THE HEIR OF SANTLEIGH

OR THE STEWARD'S SON

CHAPTER XXII.

Dead!

In the first moment of the discovery the sensation of horror seemed to turn Guildford Berton to stone, and as he knelt, leaning, shrinking as far back as he could from the still body, it almost looked as if the hand of death had touched him too.

The silence was terrible; the very dimness of the room, in which the only light was that of the murky lantern, lent an additional terror to the moment.

He had not intended to murder her; he told himself so over and over again in those first dreadful minutes. He had intended stupefying her only, and so preventing her leaving the house until he had hit upon some plan for stopping her from carrying out her threat of denouncing him. At college he had dabbled in chemistry, and the science, especially in its relations to subtle poisons, had a strange fascination for him. He loved power, and to possess a drug the very effluvia of which should be sufficient to overpower an adversary had a strange, weird charm for him. He was proud of the discovery of the drug which could do its horrible work so swiftly, silently, and surely.

He had not meant to kill her, and now she lay dead at his feet!

Gradually the benumbed feeling passed away, and he began to shake in every limb, and a terrible craving to look at her face possessed him.

Crawling on his hands and knees, he lifted her head—shuddering as his hands touched her—and looked at her.

Her face—the face which he had once thought so pretty, which he had once, and so short a time ago, almost persuaded himself that he loved—seemed to look up at him reproachfully. It was white with the whiteness of death, but so placid, so peaceful that it might have been the face of a person asleep.

With a cry that was scarcely a cry so much as a wail, he put the head down and staggered to his feet.

No man is born bad, no man is wholly wicked. At that awful moment Guildford Berton would have relinquished all his ambitions, if by doing so he could bring Becca to life again. He threw himself into a chair and, flinging his arms out upon the table, let his head fall upon them, and surrendered himself to the demon of remorse, not penitence, which is a very different thing.

Presently the dead, heavy silence began to weigh upon him like a heavy weight; a ghastly desire to leap to his feet and break the stillness with a yell assailed him; and, feeling that his reason was going, he staggered clumsily to the decanter, and, lifting it to his lips with his shaking hands, drained it to the last drop.

The wine steadied him a little, and he tried to think. For some time his brain spun round to the dull, sickening tune of "She's dead, she's dead!" but presently his mind grew clearer.

How long she had been lying there he did not know—it seemed hours to him; but he knew that the daylight would be peering through the holes in the window shutters directly, and that the old woman who waited upon him would be coming down.

The deed was done beyond all undoing, and if he did not want to be caught like a rat in a trap, he must get rid of the body.

He got to the further end of the room, as far away from it as possible, and, clasping his forehead, which was cold as ice, with his hands that burned with fever heat, he tried to think.

What should he do? For one moment a wild idea occurred to him of sounding an alarm, and accounting for the presence of the dead girl by saying that she had fallen down in a fit. But the strange odor still clung about the room, and even the village doctor would be possessed of sufficient knowledge to contradict such an assertion.

He tried to recall all the stories he had read of men who had been placed in a simlarly dreadful position, but he could think of no case parallel with his own.

At last he seized the lantern and, carefully avoiding the still form, he went out of the house by the back way and crossed the garden. He felt better, more composed, in the open air and away from the silent reproach of his dread handiwork, and he could think.

At the end of the garden was a heap of leaves which had been swept up in the preceding autumn and allowed to remain. He got a spade from the toolhouse and, screening the lantern behind some bushes, he carefully scraped the leaves aside and began to dig.

And all the while he was at work—and he worked with the furious frenzy of a man digging for gold—he planned out his precautions against detection. All sorts of possibilities tortured him and turned the sweat that rolled down his face into drops of ice. Some one might have seen her standing outside the gate, and when she was missed that some one would come forward with the clew. She might have told some one where she was going; she had been talking evidently confidentially, with Cyril Burne, and might have told him. Her footsteps might be tracked in the dusty road. These and a hundred other suggestions tortured him, and drove him almost mad, so that when his task was done he staggered out onto the brink of the grave and shook like a man in palsy.

Then he went back to the house—slowly, as if every step were leading him to his own grave.

In an incredibly short time he had accomplished his dread task, and he stood once again in the silent room, with something clinched in the palm of his hand.

It was Cyril's ring, which he had taken from Becca's finger.

He held it so tightly that its pressure hurt him and reminded him that he was holding it. He opened his hand as if the ring had turned to an asp and stung him, and let it fall upon the table.

And there he stood and stared at it, at first dully and vacantly, but presently with a more conscious gaze.

