

THE RATTLE WON.

CHAPTER III.

"Is it far to Grahame Towers?" she asked the porter.

"A matter of four or five miles before you get to the park, and then there's best part of a mile to the house. Take a fly, Miss?"

"Yes; fetch my luggage, please. There are two tin boxes with my name on them—Grahame."

She changed her last half sovereign at the refreshment bar where she had a cup of tea, gave the porter a shilling, and looking in the portmanteau at her slender resources as the fly started on its journey, she said to herself, "If I find no one there, whatever shall I do?"

She had taken irrevocable steps; but her courage had been sorely tried by the love of those she was leaving behind for ever. Even Mrs. Vic, at the last moment, had broken down, and forgiving had, with tears in her eyes, begged her to stay on. As for Tinkleton and the girls, the way they took on at parting was quite dreadful to remember.

In addition to these memories, reaction after the excitement of last night made the girl's heart very heavy indeed.

Her spirits revived, however, when the driver, turning round, pointed with his whip to a massive building rising boldly out of the dark green oaks on a distant hill, and told her it was Grahame Towers. It was something to feel that a place of such imposing grandeur, with all those green woods about it, was hers. The pride of her heart was stirred again when she caught sight of the magnificent avenue guarded by rampant panthers flanking the great gates at the entrance. It was noble!—and, thank goodness, the gates were open.

Half way up the great drive, they met a wain charged with the trunk of an enormous oak.

"Cutting my timber?" exclaimed Nessa with indignation.

A little further on the driver pulled up. A gentleman in shooting costume stood with a gun under his arm directly in the way.

It was clear to see by his commanding presence, that he was master there.

As the fly stopped, he came to the side, and, seeing a lady, raised his hat.

It was three years since they met, and for the moment he failed to recognise Nessa. Three years make a great difference in the appearance of a girl at that time of life; they make little or none in a man of middle age.

Nessa knew him at once, though his black whiskers, which were formerly trimmed to a point, were now shaved to the fashionable military cut—she knew him by those long, sleepy eyes, and that odious smile.

She bowed with severe formality.

In that moment he perceived that the haughty young lady before him was the disagreeable child he had seen last in a short dress.

"Nessa!" he exclaimed, the amiability going suddenly from his face, and leaving no trace save the two lines from the wings of his nostrils, "why on earth have you come here?"

"Because it is my home, and I intend to stay here for the present."

"You will do nothing of the kind. I told you that it was my wish you should stay in the school where I placed you."

"As you see, I have not stayed there."

"Then you will be good enough to return at once."

"Quite out of the question; I have rendered that impossible."

"How?"

"This is hardly a suitable place for discussing our affairs, Mr. Redmond."

Nessa glanced significantly at the attentive driver.

"Discussing our affairs, indeed! The discussion begins and ends here."

"As you will," said Nessa, with a shrug of her shoulders and a particularly provoking air of calm resignation.

"I insist upon your returning to Westham at once."

"It is no good insisting unless you can compel me to go; and you cannot do that."

"At least, I can prevent you from staying here, and I will," cried the man, livid with anger. "Turn round," he added, addressing the driver impatiently.

The driver turned about with a grin on his broad face and said—

"Where am I to take you now, Miss?"

"To the nearest magistrate."

"Why, that's Sir Thomas Bullen at the Chase."

"Then drive to the Chase."

Then turning slightly towards Redmond, she added, "If I have no right to set foot in my own house, you certainly have none."

"You think the magistrate has the power to settle a legal question of that kind?" Redmond said with an assumption of contempt that failed to check his anxiety, laying his hand on the side of the fly, keeping pace with it as the driver turned the horse's head.

"No; but he may tell me what steps to take to prevent you from cutting the timber on my estate," said Nessa, beginning to lose control of her temper; "and he may tell me," she continued, with rising anger, "how I may learn whether the eight hundred a year allowed for my maintenance has been properly applied."

The blow stunned Redmond. He had reason to dread inquiry. He could say nothing. His narrow, unsteady eyes betrayed the fear and the venomous hatred in his heart.

"Who-oah!" cried the driver, reining in his horse, as a light phaeton came sharply round the bend in the drive.

"Damnation!" muttered Redmond, furiously, as he caught sight of the phaeton and the lady who drove in it; the next moment, with abject entreaty in his face, he turned to Nessa and said, hurriedly in a low tone—

"For God's sake, go away! There's an hotel in Lullingford. I'll meet you there this evening, and agree to anything you like to propose." Then, with an oath for the stolid man on the box, "Drive on. What are you waiting for?"

her close-fitting jacket and neat hat. As she at length pulled up almost within hand's reach of Nessa she bowed, and looked to Redmond for an explanation.

