

A DEAD RECKONING.

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 under-lip very hard to help her in controlling her 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 case 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, aunty," 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 portiere 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 in 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 cord or two in an absent-minded way.

In rushed Margery panting once more, and to all appearance breathless. She made haste 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 mor'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 should I be speaking of but Master Geril?"

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

The two men retired down the room a little way and talked 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. 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 enquiries 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—"

"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 portiere 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 marjoromo.

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 cognizance.

"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? 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 he 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 hear me 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 Drumley in a rare wax 'cos he couldn't find Muster Geril!"

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 interrogations 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 head was scarcely as steady as it might have been. His breakfast consisted of 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 up-stairs 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 should 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 color 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 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 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 neighbor 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 while, speech seemed powerless to express a title of what George Crofton 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-closed eyes. "If one were to judge by your looks,

you might have committed the crime yourself."

Her words seemed 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 some 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 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."

Steph 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?"

"Explicitez-vous, sil 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 color 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 is dead! C'est bien—c'est tres bien."

(To be Continued.)

About the House.

SUNDAY COOKING.

In most homes the Sunday dinner is looked forward to as the principal meal of the week, and consequently the housewife is kept busy all Sunday morning preparing a number of extra or fancy dishes. She must necessarily give up church, and when the meal is over and the dishes washed she feels as if a day's work had been done. It may not be just the most satisfactory thing to sit down to very simple Sunday dinner, but one will soon become accustomed to it.

In a home where there is help or when there are one or more daughters who are old enough to help, each one can take turns in making the Sunday dinner. In this way the mother may have her much needed rest and a nice dinner can be prepared. One mother who has two daughters has found this an admirable plan, and she only prepares the dinner every third Sunday. The girls acquire a confidence in themselves and learn considerably. Their mother enjoys these days of rest, and she does not worry or help about the work, either. "Let them learn how," she says, "they cannot always have me with them." And the girls say they enjoy it, too, for they do and cook just what they please.

But the mother with a family of little ones, who never gets a chance for rest on week days needs her Sunday, and if she wants to attend church she cannot prepare a great dinner. There are any number of things which may be prepared on Saturday. Usually the baking is done then and there is fresh bread with biscuits and cakes. A pot of beans is prepared on Saturday afternoon and warmed for Sunday breakfast. The desserts for Sunday are also made on Saturday, and a few that are easily prepared and which are good cold are given below. When fresh fruit is to be obtained, nothing makes nicer dessert and is more quickly prepared. Served with rich cream and sugar any of the berries, peaches or bananas are delicious. Potatoes may be served in a number of ways which only take a short time if partially prepared on Saturday. It is customary to have a roast of some kind for Sunday, but this requires hours of attention. If cold meat is not relished, some kind which may be fried will only take a short time to prepare. Chickens may be partially fried on Saturday so that ten or fifteen minutes on Sunday will finish them. Saturday roasts may be sliced cold for Sunday evening, and the chicken or turkey for a salad may be chopped on Saturday, ready for the dressing on Sunday. There are canned lobster and salmon which may also be enjoyed on Sunday and which are always ready. Soups may be cooked on Saturday also, and reheated for dinner on Sunday. As for fresh vegetables,

nothing is so easily prepared as a lettuce salad. The lettuce may be washed and picked over in the morning and left in cold water to keep crisp until needed. Most canned vegetables require only ten or fifteen minutes to cook. Fresh asparagus if tender requires but fifteen minutes and radishes may be cleaned the day before or in the morning.

If the housewife is really desirous of having Sunday for rest she can with a little forethought serve the Sunday dinner in about half an hour from the time she commences to get it. There will then be no overheated tired mother who cannot enjoy what has taken her all morning to prepare. She can have it as early or late as she desires because there is no roast to spoil from being over-done, and no elaborate dishes which must be served as soon as ready for the table. She will have more time to spend with her husband who is away every other day, and if she chooses to go to church or to visit a friend, she has nothing to worry or detain her.

A few desserts which may be made on Saturday and served cold for Sunday dinner are herewith given:

Blant-Mange.—Two tablespoonfuls of cornstarch; four tablespoonfuls cold milk; two tablespoonfuls sugar; one pint of boiling milk and a pinch of salt. Make the cornstarch smooth in the cold milk; pour it into the boiling milk, stirring constantly until it thickens. Add the sugar and salt and also some kind of flavor. Pour into a mold to cool. Serve cold with cream or fruit juice.

