left him on watch outside. He now comes to tell me that a policeman in plain clothes is on guard outside the court, and that another is stationed inside, so that no one can pass in or out without being observed. He also tells me that there are two more constables in uniform patrolling the street close by; and that from what he can gather, they are waiting the arrival of some one, probably a superior officer. Is it possible, Brooke, that you can be the quarry on which they intend presently to swoop?"

"There can be little doubt of it," answered Gerald, who had risen to his feet while Karovsky was speaking. He had turned very pale; but his lips were firm-set, and the expression which shone out of his eyes was something far removed from craven fear.

Clara stood with one hand resting on the table, her frame trembling slightly. Was the blow she had dreaded so long about to fall at last?

Miss Primby sat down with a gasp.

"Well, let them come," went on Gerald after a moment's pause. "It will be better so. I am tired of this life of hide-and-seek. Why not end it here and now?"

"No, no!" cried his wife. "Even at this, the eleventh hour, there must surely be some way of escape."

"Even if I were eager to escape, which I am not, I know of none."

"Madame is right," said the Russian in his impressive tones. "There is still one way of escape."

"And that is?"----said Gerald interrogatively.

But before Karovsky could reply, Margery, breathless and dishevelled, burst into the room. "O Muster Geril!--O mum," she exclaimed, "the polis is in the court--four or five of 'em, and I believe they're coming here. But I shut and bolted the door at the bottom of the stairs; and it'll take 'em some time to break that down," added the girl with a chuckle.

Picot, who was on his way downstairs as Margery rushed up, had overheard her words, and he could now be seen dimly outlined on the landing, his eyes piercing the obscurity like two points of flame; but for the moment no one observed him.

CHAPTER XI.

No one spoke for a moment or two after Margery had blurted out her news. Then for the second time Karovsky said: "There is still one way of escape open to you."

And that is?"----said Gerald again.

"For me to personate you."

"O monsieur!" cried Clara, a flash of hope leaping suddenly into her eyes.

"Karovsky, are you mad?"

"Pardon; I think not; but one can never be quite sure. Listen! These men who are coming to arrest you are strangers to you, or rather, you are a stranger to them; they have never set eyes on you before. I will answer to your name; I will go with them; and before they have time to discover their mistake, you will be far away."

"And the consequences to yourself?"

"A few hours' detention--nothing more. Your English police know me not." Then he added with a shrug: "At St. Petersburg or Berlin, ma foi, it might be somewhat different."

"Karovsky, your offer is a noble one, and the risk to yourself might be greater than you seem to think. In any case, I cannot accept it."

"Gerald, for my sake!" implored his wife.

"As I said before, I am tired of this life of perpetual hide-and-seek. Let it end; I am ready to face the worst."

"No, no! Would you court a felon's doom, you whose innocence will one day be proved to the world?"

"Vous avez raison, madame," said the Russian. Then placing his hands on Gerald's shoulders, he said: "Go, Brooke, my friend; hide yourself elsewhere for a little time, and leave me to face these bloodhounds."

Picot, who had been listening and watching in the background, now came boldly forward. It was enough for the kind-hearted mountebank to know that his friends were in trouble. "I have une petite chambre en haut," he said to Gerald. "Come with me, monsieur, and I will hide you."

"Yes, yes; go, dearest, with Monsieur Picot," urged his wife, her beautiful eyes charged with anguished entreaty.

"For your sake, let it be as you wish," answered Gerald sadly.

At this juncture there came a loud knocking at some door below stairs.

"Venez, monsieur--vite, vite!" said Picot.

Gerald hastily kissed his wife, gripped the Russian's hand for a moment, and then followed the mountebank.

"It will not be wise to keep our friends waiting," said Karovsky. Then turning to Miss Primby: "Madame, will you oblige me by taking charge of these trifles for a little while?" With that he handed her a card-case, a pocket-book stuffed with papers, and a bunch of keys.

"They will be mighty clever if they get them out of here," muttered Miss Primby as the articles disappeared in the capacious depths of some hidden pocket.

The knocking was repeated in louder and more imperative terms than before.

"Let the door be opened," said Karovsky to Margery; then he addressed a few words hurriedly in a low tone to Mrs. Brooke.

The door at the foot of the stairs, which Margery in her alarm had taken the precaution to fasten, had apparently been originally put there with the view of more effectually separating the upper part of the house from the lower, probably at a time when the domicile was divided between two families. This door Margery now unbolted without a word; and without a word, after flashing a bull's-eye in her face, a sergeant of police and two men pushed past her and tramped heavily upstairs.

"Mr. Gerald Brooke, commonly known by the name of Stewart?" said the sergeant interrogatively as he advanced into the room, while his two men took up positions close to the door.

The Russian turned--he had been in the act of lighting a cigarette at the fireplace. "Who are you, sir, and by what right do you intrude into this apartment?" he demanded haughtily.

The sergeant went a step or two nearer and laying a hand on his shoulder, said: "Gerald Brook; you are charged on a warrant with the wilful murder of the Baron Otto von Rosenberg on the 28th of June

last at Beaulieu, near King's Harold, and you will have to consider yourself as my prisoner."

The Russian dropped his cigarette. "There is some strange mistake," he said. "I never either saw or spoke to the Baron von Rosenberg on the 28th of last June."

"All right, sir; you can explain about that somewhere else; but I should advise you to say as little as possible just now."

One of the men had advanced into the room, and now drew the officer's attention. "I say, sergeant," he whispered, "the gent don't seem to answer much to the printed description, does he?"

"Idiot!" whispered back the other; "as if a man couldn't dye his hair and make his beard and moustache grow any shape he liked! Besides, we knew beforehand that he was disguised, and this is the room where we were told we should find him."

When the sergeant turned again, Clara was standing before Karovsky with a hand resting on each of his shoulders.

"You see," whispered the sergeant to his subordinate. "We were told his wife was living here with him, as well as an elderly lady--the aunt. He's the gent we want, and no mistake."

"I shall only be away for a little while, cara mia," said Karovsky, as he drew Clara to him. For a moment her head rested against his shoulder, then his lips lightly touched her forehead.

She turned from him, and sinking on a couch, buried her face in her hands.

Karovsky drew himself up to his full height "Now, sir, I am at your service," he said to the sergeant.

A moment later, and the three women were left alone.

"They be clever uns, they be!" said Margery with a chuckle as the sound of the retreating footsteps died away.

"How noble, how magnanimous of Monsieur Karovsky!" exclaimed Miss Primby. "I shall never think ill of the Russians again."

"Now is the opportunity for Gerald to get away," said Clara. "The police may discover their mistake at any moment." Her hand was on the door, when suddenly there was a sound which caused all three to start and stare at each other with eyes full of terror. It was the sound

of unfamiliar footsteps ascending the stairs. Mrs. Brooke shrank back as the door opened and George Crofton entered the room. "You!" she gasped.

"Even so," he answered as he glanced round the room. "It is long since we met last."

"Not since the day you crushed my husband's portrait under your heel."

"As I have now crushed your husband himself."

"What do you mean?"

"Clara Brook; the hour of my revenge has struck. You slighted me once, but now my turn has come. It was through my efforts that your husband was tracked to this place. It was I who gave information to the police. Never could there be a sweeter revenge than mine."

"Can such wickedness exist unsmitten by Heaven!"

After that first glance round, he had never taken his eyes from Clara's blanched face. He spoke with a venomous intensity which lent to every word an added sting.

"Don't I just wish I was a man, instead of a great hulking good-for-nothing girl!" muttered Margery, half to Miss Primby and half to herself, as she defiantly rolled up the sleeves of her cotton gown.

For a little space, the two stood gazing at each other in silence.

Clam's heart beat painfully, but her eyes blazed into his full of scorn and defiance. Then she said: "George Crofton, believe me or not, but my husband is as innocent of the crime laid to his charge as I am. It is not he who is a murderer, but you who are one after this night's work--in heart if not in deed."

A sneering laugh broke from his lips. "I was quite prepared to hear that rigmarole," he said. "It was only to be expected that you should swear to his innocence. It is possible you may believe in it--wives will believe anything."

But Clara's ears, of late ever on the alert, had heard a certain sound. With a low cry she sprang to the door; but before she could reach it, it was opened from without, and Gerald, accompanied by Picot, appeared on the threshold.

Crofton fell back as if he had seen a face from the tomb. "By what fiend's trick have I been fooled?" he cried.

"There stands the villain who betrayed you," exclaimed the young wife, pointing to Crofton with outstretched finger.

"He! My cousin! Impossible."

"It may not be too late yet," exclaimed Crofton as he sprang to one of the windows and tore aside the curtain. But next instant, with a bound like that of a tiger, Picot had flung himself on him and had gripped his neck as in a vice with both his sinewy hands. The other was no match in point of strength for the mountebank; and before he knew what had happened he found himself on his back on the floor, half-choked, with Picot kneeling on his chest and regarding him with a sardonic grin.

Clara, with a natural impulse, had clung to her husband's arm. Miss Primby and Margery were too startled to utter a word.

Picot's hand went to some inner pocket and drew from it a small revolver; then rising to his feet, he said to Crofton: "Oblige me by standing up, monsieur, and by taking a seat in that chair, or in one leetle minute you are a dead man."

Crofton, with a snarl like that of some half-cowed wild animal, did as he was bidden.

Gerald stepped quickly forward and laid a hand on Picot's arm. "What would you do?" he asked.

"Shoot him like the dog he is, if he move but one finger. If he move not--tie him up--gag him--and leave him here till you, monsieur, have time to get away."

Then addressing himself to Margery, but without taking his eyes for an instant off Crofton, he said: "My good Margot, in my room upstairs you will find one piece of rope. Bring him here. Dépêchez-vous--quick."

Margery needed no second bidding.

Then the mountebank said to Gerald: "You must not stop here any longer, monsieur; the police may come back at any moment."

"Yes--come, come," urged Clara. "Another minute, and it may be too late."

"George, I did not deserve this at your hands," said Gerald with grave sadness to his cousin. The only answer was a scowl and an execration muttered between his teeth.

Gerald, his wife, and Miss Primby retired into the farther room and closed the folding-doors. Margery was back by this time, carrying a small coil of rope.

"Good child.--Now hold this--so," said Picot, as he placed the revolver in Margery's hand and stationed her about a couple of yards from Crofton. "If you see that man stir from his chair, press your finger against this leetle thing, and--pouf--he will never stir again. Hold him steady--so. You have no fear--hein?"

"Why, o' course not," laughed Margery. "It would do me good to shoot the likes o' him."

With a dexterity that seemed as if it might have been derived from long practice, Picot now proceeded to bind Crofton securely in his chair.

"You scoundrel! you shall suffer for this," muttered the latter between his teeth.

"A la bonne heure, monsieur," responded the mountebank airily. Then perceiving a corner of a handkerchief protruding from his pocket, he drew it forth, and tearing a narrow strip off it, he proceeded to firmly bind the other's wrists; then making a bandage of the remainder, he covered his mouth with it and tied it in a double knot at the back of his neck. "Ah, ha! that do the trick," he laughed. "How found you yourself? Very comfortable--hein?"

Margery, who had watched the operation with great glee gave back the revolver and retired to the inner room. Picot sat down a little way from his prisoner, but for the present took no further notice of him. He had heard a footstep on the stairs a minute or two previously, and rightly judged that Gerald was already gone.

From the first day of taking up their abode at No. 5 Pymm's Buildings, Clara and her husband had prepared themselves for an emergency like the present one. They were always ready for immediate flight, and had arranged the means for communication in case of an enforced separation.

At the end of a few minutes Margery returned, carrying a folded paper, which she gave to Picot, at the same time whispering a few

hurried words in his ear. The mountebank nodded and smiled and kissed the tips of his fingers. Then the girl went back, and the two men were left alone. But presently both of them heard the footsteps of more persons than one descending the stairs. Picot listened intently till the sound had died away, and then proceeded to light a cigarette. Of Crofton, sitting there, bound and gagged, he took not the slightest apparent notice.

A quarter of an hour passed thus, and with the exception of a footfall now and then in the court below no sound broke the silence. At the end of that time, Picot's cigarette being finished, he rose, pushed back his chair, clapped his hat on his head, and after a last examination of his prisoner's bonds, he marched out of the room without a word, and so downstairs and out of the house, first shutting behind him the door which divided the upper rooms from the ground floor.