There was no help for it. Redmond, with a sufficiently bad grace, introduced the two ladies.

"Miss Grahame, my—eh—step-daughter; Mrs. Redmond, my wife."

Mrs. Redmond smiled very sweetly, and bowed again. She was a very showy woman, tall and comely, with a heavy plait of shining yellow hair; dark eyebrows and lashes; and the most lovely pink-and-white complexion. Her white nose was a little too short, perhaps, and her upper lip a little too long; but her mouth was as small, and her eyes as large and divinely blue, as the conventional angels. At a distance Nessa thought she could not be more than five or six and twenty, but, on closer examination, she suspected herself in error. A little crease in the eyelid, a little pleat under the eye, a certain hardness and thinness in the mobile nostrils, and a pucker in her throat when she turned her head, made Nessa believe that she might be five or six-and-thirty, or even more; for people with that sort of complexion look young so long. On the whole, Nessa felt disposed to like Mrs. Redmond—she looked so amiable and simple, despite the touch of bistre under her eyes, which surely could not be natural.

But, while Nessa had been coming to this conclusion, the woman had arrived at a far more definite estimation of her character, and decided, amongst other things, that she was a young person whom it would be far easier to lead than to drive.

With the sweet expression still upon her face, Mrs. Redmond turned from Nessa to her husband, with the slightest interrogative lifting of her prettily-arched eyebrows.

"Miss Grahame came here to pay us a visit," he explained, with ill-concealed embarrassment; "but I have persuaded her to return to the hotel at Lullingford, where she will be much more at her ease. We have no accommodation in this wretched old ruin, you know."

"Oh, we are not so badly off as that, dear, we can certainly find a room, and if Miss Grahame will accept the best we have to offer—"

"Well, settle it as you please," interrupted Redmond. "I'm off for an hour's shooting," and, raising his hat, he turned his back and hurried off—saving himself, as was his habit, from the present difficulty, and leaving the worst for the future.

"Shall we walk up to the house, dear? Then we can talk as we go along," said Mrs. Redmond.

Nessa accepted readily. Mrs. Redmond handed the reins to the old man in livery who occupied the seat beside her, and, stepping to the ground, shook Nessa heartily by the hand.

"You will bring the luggage up to the house," she said to the flyman.

"If this here sort of thing goes on much longer," said the driver, as he once more turned his horse round, "my old os' will fancy he's in a suckus'!"

"Do you know, dear," said Mrs. Redmond, taking Nessa's arm as they walked towards the house, "this is the first time I ever heard your name! Men are so reserved about business matters, and I suppose you have some business relations with him?"

"Oh, yes; he is my guardian. I came here to have an understanding with him about my position."

"Your guardian! How odd he should never have told me anything about it. I feel quite hurt, dear; it looks almost like a want of confidence. I knew, of course, that Mr. Redmond was a widower when I married him, but he never told me that Mrs. Grahame had left any children. Perhaps he thought I should want to have you with me—as I certainly should, having no children of my own—that was accountable while you were a child, for men don't like children. But you are not a child now. Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"No, I don't know that I have any relations at all; I have never seen, never heard of any," said Nessa; and she gave a brief outline of her life at school, warning up as she went on under the stimulating sympathy of her companion, and telling finally the manner of her leaving Eagle House.

Mrs. Redmond was immensely tickled with her account of the performance, which Nessa gave with considerable humour, being of an impulsive and expansive nature.

"You can't tell how glad I am that you have come here, dear," said Mrs. Redmond; "and I'm sure that, with the money it would cost to keep you at school, you can provide amply for all your wants. Of course, your mamma left a proper provision for you?"

"Oh, yes. I have a copy of her will in my box. I was to have eight hundred a year during my minority."

"Eight hundred a year! That's quite a great deal. Eight hundred a year!" she repeated, reflectively. "But, surely, dear, you will soon be of age; you look quite a woman."

"I shall not be of age for three years."

"Why, how old can you be?"

"I was eighteen in June."

"Only eighteen! And, of course, when you are twenty-one you will have more even than you have now."

"Oh, I shall have everything. This estate—all is left to me."

Mrs. Redmond stopped with an exclamation that had something of dismay in it; but quickly recovering her self-possession, she drew Nessa's arm closer to her side, and said—

"You must forgive me, dear. This is such a surprise, and I feel so wounded to think that my husband should not have told me something about his position. I daresay he has his own independent fortune; but beyond that he has nothing whatever to come—to come from this estate."

