

BOYS AND GIRLS

Rasmus, or the Making of a Man.

(By Julia McNair Wright.)

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued

Without waiting to see how Rodney relished this plan of campaign, Rasmus leaped the fence, rope in hand, and crawled off in shadow of the well. Rodney had not much physical courage, and little muscularity; but Rasmus had challenged him to share in a bold act, and he felt as if he would rather die than show the white feather. He set his teeth, grew pale, fixed his eye on the clock, and at the appointed second marched boldly up the hill, carrying the rescued pail, and whistling—with a little quiver, 'My Grandfather's Clock.' Mr. Llewellyn took the school-poker, clambered over the wall, and kept even and hidden pace with Rodney, to defend him if Rasmus failed, or aid Rasmus if the maniac proved too much for him. As soon as the whistle of Rodney broke the air, the crazy man peered round the well. Seeing so bold a boy, he enraged himself, and leaping to his feet, like a lion in the spring, he roared to his prey, and brought down his club on the well till splinters flew from the curb. Rodney whistled gallantly, and kept on, quaking inwardly.

'You're dead, I'll bake you and eat you!' howled the maniac. Then he took the club in both uplifted hands and ran at Rodney.

CHAPTER VII.

Hard Cider.

'Should appetite her wish achieve,
To herd with brutes her joy would bound;
Pleased other paradise to leave,
Content to pasture on the ground.'

Rodney gave himself up for dead when he saw his enemy coming upon him in this outrageous fashion. He vaguely recalled that he had heard that when people were struck a heavy blow, they instantaneously felt the air filled with red flames, saw a rain of stars as if the firmament had fallen, and knew nothing more. He hoped his sufferings would be short, and was quite unconscious that he marched up the hill, still whistling, 'My grandfather's clock was too tall for the shelf' in a fashion that made the heart of Rasmus glad, and caused the children at the school-house to think him the bravest boy they had ever heard of. Then a coil of rope crossed the line of his vision; he saw the maniac caught by the descending loop, which tightened over his arms, and pinioned them to his side; then he fell backward to the ground, and his club flew away, while a mighty play of his slippered feet, kept time to a mighty bellowing from his throat. Mr. Llewellyn came over the wall. Rodney recovered himself, and Rasmus, stepping near his captive, remarked cheerfully:

'We've got the wust of you this time, old man—better give in.'

Then the house door opened, and out ran an elderly woman, who looked as if she had had life-long fellowship with sorrow, and after her, three young women.

'I hope he isn't hurt!' cried the woman.
'How lucky you came along,' said one of the girls.

'O, indeed, we were in a terrible way,' said another.

'He broke his cage,' added a third.
Rasmus cut off a length of rope, and suddenly seating himself across his captive's legs, was able to tie his feet.

'Now, let's look at that there cage—he's safe,' he cried.

They all adjourned to the kitchen, a large, bright room. In one corner, an iron cage of eight by eight feet was fastened to the wall. A canvas bed, with a nice blanket, was swung across one end, and two large hassocks for

seats were provided. The man had succeeded in getting one hinge of the door loose, and so had twisted himself out. Mr. Llewellyn said it could be repaired easily with two or three strong screws, which one of the young women went to the barn to seek.

'O, isn't it a dreadful place to put the father of a family!' cried the woman, seating herself in a rocking-chair, and swaying to and fro, crying, with her apron over her head.

'Why not put so dangerous a man in an insane asylum?' asked Mr. Llewellyn.

'I couldn't find it in my heart to do it,' said the poor creature. 'Such a proper figure of a man as he was, when we were married! Once love, always love, with me. I cling to him still, such a wreck as he is! And then, he saw this was coming on him, long ago, and he made me promise I'd never put him an asylum. Besides, he is very wicked to take care of, and I know they wouldn't have patience with him—on one could; they'd knock him about, maybe nearly kill him. I shouldn't have peace day nor night, fearing he was suffering.'

The younger women looked as if they could have stood almost anything, rather than the deplorable way affairs were going.

'You're laying out a murder, missis, I'm afraid,' said Rasmus.

'It may be; I don't know, indeed!' cried the unhappy wife, with a burst of grief; 'but he don't often get out. If one of the men had been home to-day, we could have stopped it; but all seemed pretty safe, and they had to be away.'

'The door is all safe again,' said Mr. Llewellyn, 'but if you will keep him in there, I think you should have a staple in the wall, and a strong girdle about him, so he cannot get out far if he breaks his cage. It could be so long as not to interfere with his moving as he liked inside. I can tell you where to get a rubber band that would be just the thing. He could not part it, and it would not hurt him.'

'Then I wish you would, and I'll send for it at once,' said the eldest daughter, 'and I'll have the smith come and set the staple; for such days as this will be the death of all of us.'

Rasmus and Mr. Llewellyn went after the maniac. All was quiet at the school-house. The teacher had gathered in her pupils, and was making up for lost time.