Left alone, George Crofton began at once to struggle desperately to free himself, but all to no purpose. After a little time, however, he discovered that the chair in which he was bound moved on casters, and this discovery put an idea into his head such as would not have entered it under other circumstances. The room was lighted by a lamp on a low table, and to this table he managed by degrees to slide his chair along the floor. Then setting his teeth hard, and stretching his arms to the fullest extent his bonds would allow of his doing, he held his wrists over the flame of the lamp, and kept them there unflinchingly till the outermost coil of the ligature which bound them was burnt through. When once his hands were at liberty, very few minutes sufficed to make him a free man.

"My revenge is yet to come, Gerald Brooke," he said aloud as he paused at the door and took a last glance round. "It is but delayed for a little while, and every day's delay will serve but to make it sweeter at the last."

CHAPTER XII.

We are back once more at Linden Villa. It is a March evening, and the clock has just struck nine. George Crofton is smoking a cigar, and gazing fixedly into the fire, seeing pictures in the glowing embers which are anything but pleasant ones, if one may judge by the lowering expression of his face. He looks haggard and careworn, and is no longer so fastidious with regard to his personal appearance as he used to be. Dissipation has set its unmistakable seal upon him; he has the air of a man who is going slowly but surely downhill.

His wife is amusing herself somewhat listlessly at the piano. There is a slightly worn look about her eyes, and the line of her lips looks thinner and more hard set than it was wont to do. Married life had not brought Stephanie the happiness, or even the content, she had looked forward to. The awakening had come soon, and had not been a pleasant one. Not long had it taken her to discover that she had mated herself with an inveterate gambler, if not with something worse. So long as plump young pigeons were to be had for the plucking, matters had gone on swimmingly at Linden Villa. There had been no lack of money, and Stephanie had never cared to inquire too curiously how it had been come by. But after a time Crofton's wonderful luck at cards began to be commented upon; people began to be shy of playing at the same table with him; pigeons were warned to avoid him; and when, one unfortunate evening, he was detected cheating at the club, and unmasked by a member cleverer in that particular line than himself, his career in that sphere of life came to an end for ever. But his ambition had not been satisfied with the comparatively small gains of the card-table; he had bet heavily on the St. Leger and other races, and had been unfortunate in all. So far he had been able to meet his racing liabilities, but the doing so had exhausted the whole of his available resources, and matters at Linden Villa had now come to a pass that might almost be termed desperate.

Stephanie brought her roulades to an end with a grand crash; then turning half round she said in her clear metallic tones: "Have you anything to talk about, mon ange? Have you nothing to say to me?" Her husband's back was towards her as he sat brooding sullenly in

front of the fire. "It is not often that you stay at home of an evening, and when you do--chut! I might as well be alone."

He shrugged his shoulders. What would you have me talk about? Our debts--our difficulties--our"----

"Why not?" she broke in quickly. "If you talked about them a little oftener, it might be all the better. You seem neither to know nor care anything about them. You are out from morning till night. It is I who have to promise, to cajole, to lie, first to one person and then to another who come here demanding money when I have none to give them. Oh, it is a charming life--mine! N'importe. It will end itself in a little while."

"What do you mean? What new trick are you hatching now?" he demanded.

"It is nothing new--it has been in my head for a long time. Shall I tell you what it is? Why not?" The fingers of one hand were still resting on the piano. She struck a note or two carelessly, and then went on speaking as quietly as though she were mentioning some trifling detail of everyday life. "One evening, cheri, when you come home you will not find me; I shall be gone. This life suits me no longer. I will change it all. I will go back to the life I used to love so well. I have had a letter. Signor Ventelli is at Brussels; he prays to me to return to him. I shall go. You and I my friend, can no longer live together. It will be better for both that we should part." Again her fingers struck a note or two carelessly.

Crofton was roused at last. He started to his feet with an imprecation and faced his wife. "What confounded stuff and nonsense you are talking, Steph," he exclaimed. "As if I believed a word of it!"

"Do I ever say that I will do a thing when I do not intend doing it?" she quietly asked.--In his own mind he was obliged to confess that she did not.--"We have made a mistake, you and I, and have found it out in time," she resumed. "We can be friends, always friends--why not! But you will go your way, and I mine; that is all."

The cold indifference of her tone and manner stung him to the quick. Evidently she was minded to cast him off as carelessly as she would an old glove. The sullen fire in his heart blazed up in a moment. He loved this woman after a fashion of his own, and was in

nowise inclined to let her go. "What you say is utter nonsense. I would have you remember that you are my wife, and that I can claim you as such anywhere and everywhere."

"And do you imagine that if I were twenty times a wife I should allow you or any other man to claim me as such against my will!" demanded Steph with a contemptuous laugh. "Tza! tza! my friend, you talk like a child."

They were standing face to face, and for a few moments they stared at each other without speaking; but the clear resolute light that shone out of Steph's eyes cowed, for a time at least, the fitful, dangerous gleam flickering redly in her husband's bloodshot orbs, as though it were a reflection from some Tophet below.

George Crofton turned away, and crossing to the sideboard, poured himself out a quantity of brandy. "You would be a fool, Steph, to leave me as you talk of doing, were it only for one thing," he said dryly. He seemed to have quite recovered his equanimity, and was choosing a cigar as he spoke.

"If it pleases me to be a fool, why not?"

"Has it never occurred to you that any morning the newspapers may tell us that my cousin, Gerald Brooke, has been captured? Every day, that is the first news I look for."

"Ah, bah! you mock yourself. Your cousin will never be arrested now; he has got safe away to some foreign country long ago."

"You have no ground for saying that. Any hour may bring the tidings of his capture, and then---- But you know already what the result of his conviction would be to you and me. Beechley Towers and six thousand a year--nothing less."

"You deceive yourself," resumed Steph. "You are waiting for what will never happen. Nine months have passed since the murder, and the crime is half forgotten. You let Gerald Brooke slip through your fingers once; but you will never have the chance of doing so again.--Let us come back to realities, to the things we can touch. Dreams never had any charms for me."

He went back to the fireplace with his cigar, and took up a position on the hearthrug. "As you say--let us stick to realities; it may perhaps be the wisest," he went on. "What, then, would you think, what

would you say, if I were to tell you as a fact that in less than six weeks from to-day I shall be in possession of ten thousand pounds?"

"I should both think and say that it was not a fact, but a dream, a--what do you call it?--a Will-o'-the-wisp."

"And yet it is not a dream, but a sober solid fact, as a very short time will prove."

She raised her eyebrows; evidently, she was incredulous. "Yon made sure that you would win two thousand pounds at Doncaster, whereas you contrived to lose five hundred. You were just as certain that you would win"----

"What I am referring to now has nothing to do with horseracing," he broke in impatiently.--"Listen!" he added; and with that he planted himself astride a chair and confronted her, resting his arms on the back of it and puffing occasionally at his cigar as he talked. "I am about to tell you something which it was my intention not to have spoken about till later on; but it matters little whether you are told now or a month hence." He moved his chair nearer to her, and when he next spoke it was in a lower voice: "The young Earl of Leamington, who is enormously rich, is to be married on the 27th of next month. On the 14th of April one of the partners in a certain well-known firm of London jewellers, accompanied by an assistant, will start for the Earl's seat in the north carrying with him jewelry of the value of over twenty thousand pounds, for the purpose of enabling his lordship to select certain presents for his bride. That box of jewelry will never reach its destination."

Stephanie was staring at him with wide-open eyes. "You would not"----she exclaimed, and then she paused.

"Yes, I would, and will," he answered with a sinister smile. "I and certain friends of mine have planned to make that box our own. The whole scheme is cut and dried; all the arrangements in connection with the journey are known to us; and so carefully have our plans been worked out, that it is next to impossible that we should fail."

"And you, George Crofton, my husband, have sunk to this--that you would become a common robber, a thief, a voleur!"

His face darkened ominously, and the gash in his lip looked as large again as it usually did. "What would you have?" he asked with a

snarl. "My cursed ill-luck has driven me to it. I cannot starve, neither will I."

For a little while neither spoke.

"I didn't think you would take my news like this, Steph," he said presently. "Think of the prize! How is it possible for a man fixed as I am to resist trying to make it his own? One half comes to me because the plan is mine, but of course I can't work without confederates. My share will be worth ten thousand at the very least; and then, hey presto for the New World and a fresh start in life with a clean slate!--What say you, Steph?"

"At present, I say nothing more than I have said already," she answered coldly. "I must have time to think."

CHAPTER XIII.

Cummerhays, in one of the most northerly of the northern counties of England, although it considers itself to be a place of no small importance, has not the good fortune to be situated on any of the great main lines of railway; consequently, to most people it has the air of being somewhat out of the world. Of late years, however, a branch line has found it out, and has thereby enabled it to emerge from the state of semi-torpor in which it seemed destined to languish for ever. The branch line in question, of which Cummerhays is the terminus, is about twenty miles in length, and leaves the main line at Greenholm Station. About halfway between the two places, but about a couple of miles distant from the line itself, are certain important collieries, to meet the requirements of which a secondary branch has been constructed, which turns abruptly from the main branch at a point dignified with the euphonious title of Cinder Pit Junction. Here a signalman's box has been fixed, a wooden erection, standing about six feet above the ground, with an arrangement of levers inside it, for working the points and signals in connection with the traffic to and from the collieries. At the time of which we write two men were stationed at the box in question, who came on duty turn and turn about, in each case a week of day-duty alternating with one of night-duty. The cottage of one of the signalmen was about half a mile from the box, on the road leading to the collieries; while that of his "mate" was about a quarter of a mile down the road in an opposite direction.

Into this second cottage, which stood by itself in a lane a little removed from the high-road, and having no habitation near it, we will venture, Asmodeus-like, to take a peep on a certain April evening. It was already dusk in the valleys, although a soft rosy light still made beautiful the tops of the distant fells.

In half an hour James Maynard, the signalman, would be due at his box to take his "spell" of night-duty. His thick blue overcoat was hanging behind the door ready to put on, his wife was washing up the crockery, and Maynard himself was smoking a last after-tea pipe before leaving home. He was a well-built stalwart man, with a jet-black beard and moustache, and close-cut hair of the same

colour, to which his dark-blue eyes offered a somewhat striking contrast. He had been about three months in his present situation, and among the drivers and guards who worked the traffic between the junction and the collieries he had come to be known by the sobriquet of "Gentleman Jim." It was not that he ever set himself up as being in anyway superior to or different from his mates; indeed, he was universally popular; but these grimy-faced men, who in their way are often keen observers of character, had an instinctive feeling that, although necessity might have made him one of them to outward seeming, he was not so in reality, and that at some anterior time his position in life must have been widely different from that which he now occupied. But genial and good-natured though "Gentleman Jim" might be, he was a man who brooked no questioning, and no one thereabouts knew more about him than he chose to divulge of his own accord.

Maynard and his wife had been chatting pleasantly together. Suddenly the latter laid a hand on her husband's arm to bespeak his attention.

"What is it?" he asked. "I heard nothing."

"There was a noise of wheels a moment ago, and now it has ceased. It sounded as if some vehicle had stopped suddenly at the end of the lane. Do you remain in the background, dear, while I go and ascertain whether any one is there."

She opened the door and went out quickly. There was still light enough in the valley to see objects a considerable distance away. One side of the lane in which the cottage was built was bounded by a high bank. Up this Mrs. Maynard now clambered, assisted by the branch of a tree; she knew that from the top of it she could see not only the lane, but a considerable stretch of high-road on either hand. After gazing for a moment or two, she leaped lightly down and ran back to the cottage. "A carriage with two horses is standing at the corner of the lane," she said to her husband. "A lady has got out of it, and is coming towards the cottage, and--oh, my dear--I'm nearly sure it's Lady Fanny Dwyer."

"Lady Fan! Well, I shall be very glad to see her. No doubt she is visiting at Seaton Park; and as she knows we are living in the neighbourhood, she must have made inquiries and discovered our whereabouts."

"I hope she has not made her inquiries in such a way as to arouse any suspicion that we are at all different from what we seem to be?"

"I think you may trust Lady Fan for that. She generally knows pretty well what she is about.--But had you not better go and meet her?"

Clara hurried to the door; but as she opened it, Lady Fan appeared on the threshold. She looked a little white and scared, adventures with a spice of risk or romance in them not being in her usual line. Making a step forward and grasping Clara's hand, she said in a whisper: "Is it safe to speak aloud? Is there any one but yourselves to hear me?"

Reassured on this point, Lady Fan threw herself into her friend's arms and burst into tears, holding out a hand to Gerald as she did so. "I can't talk to either of you till I have had my cry," she said between her sobs. "What a wicked, wicked world this is!"