"Nothing that he can legally claim; but of course," said Nessa, her anger subsiding, "of course I should never—never—" She hesitated, at a loss to find a phrase that might assure her new friend of a kindly intention without wounding her feelings.

"I know what you would say," said Mrs. Redmond; "that if my husband should happen to be in difficult ties, and we found ourselves without a penny in the world at the end of three years, you would give us a home and—and food—" She stopped, choked with disappointment, indignation, envy, and malice; but in the next moment masked her feelings under a Judas' kiss, as she

murmured, "Oh, you dear, dear, generous, kind-hearted friend!"

CHAPTER IV. A DAY OF RECKONING.

An embarrassing silence succeeded Mrs. Redmond's effusive outburst as they walked on, and then, happily, Nessa found something else to think about and talk about as they came to the end of the drive and she got a fair view of the house.

It was a long, gabled building, standing on a terrace, with a gatehouse in the middle flanked by two towers, the gate opening on to a courtyard beyond. The face of the west wing was completely covered with ivy; the growth on the east wing had been cut away in places to give light to the windows of the inhabited rooms, and stripped down from the richly-carved bargeboard of the end gable. The gatehouse and one of the towers alone showed the rich red bricks of the building and something of its fine architectural details. One of the chimney stacks in the west wing had fallen; there was a black hole in the lichen-covered roof where the tiles had been broken in. The weathercock over the gate had lost two of its arms; a rusted beacon basket hung from an iron gibbet on the tower. It was very picturesque, but particularly dismal. The ornamental grounds in the foreground gave evidence of neglect that was hardly less depressing to Nessa's spirits than the signs of decay in the fine old house. What must at one time have been a smooth lawn was now nothing but a waste of rank grass and thistles; clumps of brier and bramble marked the place of flower beds. The yew hedge skirting the lawn was ragged and patchy; the trimmed figures in it had grown into shapeless monsters; there was not even a wild flower to give a touch of gaiety to the sombre scene.

"Oh, I didn't think it was like this!" Nessa exclaimed, with an accent of regret.

"I daresay not. I would not have come if I had known what it was like. It's like a horrid old church, and the rooms smell like vaults. And, look—nothing but trees to be seen. I detest the country."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because my husband talked about a pony chaise, and a fine old mansion, and shooting parties, and the society of good old country families. I got the pony chaise—before I left London; but as to the rest—well, that's the fine old mansion, the only shooting party I've seen in my husband, and the nearest good old family lives three miles off, and is never at home. I'm sorry enough I ever came here; and so are you, dear, already, I daresay."

"No, I am not," replied Nessa, in a tone of firmness that was not lost upon her observant companion. "Oh, it's a shame to let the place go like this!" she added, catching sight of a piece of carved wood on the heap of ivy that had been torn down from the bargeboard.

"I suppose somebody is responsible for the estate," said Mrs. Redmond, tentatively.

"Yes; I know there is a clause in the will providing a certain fund for the executor to employ in keeping the house and park in order."

"In addition to the sum for your maintenance, dear?"

"Yes; the two are quite distinct. You shall see for yourself."

"I might be able to explain it. Tell me, dear, who is the executor?"

"Mr. Redmond."

Mrs. Redmond's face expressed no surprise now, but rather confirmation in a foregone conclusion, as she nodded her head slowly, half closing her eyes, her small mouth so tightly pursed that her long upper lip formed an unbroken line with her chin, her thin nostrils whitening with their dilation.

Nessa felt inexpressibly uncomfortable, finding in her hostility to Redmond an ally in his wife. She would rather have dealt with both as enemies or friends.

The flyman had discharged the luggage, and was waiting at the gate to be paid. Nessa would have hastened her steps, but Mrs. Redmond detained her.

"One moment, dear," said she, stopping short; "do you know how much that fund was for keeping the house in repair?"

"Two thousand pounds, I think."

"And as he has not spent a penny of the money on the place, he will have that nice little sum to answer for when the time comes to settle with you. He can put that off for three years; but there's another account that he will have to settle to-night. His day of reckoning with me has come!"

"You fear me, I suppose, because you have not a great stock of courage. If you cannot imagine any other reason, it's not worth the trouble of talking about."

"Oh, of course, you are angry because I didn't tell you of the existence of this girl. What was the use of telling you? You would only have worried about it."

"And you do not like being worried, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"There, we will say no more about it."

And by a considerable effort of self-control she maintained a silence that perplexed and troubled her husband.

At length, affecting a yawn, and stretching his arms, he said—

"Are you coming up now?"

"No."

