

THE RATTLE WON.

CHAPTER VII.
AT THEIR MERCY.

Nessa lay where she had sunk, her cheek pressing the pillow, her head thrown backward towards the wall. She breathed inaudibly; her bosom rose and fell with gentle regularity. Mrs Redmond brought the light close to her eyes; the lids, slightly parted, showed the blank, white body of the upturned ball under the long, curved fringe of the lashes, but they made no movement.

She turned to her husband, who stood at the foot of the bed craning his neck to watch the experiment with the earnestness of a surgeon following the course of an operation. He nodded satisfaction. She called Nessa by her name, raised her into a sitting posture, and let her fall back again upon the pillow, without making any visible effect upon the sleeper's senses.

"Come on! Do your work!" said Mrs. Redmond.

He drew back to the door, beckoning her.

"Where's the girl?" he asked in a whisper when she joined him.

"In her bed-room and asleep this last half hour."

"I shan't do it on the parapet. I looked at it this morning. It isn't natural that she should get out of the window."

"Where shall you put her then?"

He pointed down the corridor.

"Is it all ready?"

"Give me the light."

He took the candle, and she followed him down the corridor, away from the staircase, and towards the unoccupied side of the house. Beyond Nessa's room the wainscoted walls were grey with the dust of years. Cobwebs tattered the angles of the unused doors, and hung in ragged festoons from the low ceiling. At the further end there were signs of humidity; the boards yielded to the pressure of the foot; there was a growth of crimped, yellow fungus in the old moulding of the lower wainscot panels. The old door that closed the corridor was green in one corner where the rats had gnawed the rotten wood away and given passage to the damp air; a prismatic slime marked the course taken by a slug; the great hinges, the rivet heads, the heavy bolt, and hand ring were crusted with red rust.

They stopped. Mrs. Redmond drew her skirts together and glanced to the right and left in horror. She had courage enough for murder, but went in mortal dread of a spider!

Redmond pulled the ring, and the door, grating hoarsely on its hinges, swung back against the wall, showing a space of impenetrable darkness beyond. He dropped on his knees and thrust out the hand that held the light; the candle flaring and guttering in the current of cold air.

Mrs. Redmond stepped boldly to the door sill and looked in. She now distinguished brickwork on the opposite side, and knew that this must be the tower of which she had heard. It had once been floored, but the roof had fallen in and broken away the rotten planks, leaving nothing but a couple of mouldering cross beams and a narrow ledge of crumbling woodwork just beyond the sill.

"What is down there?" asked Mrs. Redmond. "Is it deep enough?"

Redmond took a brick from the debris that lay on the ledge and dropped it. One might have counted twenty before the hollow sound that followed reached their ears.

"That will do!" said the woman.

They left the door open and returned to Nessa's room. There Mrs. Redmond took the light, and nodded to her husband to do his work. For a moment he hesitated, looking down on the sleeping girl and rubbing one clammy hand against the other, his moustache twitching with the convulsive movement of his lips; then, with the energy of desperation, he suddenly caught hold of her and lifted her upon his shoulders. Now that he had overcome his moral weakness his physical vigour was capable of any strain. He was like those beasts of prey, also, for the most part cowards, who lose all sense of fear from the moment they are nerved to make the attack.

He carried Nessa down the corridor quickly, as if she had been a mere infant. When his wife came up with the flickering light, he laid the supine girl down on the edge of the door sill. That was not the easiest thing to do; it required dexterity and strength of no ordinary kind. The sill was not long enough to lay her out at full length; her shoulders had to be raised and placed at the edge of the wall. Without a firm grip the flaccid body would have slipped from his hands; a clumsy movement would have broken away the rotten wood on which she rested.

"That will do," said he, when he had disposed of her to his satisfaction. "The slightest movement will finish her. If she only turns her head she must topple over."

He was still kneeling with his hand on Nessa's shoulder. Mrs. Redmond bent down.

"If a touch will do it, why not push her down and be done with it?" she asked.

He knelt there meditating on this suggestion for a moment in silence; then rising and turning his cunning eyes on his wife, he said—

"You do it."

"Not I," she replied; "I've done my share. I'm not going to have a murder to answer for."

"Nor I neither," said he, taking the light roughly from her hand.