She grew calmer in a little while, and sat down close to Clara, holding a hand of the latter while she talked.

Here it may be remarked that it was through the influence of Lady Fan's husband that Gerald Brooke had obtained his present situation as signalman at Cinder Pit Junction. The mode of life was of his own choosing. He wanted something to do that would take him out of himself as much as possible, and while not entirely isolating him from his fellow-men, would not bring him into contact with too great a number of them. In this out-of-the-way valley among the fells and moors, if anywhere, shelter and safety might surely be found.

"O my dear, my dear," cried Lady Fan as she dried her eyes and looked round her, "and has it really come to this, that this dreadful poky little hole of a place is your home--the only home that you have!"

"It is not a dreadful little hole by any means, dear Lady Fanny," answered Gerald with a smile. "It, is a substantial well-built cottage of four rooms--quite large enough for a family without encumbrances. You don't know how snug and comfortable we are in it. Economy of space is not half enough considered in a small world like ours."

"I am glad you keep up your spirits," retorted her ladyship; "though how you contrive to do so under such circumstances is a mystery to me."

"We have really and truly been very comfortable since we came here," answered Clara. "I have conceived quite an affection for our little house, and somehow, I hardly know why, I feel as if we were safer here than elsewhere. Probably it is the loneliness of the place that gives one this feeling of security; and then the air that blows down from the moors is so pure and invigorating that both Gerald and I feel as if we were growing young again."

"Oh, of course you try to make the best of everything--it's just your aggravating way," retorted Lady Fan. "But if I were in your place, I should fret and fume and worry, and make myself and everybody about me as miserable as possible. That would be my way."

"I don't believe it," answered Gerald with a laugh. "You don't know how many unsuspected qualities you possess that go towards making a capital poor man's wife."

Lady Fan shrugged her shoulders. "And so you, Gerald Brooke, the owner of Beechley Towers, are living here as a common railway signalman," she said; "finding your companions among a lot of engine-drivers and--shunters, don't they call them?--and grimy people of that kind. What is the world coming to!"

"My companions may be grimy, as you say; but I can assure your ladyship that they are a very hard-working, good-hearted, decently behaved set of fellows, and that among them is more than one of whose friendship any man might be proud. And I can further assure you, Lady Fanny, that I am quite satisfied with my mode of life--for the present and till brighter days return, if they ever will return. And that reminds me that I have had no opportunity of thanking Dwyer for the trouble he must have been put to in procuring me my present situation. Is he here with you?"

"Oh dear, no. His last letter was dated from Cairo; where his next will be dated from, goodness only knows."

"Well, I hope you won't forget to thank him for me when next you write."

"By the way, how did you succeed in finding us out?" asked Clara.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, one of my chief objects in accepting an invitation to Seaton Park was the hope of seeing you and your good-for-nothing signalman. I knew you were living close by, but not exactly where. I also knew that you were passing under the name of Maynard. Accordingly, I set my maid to work to make certain inquiries, telling her a white fib in order to stifle any curiosity she might feel in the matter; in fact, my dear Clara, I gave her to understand that before your marriage you had been in my service, and that I was desirous of ascertaining how you were getting on in life. It was the most likely tale I could think of, and I've no doubt it answered its purpose; anyhow, this morning Simpkins brought me your address, and here I am."

"How it brings back the memory of old times to see you and hear your voice!" said Clara. "It seems years since I left the Towers, although it is only a few short months ago. I am often back there in my dreams."

Lady Fan squeezed her friend's hand in silent sympathy. Then she said: "By-the-by, what has become of darling, quaint Miss Primby? I hope she is quite well?"

"She has gone to stay for a time with some friends in Devon. This place was too bleak for her during the winter months; but now the spring is here, she will be back with us again before long."

"You talk as if you were likely to remain here for ever and a day," answered Lady Fan. "And that reminds me that I have done to-day as our sex are said to do habitually with their postscripts--that is, I have left mentioning till the last the most important of the reasons which brought me here. Algy, in the last letter I had from him, charged me to either see or communicate with you as early as possible, and tell you from him that his banker is at your service for any amount you choose to draw upon him. He has a lot of money lying idle, and would only be too glad if you would favour him by making use of it."

"Dwyer is a noble-hearted fellow, I know, but"----

"But me no buts," broke in her impetuous ladyship. "There is no reason why you should not end this mean and sordid way of life at once. There are plenty of charming nooks on the Continent where you and Clara might live with everything nice about you while

waiting for better days; and really you would be doing Algy a great kindness at the same time."

But this was a point on which Gerald was not to be moved. He combated Lady Fanny in almost the same terms that he had combated Karovsky when the Russian had made him an almost identical offer. He would never leave England, he said--on that he was determined--till the mystery that enshrouded Von Rosenberg's death should be cleared up and his own fair fame vindicated before the world. There was within him a hidden faith that, like an altar flame, sometimes burnt high and anon died down to a mere spark, but was never altogether extinguished, that one day his long waiting would be rewarded.

Lady Fan fumed and lost her temper, and then recovered it again with equal facility, but in nowise shook Gerald from his purpose. The striking of the hour startled them both.

"Eight o'clock and Sir William's horses waiting for me all this time!" exclaimed Lady Fan.

"And I'm a quarter of an hour late," said Gerald to his wife. "Lucas will begin to think something has happened to me."

Lady Fanny's last words to her friend were: "To-day is Tuesday. I'll come again on Thursday, when we will have a good long talk together, by which time I hope that obstinate and wrongheaded husband of yours will have come to his senses."

Gerald Brooke had kissed his wife and had gone off to his duty at the signal-box, leaving her alone in the cottage. But not long would she be left in solitude. Margery, who had gone to Overbarrow, a village about two miles away, to purchase some groceries, would be back in a little while.

But half an hour passed after her husband's departure without bringing Margery, and Clara began to grow seriously uneasy. Never had she been so late before. When the clock struck nine and still the girl had not come, Clara could contain herself no longer. Putting on her bonnet and shawl and locking the door, she hurried down the lane, and turning into the high-road in a direction opposite that which led to the railway, she went quickly forward along the way by which she knew Margery must come. The night was dark and moonless, but the stairs shone clearly, and by their faint light Clara

could just discern the black outlines of the hedge which bounded the road, and thereby keep herself to the line of narrow turf-bordered footway which ran by its side. She had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when her heart gave a throb of relief. She heard footsteps advancing towards her, and her fine ear recognised them as those of Margery, even while the latter was some distance away. "Is that you, Margery?" she called, so that the girl might not be startled by coming suddenly upon her in the dark. A moment later they had met. Margery had been hurrying home at such a rate as to be nearly breathless.

"O mum, he's here! I've seen him, and heard him speak," were the girl's first incoherent words.

"Who is it that you have seen and heard?"

"Muster Crofton, mum--Muster Geril's cousin--him as the Frenchy tied up in his chair."

"George Crofton here!" murmured Clara, her heart seeming to turn to ice as she spoke. "Surely, surely, Margery, you must be mistaken."

"I only wish I was, mistress," responded the girl fervently; "but he only need speak for me to pick him out of a thousand men in the dark. Besides, I saw his face with the cut in his lip and his teeth showing through."

For a little while Clara was so dazed and overcome that she could neither speak nor act. In that first shock her mind had room for one thought and one only: George Crofton was on the track of her husband! No other purpose could have brought him to this out-of-the-world place. Gerald must be warned and at once; but first she must hear all that the girl had to tell. She had turned mechanically, and was now retracing her way to the cottage.

"I suppose Mr. Crofton saw you at the same moment you saw him?" she said anxiously.

"I saw him, but he never set eyes on me."

"How could that happen?"

"I'll tell you all about it, mum. I had got my groceries and had left the village and was coming along pretty fast, 'cos I was a bit late, when just as I was getting near the end of a lane I hears two men coming along it talking to one another. I was not a bit a-feared; but

still I thought I might as well keep out of their sight; so just before they turned out of the lane, I slipped into the dry ditch that runs along the hedge-bottom and crouched down. They passed me without seeing me, still talking, and then I knowed at once that one of 'em was Muster Crofton. 'We are before our time,' says he to the other one; 'we shall have nearly an hour to wait.' Then says the other: 'Better be afore our time than after it.' After going a bit up the road, they crossed it, and passing through a stile, got into the fields, I making bold to skulk after 'em, first taking off my shoes so as they shouldn't hear me. On they went, I following, till they came to a hollow where there's a lot of trees, and in the middle of the trees a little house that seems, as well as I could make out, as if somebody had pulled it half to bits and then left off. When they were well inside, I followed on tiptoe; and then I heard one of 'em strike a match, and then I saw a light through the broken shutter of a little window. Going up to the window, I peeped in. Two lanterns had been lighted, and by the light of one of 'em I could see Muster Crofton's face quite plain. I couldn't make out much of what they talked about, only that they were waiting for somebody, and once the other man said: 'We shall be quite time enough if we leave here by half-past ten.' Then Muster Crofton, he swore, and said that he never could a-bear waiting."

"Did you hear them mention your master's name?" asked Clara anxiously.

"No, mum, not once."

Clara was puzzled. To her wifely fears it seemed impossible that Crofton's presence should not bode danger to her husband. It was almost incredible that he should be there unless he were on the track of Gerald. Yet, on the other hand, what could be the nature of the business which took him at that late hour to a ruined cottage buried among trees? It almost looked as if he were concerned in some dark and nefarious scheme of his own. Suddenly a fresh thought struck her, and as it did so she came to an abrupt halt.

"Margery," she said, "you shall show me the way back to the cottage among the trees. I will go and endeavour to find out for myself what it is that has brought Mr. Crofton so far away from home. Come."

"O mistress!" said Margery with a gasp. It was her only protest: with her to hear was to obey.

CHAPTER XIV.

Varley's Cottage, which place George Crofton and his confederates had fixed upon as their rendezvous, was a spot of ill repute for miles around, and one which no inhabitant of the district would willingly go near by day, much less after dark. A grim tragedy centred round the spot. Some quarter of a century previously the cottage had been the home of a certain gamekeeper, Varley by name, who had made himself specially obnoxious to the poachers of the district. One night he was shot dead on his own threshold and his cottage fired in two places. The crime was never brought home to any one, neither was the cottage ever rebuilt. But of all this neither Clara Brooke nor Margery, being newcomers in the neighbourhood, knew anything.

The elder woman hurried feverishly onward, the younger leading the way. Scarcely a word passed between them. Presently they reached the stile through which Margery had followed the two men, and crossing it, took a winding footway through the fields. They went swiftly and silently, walking not on the path itself but on the soft grass which bordered it. Not a creature did they see or hear, and before long the path began to dip to a hollow, then came some straggling patches of brushwood, and presently they were in the spinney itself, with trees and a thick undergrowth on both sides of them. Margery led the way as by a sort of instinct, only pausing for a second now and again to listen. To Clara, the adventure, with its darkness, its silence, and its mystery, had all the complexion of a nightmare. Again and again she had to ask herself whether it were indeed a reality.

"We are nearly there now, mum," said Margery presently in a whisper. "Do you wait here among the trees, while I creep forward and try and find out what they be about." So saying, the girl stole forward, and was at once lost to view.

The young wife waited with a heart that beat high and anxiously. The moments seemed terribly long till Margery returned, although in reality she was not more than three or four minutes away. Clara trembled so much that she could not speak.

"There's four of 'em now, mum," said the girl. "I could see them quite plain through the crack in the shutter, and from what I could

make out, there's more to come. O mistress, I wouldn't go near 'em if I was you; they're a desperate bad lot, and if they found you there, nobody can tell what might happen."

Of a truth, Clara might well hesitate, and it was only the thought that some new and unforeseen danger might possibly at that very moment be closing like a net round the husband she loved so devotedly that nerved her to the task she had set herself to do. "Margery," she said after a brief silence, "where you can go with safety I can surely go. I must see and listen to these men for myself.--Now, attend to this. Should I be discovered by them, or should anything happen to me, you will fly as for your life and warn your master."

"I understands, mum, never fear," was the girl's earnest response.