"Well, I shall. I'm done up. By the way," he added, rising, "I think I shall go over to the Moor for three or four days' shooting."

"You needn't stay away so long. Miss Grahame is going to-morrow."

"Oh, well, I'm glad of that. Where's she going?"

"To London with me."

"What are you going there for?"

"To see your wife's will at Somerset House."

"You know what's in that will," he said, with difficulty steadying his voice.

"I know what was in the will you showed me when your wife was dying. She left everything to her dear husband, James Redmond. But that does not agree with the copy Miss Grahame showed me this evening, in which your wife leaves everything to her dear daughter, Venessa Grahame. I'm going to find out the truth with my young friend."

"And what shall we do," he asked with an effort, "supposing the will is in favour of that girl?"

"Supposing it is!" she said dropping her feet to the ground quickly. "Supposing it is!" she replied, rising and coming toward him with slow steps that kept time to her words. "You lying, cowardly, mean, miserable, crawling cad—you know it is! And you ask me what I shall do, as if I were fool enough to show my hand to such a shuffling trickster as you. One thing you may be sure of—I shan't stay to go down in a sinking ship with you. And go down you will, as surely as any other fool who puts out in a rotten shell. I shall see you in rags whining for charity to the girl you have robbed—if you are not sent to prison for robbing children in the streets; that's the only crime you have the courage for."

He did not attempt to defend himself. She looked at him, the supine villain, in mute disgust for a minute; then he rose again with the sense that she had been waxed by such a creature, she continued:

"The will you showed me when your wife was dying, was a forgery—you admit it"—he did not deny it but sat in stolid silence—"you forged it to hoodwink me. I believed it was a forgery, but I gave you credit for enough courage to stand by the forgery for your own sake. Why didn't you let the will stand, you fool?"

"I should have been found out; she had already made a will—the will that exists. It was too obvious; and I—I—I couldn't get the signature right. I—I—I couldn't sleep until it was burnt."

"You thought only of your own comfort—of sleeping easily. You never thought of me. You were content with having tricked me—with taking me out of the profession to satisfy your wretched jealousy, with leading me to throw away a dozen chances of settling well. I might have had any man I chose to look at."

"You preferred me."

"Why? Not for your virtues. You know it was for a fortune I accepted you. And having got me to believe in your promise, you did nothing to fulfil it."

"Yes, I did. I took her brother's name out of the codicil and put in my own. That was safe. It gave us twelve thousand pounds—and you've had your share of it. I didn't do that without risk. The will would have been disputed if the brother hadn't died in the very nick of time, thank God!"

"How much is left of that money?"

"Not a penny. I'm cutting the trees to pay your debts. It's you who have spent it all. I am a careful man."

"You will have to be more careful in the future—especially in your dealings with women. Before a week's out you will have to answer for the money you have misappropriated, and you won't cut a stick, unless it's your own, after to-morrow."

He wiped the perspiration from his face with his trembling hand.

"I've done everything for the best," he whined. "God knows I haven't got much pleasure by it. It was all for you. I shouldn't have done it for myself. You won't hunt me down for that, will you?"

She had seated herself, and sat tapping the ground impatiently with her feet. Her silence encouraged him to hope faintly.

"It's no good flogging a dead horse," he muttered.

She turned her shoulder upon him with a jerk, and an exclamation of disgust and contempt.

"Dead horse! If you had the spirit of a cur I could hate you less."

"You can do yourself no good; she can't touch a farthing of her fortune for three years. Why not let things go on till the worst comes?"

"Do you think the girl will wait passively while you rob her for three years? Not she. She doesn't need my help—doesn't want it. If I help her it is simply to help myself."

"She can do nothing without money. You have not lent her anything?"

"No."

"Then what can she do? She has no friends."

"None?"

"Not a soul. She can't get to London without money; and if she could, what lawyer would open a suit in Chancery without seeing his fees? You have not promised to take her to a lawyer?"

"It wouldn't matter what I had promised if I altered my purpose."

"You won't take her, Maud," he entreated.

"Can you suggest anything more to my advantage?" She turned about and looked him steadily in the face as she slowly put the question.

"We have been a long while coming to the point; but I thought it might be worth while," she continued in the same slow, suggestive undertone.

"I should have sat up all night to speak to you on the subject." She paused again, giving him time to get the idea she had led up to.

"Of course I will do all I can for you—three years is a good long time. And the timber is valuable."

"Bah!" she exclaimed, turning away once more in impatient disgust. "You are only fit to be a pickpocket." And then, as quickly turning back upon him, "Do you think I am to be satisfied with despicable pilfering? Do you think a few pounds—a few thousands, if you like—do you think that will recompense me for the best years of my life that have been thrown away upon you?"