He looked to Nessa's position again, and then carefully closed the door upon her and shot the bolt. They stood there in silence, listening for the sounds that must come—a brush against the door, the rattle of rubbish falling down the pit, the scream of terror, the crashing of rotten woodwork, and then that dull, muffled sound welling up from below to tell that Nessa was killed.

"What are we waiting here for?" asked Mrs. Redmond with quick impatience, seized with a sudden panic she could not account for. "She is not likely to move of her own accord for hours."

They went back through the passage—he first; hastening to get away from the place and escape the awful sounds their ears were straining to catch. The panic was upon them both now. Near Nessa's empty room he stopped suddenly, catching his breath with a rattle in his parched throat.

"What?" ejaculated she, clutching his arm.

It was a trifle—nothing. His foot had struck against the shoe that had fallen from Nessa's foot as he carried her along. Yet this little thing had crisped the hair on his head and paralysed him for the moment.

His wife pushed angrily past him as the light fell on the shoe. He hurried after her, sick with the dread of being there alone. They stopped on the landing below, holding their breath to listen. They heard nothing but the rushing of the blood in their ears. They were under a terrible fascination, possessed by an irresistible anxiety to catch the sounds that in anticipation terrified them.

They entered an adjoining room, treading noiselessly, as if a sleeper were there whom they feared to wake. He set down the light upon the table. There was a bottle of whisky there, but he could not find the force to fill the tumbler that stood beside it. She, less irresolute, poured some water into the basin and sponged her face, attributing her weakness and sense of suffocation to the closeness of the night.

She stopped in drying her hands as she caught sight of her husband staring with outstretched neck towards the door. He stood in shadow there, but she could see his white face turned towards the stairs. After waiting a minute, motionless, she crossed the room hastily, the towel in her hand, and coming to his side, said, in a whisper—

"Is it over?"

He shook his head without moving from his position.

"Go out or come in, for God's sake!" she muttered. "You'd frighten the devil!"

She returned to the table, and half filled the tumbler with spirits. When she had drunk she pushed the glass across to Redmond, who had come back from the door; but he took no notice of it, having his face still turned towards the door.

"Drink!" she said, imperatively.

He turned eagerly, took up the glass in his trembling fingers, and emptied it; then, seating himself, he turned his face again to the dark space outside the room.

It was no good fighting against that fascination. Her eyes took the same direction as his, her ears straining for the last despairing cry of that voice which had brightened the day with laughter and lively chat. Now that the colour was washed from her face, she looked scarcely less livid than her husband in the feeble light of the candle that stood on the table between them. Every moment added to the terror of their situation, and brought fresh horror to their wild imagination.

Supposing the fall should not kill her, he thought—supposing from the bottom of the tower she should cry in agony for help? She could not be left there to die. The servant girl, when she got up in the morning, would hear her. Should he have to kill her outright? How? Must he lower a light to see where she lay, and then loosen a beam, to throw it down to crush her? He recollected torturing a cat in his boyhood. The thing would not die. It fastened its teeth and claws on the iron bar he thrust at it. He dared not put his heel on it; he dared not leave it, for fear it should drag its broken body into the light and betray him. Supposing he failed to kill Nessa from above—if her cries brought help, and she was brought up, mangled and torn, to convict him with her last breath?

The sweat dropped from his face. The suspense was interminable. Would the end never come? His wife had said that of her own accord Nessa would not move for hours; but surely hours had passed since then. Yet that could not be; the candle his wife had lit was not yet burned an inch. It might burn to the socket before their torture was over.

And then when the light was out, when the cry came, what was to be done? Who was to put the door open that it might appear Nessa had opened it and fallen in her sleep? How was the night to be passed before they could go through the scene laid down by his wife of pretending to miss Nessa: of sending the girl to inquire if she felt unwell: of making a search, and facing the world when the broken body was found and brought to light?

These were consequences that must be faced if all went as they expected; but if some unanticipated difficulty arose—if she should not be killed outright! Then his frenzied imagination conjured up new horrors.

Suddenly he started, and turned to his wife with gaping mouth. Her lip, too, had fallen. They had both heard it—a sound; but not that they listened for. Somebody was moving downstairs.