Then the two crept together through the trees, almost as silent as the shadows of which they seemed to form a part, and presently Clara found herself under the walls of the ruined cottage. Margery guided her to where a rickety shutter still guarded a small square window, from which, however, the glass had long since disappeared. Through a chink in this, the interior of the room, such as it was, was plainly discernible. Two old-fashioned lanterns threw a dim weird light over the scene. Clara's eyes sought instinctively for the face of Crofton before taking any note of the others; it may be that some faint hope had all along lingered in her breast that Margery had been mistaken. But if that were so, the hope at once died out. George Crofton himself was before her. He was the only one of the party that was seated, and his seat consisted of nothing more than a pile of loose bricks, with part of the stone shelf of the mantel-piece laid across them. He was smoking, as were also two of the others, and seemed deep in thought. The rest of the party were utter strangers to Clara; they talked in low tones among themselves, and, much to her surprise, she saw that one of them was in the garb of a clergyman.

Scarcely had Mrs. Brooke noted these things, when a low whistle sounded from somewhere outside. Crofton sprang to his feet, and all were instantly on the alert. The whistle was answered by another from within, and then one of the men left the cottage carrying a lantern. Clara and Margery sank noiselessly back into the undergrowth of bush and bramble by which the cottage on three sides was surrounded.

When, two or three minutes later, Clara ventured to resume her post of observation at the window, she found that the party inside had been augmented by two fresh arrivals. The men had now grouped themselves round Crofton in various attitudes of attention, listening to the instructions he was evidently impressing upon them. Whatever the objects of this strange company might be, there could be little doubt that George Crofton was the leader of it. One man, who bent forward a little, had made an ear-trumpet of his hand, and it might be for his benefit that Crofton now pitched his voice in a higher key than he had previously done. Clara hardly breathed as she strained her senses to catch the words that fell from his lips.

What she heard, gradually piecing the plot together in her own mind as Crofton issued his final orders to the men, was enough to blanch the heart of any woman with terror and dismay. The train to Cummerhays was to be attacked and robbed; some great treasure--Clara could not make out of what nature--was to travel by it to-night, which these desperadoes had determined on making their own. As a preliminary step, the signalman at Cinder Pit Junction was to be seized, bound, and gagged, his box taken possession of, and the telegraph wires cut. A member of the gang who answered to the name of Slinkey, and who understood the manipulation of points and signals, would install himself in the box. Then, when the train came up on its way to Cummerhays, passing the box at a speed of about twenty miles an hour, by a reversal of the points it was to be turned by Slinkey on to the branch leading to the collieries. As a matter of course, the driver would bring his train to a stand as speedily as possible, and then would come the opportunity of the gang. It was well known that, except at holiday times, passengers and officials together by this train rarely numbered half a score people. It would be strange if half-a-dozen desperate men, armed with revolvers, could not so far intimidate the driver, the guard, and a few sleepy passengers as to have the whole train at their mercy. Five minutes would suffice to successfully achieve the object they had in view, after which the train might go on its way again as if nothing had happened.

Such were the chief features of this audacious scheme, as gathered by Clara from Crofton's instructions to the others. Of course, each man had known beforehand what he was expected to do, and what

passed at the cottage was merely a sort of final rehearsal of the scene that was to follow.

Crofton now looked at his watch and announced that it was time to start. The lanterns were extinguished, and the men filed silently out of the cottage, half of them taking one road and half another. Clara and Margery had but just time to draw their shawls over their heads and crouch on their knees amid the brushwood, when three of the men passed within as many yards of them. When all was silent again, they stood up. Never on any previous occasion when danger threatened her husband had Clara felt so utterly helpless as she did now. What could she, one weak woman, do to confound the machinations of six armed and desperate men?

"O Margery," she cried, seizing both the girl's hands in the extremity of her distress, "there seems no help either in heaven or on earth. We are lost--lost!"

The faithful girl could only kiss with a sob the hands that held her own. "What be they going to do, mistress?" she asked a moment or two later. She had not been able to see and hear what had passed in the cottage, as Clara had done.

"They are going to seize and bind your master, and then they are going to stop and rob the train. O Margery, if there was but some way by which the train could be warned in time! Think, think; is there nothing we can do?"

"Why, o' course there is, mum," answered the girl with one of her uncanny chuckles. "You just let me run home as fast as my legs'll carry me and get three or four singles--them things, you know, that Muster Geril used to fasten on the rails when the fog was bad in winter. I know how to fasten them, 'cos I watched Muster Geril do it one day when I took him some to the box. Then I'll take the short cut across the fields to where the line turns sharp round more'n half a mile away from the box, and I'll fix the singles there.--But what am I to tell the driver, mum, when he stops the train?"

"Tell him there are half-a-dozen men with revolvers who are going to stop and rob the train, just beyond your master's box. After that, he will know what it will be best to do." She could have flung her arms round Margery's neck and kissed her, such a weight had the girl's words lifted off her heart.

"But what about pore Muster Geril, mum?" urged Margery.

Ah, what indeed! Clara shivered as though an icy wind had struck her. She had not failed to notice that her husband had never been mentioned by name by Crofton, who had spoken of him to the others as though he were an utter stranger. Could it be possible he was unaware that Gerald filled the position of signalman at Cinder Pit Junction. It was possible, but by no means probable; but in that faint chance lay her only hope of her husband's safety. In that case, should he and Crofton not encounter each other, the rest of the gang would merely regard Gerald in the light of an ordinary railway servant; and although he might chance to be assailed and maltreated by them, that would be but a minor evil in comparison with the other, and one which an hour or two at the most would set right. These thoughts passed through her mind far more rapidly than she could have given them utterance in words. The only question now was, had she time to warn her husband before the attack took place? The gang were on their way already: could she overtake them, pass them unseen, and reach the signal-box before they did? The chance was a desperate one, but she must attempt it--no other course was open to her.

"Come!" she said, grasping Margery by the hand. "Let us hurry--let us hasten! While you go and fix the signals, I will go and warn your master, only pray heaven I may not be too late!"

With scarcely a word more they sped swiftly back along the starlit fields; but when they reached the stile, Clara said: "Is there no nearer way to the signal-box than going round to it by the high-road?"

"There's a way through the fields, that cuts off a big corner. I've walked it onst; but I dunno, mum, as you could find it in the dark."

"I must try," answered Clara desperately. Every second was precious.

The near cut in question was through a second stile somewhat farther on. At this point, after a few last words, the two parted, each going a separate way.

Clara's way led her through more fields; but the track was so faint that she was utterly unable to distinguish it, and had to trust to her vague local knowledge that she was going in the right direction. In a little while she surmounted a rising ground, and then, to her utter dismay, she saw, from the position of the signal lamps in the valley

below, that she had wandered a full quarter of a mile too far to the right of them. It was a thousand chances to one now that Crofton and his crew would be there before her.

Anguish lent wings to her feet, and she flew down the slope like a creature pursued by the Furies. She could see the lighted window of the signal-box shining in the distance, a faint yellow disc. The next thing she knew was that she had reached the boundary of the line, but at a point still some distance from the box. It now became needful to exercise more caution than she had hitherto done, lest she should be seen by any of the gang, who were doubtless somewhere near at hand. The line at this point was bounded by a wooden fencing put up to prevent the straying of cattle, close to which, on the field-side, grew a thin straggling hedge. Under the shelter of this hedge Clara now stole softly and cautiously forward, with eyes and ears preternaturally on the alert. Step by step she drew nearer without being disturbed by a sight or a sound, till at length she faced the box with its lighted window where it stood on the opposite side of the line. Then with a heart, the pulsing of which sounded like a low drumming in her ears, she parted the bushes and peered through.

For a moment or two a mist dimmed her eyes, and all she could discern was that there was some one inside the box. Then the mist cleared away, and she saw that the man standing there with one hand resting on a lever was not her husband, but the man Slinkey, whose sinister face she had seen through the broken shutter. Gerald was nowhere to be seen. She had come too late!

CHAPTER XV.

Gerald Brooke having relieved his "mate" Lucas at the signal-box, and having satisfied himself that his lamps were properly trimmed and set for the night, sat down in his box to read. The night duties at Cinder Pit Junction were not of a very onerous nature. The last passenger train from Cummerhays, which also carried the mail, passed at eight-thirty; and the last train to that place till the arrival of the morning mail, at a few minutes past ten o'clock. In the course of the night two or three trains of mixed merchandise and minerals passed through without stopping, and these, together with a train from the collieries bound for the South, comprised the whole of the nocturnal traffic. Thus it fell out that Gerald had plenty of spare time on his hands, and always brought a volume with him to help to while the long dark hours away.

The signal-box, the entrance to which was reached by a flight of eight or nine steps, stood on a small space of cleared ground by the side of the line. A little way back was a low embankment crowned by a hedge, overshadowed here and there by an umbrageous beech or elm, beyond which the open fields stretched far and wide. Few places could be more solitary and deserted; not a house, not a habitation of any kind was within ken; but by day a haze of smoke in the distance told of life and labour not far away.

The last train from Cummerhays had passed more than an hour ago, the next one would be the train going the reverse way. Gerald sat reading, but with his ear on the alert for the ting of the telegraph bell which should tell him when the coming train had passed Mellingfield, the nearest station south, five miles away. All at once he was startled by the sound of some one coughing, evidently just outside his box. It was a sound so unexpected and surprising in that lonely spot and at that hour of the night, that he sprang to his feet, while his nerves began to flutter strangely. Next moment there came a loud rapping at the door, as it might be with the handle of a walking-stick. Gerald opened the door at once; and then he saw a portly middle-aged man dressed in black, with a white cravat and spectacles--to all appearance a clergyman--standing at the foot of the steps and gazing blandly up at him.

"My good man," said the stranger in unctuous but well-bred accents, "I am a stranger in these parts, and am sorry to say that I have lost my way. I want to get to a friend's house at Overbarrow; no doubt you can put me in the right road for doing so?"

You must cross the line"--began Gerald.

"My good man," interrupted the stranger, "I am somewhat deaf, and cannot hear what you say. I wish you would be good enough to come a little nearer. With my defective eyesight, I dare not trust myself up these steps of yours."

Gerald stepped down without hesitation. "You must cross the line," he began again in a somewhat louder key, "and about twenty yards farther on you will find a gap in the hedge."

"Yes, yes--a gap in the hedge; I understand," responded the other eagerly.

"And after that you will find a footpath which will bring you to the high-road. Then"----

Not a word more spoke Gerald. A soft heavy cloth of some kind was suddenly thrown over his head, while at the same instant his arms were pinioned firmly from behind, and a cord with a running noose was drawn tightly round his legs. The attack was so sudden that he was powerless to make the least resistance, and in less than half-a-dozen seconds he found himself as helpless as a babe. Then a corner of the cloth that enveloped his head was raised and the sham parson said in his most oily tones: "My friend, if you have any regard for your life you will neither cry out nor attempt to make the least disturbance. Be obedient and good, and no harm shall befall you." As if to add emphasis to the warning, Gerald was lightly rapped on the knuckles with what he could feel to be the chilly barrel of a pistol. Then with a man on each side of him holding him by an arm, he was conducted to the background; and having been planted with his back to a tree, he was bound firmly to it with several folds of thin cord. The cloth which still enveloped his head was fastened loosely round his throat, so as not greatly to impede his breathing; but his voice would have been smothered in it had he even been in a position to call for help.

He had no means of ascertaining the number of his assailants, but as far as he could judge there must have been three or four of them.

He was lost in a maze of the wildest conjectures as to what the object of the attack could possibly be. Apparently none of the gang had recognised him as Gerald Brooke, the man for whose capture so large a reward was still unclaimed. Yet why, then, had they made him a prisoner? What object was to be gained by his capture? Never in his life had he felt so utterly perplexed. He could hear an eager conversation going on a little distance away; but all sounds now came dull and muffled to his ears.

As already stated, the gang had previously separated into two parties. Three of the men, at the head of whom was Crofton, had made their way down the branch to a point close to where, as nearly as they could judge, the driver of the train would be able to pull up as soon as he found himself on the wrong line of rails. The other three men, with the sham parson as their chief, had been detailed for the capture of the signalman, the result of which we have seen. After a little talk together, one of the three now started off down the branch to carry the news to Crofton and the others.

Slinkey at once took possession of the box, and proceeded to test the working of the various levers, in order that there might be no hitch when the critical moment should arrive. He was an ex-railway servant and thoroughly understood what he was now about.

