# A DEAD RECKONING.

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 labor 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 someone 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. I suppose—"

"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 highroad. 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 was 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 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 knuckle 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 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 recognized 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 the words 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 gone farther up the branch to a point close to where 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 set off down the line 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 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 la 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 that signal from Mellingfield three minutes afore now. Can anything have happened?"

"Pooh, man—what is likely to have happened?" said the other cooly. "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 Mellingfield.

"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 joined 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 ot, 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 of the 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 it was too dark to admit of her seeing him from that distance. She felt at once that she must get around 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 if possible 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 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, sped 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, so as to bring herself 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-tong of the telegraph bell. She knew that it was a signal of some kind, but was ignorant of its precise meaning. Then one of the men disappeared into the box, while the other—it was the one, she could now see, 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 upon 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 the man seemed to be carefully examining the trunk of a tree some little distance away. She strained her eyes in the endeavor to discover what his object might be, and then suddenly her heart gave a great bound. The trunk of the tree was defined like a faint silhouette against a background of star-lit 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 wild cry that rose 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 lips were closely muffled. Her trembling but skilful fingers quickly untied 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—and now that he was left alone, now that he no longer had Lardy Bill's audacious bulldog courage to back up 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. 8, 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 two the tattoo came to a dead stop. He had heard a sound that he remembered till well it was the noise caused by the explosion of a fog-signal. At the same instant the engine began to whistle its shrill [illegible] 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 was just beginning till it was scant of breath; and Slinkey knew that the train had slackened speed and was creeping 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. [illegible] 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 wisestt hing he could do be tode- 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 had sold us," said Lardy Bill with a fierce imprecation, "I'd scatter his brains with a bullet,t hough 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 back ground, 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 words 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."

(To be Continued.)

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"Mrs. Meeker," observed a friend of the family, "is a very superior woman. She can converse intelligently, I believe, on a thousand different topics." "Yes," sighed Mr. Meeker, "and she does."

# AGRICULTURAL

## SPECIALTIES IN FARMING.

The most common mistake in modern farming is entire compliance with what used to be the universal rule for farming successfully. The advice to beginners was always to watch the farm methods of those more experienced and copy them implicitly without change. That was, indeed, the way in which farming was almost universally done. There was a regular rotation of crops, each field following in its order. These crops were always planted and grown in the same way. Thus farming became with most a mere round of routine work, says American Cultivator, varying only as the differing seasons provided different tasks. He who could rise early, work most effectively and latest, made the greatest success. Thus farming became what no occupation ever ought to be, a life of monotonous and severe toil, unrelieved by the hope of much improvement, except as failures of crops in other sections, or foreign wars, increased the prices of farm products, and made them profitable. The successful farmers of the present day still have some crops grown after the old methods, and which it is supposed that anybody can grow. So they can, but in those universally grown because easily grown crops there is seldom if ever any profit. All the farmers who make more than a bare living have done so by getting out of the ruts far enough to take some specialty and make it a success. This can only be done by such close study of this specialty that the farmer is enabled to produce it of better quality or more cheaply than can anybody else. It is a common saying of the much-overcrowded professions of law and medicine that "there is room at the top." The same is true in farming, with the advantage to the farmer that there are a great many more chances for his success, working as he does with nature, than there is for the success of those who must win it by sharp competition with their fellowmen. The demand for the farmer's product is universal. One man's success does not, therefore, imply the failure of anybody else. With each farmer devoted mainly to the production of one specialty they may all succeed, for since the world began the food products that the farm has produced have never been more bountiful than the world has required. The usual surplus of food carried over from year to year is commonly only enough to supply the world's needs for a few weeks, so that should a single harvest fail all over the world, mankind would be very quickly confronted by famine. It is the making of specialties of different farms products that has largely in modern times lessened this danger of famine. If farming were altogether routine work it is conceivable that over wide areas where the staple grains are grown, the common routine methods might fail. But the advantage of making a specialty of some crop is not only that the specialist can, in ordinary seasons, produce more cheaply, but that he will be able to make a crop when if he grow only by routine methods failure would be inevitable. To this day in countries like India and Russia, where farm methods, are wholly on the routine plan, famine is frequent. The good farming which the growing of specialties requires always insure a crop of some kind, thus overcoming the unfavorable seasons which are ruinous to the farmer who has used only routine methods.