A step in the hall! Silence! Another step! Silence! Husband and wife staring at each other aghast, without realizing the cause of their terror. A sharp rap, tap, tap! Somebody must be knocking at the hall door with a stick.

It occurred to Mrs. Redmond that the hall door had been left open to admit air; it was obvious some one had come into the house. But she still sat, spellbound with a nameless fear. Another interval of silence brief in itself, yet painfully protracted to the two conscience-stricken wretches; then the handle of a door turned.

"You must go down and see who it is," Mrs. Redmond said.

Her husband shrank back, shaking his head. She snatched up the light, and went out of the room. He waited till the room was in darkness, listening for a sound from below and for that sound from above; and then, unable to endure the suspense, and in craven fear of the obscurity, he crept after his wife. Better be down there than be found quivering up here, if that cry came, and this visitor should rush up to discover the cause.

It was Dr. Shaw. He had walked into the living room seeing a light there. His first words when he saw Mrs. Redmond were—

"Good gracious, madam! what is the matter?"

He had never before seen her without colour on her face. But even colour would not have disguised her agitation from his penetrating eyes.

She made some excuse about the weather and her nerves, with as much self-composure as she could assume.

Just then Redmond, reassured by her tone of voice, ventured into the room. The two ghastly faces presented a curious spectacle to the student of physiognomy, and excited odd speculations.

"The weather seems to have affected you also, Mr. Redmond," said the doctor, taking his limp, wet hand.

Redmond faltered a perfectly unintelligible answer.

"If they had been doing a murder, they couldn't look more guilty," said the doctor to himself, dropping Redmond's hand with inward disgust, and seating himself.

"We didn't hope to see you so late," said Mrs. Redmond with an effort.

"It is late," assented Dr. Shaw, looking at his watch. "Half-past nine."

Only half-past nine! It should have been past midnight by the feelings of the woman and her husband.

"My round has been long; I was kept in the village," the doctor continued. "How is the girl?"

"I have sent her to bed," Mrs. Redmond answered, recollecting Emma for the first time. "I think I frightened myself for nothing. It is only a bilious attack, and I am sorry I troubled you to come out of your way, doctor."

Dr. Shaw accepted the apology with a bend of the head.

"And my other patient—the somnambulist?" The doctor addressed the woman, but his eye was on the man, who, with his head turned a little on one side, seemed to be listening, and with an intense concentration of his faculties that totally alienated his mind from other considerations. The doctor asked himself what on earth the man had been doing, with a perfect certainty that he was in mortal dread of discovery.

"She too has gone to lie down," said Mrs. Redmond in reply to the doctor's question.

"Indeed I left her in her room sound asleep, thanks to your mixture."

If she had been mistress of herself she would never have said that. But her mind was not proof against the terrible strain put upon it. It was only too clear that the doctor's suspicion was aroused by the abject terror and mental collapse of her husband. She repeated her words the moment they were spoken.

"My mixture!" he exclaimed, turning his eyes sharply upon her.

His quick glance, following a movement of her hand, fell on the bottle that stood on the lamp with a wine glass beside it. There was a milky sediment at the bottom of both; if any colour had been precipitated from the mixture he gave it should have been pink.

"Yes, your mixture, doctor," she said, putting her elbow on the table and trying to fix his eye with hers.

He saw what she was about to do—she intended by a backward movement of her arm to sweep bottle and glass from the table as if by accident. Without a moment's hesitation he put out his hand and took the bottle.

"You have been tampering with this," he said, putting the bottle to his nose.

"What do you mean, Dr. Shaw?" she asked, rising with an air of indignation.

"I mean what I say. You have been tampering with the mixture I gave. This bottle contained nothing but peppermint and water this morning. There is chloral in it now, and in this also," he added, taking up the glass. "Are you aware that in certain circumstances it is felony to administer a drug of this kind?"

"How do you know it has been administered?"

"By this bottle. There would have been no necessity to refill it if the chloral had been taken voluntarily. Mr. Redmond," he said, turning round sharply, "I address myself to you. I must see the young lady at once: where is she?"