The sham parson was known familiarly among the "profession" which his eminent talents adorned under the pseudonym of "Lardy Bill," a title conferred upon him in the first instance by reason of his fondness for swell clothes, flash jewelry, and scented pocket-handkerchiefs. He was one of the most clever and unscrupulous rogues of which the great Babylon could boast; but it is pleasant to be able to record that despite his cleverness, a considerable portion of his knavish existence had already been passed in an enforced seclusion where board and lodging had been provided him free of charge. His appearance was eminently in his favour. He was a well-built, ruddy-cheeked man, with a moist and humorous eye, and a sort of hail-fellow-well-met air. He had the suggestion of a man who could tell a good story and appreciate a good glass of wine. He looked equally at home when made up as a clergyman, a gentleman farmer, a staid City magnate, or a poor tradesman who had fallen upon evil days. He had always *les larmes dans le voix* at command when the occasion needed them, and he

could choke a sob in his throat as cleverly as any low comedian on the stage.

As soon as the two men were left alone, with their prisoner in the background, Lardy Bill lighted a cigarette--he liked to follow the fashion in everything--and began to stroll up and down the narrow clearing on which the box was built. Slinkey was too nervous to follow his companion's example. "As I calkilate," he said, "we ought to have had the signal from Mellingfield three minutes afore now. Can anything have happened?"

"Pooh, man--what is likely to have happened?" said the other coolly. "These beggarly branch trains are nearly always late."

Half a minute later they heard the welcome ting-ting announcing that the train had just passed Melling field.

"She'll be twelve minutes or more yet afore she's here," remarked Slinkey as he again ascended the steps and entered the box.

Presently Lardy Bill tossed away the end of his cigarette, and crossing to his prisoner, examined his bonds and satisfied himself that they were still intact. On going back to the box he was rejoined by Slinkey, who now proceeded to go down on one knee and rest his ear on the rail. "She's coming; I can hear her quite plain," he said after a few moments. "Another five minutes and she ought to be here."

"Then I'll hurry off to the others," said Lardy. "I shall be wanted there when the shindy comes off, and you'll manage here by yourself all right."

"Right you are," responded the other. "As soon as ever the train's past, I shall cut the wires, and then make a bolt of it, and wait for you fellows at the cottage."

Nothing more was said. Lardy Bill started at a quick pace down the branch, while Slinkey re-entered the box.

Neither of them had the slightest suspicion that for the last ten minutes or more all their actions had been watched by an unseen witness; but such was the case. When Clara Brooke, to her intense dismay, discovered that not her husband, but a stranger, was the occupant of the box, she felt for a little while as if her heart must die within her. Then she became aware of two dusky figures standing a little distance away, whom she rightly concluded to be other

members of the gang; but still her husband was nowhere to be seen. She had arrived on the spot almost immediately after Gerald had been bound to the tree; but the night was too dark to admit of her seeing him from that distance. She felt at once that she must get round to where the signal-box stood, on the opposite side of the line, and, if it were possible, approach near enough to the men to overhear their conversation, and by that means discover what had become of her husband. No sooner was the thought formulated in her mind than she began to put it into practice. Still keeping in the shelter of the hedge that ran parallel with the line, she sped as fast as her feet could carry her to a point some forty or fifty yards farther down the line, far enough, as she judged, to be out of the range of vision of any one who might be on the lookout at the box. Here, after drawing her shawl over her head--she had discarded her bonnet some time before--she broke through the hedge, was across the line in three seconds; and then, after pushing through the hedge on the opposite side, she turned back in the direction of the signal-box, she and it being both now on the same side of the line. Creeping forward foot by foot and yard by yard, she presently found herself a little way behind the box, and within a dozen yards of her husband, had she only been aware of it.

While this was happening, one of the men had gone off to join the others down the line. Clara, peering through the interstices of the hedge, could see the two remaining men walking and talking together, but was too far away to distinguish what they said. Not long had she watched and waited when she heard the ting-ting of the telegraph bell. She knew that it was a signal of some kind, but not what its precise meaning might be. Then one of the men disappeared into the box, while the other--it was the one, she could now make out, who was dressed like a clergyman--turned, and seemed as if he were marching directly towards her. Terror-stricken, she dropped completely out of sight behind the hedge-bank, expecting every moment to feel a hand laid on her shoulder. But nothing coming, she breathed again; then her head went up till her eyes were on a level with the top of the bank; then, to her surprise, she saw that the man seemed to be carefully examining the trunk of a tree some little distance away. She strained her eyes in the endeavour to see what he could possibly be about, and then suddenly her heart gave a great

bound. The trunk of the tree was defined like a faint silhouette against a background of starlit April sky, but it was a silhouette which in one portion of its outline bore a startling resemblance to a human figure. As by a flash of divination, Clara knew that it was her husband she was gazing upon. Her breath fluttered on her lips like a bird trying to escape, and she set her teeth hard in the flesh of her arm, to stifle the cry that broke involuntarily from her heart.

After a few seconds the man went back; and after saying a few words to his confederate, he apparently took leave of him, and starting down the branch, was quickly lost to view; then the other at once went back into the box. Now was Clara's opportunity.

Half a minute later she was by her husband's side. Laying a hand softly on his arm, she said in a low voice: "Gerald it is I--Clara." Some smothered sounds came back to her; and then she discovered, what the darkness had hitherto hidden, that her husband's head and face were closely muffled. Her trembling but skilful fingers quickly undid the knots and removed the covering. Gerald gave a great gasp of relief as he drew a deep inspiration of the cool night-air. Then he whispered: "You will find a knife in my outside pocket." In a minute from that time he was a free man.

Slinkey, waiting alone in the signal-box, had tried the lever again and again by means of which the points were opened that would turn the train on to the branch, and had satisfied himself that everything was in working order. Both the distance and the home signal-lamps showed the white light, so that the train would speed on unsuspectingly with unslackened pace. Slinkey at the best of times was a nervous timid creature--a man who walked ever in trembling dread of the hand which he knew would some day be laid suddenly on his shoulder--but now that he was left alone, now that he had no longer Lardy Bill's audacious bulldog courage to help to animate his own, his craven heart sank lower and lower, and he would have given a year of his life to be well out of the adventure into which he had allowed himself to be seduced.

The low deep hum of the oncoming train grew palpably on the ear. Instinctively, Slinkey's hand closed on lever No. 3, while his heart began to beat a sort of devil's tattoo after a fashion that was far from comfortable. Suddenly he gave a great start, and for a moment or more the tattoo came to a dead stop. He had heard a sound that he

remembered full well: it was the noise caused by the explosion of a fog-signal. At the same instant the engine began to whistle its shrillest. Then came the explosion of a second signal, and then the whistle ceased as suddenly as it began. And now he could faintly hear the soft rhythmical pulsing of the engine, as it might be that of some antediluvian monster which had been racing till it was scant of breath; and Slinkey knew that the train had slackened speed and was feeling its way forward slowly and cautiously. What could be the matter? What could have happened? By whom and with what intent had fog-signals been placed on the line on a night so clear and beautiful?

Such were a few of the queries that flitted through Slinkey's puzzled brain. And now not even the faintest pulsing of the engine could be heard. Could it be possible that treachery was at work, and that the driver had been warned and the train brought to a stand? Slinkey ran lightly down the steps and, kneeling, laid an ear once more to the rails. Not a sound came to him; the train and those in charge of it might have vanished into space, so unbroken was the silence. He got on his feet again, his tongue and throat as dry and constricted as those of a man who had been athirst for days. Instinctively his eyes turned to the tree to which the captured signalman had been bound; but he was too far away to be able to discern whether the man was still there. With a heart that misgave him, he hurried up to the tree, only to find that the prisoner had escaped. The cords were there, but the man was gone. Evidently, treachery was at work somewhere. Would not the wisest thing he could do be to decamp while he had a chance of doing so? He was asking himself this question but had not answered it, when up came Crofton, Lardy Bill, and one of the other men, at double-quick time. They, too, had heard the fog-signals, and had been as much at a loss to account for them as Slinkey had been. But when the latter told them that by some mysterious means their prisoner had contrived to escape, it was evident both to Crofton and Lardy that their carefully planned scheme had met with some dire mishap. They had been betrayed, but by whom? A traitor had been at work, but who was he? Each of them stared suspiciously at his fellows.

"If I only knew who it was that bad sold us," said Lardy Bill with a fierce imprecation, "I'd scatter his brains with a bullet, though I had to swing for it after!"

"That's all very well," said Crofton; "but the question is, what are we to do now?"

"Do!" exclaimed Lardy, whom danger always made reckless. "Why, do what we intended from the first. The train's waiting there, ain't it, not five hundred yards away? Instead of its coming to us, we must go to it--that's all. Is there any one here," he demanded fiercely, "who would rather not go?"

Slinkey would fain have answered that he for one would very much prefer to keep in the background, only that Lardy Bill was a man of whom he stood in mortal fear.

"Now, mates, come along," added Bill. "We are only fooling away our time standing here. One bold stroke and the prize is ours."

Scarcely had the last word passed his lips, when some half-dozen dark-coated figures burst suddenly through the hedge and made a dash into the midst of the gang.

"We are sold!" screamed Crofton with an oath. "Every man for himself;" and with that he fired his revolver at the nearest of his assailants and then turned to flee. But he was too late. He was tripped up, seized, and handcuffed all in a breath as it seemed. A like fate befell Slinkey and the other man; but Lardy Bill, slippery as an eel, after felling two of his assailants, vanished in the darkness. The remaining two men, who had been left behind when Crofton and the others hurried to the signal-box, also contrived to escape.

Crofton's shot had taken effect. The man he fired at staggered forward a pace or two and then fell on one knee. Now that the scrimmage was over, his companions had time to attend to him. They helped him to his feet; he was evidently suffering great pain, but was perfectly cool and collected. As the light of the bull's-eye which one of the men produced fell upon his face, Crofton, who was close at hand, staggered back with a cry of amazement Next moment he had recovered himself. "I denounce this man as Gerald Brooke," he exclaimed, "the murderer of Baron von Rosenberg, for whose capture a reward of three hundred pounds is offered."

CHAPTER XVI.

Never had the little town of Cummerhays been stirred to its depths as it was on a certain April morning, when it awoke to find that it had rendered itself famous after a fashion which would cause its existence to become known wherever an English newspaper penetrated. Its name would be in everybody's mouth for weeks to come. It felt that it could never again sink into utter obscurity.

For the prisoners--about whose alleged attempt to rob the train all sorts of wild rumours were afloat--had after their capture been put into the train and brought on to Cummerhays, and were for the present lodged in the town jail. The magistrates would assemble at ten o'clock, when the preliminary inquiry would take place. But even a deeper interest, if that were possible, centred itself in the arrest of the alleged murderer of the Baron von Rosenberg, who was said to have actually been working as a signalman on the line for the past three or four months. It was dreadful to think that the lives of several hundreds of respectable people should have been at the mercy of such a miscreant!

The town-hall was besieged by an excited crowd long before the opening of the doors, and had the justice-room been three times larger than it was, it might easily have been filled three times over. Among the foremost ranks of the surging crowd, and maintaining his position with passive tenacity, was a man on whom many curious eyes were bent. He was a foreigner--so much was evident at a glance--and that of itself was enough to excite the curiosity of the good folk of Cummerhays, many of whom had never been a score miles from home. He was very lean and very sallow, with drawn-in cheeks and sharply defined cheek-bones. He had deep-set eyes, black and burning, with something in them of the expression of a half-famished wild animal. He wore small gold circlets in his ears, and was dressed in a coat of frayed velveteen, with a soft felt hat; and a coloured silk handkerchief knotted loosely round his throat. He spoke to no one, and no one spoke to him; but now and then his lips worked strangely, as though he were holding a silent colloquy with some invisible companion. He was the one man in the crowd who was the least incommoded by the crowd. Those nearest to him

shrank a little from him, involuntarily as it were. He was a being of a different world from theirs, and they knew not what to make of him.

Jules Picot--for he it was--had arrived in Cummerhays at a late hour the preceding night, having walked there from another town about a dozen miles away. By what strange chance his wandering footsteps had brought him by many devious paths to this place of all others, and at this particular time, will be told a little later on. He had hired a bed for the night at the *Wheatsheaf Inn*, a cheap and unpretentious hostelry. He was up and had ordered his breakfast by eight o'clock next morning, and it was while waiting for that meal to be brought him that his attention was attracted by some conversation in the taproom which he could not help overhearing. The pallor of his face grew deeper as he listened; but whatever other emotion the change might arise from, it certainly had not its origin in fear.

"Soh! It is for this that I have been brought here," he muttered, half to himself and half aloud, in French. "Now I understand."

Going into the taproom, he put a few questions to the men to whose talk he had been listening. Having ascertained what he wanted to know, he left the house without waiting for his breakfast, and bent his steps in the direction of the town-hall. At a quarter to ten o'clock, when the doors were thrown open, Jules Picot was one of the first to push his way forward, or to be pushed forward by those behind him, into the small penned-up space allotted in the justice-room of Cummerhays to the general public. In three minutes the place was crannied to its utmost limits.