But it is to the farmer himself that the greatest benefit comes from cultivating some specialty. It becomes necessary for him to study this subject so as to learn thoroughly all that can be known about it. Only doing this can the specialty be made a success. This thorough study of some farm subject has quite as beneficial an effect on the mind as does the thorough study of the professional man which fits him for success in his vocation. The farmer may study nature and nature's' laws rather than books, but he will become not merely as well educated but better educated than the man who has studied books alone. The educated man, if he be a philosopher, will find when he talks with a farmer who has been taught by nature to think in the cultivation of his crops, that he is meeting men who have, perhaps, learned to think quite as deeply as himself. The homely wisdom of many a modern farmer easily sets aside the scoffing question of the ancient Jewish writer, who, in the Apocrypha, is supposed to be Solomon; "How shall he get wisdom whose talk is of oxen?" At least the wisdom learned on the farm, in converse with nature, may save the man whom the Jewish king despised from the sensual excesses into which Solomon's pride obliged him to fall. He had written that "pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," and his life illustrated these proverbs. The practical question of what specialty each farmer shall adapt himself to must be determined by locality and circumstances. Usually each locality is by soil, climate or nearness to market adapted to producing something better than can be produced anywhere else. Thus, when the skill and study of one man makes a great success of anything most of his neighbors will soon be found following him. It is thus that the possibilities of cranberry growing have been developed on marshy lands easily overflown that were formerly thought of little value, but are now held at very high prices. Other localities inland are found to be especially adapted to grape growing, and others still to varieties of the small fruits or to growing of apples, pears, peaches or plums. The low, mucky lands near Kalamazoo, Mich., were believed by a shrewd farmer to be especially adapted to growing celery. Experience since has proved this fact. It requires much knowledge of the best conditions for growing crops to decide what can most probably be grown successfully. But when the crop has been tried, and has proved adapted to the location, the value of all the land in the neighborhood is at once raised. What one man has done others may do. In this way the extensive cultivation of an article in one locality attracts to it buyers from all the world, and that in far greater numbers than if only the originator of the specialty were allowed to grow it. There can be no monopolies in farming. It would do nobody any good if there were. Land can be bought by anybody who has the knowledge of how to make it more profitable than can anybody else. Thus the thorough mastery of some specialty in farming or fruit growing becomes more valuable capital to whoever has it than would large amounts of land with buildings and all the means for cultivating it without the special knowledge how to make the best use of it. There is no kind of practical knowledge about farming that cannot be made valuable to the thinking and energetic farmer. It saves him from the mistakes which many men make in farming because they rely wholly on the expensive method of experience that is essential.

## THE HEN AS AN ADJUNCT.

Passing through the country the observing traveler is impressed with the low estimate placed upon the hen. Many only having a few, and these are left to shift for themselves, roosting in trees and out of the way places, and yielding returns just about equivalent to the care given them.

As an adjunct to dairying, the hen, properly treated, cannot be over-estimated. The reasons for this statement will readily present themselves to the thoughtful man. In the first place, the hen will find a way of utilizing many of the by-products of dairying. Skim milk these fowls will devour by the gallon. So with buttermilk. Without question, milk fed to hens will yield a readier and more profitable return than in any other way.

Then, too, butter and eggs go well together when it comes to marketing. How many times when selling butter is the call made for eggs! A few chicks taken along in the fall of the year find ready sale and add to the family exchequer. It is not necessary to buy very much of the feed consumed by poultry. We may raise all the corn, oats and buckwheat we need for this purpose. Warm quarters in houses constructed especially for them; careful attention as we bestow upon other domestic animals; and a little skill in disposing of the egg product will soon convince the most incredulous that hens and dairying go well together.

The garden and other fields near by which are under cultivation should be closely fenced from the hen. Valuable time and loss of patience will thus be saved. A hen out of place, as well as anything else, is a pest. We believe that one great source of the prejudice against the hen arises from the fact that she is not kept in her proper place. The hen is worthy of the farmer's serious consideration. She may be one of his best friends instead of being thought a dire enemy.

## THE OAT HARVEST.

I like to cut oats before they are fairly ripe. If harvested when the kernels are just beginning to harden, the straw will be almost as good to feed as hay, and the grain will be bright and rich, says E. L. Vincent, the well-known writer. I usually let my oats lie in the swath for a day or two, until well dried out. Then they are raked, bound and set up in shocks of ten bundles. There is room for a great deal of care in this part of the work. Grain carelessly put up will in stormy weather become wet easily. My way is to set up eight bundles "two and two." Then I take two bundles and standing them on the butt end, split them by pulling the heads down toward the ground until half the bundle has been treated in that way. Then I turn the bundles over the top of the shock, one on one end, and one on the other, butts together. These form a cap which will, after fairly settled, greatly protect the shock from injury by storm. Some hold the bundle against their bodies while preparing them for caps, and others bind part of their bundles with the band nearest to the butt and use these for caps. No doubt they do make better caps. The Dutch cap is made by setting the bundles in a round shock, and opening one large bundle so that it will stand with the butt upward, covering the entire top of the shock. This is a good way to put up grain. After the grain has stood for a week or two, depending upon the weather, it will do to go in. If the shocks seem damp, it may be necessary to set them apart for a few hours in the sunshine. Of course, if one has a large crop, and uses a reaper and binder, it may be necessary to let the grain stand a little longer before cutting, but even then it may be done before the crop is dead ripe. It will not shell then, the grain will be much finer, and the straw a great deal nicer. Oat straw is coming to be valued much more highly than formerly. It used to be common to see great stacks of straw rotting or burning down in the field or near the barn. We have learned that straw has a good market value, and that we may add many dollars to our receipts for the year by cutting oats early and properly caring for them.

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"They say people in this country spend more money on bicycles than on bread." "That's queer; bicycles can't be eaten." "I know; but then people can't show off with a loaf of bread."


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