He had hidden his victim from mortal eyes, but more, much more, was required of him.

In a few hours Becca would be missed and inquiries would be made. The first question that would be asked would be: With whom was she seen last?

He covered his eyes with his hands and thought keenly, acutely. Could he not invent some story based upon facts which would account for her absence?

If any one had seen her standing at the gate, he was lost. But he remembered that as he stood talking to her with the key in his hand, he had looked up and down the lane, and had seen no one. The lane led directly to no other house than the cottage; it was unlikely that any one should have been passing. The persons who were making the best of their way to the village. It was unlikely, too, that she should have told any one of her intended visit to him and its purport. If she had told Cyril Burne, for instance, she would have been almost sure to tell him, Guildford Berton, that she had done so.

Probably no one had seen her after she left the park. In that case almost the last person with whom she would have been seen was Cyril Burne himself.

If he could—his dark eyes began to flash—if he could only contrive to saddle Cyril Burne with the murder!

But an instant's reflection showed him the futility of the idea. Cyril Burne would be traced, and be able to clear himself, and—— Suddenly the idea he had been searching for flashed upon him.

Why should the murder be discovered? Why should she not have disappeared? Why should she not have gone off with Cyril Burne himself?

The blood rose to his face, and he raised his head and drew a long breath.

As a child puts into its place a picture puzzle, his acute brain set to work at once at fitting the incidents of the night into a consecutive shape to correspond with his hypothesis.

He took Cyril's letter from his pocket, and, spreading it out on the table, pored over it word for word.

He would be absent for months; he had gone without a word—other than this letter—of explanation to Norah. They were virtually separated, with this letter—while he held it!—as the only link between them.

Let Norah be convinced that Becca had flown with Cyril Burne, and the separation would be complete.

She would be too proud to write to Cyril for an explanation, and he, Guildford Berton, must by hook or by crook intercept any letter from Cyril to her.

The mental exertion served to dispel something of the horror that possessed him. He was fighting now, not only for Norah and the Arrowdale wealth, but for his own life. He must guard every look, every word of his own, must watch and weigh every look, every word of others. Was he equal to the task, or should he seek safety in flight?

As he asked himself the question, the next one, "Where should he fly?" arose to answer the first.

There was no place now where a murderer could be beyond the reach of the dread arm of the law.

No, he must remain and fight the battle to the end. If he could divert suspicion for two months, much might happen to render discovery impossible. In two months he might even succeed in winning Norah. In two months Cyril himself might be dead. He shuddered as he remembered how the longing to kill Cyril had come over him the last time Cyril was in the cottage. Was he a homicide by instinct?

The hours crept by as he sat in the silent room in the tomb-like house, scheming and plotting, and at last, unable to think any longer, he took the lantern and went upstairs to his bedroom.

The room was at the back of the house and instinctively he walked to the window and peered down into the garden.

How long he looked at the heap of leaves which hid its awful secret he did not know, but presently he felt the room spin round, and, staggering, he fell full length across the bed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Norah woke with a bad headache and a worse heartache; and, as is the way with women, she began to make excuses for the lover whom she had treated so coldly the night before.

There may have been some reason for his long absence and silence. She had treated him so coldly that it was little wonder he had avoided her; and as to the scene between him and Becca—well, Norah found it impossible to explain that away, but as Lady Ferndale's maid brushed the long red-gold tresses, Norah tried to find some excuse even for what she had seen pass between Becca and Cyril.

Becca she knew was a flirt, and the love-making, if love making it was, must have been altogether on her side.

In short, her love, strong and passionate, overcame her jealousy and resentment as all true love must, and by the time the breakfast bell rang she had gone a long way to forgiving Cyril, and was simply longing to see or hear from him.

The house was full of visitors, and their talking and laughing seemed to fill the place.

"My dear," said Lady Ferndale, as she put her arm round Norah and kissed her affectionately, "no need to ask how you are. You look as bright and fresh as one of the roses. Are you quite rested? Come and sit near me."

Exchanging salutations, Norah went to her place, and, amid the chatter and laughter of the young people, breakfast commenced.

Norah looked toward Lord Ferndale's place to see if there were any letter beside his plate, thinking, hoping that Cyril might have sent her a line; but Lord Ferndale did not hand her a letter, and her spirits began to droop, notwithstanding that she assured herself that Cyril would be certain to call early in the morning.

But the morning passed, and no letter and no Cyril appeared, and long before noon the roses had died out of her face and she became devoured by an anxious longing to reach home. It was just possible that he had written to the Court, she thought.