"What can I do?" he asked in a piteous tone of helplessness.

"What can you do?" she repeated.

"Why, get me the whole of that fortune—for which I married you."

"How can I—how can I? The money can only come to me, even by that codicil, in the event of the girl's death."

"You've got it at last? That's it! The girl must die!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Fasting for One's Sins.

First I think that, far short of enfeebling and fretting hunger, which is unnatural and seems to me frequently to cause as evil an effect morally as it does physically, it would be a very good thing for nearly all men if they were more moderate in the quantity of food habitually taken. Three very hearty and almost plethoric meals a day, with meat at all of these, and various lighter "nips" and "afternoon teas" intermixed, is a not uncommon allowance; and as all wise doctors tell us, it is far more than is desirable for any one, unless it be for vigorously-growing boys and athletes who take an immense amount of exercise in the open air. It is told of one of the most eminent physicians of the day that visiting a person of importance he excited him to something like fury by saying: "There is nothing in the world the matter with you except this; you eat too much and you drink too much." "I sent for you, Sir, to give me a medical opinion," was the reply, "and I wanted to be cured from gout, rheumatism, and other maladies from which I am suffering." "And I have given you my medical opinion," replied the physician; "there is nothing in the world the matter with you except that you eat too much and drink too much. And my fee for visiting you is twenty guineas." The patient paid it with a paroxysm of indignation, but the advice might have been more valuable to many patients than a hundred prescriptions.

Secondly, I venture to believe that all society would gain by diminishing the consumption of meat. Queen Elizabeth ordered a fish diet on Wednesdays and Fridays, not for any ecclesiastical reason but (ostensibly at any rate, to encourage the fish trade, and to diminish the demand for flesh. That interference with the market was not wise; but I think that the adherents of the Vegetarian Society will do good if they persuade multitudes to learn the value of whole meal bread, and oatmeal, and vegetables, and fruit, and not rely so exclusively on beef and mutton. The poor especially might find in porridge and lentil soup and well-cooked vegetables a far cheaper, more wholesome, and more sustaining diet than the often unsatisfactory, coarse, and even unwholesome scraps which they buy from the butchers at a far greater cost.

Thirdly, if we are to attach any importance to a mass of medical evidence, the form of abstinence which consists in the entire abandonment of all intoxicants in Lent would certainly do no harm to the vast majority and might become in time a new means to promote that national growth in temperance which if once it reaches the poorer classes would be the cure for some of their deadliest and most appalling miseries.—[Archdeacon Farrar.]

The African King the Cause.

The French colonial authorities insist, in opposition to some recent views, that their war with Dahomey was forced upon them. It began, they say, by King Gelele's invasion of their protectorate of Porto Novo, where he plundered and burned many settlements, carrying off a thousand of the people, a part of whom were sold as slaves and the rest kept by him in captivity. A French officer sent to remonstrate was told by the King that he recognized no French protectorate in Porto Novo, and that his action was expressly meant to show this. That officer saw hundreds of human beings sacrificed at the royal ceremonies. On the death of Gelele, his successor, King Kondo, renewed the war, and attacked a body of Senegalese troops whom the French authorities had sent to reinforce the garrison of Kotonou, a port claimed by Dahomey as well as by France. These attacks were repulsed, but some Frenchmen who had risked remaining in Whydah, a place belonging to Dahomey, were seized and imprisoned. The subsequent hostilities as well as the negotiations for the release of the prisoners have been mentioned from time to time in the dispatches. Of course the essential question whether France occupied Porto Novo in violation of the rights of Dahomey still remains; but there is no doubt that she represents the movement of civilization against one of the strongholds of African barbarism.

The Heathen's Way the Best.

The King of Uganda might be pardoned if he should claim that the principles of Christianity do not always work satisfactorily in that Central African kingdom. When Speke discovered that country he found the brothers of the King in chains and about to suffer death because they were of royal blood and might menace the public peace by making claims on the throne. The missionaries induced M'wanga to suspend the custom when he came to the throne, and one of them, Karema, has plunged the country into civil war, utilizing the chance when he was in power to kill all his brothers except M'wanga, who was out of reach. As the civil war is still in progress, the heathen must be convinced that the old way of securing the public peace was much better suited at Uganda than the foreign innovation of letting the superfluous princes live. This may not be perfect logic; but it is strongly akin to the arguments by which the injuriousness of economic forces is demonstrated, for the vindication of trusts of pools.