The herculean prisoner was led in, taking short steps because of his fettered feet. Rasmus put him in the cage, and locked him in; then he reached through the bars and untied his feet, and then took the rope from his arms.

'Don't leave him any rope!' cried the woman, 'or he will hang himself!'

The first use the prisoner made of his partial freedom, was to go to his basket of comestibles, and deliberately fire the several dainties at the heads of his enemies assembled in the room. After this dispersion of benefits, he tried to break down his cot by bouncing upon it. As he failed in that undertaking, he sat upon the cot, looked steadfastly at the floor, and repeated in a rapid tone:

'Am I Ammi, or am I not Ammi? Some say I am Ammi, some say I am not Ammi. I say I am not Ammi; but if I am not Ammi, who the nation am I?'

This formula he repeated again and again, with ever-increasing rapidity, until it seemed as if his tongue must fly out of his head.

'I guess we'd better be moving along,' said Rasmus.

'Please do not,' said the mother. 'Our men will not be home till dark, and I feel too shaken up to be left alone. We have plenty of room, and we'd take it a favor if you'd stop till after breakfast. I see, sir, from your nets and box, you are a scientific gentleman, travelling, and it cannot be an object for you to hurry along.'

'I am in no hurry,' said Mr. Llewellyn, 'and I dare say the lad is tired.'

'Such a pretty lad as he is, and so brave,' said the woman.

Rodney had never been called brave before, and he grew red with joy—to be brave was his ideal.

'Then I'll go down to the school-h'us, and get our bags,' said Rasmus, 'and tell the school-ma'am all is right.'

Jane, the school-ma'am, came back and helped her mother get tea; and a boy bringing up the cows, Lucy and Delia went out to look after them, and the fowls, as the men were away. Rasmus, however, had an eye to these congenial cares. He had not forgotten his farm-life; he begged as a great privilege to be allowed to feed and water the stock, and do most of the milking, while Rodney and Lucy fed the fowls, and collected eggs.

The unhappy Ami had fallen asleep from exhaustion. His wife, by means of a long iron rod, skilfully covered him with a blanket, explaining that they were chary of going into the cage, as he sometimes pretended to be asleep, and was yet wide awake, and ready for a spring. The men went into the cage together when needful, one defending the other. A lamp screwed on the opposite wall gave him light all night; the wife reached through the bars a napkin, on which she laid eggs, apples, and bread and butter, and a rubber bottle of milk was hung on a small hook. Thus the prisoner would have all the ameliorations that could be afforded his miserable existence. The family had a very nice supper, and the three guests were shown early to a double-bedded room.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, the three set off again, and now Rodney found himself more rested and fresher for the road; his feet were becoming accustomed to constant walking, and his legs seemed limber, and the proper size. Lucy had put up a nice lunch, as much as would do for dinner and supper for them all; the weather was increasingly fine, and their spirits rose as they left the home of so much sorrow behind them.

'Do you believe that's true?' asked Rodney of Mr. Llewellyn, referring to the story of the house they had left.

'Undoubtedly. I knew of a case in Connecticut where six brothers, hearty men, got infatuated with cider-drinking, so they would touch no other drink. They put a great number of barrels of the liquor in their cellar, and used it, very hard. In less than three years they had all died horrible deaths from the use of cider.'

'Well, it beats me why folks will do like that,' said Rasmus. 'Why would he take to cider, when he had such tip-top water as comes out of that well, and such quarts of rich milk as them handsome cows give, and such a cup of tea or coffee as them women know how to make! Land, what fools we mortals be! The things people put into their mouths do beat my time!'

'I notice one thing about you, Rasmus, quite remarkable in a man living as you do—you use no tobacco.'

'No, professor, I don't. My little chap had a dreadful delicate nose, he couldn't abide the smell of a man as chewed; he'd grow sick and whimper pitiful, at smell of a plug, and so of course I wasn't going to have that between him and me, and him such a pretty little fellow, with that misfortune in his back.'

Rasmus furtively drew his hand over his eyes, and remarked 'the sun was dreadful dazzling.'

'I wonder if my little lad is dead? It would be better than some kinds of living,' said he wistfully.

'No, I know he is alive, and you'll find him,' said Rodney.

'Once I made sure he was dead—out in Ohio. I'll tell you about it. It was about six years ago. I thought I had got on the track of the people that 'dopted Robin, and I heard that at this Ohio farm there was a little boy with a crooked back, that had been 'dopted. Well, I got there, and inquirin' round for the farm, in the neighborhood, some said they'd heard the child was dead. Well, I hurried along, and I struck the house, the time of the funeral. The people was standing around and the hearse was at the gate, and the preachin' was going on. Well, I made such a stir outside, among the folks, that they sent for the man of the house, and he said the little lad's name wasn't Robin, but James. I knowed it wasn't much trouble to change a name, so I wouldn't take no for an answer, wanting to see the coffin opened. I don't know how it would have turned out, only the preacher, a young man, he come out to me. Well, I told him how for four years I'd gone up and down the country looking for my lit-