A few minutes after ten, the magistrates entered one by one and took their seats, their clerk having preceded them by a few seconds. They were three in number, all venerable gentlemen. One was partially blind; one partially deaf; while the third, who had a very red face and took the lead in everything, was quick-tempered and aggressive in his manner. There were two cases of drunkenness and one of theft to be disposed of before the great sensation of the day would begin.

Everybody seemed relieved when they were over; and presently a flutter of intense excitement ran through the court as three men, in charge of as many constables, filed in and were placed in the dock. Then, after a brief pause, a fourth man was ushered in whose left

arm was supported by a sling, and a murmur ran round that this was the alleged murderer of the German Baron. A moment later another door opened, and there glided in a female in black, closely veiled, who sat down on a chair in the background which one of the officials handed her with a bow. The prisoner with his arm in a sling was also allowed to be seated a little way from the dock in which the other men had been placed.

When the mountebank beheld Gerald Brooke, whom he still knew only by the name of "Mr. Stewart," marched in as a prisoner, and when he saw, and his quick eyes recognised, the veiled figure in black who entered immediately afterwards, he was seized with a vertigo, which caused the room, the magistrates, and the prisoners to surge up and down before his eyes as though they were being tempest-tossed at sea. "Mon Dieu! est-il possible?" he exclaimed half aloud. Then he buried his face in his hands for a time, while a cloud seemed to lift itself slowly from his brain, and much became clear to him that had been dark before.

The charge against the first three prisoners was one of assault and attempted robbery; but against one of them there was a supplementary charge of attempted murder. That against the fourth prisoner was the much more serious charge of murder. But from what the magistrates could understand of the case at present, this fourth prisoner was so mixed up with the charge against the other three--he being the man who had been assaulted and bound and afterwards shot by one of them--that the poor gentlemen, who had never before had to investigate a case of such gravity, or one which presented so many peculiar features, were fairly at their wits' ends to know how to deal with it from a strictly legal point of view. Thus it fell out that the whole of the prisoners found themselves in court at the same time. It was now, however, suggested by the clerk that the prisoner on the capital charge should be put back while the examination of the others was being proceeded with. This suggestion was at once acted upon.

After the remaining prisoners had answered to the names entered on the charge-sheet, the first witness was called, but not till the red-faced magistrate had intimated that he and his colleagues only intended to take sufficient evidence that day to justify a remand. The first witness proved to be Mr. Sturgess, a London jeweller. His

evidence went to show that, accompanied by a trustworthy assistant, he had left home the previous day on his way to Lord Leamington's seat, a few miles beyond Cummerhays, having in his charge a box containing jewelry to the value of several thousands of pounds. All had gone well till he reached Greenholme, at which place he had to wait an hour and change to the branch line; but on his arrival there, he had found a telegram awaiting him from his partner in London in which he was told on no account to pursue his journey without first obtaining an escort of four or five constables. No reason was furnished by the telegram for taking such extraordinary precautions and he could only surmise that an attempt was about to be made to rob him of the box, and that by some means his partner at the last moment had obtained wind of the affair. Fortunately, through the courtesy of the police authorities at Greenholme he experienced no difficulty in obtaining the required escort, and under its protection he resumed his journey by the next train.

The next witness to answer to his name was the driver of the train, who deposed to everything having gone right till he was just inside the distance signal of Cinder Pit Junction, which showed "line clear," when he and his mate were startled by the explosion of a fog-signal. He at once whistled and put on all the brake-power at his command, and could not have gone more than forty or fifty yards farther before a second signal exploded; and then he could just make out the figure of a woman standing on the embankment and beating the air with both her arms as a sign for him to stop, which, as the brakes were on already, he was not long in doing. After that, the police took charge of the affair, and he did just as they told him.

The next witness called was Margery Shook. She had been sitting out of sight behind a large screen which sheltered their worships from any possible draughts at the lower end of the room. As she entered the witness-box she shot a glance of venomous hatred towards Crofton, which would have killed him then and there if looks had power to slay. The nature of the evidence she had to give we know already. More than once her peculiar phraseology caused a titter to run through the court, which was, however, promptly suppresed.

Clara Brooke was the next person called upon. As she raised her veil her eyes met those of Crofton for a moment, while a faint colour

suffused her cheeks, only to die out as quickly as it had come. A low murmur of commiseration passed like a sigh through the court; and the eyes of many there filled with tears when they beheld her pale beautiful face, for it had been whispered about that this was the wife of the man who was accused of murder. The evidence she had to offer was given clearly and unhesitatingly; with the purport of it we are sufficiently acquainted already. When she had told all she had to tell, she let her veil drop and went back to the seat she had occupied before.

The next and last witness whose evidence it was proposed to take at present was the Greenholme sergeant of police. He told how he had been instructed by his superintendent to take four men and accompany the gentleman from London as far as Cummerhays. Then he narrated how the train had come to a stand in consequence of the explosions of the fog-signals; and how, when he and his men alighted from it, they had found the witness Margery Shook, who gave them to understand that the train was about to be attacked a little way farther on. How the girl had scarcely finished telling them this when up ran the signalman, who had been released by his wife; and how, under his guidance, he, witness, and his men had succeeded in surprising the would-be thieves and in capturing three of their number; and finally, how the signalman had been severely wounded by Crofton, one of the prisoners, firing his revolver point-blank at him.

"You have omitted one little episode," said Crofton in cold measured tones as the sergeant was about to step down from the witness-box; "you have forgotten to tell these worthy gentlemen that it was I who recognised the so-called signalman as Gerald Brooke, the man charged with the wilful murder of the Baron von Rosenberg, and that I denounced him as such then and there."

"That is so, your worships," said the sergeant.

"We quite understand that already," remarked the red-faced magistrate; "but it is a point on which we need not enter at present, more especially seeing that the prisoner in question has already admitted that his name is Gerald Brooke, and that he is in point of fact the man for whose apprehension a reward of three hundred pounds is still unclaimed." With that the magistrates laid their heads together and consulted for a little while among themselves.

By Picot, sitting quietly among the general public and watching everything with restless burning eyes, all these proceedings were only imperfectly understood. Why Gerald Brooke had been brought in a prisoner and almost immediately taken out again without any charge being brought against hi, was a mystery to the mountebank. Neither could he understand how "la belle madame" and "Margot," as he termed them, came to be mixed up in such a strange fashion with the prisoners at the bar, in one of whom he had at once recognised the man he had gagged and bound to his chair in the house in Pymm's Buildings. He lacked the key to the situation, and wanting that, he could only look on and listen, and feel himself becoming more bewildered after each witness that appeared on the scene. Not that he troubled himself greatly about these things; something of much deeper import lay at the back of all his wandering thoughts about this matter or the other. He had been led to that place, his footsteps had been mysteriously guided thither--he could see it all now--for a certain purpose, and that purpose, as he sat there, was never for one moment out of his mind.

The magistrates having brought their brief consultation to an end, intimated that the prisoners at the bar would be remanded till the following Monday. They were at once removed; and after a brief pause, Gerald Brooke took his stand in their place. Having answered to his name in the usual way, the red-faced magistrate leaned forward a little to address him. "Gerald Brooke," he began, "you stand charged on the verdict of a coroner's jury with the wilful murder of Otto von Rosenberg, commonly called the Baron von Rosenberg, at Beaulieu, in the county of ----, on Thursday, the 28th day of June last. The crime having been committed outside the jurisdiction of this court, all we have now to do is"---

Suddenly a man with gold circlets in his ears and holding a soft felt hat in his hands stood up in the body of the court, and addressing himself directly to the magistrate, said in a voice which all there could hear "Pardonnez moi, s'il vous plaît, monsieur, but I--Jules Picot--and not the prisoner at the bar, am the man who killed Otto von Rosenberg."

CHAPTER XVII.

For the first few moments after Picot's startling confession had fallen like a thunderbolt among those assembled in the justice-room of Cummerhays, the silence was so intense that, to use a common phrase, a pin might have been heard to drop. Every eye was focused on the mountebank, who stood on the spot where he had risen, erect and very pale, his eyes glowing in their deep orbits like live coals, and pressing his soft felt hat with both hands to his breast. Suddenly there was a slight commotion close to where the magistrates were sitting; the strained silence was broken, and all eyes turned as with one accord. The lady in black, she who was said to be the wife of the accused man, had fainted. But Margery's strong arms had caught her ere she fell. Another woman in the body of the court at once hurried to her help, and between them the unconscious young wife was carried out.

"Place that man in the dock," said the red-faced magistrate, "and allow the other prisoner to be seated."

Picot stepped quietly forward of his own accord, the people near making way for him with wonderful alacrity, and placed himself on the spot the magistrate had indicated, a couple of constables stationing themselves behind him as he did so. Then the clerk put certain questions to him, which Picot answered without a moment's hesitation. When these came to an end the entry on the charge-sheet stood as follows: "Jules Picot. Age, forty-three. Native of France. Profession, acrobat. No fixed place of residence."

Then the magistrate, clasping the fingers of one hand in those of the other, and resting them on the table in front of him as he leaned forward a little, said: "Jules Picot, you have confessed openly and in public to the commission of a most heinous and terrible crime. Such being the case, we have no option but to detain you in custody while inquiries are being made as to the truth or falsehood of the extraordinary statement just volunteered by you. Any further statement you may choose to make we will of course listen to; but at the same time we must caution you that anything you may say will be taken down and used as evidence against you elsewhere. Is it your wish to make any further statement, or is it not?"

"Ma foi, monsieur," answered Picot, with a slight shrug, "that is what I am here for--to make what you call statements, to tell the truth, to prove that this gentleman is innocent, and that I, Jules Picot, and I alone, killed Otto von Rosenberg." He paused, and in the hush that followed, the rapid scratching of the clerk's pen as it raced over the paper was clearly audible. The pencils of the two reporters who sat in a little box below the clerk moved at a more deliberate pace. One of them even found time to make a furtive sketch of Picot on a blank page of his note-book.

It was so evident the prisoner had something more to say that no one broke the silence.

"Eight years ago, monsieur," he began in a low clear voice, "I had a wife, a daughter, and a son. Now I am alone. I was living in Paris. No man could have been more happy than I was. Stephanie, my daughter, had an engagement at the Cirque de l'Hiver. She was beautiful, she was good. In an evil hour she attracted the attention of the Baron von Rosenberg. He followed her everywhere; he gave her rich presents; he even went so far as to promise to make her his wife--*scélérat* that he was! Of all this I knew nothing till afterwards. One day Stephanie does not come home. I make inquiry for her. She has fled. Von Rosenberg, too, has disappeared. They have fled together. From that day I never saw Stephanie more." Again he paused, and although there was no trace of emotion in his voice, it may be that the hidden depths of his being were profoundly moved.

"A little while later, ma pauvre Marie died. She had been ill a long time; but what killed her was the loss of Stephanie. Ah yes! After that, Henri and I set out, wandering from place to place, not caring much where we went, but always looking and asking for Von Rosenberg, because I want to demand of him what has he done with my child. All at once I discover him. It was at the house of this gentleman, Monsieur Brooke. Next day they tell me that he has gone away back to his own country, and they know not when he will return. But I wait and wait while one week go away after another, and at length he comes back. I hide myself in the wood. I climb into the thick branches of a tree, and stay there hour after hour till he shall be alone. At length I see him coming down the path that leads from the house to the châlet near the wood. He whistles as he comes, and he is alone. I wait a little while, then I come down from the tree

and walk up to the châlet. The Baron is standing up, examining a pistol--a pistol with inlay of ivory and gold, and with strange figures marked on it. On the table close by is a heavy riding-whip. He has not heard my footsteps. I enter, and he starts and stares. I make him a profound bow, and say: 'Bonjour, Monsieur le Baron. My name is Jules Picot, and I come to demand from you what you have done with my daughter Stephanie.' He still stares, and seems to be thinking to himself how he shall answer me. At last he says: 'I know nothing whatever of your daughter; and if I did I should decline to tell you.' 'She left Paris in your company,' I reply. 'Possibly so,' he answers with an evil sneer. 'Monsieur, I repeat that I am her father. I seek for her everywhere, but cannot find her. You, monsieur, if you choose, can give me some clue by which I may be able to trace her. Her mother is dead, and I have no other daughter. Think, monsieur--think.' He laughs a laugh that makes me long to spring at his throat and strangle him. 'I. altogether refuse to give you any information whatever about your daughter,' he says. 'How, monsieur, you refuse!' I say as I draw a step or two nearer. He has laid the pistol on the table by this time, and his fingers now shut on the handle of the riding-whip. 'Then you are a coward and a villain,' I continue; 'and I spit in your face, as I will do again and again whenever I meet you. I have found you now, and I will follow you wherever you go.' He replies only by seizing the whip, hissing it quickly through the air, and bringing it down with all his strength round my head and shoulders. Strange lights dance before my eyes; there is a noise in my ears as of falling waters. The pistol is close to my hand; I grasp it; I fire. Von Rosenberg falls without a cry or a word. I fling the pistol away and walk quietly back through the woods. As I reach the village, where my boy is awaiting me, the church clock strikes seven. The evening is that of the 28th of June."