Cocoanut Pudding.—Put a pint of milk into a saucepan; moisten three tablespoonfuls of cornstarch in a little cold milk and add to the boiling milk; beat the whites of four eggs to a stiff froth, add a small cupful of sugar to the pudding, with the eggs; stir over the fire for two or three minutes, add two cupfuls of grated cocoanut flavor with vanilla, and turn into a mold to harden. Serve cold with vanilla sauce.

Banana Cream.—This is a simple dessert. Peel the fruit and rub it through a coarse sieve, add as much cream as you have fruit, and a pinch of salt. To one pint of this mixture put two ounces of powdered sugar. Beat this with a whip until it is light and frothy. Pile the mixture in glasses, and sprinkle blanched and powdered almonds over the top. In the center of each place a candied cherry.

Bananas and Whipped Cream.—Pare and slice thin half a dozen bananas; lay them in a pretty dish, and sprinkle with half a cupful of powdered sugar and four tablespoonfuls of orange juice. Let them stand in a cold place an hour or more, and serve with whipped cream.

Rhubarb Blanc Mange.—Prepare rhubarb as for sauce, stew until in a pulp, sweeten and thicken with corn-starch which has been dissolved in cold water. The amount of corn-starch used depends upon the juiciness of the rhubarb. Pour into moulds while hot. Serve when cold with sweetened cream or whipped cream. This is delicious.

Fruit jelly is delicious and is always served cold. Make as much jelly from gelatin as is desired and flavor it with lemon. In the bottom of a wet mold put a layer of sliced fruit, either bananas, berries or oranges and pour the gelatin over. This may be made in layers if desired, but each layer of jelly must be allowed to stiffen before more fruit is put on. Serve with cream. Directions for making the jelly are on every box of gelatin. It makes a nice dessert and is quickly prepared.

Apples may be cooked in many ways and are always acceptable when nicely served. Instead of baking them with the skins on, pare and core them. Fill the cavities with sugar and pour very little water on them. When baked tender remove to a pretty dish. Serve cold with sweetened cream flavored with a little vanilla. If apples are tasteless as usually is the case so late as now, a little lemon juice makes a great difference in their flavor.

Here are two ways of serving the potatoes cooked Saturday:

Stewed Potatoes.—Put into a frying pan a small piece of butter, a little parsley chopped fine, salt, pepper and a half cupful of cream. Let this come to a boil; add cold boiled potatoes cut into dice, and let the cream boil up well around them, then add another small piece of butter and serve.

Potato Cakes.—Work into each pint of cold mashed potato a tablespoonful of butter, two eggs beaten light, and salt to taste. Make into cakes; roll in egg, then in cracker-dust, and fry in hot butter or lard. Serve at once.

STRAWBERRIES.

Strawberry Foam.—Wash, hull and cut, or mash slightly, one cupful of strawberries. Beat the whites of two eggs till stiff, add two heaping tablespoonfuls of powdered sugar and the berries, and beat until very thick and stiff. Use a broad bowl and a wire egg beater. Pile it lightly on a glass dish and serve with sponge cake.

Strawberry Whipped Cream.—This is not frozen. Mash one quart of berries; strain through a sieve; sweeten with three-quarters of a pound of white sugar and beat well. Pour in a pint and a half of rich cream and beat well for a quarter of an hour. Serve at once.

Strawberry Mousse.—Crush one quart of strawberries and add two cupfuls of powdered sugar. Let it stand two hours. Then add one pint of cold water, and the juice of one lemon. Mix it well, and freeze without stirring it.

Shortcake.—Into one pint of flour put a large teaspoonful of baking powder, and one-quarter of a teaspoonful of salt. Sift thoroughly. Rub into the flour four large teaspoonfuls of butter. Wet with a teaspoonful of sweet milk. Bake quickly in a hot oven. When well browned spread with butter and berries, whole or mashed, cover heavily with sugar, or serve hot, passing a pitcher of whipped cream with the shortcake cut in cubes.

Another recipe for strawberry shortcake runs thus: One quart of flour three teaspoonfuls yeast powder; one teaspoonful salt; half cupful best butter; one pint of sweet milk or water. Bake in four shallow pans; fill with strawberries lightly chopped in sugar with a knife—not bruised, but cut in pieces. Serve with the heated juice of one pint of berries and one cupful of sugar.