Redmond was standing as if petrified, with his livid face towards the half-opened door. The doctor's address made not the slightest impression on him. Glancing at Mrs. Redmond, he found her face also blank with some unaccountable dismay. What was the matter with them both, he asked himself. There was a sound outside beyond the hall at the foot of the tower; that was what roused them. Was it all over? Had Nessa fallen without a cry? Or was this indefinable sound but preparatory to those that must proclaim their crime intelligibly—the fall of debris caused by a movement above to be followed by the crash and ringing scream they had been waiting to hear with such long horror?

The doctor, who had fastened his cob by the rein to a loose ring in the gatehouse, might have heard the movement, but certainly he could not have imagined that the speechless consternation of this man and woman was due to such a trifle. Their attitude was inexplicable to him. One thing however, was clear: he must look after the poor girl that Mrs. Redmond in perverse stupidity had been dosing. He made a movement towards the door.

Dread of discovery brought Redmond in a moment to his senses.

"Where are you going?" he asked with the energy of desperation.

"I am going to find the young lady your wife has drugged."

"You cannot see her. I forbid you to go to her."

"But I insist upon seeing her. Do you know that a dose of this stuff is enough to paralyse a feeble heart and cause death?"

He would have passed by, but Redmond clutched his arm and held him back, crying, incoherently—

"You shall not go up. This is my house. I forbid you. I'm a dangerous man. I'll kill you; by God, I'll kill you if you attempt it!"

The doctor looked at him keenly. It was clear enough he meant what he said; there was murder in his eyes, and he was a powerful man.

"Very good," said he disengaging his arm. "I shall not put your threat to the test. I have done all that professional duty requires, but I warn you that if anything happens to that young lady, you will have to answer for neglecting my warning; and you," he added, turning to Mrs. Redmond, and showing the bottle he held in his hand, "for this!"

He passed alone through the hall and out through the door under the gatehouse. But he turned his back on the place with an uneasy conscience—an assertive conviction that something more than professional duty called for his interference in behalf of Nessa. He felt that he was a coward to leave her thus at the mercy of the man and woman whose murderous character was stamped upon their faces. Turning in his saddle as his horse walked noiselessly over the grass-grown drive, he saw the house standing in a sombre mass, the towers and gables sharply defined against the light of the moon rising beyond. His flesh crept with the suspicion, almost amounting to certainty, that at this very moment that young girl whose vivacity and brightness had charmed him in the morning, was being murdered. And just then a faint sound reached his ear; it might have been a night bird's cry or the muffled shriek for help of a girl's voice. He stopped his horse involuntarily and listened. The cry was not repeated, nor the rustling of a leaf broke the dead silence; but he thought he descried a man's figure crossing the dark lawn stealthily towards him. Craven fear shook him.

"It was fancy," he said to himself, and

digging his heels into the cob's side he escaped.

CHAPTER VIII.

But it was not fancy; the long-expected sounds had come—a despairing cry, an audible fall within the empty tower. Prepared as they were, Redmond and his wife heard it with a convulsive start and a sudden check in their breathing; their eyes met in a glance of mutual intelligence. But a minute before they had heard the doctor unfastening the rein of his horse; he might be now within hearing. If he were there he must be silenced to save them from conviction by his evidence. Spurred to desperation by the sense of danger, Redmond needed no prompting from his wife. He slipped into the hall, and taking down his gun from the rack made his way rapidly to the front of the house. The doctor had pulled up, and stood out clear enough beyond the shadow of the building. He was within range, but Redmond hesitated to fire, doubting if he could kill at that distance. Clearly he had heard the cry; it would be fatal to let him escape with a wound. Redmond made a couple of quick, cautious steps forward, crouching down, and trusting to the deep shadow of the house to avoid discovery. Suddenly the horse started, and the next minute the doctor was lost to sight in the darkness of the avenue. What was to be done now? Two things were obvious: the doctor had heard Nessa's cry, and seen him. It was hardly less certain that he had gone off at a gallop to raise the alarm and procure assistance.

To go back to the house, and be taken there like a rat in a trap, was madness. With speed he might get to Lullingford in time to catch the last train: that would enable him to get on to Liverpool, where the morning papers would tell him whether the murder had been discovered. From Liverpool he could get away in the first outward-bound vessel, and save his neck. Without another thought, he threw down his gun and bolted.