He ceased speaking as quietly and impassively as he had begun: he might have been reading something from a newspaper referring to some other man, so little apparent emotion did he display; yet his hearers felt instinctively that he was speaking the truth.

"What you have just told us," said the magistrate, "will be taken down in writing; it will afterwards be read over to you, in order that you may make any additions or corrections that you may deem

necessary; and you will then be asked to affix your name to the document. You will have no objection to do so, I presume?"

"To write my name on the paper, is that what monsieur means?"

"That is what I mean."

"Certainement, monsieur, I will write my name. Why not?"

"Then for the present you are remanded."

Picot looked round with a puzzled air; but one of the constables touched him on the shoulder and whispered, "Come this way."

He turned to obey, and as he passed Gerald the eyes of the two men met. Gerald's hand went out and gripped that of the mountebank. "O Picot!" was all his lips could utter. The mountebank stroked the back of Gerald's hand caressingly for a moment while a strangely soft smile flitted across his haggard features. "Ah, monsieur, you and la belle madame will be happy again," was all he said. Next moment he had passed out of sight.

Gerald was now replaced in the dock; and one of the magistrates, addressing him, said that although, on the face of it there seemed little reason to doubt the truth of the singular narrative to which they had just listened, it would have to be confirmed by ample inquiry before it could be accepted and acted upon. Meanwhile, he regretted to say Mr. Brooke would have to remain in custody. But on the morrow, or next day at the latest, both prisoners would be transferred to King's Harold, when the amplest investigation would doubtless at once take place. With that the prisoner was removed.

Before going back to his cell, Gerald was allowed to see his wife for a few minutes. The meeting was almost a silent one; words would come after a time; just now their hearts overflowed with a solemn thankfulness, the roots of which struck deeper than speech could fathom.

As soon as Picot reached the cell allotted to him, he asked to be supplied with a cup of coffee, after which he lay down on his pallet with the air of a man thoroughly wearied out, and in a few minutes was fast asleep. He slept soundly till aroused some three hours later, when he was conducted to a room where he found one of the magistrates, the clerk, the governor of the jail, and two other officials. Here a paper, which had been drawn up from notes taken in the justice-room, was read over to him. After having caused it to be

corrected in one or two minor particulars, he affixed his name to it; and his signature having been duly witnessed, he was reconducted to his cell.

About eight o'clock, after the gas had been lighted, he asked for pen, ink, and paper, and a small table to write on. These having been supplied him, he sat and wrote, slowly and laboriously, for nearly a couple of hours, finally putting what he had written inside an envelope and sealing and directing it. Then, after having taken off his shoes and coat, he wrapped himself in the blanket which had been supplied him and lay down to sleep. The gas was lowered, and silence reigned throughout the prison. Once every hour during the night a warder went the round of the cells and peered into each of them that was occupied through a grating in the door. All through the night Picot apparently slept an unbroken sleep. When the warder visited him at one o'clock he found that he had turned over and was now lying with his face to the wall, after which he seemed never to have stirred between one visit and another. At seven o'clock another warder, who had just come on duty, went into his cell to rouse him. To his dismay, he could not succeed in doing so. He turned the unconscious man over on his back, and then the drawn, ghastly face told its own tale.

"Ah," remarked the doctor, who was quickly on the spot, as he held up to the light a tiny phial only about half the size of a man's little finger and smelt at its contents, "five drops of this would kill the strongest man in three seconds."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Jules Picot had been carefully searched before being locked up in his cell, and it was an utter puzzle to the jail officials how he had contrived to conceal about him even so insignificant an article as the tiny phial of poison so as to evade detection. One of the warders, however, of a more inquiring turn of mind than his fellows succeeded, a day or two later, in solving the mystery. The mountebank wore very high-heeled shoes, as many of his countrymen make a practice of doing. The heel of one of his shoes had been so made that it could be unscrewed at will, while inside it was a cavity just large enough to hold the phial. Picot had evidently prepared himself beforehand for a contingency the like of that which had at length befallen him. The letter written a few hours before his death was in French, and was addressed to "Madame Brouke." The following is a translation of it:

Madame--When these lines reach you, the hand that writes them will be cold in death. I am tired of life, and life is tired of me: this night we part company for ever. I take the liberty of addressing you because of your kindness to my little Henri (whom *le bon Dieu* has seen fit to take from me for my sins), and because you were so much in his thoughts when he was dying. I also address you for another reason, which I will explain presently.

It was in the first week of the new year that Henri met with the accident which proved fatal to him. He lingered for two weeks, and then died. He had but little pain; life faded out of him like a lamp that slowly expires for want of oil. As I said before, he often talked about his *belle madame*. He could not remember his mother, and it was your face that shone on him in his dreams, as it were the face of an angel.

After he was gone and I was alone in the world, I, too, began to have dreams such as I had never had before. Every night Henri came and stood by my bed, but it was always with an averted face; never would he turn and look at me. I used to try to cry out, to seize his hand; but I was dumb and motionless as a corpse. Then, after a minute or two, he would slowly vanish, with bowed head and hands pressed to his face, as though he were weeping silently. Night after

night it was ever the same. Then a great restlessness took possession of me. I seemed to be urged onward from place to place by some invisible power and without any will of my own. When I rose in a morning I knew not where I should sleep at night; onward, ever onward, I was compelled to go. Last night I reached this place, and this morning I rose thinking to resume my wanderings; but a conversation I chanced to overhear led me to seek the court of justice. You, madame, know what took place there.

Even before I had spoken a word, I knew why my footsteps had been directed to this place, and that my wanderings were at an end. This afternoon, after all was over, I lay down on my pallet and fell asleep, and while I slumbered, Henri came to me; but this time his face was no longer averted; his eyes gazed into mine, and he smiled as he used to smile at me out of his mother's arms. Ah, how shining and beautiful he looked! Then a soft cool hand was laid on my brow, that had burned and burned for months, and all the pain went, and I knew nothing more till I awoke.

A word more and I have done. Madame, pray believe me when I say that never could a man be more surprised and astounded than I, Jules Picot, was to-day when I found that it was your good husband who was accused of the death of the Baron von Rosenberg. When I made my way into the court after hearing that some one had been arrested for the murder, I thought to see only a stranger, one whom I had never seen before. But even in that case I should have done as I did to-day, and have confessed that it was by my hand and mine alone that Von Rosenberg met his death. Conceive, then, my astonishment when in the accused I recognised M. Brouke, whom I had known in London under the name of "M. Stewart!" I knew that when in London he was in trouble--in hiding--but never did I dream of the crime that was laid to his charge. Had I but known it, you and he would long ago have been made happy by the confession of him who now signs his name for the last time.

Jules Picot.

With what a host of conflicting emotions this document was read by her to whom it was addressed may be more readily imagined than described.

George Crofton sat alone in his cell, devouring his heart in a bitterness too deep for words. All was over; all the bright prospects

of his youth and early manhood had ended in this; his home for years to come would be a felon's cell, his only companions the lowest of the low, the vilest of the vile. "Facilis est descensus Averno," he muttered with a sneer. "Yes, in my case the descent has been swift and easy enough in all conscience." One gleam of lurid joy, and one only, illumined the black cavernous depths in which his thoughts, like fallen spirits, winged their way aimlessly to and fro, finding no spot whereon to rest. Gerald Brooke, the man he hated with an intensity of hatred bred only in natures such as his, was a prisoner even as he was, and it was his, Crofton's, hand that had brought him there! He had but spoken the truth when he said that the hour of his revenge would come at last. It was here now, although it had come after a fashion altogether different from what he had expected. Thanks to his folly, his own outlook was a dreary one enough; but what was it in comparison with the grim prospect that stared his hated cousin so closely in the face! When he thought of this it was as the one sweet drop in the bitter cup which Fate had pressed with such unrelenting fingers to his lips.

While he sat brooding over these and other matters, just as daylight was deepening into dusk, a warder unlocked the door of his cell. "You're wanted in the waiting-room," said the man. "Your uncle, Colonel Crofton, has called to see you. It's past the hour for visitors; but as he's brought a magistrate's order, and as he says he's obliged to go back to London to-night, the governor has agreed to relax the rules for once."

Crofton stared at the man in stupefaction. To the best of his belief he had no such relative in the world as the one just named. "Ah, you didn't expect to see him, I daresay," continued the warder. "A nice affable gent as ever I see; but I wouldn't keep him waiting if I was you."

Crofton followed the man without a word; and after being conducted through a couple of corridors, was ushered into a sparsely furnished whitewashed room, where a middle-aged, well-built man of military carriage, who had been perusing through his eyeglass the printed rules and regulations framed over the mantel-piece, turned to greet him. He had close-cut grizzled hair and a thick drooping grizzled moustache. He wore a lightly buttoned frockcoat, gray trousers and straps, and military boots highly polished. He carried

his hat and a tasselled malacca in his hand, and one corner of a bandana handkerchief protruded from his pocket behind.

"My dear nephew--my dear George!" he exclaimed with much effusion as he advanced a step or two and held out his hand. "This is indeed a dreadful predicament in which to find you. What, oh, what can you have been about that I should have to seek you in a place like this! Your poor aunt will be heart-broken when she hears of it. I must break the terrible news as gently as possible; but really, really, in her delicate state of health I dread the effect such a disclosure may have upon her." His voice trembled with emotion; he brushed away a tear, or seemed to do so.

George Crofton had undergone many surprises in his time, but never one that left him more dumfounded than this, for in his soi-disant uncle his quick eyes recognised at a glance no less a personage than Lardy Bill. If at the moment his eyes fell on him he had been in the least doubt of the fact, that doubt would have been dispelled by the expressive wink with which his friend favoured him an instant later. The man's audacity fairly took Crofton's breath away.

"The first question, my dear boy," resumed the sham colonel, so as to give the other time to recover himself, "of course is whether anything can be done for you, and if so, what. I need not say that my purse is at your service; for, shocked as I am to find you in this place, I cannot forget that you are my brother's son. I leave for London by the first train, and immediately on my arrival I will take the advice of my own lawyers in the matter, which will, I think, be the best thing that can be done under the painful circumstances of the case."

"I suppose that's about the only thing that can be done," answered Crofton, who was still utterly at a loss to divine the motive of the other's visit.

The warder who had conducted Crofton from his cell was present at the interview, ostensibly for the purpose of seeing that none of the jail regulations were infringed either by the prisoner or his visitor; but a sovereign having been pressed into his unreluctant palm at the moment he ushered the latter into the waiting-room, he now discreetly turned his back on the pair and stared persistently out of the window.

A little further conversation passed between uncle and nephew, the chief part of it falling to the lot of the former, then the colonel looked at his watch and rose to take his leave. The warder turned at the same instant.

"As I remarked before my dear George," said the uncle as he clasped both the nephew's hands in his, "however pained--most deeply pained--I may be, everything shall be done for you that can be done. I refrain from all reproaches--at present I can only grieve. But your poor aunt, George--your poor aunt! You are her godson and favourite nephew. Ah me--oh me!"

He walked out of the room with both hands outspread and slowly shaking his head, like a man whose feelings were more than he could control.

The jail officials at an early hour next morning, in addition to making the discovery that in the course of the night their French prisoner had taken leave of them after an altogether illegal and unjustifiable fashion, were further astounded by finding that the inmate of cell No. 5 had also relieved them of his presence, but in a mode altogether different from that which had found favour with the mountebank.

Crofton, unheard by any one, had contrived to file through the middle bar of his cell window and then to squeeze himself through the aperture thus made, after which there was nothing but a high wall between himself and liberty. Beyond this wall were some market gardens, the jail being situated in the outskirts of the town, and then the open fields. Outside the wall, a coil of rope with a strong steel hook at each end was found; and the footsteps of two if not of three men were plainly traceable for some distance in the soft mould of the garden. As to how Crofton had become possessed of the file, and by whose connivance and help he had been able to climb the wall and descend safely on the other side, there was no evidence forthcoming. The only fact the jail officials could affirm with certainty was that their prisoner was nowhere to be found.