The young people had broken up into groups, some to play tennis and others to ride or drive, and Lady Ferndale pressed Norah to join one of them, and was filled with dismay when she declared that she must go back to the Court before luncheon.

"But why should you go so soon, dear?" she remonstrated. "Stay with us for a day or two; I'm sure Lord Arrowdale will not mind."

Norah declined; and Lady Ferndale, seeing that there was some reason for her persistence, at last yielded and ordered the carriage, and Norah started.

"Good-by, dear," said Lady Ferndale. "I don't know what your host of admirers will say when they call this afternoon and find you have flown. What shall I say to them? Oh, by the way, Norah, we have decided to ask Mr. Cyril Burne to paint a picture for us. I wonder whether he will call to-day."

It was an innocent remark, but Norah had hard work to keep the color from coming into her face, and it was lucky for her that the carriage started as she murmured a half-audible response' and all the way home she tormented herself with the thought that after all, perhaps, she had better have remained at Ferndale, as Cyril might call in the afternoon.

When she had reached home, her first question was whether any letters had come for her.

There were no letters for her ladyship, the butler replied, and Norah was going up to her room with a deeper sinking of the heart, when the earl came out of the library.

"Well, Norah," he said, making her a little bow, "you have got back. I am afraid you have tired yourself with your exertions," he added, as he noted her paleness and lassitude. "It must have been a terribly trying day. The few hours I was there exhausted me."

"I think I am a little tired, papa," she said.

He looked at her with something almost like pride in his eyes, for her popularity, and the admiration she had received, had flattered his vanity.

"You had better go and lie down for a few hours," he said, in a more kindly tone than usual. "I will send you a glass of wine."

Norah was in the condition to be moved by any show of tenderness, especially from him, and her eyes filled with tears as she went up the stairs.

While she was taking off her outdoor things Harman entered, and in her quiet way came to her assistance.

Norah did not notice that Harman had not spoken to her as she entered or that she was more silent even than usual, and, happening to glance at her, she was startled by the expression of the woman's face. She looked as if she were in some trouble, and had been crying, and Norah turned to her with ready sympathy.

"What is the matter, Harman?" she asked.

The woman's face quivered, and she dropped her eyes, but she replied in a low voice:

"Nothing, my lady."

Norah did not like to seem obtrusive, and she waited until Harman was on the point of leaving the room before she spoke again.

"I'm afraid you have one of your bad headaches," she said. "Never mind about my things," for Harman had some dresses on her arm. "Go and lie down in your own room, and if I want any one I will send for Becca."

The name left her lips reluctantly, and her color rose as she pronounced it, for ever since last night she had been regretting the impulse which led her to have anything to do with the girl.

"Becca, my lady——" began Harman, and Norah saw that she turned even paler than before, and had some difficulty in repressing her tears. "Becca is not here this morning, my lady."

"Not here?" said Norah, coldly; "I suppose she is tired after last night's gayety. It does not matter, I shall not want her; and please do not send for her."

"No, my lady," said Harman, almost inaudibly; then she seemed to linger and hesitate, and at last she said, tremulously, "your ladship hasn't heard, then?"

"Heard what?" asked Norah.

"I—I beg your ladyship's pardon; I thought you had heard."

"I have heard nothing," said Norah the indefinable dread growing more distinct. "Is it anything about Becca, Harman?"

"Yes, my lady; Becca is lost."

Norah stared at her in silent astonishment for a second or two; then she echoed the words in amazement.

"Becca lost! What do you mean, Harman?"

"I—I beg your ladyship's pardon for troubling you," said poor Harman, humbly. "I shouldn't have mentioned it just yet a while if—if your ladyship hadn't spoken about her; but Becca has disappeared, my lady."

"Do you mean to say that Becca is not to be found?"

"Yes, my lady."

"She is not in the Court, and she is not at home with her grandfather, and I have sent to look for her all over the village; but she cannot be found."

"Oh, but you should not worry yourself needlessly, Harman. Perhaps she stayed with some friends at Ferndale."

"There isn't any one in Ferndale she knows well enough to stay with, my lady, and if she had slept the night at Ferndale, she would have been sure to come home early this morning."

"Then what has become of her?" said Norah.