Meanwhile, what had happened to Nessa? A strange singing and throbbing in her ears accompanied the first return of consciousness, and with that a bewildering inability to remember anything, and to realise her present position. It seemed to her that she was revolving with prodigious velocity in some piece of machinery; that in some way coloured light that passed before her eyes, the feeling of sickness and giddiness, the burning and throbbing in her ears, the confusion of ideas, and the incapacity to distinguish any object save patches and streaks of colour.

Gradually the whirling sensation slackened. The light took the form of globes floating upward, and faded away, leaving her in complete darkness as the motion came to an end and the feeling of giddiness passed off.

Then she became conscious that her eyes were closed, and that a sharp projection was pressing the back of her head. With the effort to open her eyes and move her head, a new phenomenon became evident: her will was powerless to influence a muscle of her body. She strove in vain to raise her hand, to stir her foot. It was as if she had been plunged into a bath of liquid plaster and it had hardened.

And now reviving recollection of the past suggested the idea that the opiate she took had thrown her into a trance, and she had been buried as dead. Her reasoning faculty was sufficiently awake to explain the inability to move by the equal pressure on her muscles of the surrounding earth. In imagination she felt the cold wet clay pressing upon her; the wonder to her was that she felt no suffocation, and breathed freely. But the sense of impotency was horrible. The futile endeavour to remove her head from the projection was maddening. She knew that she must lose her reason if this continued—like those martyrs she had read about, who died raving mad from the continued dropping of water upon their lips. If she had known that sure death would have resulted from a movement, she would have moved to overcome that awful cramp that seemed to frenzy every tissue and fibre of her body. Yet she knew that the cramp was imaginary, and that relief from this purgatory was to be obtained by reason and calmness. But reason only added to her horror.

She argued that if she could breathe she could surely cry out, and so, perhaps, make it known to those outside that she was there buried alive. She tried with every effort of her will to scream, and her breath escaped from her lips with scarcely an audible sound. Why was this? She felt the sweat trickling down her cheek; that could not be if her face were covered; and if her mouth was not imbedded in clay, why should her voice fail to produce a sound?

She lay there exhausted with her effort, on the border of insanity, her power of reasoning dissipated in a delirious tumult of recollections and fancies; and then, in frantic desperation, she strove again to open her eyes. The lid rose feebly, the ball of the eye rolled down, and she saw—what? a spark of light.

She kept her eye fixed with the strenuous energy of despair, too overjoyed at the victory she had won to care or think what the rich gold spark was that she saw.

After awhile she determined that it must be a star in the heavens, and that the black silhouette standing out against the lighter background must be foliage. She strained her eyes, and reasoned until she came to perceive that the foliage was ivy, and that she must be lying in the open air. But where, where?

By another fierce effort she moved one foot. It slipped from its resting place on the sill, and fell down till it struck heavily against one of the rotten joists. It was all a mystery to her; but it was with ecstasy of delight she found that her limbs were free, and that she was recovering the use of her will—was not buried there! Next she concentrated her energy into a movement of the hand, on the same side as the foot which she had released. That fell down too, her arm dropping from the shoulder as if it were lead. Her strength was just sufficient to enable her to pass her fingers feebly along the bricks against which it rested. She felt that there was damp moss there.

Suddenly there came into her mind something like an approximation to the truth. By some means she had come in her sleep to lie down there, and it seemed to her that this must be the parapet that she had observed running under her window. With that conviction came a consciousness of her perilous position, and she concluded that her foot and arm must be hanging over the side of the parapet.

Great God! what mercy had been shown her! But for this paralysis that bound her limbs she would have fallen into the courtyard and been crushed to death. If she had awoke in the ordinary way, and sprung up, nothing in the world could have saved her.

Now all her endeavour was to draw back her arm and foot. Under the continued strain her muscles were awaking to their duty. She lifted her hand up with comparatively little difficulty; but her foot was still numb and weak. Summoning all her faculties to the effort, she pushed with the lower foot to get herself further from the treacherous edge. She thought she was succeeding as her leg straightened out; but a crumbling, grating sound proved soon enough that it was the support that moved—not she. With a sudden crash, it slid away, and fell grinding against the wall down, till it struck the bottom far below with a dull smash.