At as early an hour as possible on the morning following his capture, Crofton had obtained permission to send a telegram to his wife, and before noon Stephanie was speeding northward by the express in response to his summons. When she reached Cummerhays, it was too late for her to visit her husband that night;

so, carrying her little handbag, she walked from the station to the inn nearest to it and asked to be accommodated with supper and a bed. She had ascertained from a constable in the street that the earliest hour at which visitors were admitted to the jail was ten o'clock.

Next morning, which was that of Saturday, Stephanie rose betimes. While she was eating her breakfast the landlady bustled in, carrying an open newspaper. "Here's the weekly paper, ma'am," she said. "The boy has just brought it; and as it contains a long account of the doings at the justice-room yesterday, about which you may have heard, I thought that perhaps you would like to read it over your breakfast."

"Thank you very much; I shall be glad to do so," said Stephanie quietly. She had given no name at the inn, and the landlady had not the slightest suspicion that her guest had any reason for being more interested than any stranger might be supposed to be in the news contained in the paper. Nor, in fact, had Stephanie any knowledge of what had happened. Her husband's telegram had been of the briefest; it had merely said: "I am in trouble. Come at once. Bring money. Inquire for me at the jail." But from what she knew already, she guessed, and rightly, that the enterprise on which Crofton was bent when he left home had failed, and that by some mischance he himself had come to grief.

The moment she was left alone Stephanie opened the paper with eager fingers. Her quick eyes were not long in finding the particular news of which they were in search. She read the story of the attempted robbery, as detailed in the evidence, with ever-growing wonder--a wonder that was intensified twenty-fold when she read how Gerald Brooke had been arrested at the same time as her husband, and by what strange chance the two cousins had once more been brought face to face. But when, a few lines lower down, her eyes caught sight of another well-known name, all the colour ebbed from her face, leaving it as white as the face of a dead woman. She read to the end, to the last word of Picot's strange confession before the magistrates, and then the paper dropped from her hands.

"My father the murderer of Von Rosenberg, and I--I the cause of it!" she murmured in horror-stricken accents. For a little while she sat like a woman stunned, stupefied, her eyes staring into vacancy, her mind a whirling chaos in which thoughts and fancies the most

bizarre and incongruous came and went, mixing and mingling with each other in a sort of mad Brocken dance, all the elements of which were lurid, vague, and elusive.

How long she sat thus she never knew; but she was roused by the entrance of the landlady, who had come to reclaim the newspaper, there being three or four people in the taproom who were anxious to obtain a glimpse of it. Fortunately, the good woman was somewhat short-sighted, and perceived nothing out of the ordinary in her guest's appearance or demeanour. But her entrance broke the spell and served to recall Stephanie to the realities of her position.

For a little while all thought of her husband had vanished from her mind. This second blow had smitten her so much more sharply than the first that the pain caused by the former seemed deadened thereby. But now that her waking trance was broken, the double nature of her calamity forced itself on her mind. "My father and my husband shut up in one prison!" she said to herself; and it was all she could do to refrain from bursting into laughter. For are there not some kinds of laughter the sources of which lie deeper than the deepest fountains of tears?

Suddenly she started to her feet and pressed both hands to her forehead. "But why--why should my father have gone to Von Rosenberg to demand from him tidings of me, when I wrote to him from London telling him all that had happened to me and where I was? Can it be possible that my letter never reached him? Had he received it, there would have been no need for him to seek Von Rosenberg. Even after so long a time I could almost repeat my letter word for word. In it I told my father how I had left home with Von Rosenberg, but only after he had given me his solemn promise to make me his wife the moment we set foot in England. I told how, within an hour after our arrival in London, I had claimed the fulfilment of his promise, and how he had laughed me to scorn, thinking that he had now got me completely in his power. I told how I flung all Von Rosenberg's presents at his feet and left him there and then, and going out into the rainy streets of the great city, fled as for my life. I told how I hid for weeks in a garret, living on little more than bread and milk; and how at last, when my money was all gone, I found my way to the nearest cirque, and there obtained an engagement. All this I told my father in my letter, and then I prayed

him to forgive me, and told him how I longed to go back to him and my mother. Weeks and months I waited with an aching heart for the answer which never came. Then I said to myself: 'My father will not forgive me. I shall never see him or my mother again.' But the letter never reached him. Had it done so he would not be where he is to-day." Tearless sobs shook her from head to foot.

At this juncture in burst the landlady with an air of much importance. "As you have read the paper, I thought that maybe you would like to hear the news that one of the warders just off duty has brought us from the jail. Such times as we live in, to be sure!"

"News--what news? asked Stephanie faintly.

"John Myles has brought word--and he ought to know, if anybody does--that one of the prisoners--Crifton or Crofton by name--managed to break out of his cell in the night, and has got clear away. But that's not all by any means. The foreigner--him as accused himself in open court of the murder--was found dead this morning, poisoned by his own hand. The news will be all over England before nightfall--Gracious me, ma'am, whatever is the matter!--Mary, Eliza--quick, quick!"

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

Six weeks had elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapter. It was the evening of the return of Gerald Brooke and his wife to the home which they left under such tragic circumstances nearly a year before. Gerald's wound had proved a troublesome one; and after his release from custody, which was merely a matter of a couple of days, he had hurried up to London for the sake of obtaining the best medical advice, and there he had since remained; a few friends had met to welcome the home-comers; there was to be a grand reception by the tenants and others on the morrow.

First and foremost there was our dear Miss Primby, not looking a day older than when we first made her acquaintance. She had been filling the post of mistress *pro tem*, at the Towers for the past month. She was of an anxious mind, and small responsibilities assumed a magnitude in her eyes they did not really possess, and thereby worried her not a little. She will be thankful when Clara resumes the reins of power, and she herself is allowed to subside into that life of tranquil obscurity in which she finds her only true happiness. There, too, deep in conversation, were Lady Fanny Dwyer and Mr. Tom Starkie. Her ladyship was husbandless as usual, but seemed in nowise put about thereby. She and Tom struck fire frequently in the arguments and disputations they were so fond of holding with each other; they agreed to differ and differed to agree, and perhaps were none the less good friends on that account.

Flitting in and out and round about was Margery, spick and span in a new gown and gay ribbons, and a tiny apron all pockets and embroidery. For the first time in her life she had on a pair of French kid shoes, and she could not help stealing a glance at her feet now and again when no one was looking. She scarcely knew them for her own property, so changed an appearance did they present. This evening she was to enter on her new duties as "own maid" to her beloved mistress. Who so happy as Margery!

The turret clock struck seven, but Mr. and Mrs. Brooke had not yet arrived. They were to drive down from London, and ought to

have been here nearly an hour ago. Every minute Miss Primby grew more fidgety. Some accident must have happened, she felt sure. Perhaps the horses had run away; perhaps a wheel had come off the carriage; perhaps any of twenty possible mishaps had befallen the travellers. Fidgets are infectious, and before long Tom Starkie began to consult his watch every minute or two and to answer her ladyship at random. So many strange things had happened to Gerald during the last twelve months that anxiety on the part of his friends might be readily excused. The suspense was brought to an end by the sudden inroad of Margery, who had been down to the lodge, and now brought word that a carriage and pair had just turned the corner of the high-road half a mile away. This news sent every one trooping to the main entrance to the Towers. Not long had they to wait.

Gerald still carried his arm in a sling, but his other hand was clasped tightly by his wife. Neither of them could speak as the carriage wheeled into the avenue and the old home they had at one time thought never to see again came into view. Nor was there much said for the first few moments after they alighted. A kiss, an embrace, a handgrip, told more than words: of tears the ladies shed not a few, but they were tears which had their source in the daysprings of happiness.

Dinner was over and the company had returned to the drawing-room. The lamps had been lighted; but so soft and balmy was the evening that the long windows had been left wide open. Outside, terrace and garden and the miles of woodland stretching far beyond were bathed in a tender sheen of moonlight. Lady Fan was at the piano turning over some music. Mr. Tom Starkie was stooping over the canterbury, trying to find a certain piece of Schubert's he was desirous her ladyship should play. Clara and her aunt were talking together in a low voice on the sofa at the opposite side of the room. On the hearthrug, his back to the empty fireplace, stood Gerald. As he gazed on the pretty domestic scene before him, he could scarcely realise that all the strange events of the past year were anything more than the dream of a disordered brain. Could it be possible that only a few short weeks ago he who now stood there, so rich in all that makes life beautiful, had been a hunted felon on whose head a price had been set Incredible as it seemed, it was yet but too true. If proof positive were needed there was his arm still in a

sling to furnish it. His eyes turned fondly to the sweet face of his wife, to which the sunshine and roses of other days were already beginning to come back. How brave, how loyal, how devoted she had been through all the dark days of his trouble! The care and love of a lifetime could scarcely repay her for all she had gone through for his sake. She had indeed been that crown of glory to her husband of which the sage made mention in days long ago.

Clara, who while talking with her aunt had been absently gazing through the open window on to the terrace, suddenly gave utterance to a shriek, and springing to her feet, flung herself upon her husband's breast and clasped him round the neck with both arms. An instant later a pistol-shot rang through the dusk, and the bullet, passing within an inch or two of Gerald's head, crashed into the pier-glass behind. At the open window stood George Crofton, hatless and haggard, his white drawn features distorted by a scowl of fiendish malignity, the light of mingled hate and madness blazing in his eyes. Tom Starkie sprang forward as Crofton, with an imprecation on his lips, raised his revolver to fire again. But quicker even than Tom was a dark-cloaked figure which sprang suddenly into the range of vision framed by the window and dashed the uplifted weapon from Crofton's hand. For a second there was a cold gleam of steel in the moonlight and then the cloaked figure vanished us quickly as it had come. With a loud cry Crofton flung both arms above his head and staggered forward a pace or two into the room. "Gerald Brooke, you have won the game!" he exclaimed in hoarse accents; then making a clutch at his heart, he gave a great gasp and fell forward on his face. Gerald and Tom raised him. A tiny stream of blood trickled from his lips: he was stone-dead.

The *portière* was drawn aside, and all eyes turned on him who stepped into the room. It was the Russian, looking as cold, pale, and impassive as he always looked.

"Karovsky, have you had any hand in this?" demanded Gerald sternly, as he pointed to the dead man.

"I, my friend! what should I have to do with such *canaille?*" demanded the other with a shrug.

Not more than half a minute had elapsed from the beginning to the end of the tragedy. Under the direction of Starkie, two or three of the servants who had hurried in now proceeded to remove the body

to another room. While this was taking place the Russian drew Gerald aside. "Look here, Brooke," he said. "It is never wise to inquire too curiously into matters when no good end can be served thereby. This man had made up his mind to murder you. It was your life against his. It may be--mind you, I only say it may be--that that fact had come within the cognisance of the Brotherhood to which you and I have the honour to belong. If such were the case, they were bound by their laws to take his life rather than allow him to take yours. But this is nothing more than guesswork. In any case the scoundrel is dead and your life is safe; but it was touch-and-go with you, my friend--touch-and-go."

The unexpected appearance of Karovsky following so closely on the grim scene just enacted before his eyes revived in Gerald's mind certain apprehensions that had slumbered almost undisturbed for many months. All his fears took flame at once as his memory travelled back to that April evening when Karovsky's ill-omened presence first crossed the threshold of Beechley Towers. What if, at some future day, when all the world seemed full of sunshine, he should suddenly appear again with a message of the same dire import!

Gerald's heart seemed compressed as in a vice as this thought with all its dread significance forced itself on his mind. "Karovsky, he said in a dry hard voice, now that you are here, there is one question I would fain ask you."

"I think I can guess the purport of it," answered the Russian with his imperturbable smile. "You need be under no fear, *mon ami*, that I or any other emissary of the Brotherhood will ever come to you again with evil tidings. The man who was condemned to die is dead, and although he did not meet his fate at your hands, that matters nothing. The sentence has been carried into effect, and such being the case, by the rules of the Supreme Tribunal you, Gerald Brooke, are absolved in full from ever being called upon again."

THE END.

THE END

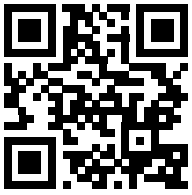
A Dead Reckoning

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