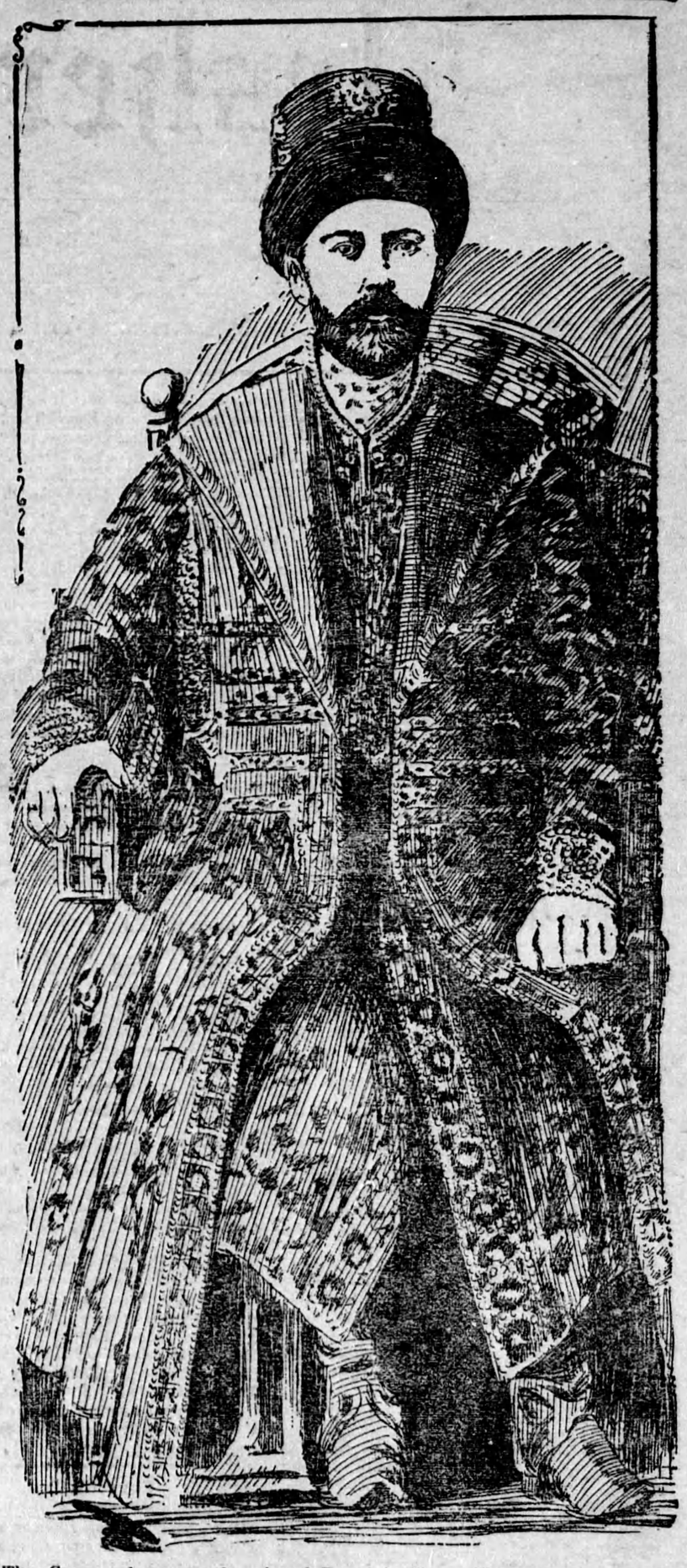
"I can't think, my lady. Becca is giddy and flighty, but I don't think she'd stay out all night away from her grandfather unless——"

"Unless what, Harman?" asked Norah, as the woman hesitated.

"Unless she'd been forced to, my lady."

Norah sat and thought with knit brows. All night Becca had haunted her, and she had dreaded to meet her and to speak to her, and now the girl had disappeared!

(To be Continued.)



The Czar, who recently signed Russia's Magna Charta, as he appears in his Coronation Robes.

KILLED THE PARROT.

Enraged Elephant Charged a Restaurant After a Boy.

To take part in the performance at the Lisbon (Portugal) circus three elephants arrived from France at the railway station recently, but the journey had upset their tempers, and they became troublesome after they left the train. There was a large crowd waiting to see the huge beasts pass, and the usual collection of small boys surrounded the animals. Suddenly one of the leading elephants rushed at one of the boys, who fled screaming into a restaurant. The angry animal followed, and caused much alarm among the customers who were at lunch. Tables were overturned and dishes and plates smashed, while the customers jumped over the counter and made hasty barricades of chairs.

The only victim was a parrot, whose terrified screams so exasperated the elephant that he encircled it with his trunk and silenced it forever. After much persuasion on the part of its keepers the elephant returned to the street, and with its companions was safely put in custody at the circus.

Like other trees, there is usually something shady about the family tree.