As her foot fell, it seemed to her that the weight must drag her down, and terror gave sound to her voice. She screamed aloud, at the same time straining to maintain that rigidity which she had previously striven to overcome. She knew that she owed her escape to this. It was obvious that she lay upon a narrow and treacherous ledge between two blocks of masonry, and that while she could keep tightly wedged there, and perfectly still, she was safe. All depended upon her holding her foot firmly against one side and her shoulders against the other.

But dread, that gave her strength at first, robbed her of it presently, as she thought of what must happen if she gave way. Her heart fluttered with the recollection of that dull, sickening crash she had heard, and might hear again when she fell. Her knee gave way, and trembled under the forced tension. She dared not cry for help; yet how could help come if she could not make her position known?

A cold faintness, the beginning of unconsciousness, crept upon her as she lay there panting, with wild terrors whirling through her brain and sapping her self control. Oh, nothing could save her! That thought brought again a faint, despairing cry from her quivering lips.

What was that? A footstep near her? A sound like a bolt being drawn in its rusty holdfast?

"Oh, God, give me strength for another moment!" she prayed.

And then as the door swung back, she rolled heavily over at Mrs. Redmond's feet and lay there so still that the woman believed that the fright had killed her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Queer Battle.

At Stafford Springs, Conn., a facetious and determined old hen wanted to sit, but her owner took away her eggs, whereupon in querulous mood she quit her nest and blustered about the homestead, finding a great deal of fault with life. While she was doing that the family cat discovered her artistically wrought and rounded nest, curled up in it and deposited five kittens there. Then the hen came back, pitched into pussy, fairly drove her off the nest, flew in and sat on the kittens, evidently inferring that they were a new kind of chickens she had hatched in a moment of mental abstraction.

For a day or two the hen brooded away and the unhappy cat stalked about the premises, watching for an opportunity to get back her own. At the end of three days the hen had to quit the old stand for food and water and promptly the cat slipped into the nest, and taking the kittens one by one by the scruff of the neck, transported them all to a distant part of the hay-mow. Then came the hen home again, and when she found the fledglings flown she raised another noisy row all about the farm. She looked aloof and aloft, vainly for awhile, for the missing brood, and finally found them ranged alongside the parent cat. Again there was a battle and again the old cat had to flee from the furious henpecking, but she took along one kitten in her teeth, while the hen held the field of battle and our feline spoils.

With the kitten in her mouth the cat scaled a high scaffold and made for herself a new home, with her one offspring by her side, but the old hen is still encamped on the rest of the kittens in the new-made nest. She lays not, neither does she cackle, but it really looks as if she were going to bring up the four kits in spite of all drawbacks and setbacks.

A Spider's Execution.

A story showing the strength and intelligence of the spider has been revived. Following is the original account clipped from the Lebanon (Ky.) Standard of 1882: A tolerably tall task stands against the wall in P. C. Cleaver's livery stable. A small spider had fastened to the bottom of the desk a conical web reaching nearly to the floor. About 11.30 o'clock Monday forenoon it was observed that the spider had ensnared a young mouse by passing filaments of her web around its tail. When first seen the mouse had its fore feet on the floor and could barely touch the floor with its hind feet. The spider was full of business, running up and down the line and occasionally biting the mouse's tail, making it struggle desperately. Its efforts to escape were all unavailing, as the slender filaments about its tail were too strong for it to break. In a short time it was seen that the spider was slowly hoisting its victim into the air. By 2 o'clock in the afternoon the mouse could barely touch the floor with its fore feet; by dark the point of its nose was an inch above the floor. At 9 o'clock, at night the mouse was still alive, but made no sign except when the spider descended and bit its tail. At this time it was an inch and a half from the floor. Yesterday morning the mouse was dead, and hung three inches from the floor.

Early Rising Birds.

The thrush is audible about 4:50 in the morning. The quail's whistling is heard in the woods about 3 o'clock.

The blackcap turns up at 2:30 on a summer morning. By 4 the blackbird makes the woods resound with his melody.

The house sparrow and tom-tit come last in the list of early rising birds. At short intervals after 4:30 the voices of the robin and wren are heard in the land.

The green finch is the first to rise, and sings as early as 1:30 on a summer morning. The lark does not rise until after the chaffinch, linnet, and a number of other hedge-row folk have been merrily piping for a good while.