

THE BATTLE WON.

CHAPTER V. THE FIRST STEPS.

Nessa awoke suddenly. In the confusion of ideas and impressions at that moment, she was conscious of a shapeless dream, of a brusque movement, of a light dazzling her eyes, and of a voice murmuring unintelligibly in her ear. Then, as her intelligence awakened, she perceived that she was crouching on the floor beside a bed, that the dazzling light was nothing more than a chamber-candle, and that somebody was supporting her, whom she presently recognised as Mrs. Redmond.

"What is it? Where am I?" she gasped in bewilderment.

"It's all right, dear. You are in your own room. See, this is your bed. Don't be frightened! You're awake now, aren't you? You know who I am!"

Nessa rose to her feet, and, still dazed, looked about her. She recognised the deep dormer windows—the leaded panes of the casement she had put open, on which the light of the moon was now reflected. It was Mrs. Redmond by her side, with the long plait of shining yellow hair falling over her shoulders on the crimson dressing gown.

"When did I come here—I don't understand?" she said.

"Why, you came here last evening. Oh, dear, what a fright you have given me!" Mrs. Redmond sank down on the side of the bed, putting her hand on her heart. The candle on the floor, where Mrs. Redmond had set it, flared in the current of night air from the open window.

"What have I been doing?" asked Nessa, now wide awake.

"You have been walking in your sleep; that's all; but you scared me out my wits."

"Walking in my sleep!" Nessa repeated incredulously.

"Yes, dear—you were halfway down the great stairs. When I heard the stairs creak, I thought it must be my husband come home. Oh, you can't tell what a turn it gave me when I caught sight of you there in your white nightdress! I knew you must be asleep by the way in which you felt the wall as you went along. But I managed to keep myself possessed, knowing how dangerous it is to wake people suddenly when they are like that. Your eyes were quite closed when I came to your side, and you suffered me to lead you gently back to your room like a little child. But in attempting to lift you into bed I woke you; and the moment your eyes opened your strength seemed to go, and you fell down. Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember anything!" exclaimed Nessa—"not anything. Oh, I am so sorry I frightened you."

"Don't say a word about that. I am only too happy to have heard you. Heaven only knows what might have happened in a horrid old den like this if I had not discovered you. There's a door somewhere that opens into the tower, where the floor has rotted away. If you had gone through there nothing could have saved you, you must have been killed. Get into bed, dear."

Nessa obeyed, quite overcome with astonishment at what she had heard.

"Is it late?" she asked.

Mrs. Redmond, looking at the watch on the table as she picked up the light, told her it was half-past twelve, and then offered to stay with her; but Nessa would not listen to this. Such a thing had never happened to her before, and she was sure it never would again. So, after a little half-hearted persistence on Mrs. Redmond's part—she seemed much more terrified than Nessa—they said "good-night" with an exchange of kisses, and Mrs. Redmond went down to her bedroom on the floor below.

Redmond was waiting there in the dark, his hands in his pockets thumbing a piece of paper into pellets, in anxious suspense. He raised his eyebrows interrogatively as his wife entered with her finger raised; she replied with a nod signifying that the prepared scene had been acted satisfactorily.

"She was lying on the edge of the bed," whispered Mrs. Redmond after closing the door carefully. "I pushed her down to the floor and when she woke up staring about her like a fool, I made her believe I had found her half way down stairs walking in her sleep. Remember that it won't do to tell two stories."

"I won't forget" muttered Redmond approvingly.

"Now as I've made a beginning we'll just settle clearly what's to be done next, and what part you are to play."

Remond nodded, they sat down together and plotted the destruction of the young girl who slept over their heads.

Nessa awoke early the following morning, invigorated by her long sleep, and feeling not a pin the worse for what had happened in the night. It returned to her memory as she crossed the room to look out of the dormer window and then only aroused a pleasant self-interest. Most young persons feel flattered by the discovery that they are distinguished from the rest of young persons by some peculiarity. The sun shone brightly on the dark oaks; a grey veil of mist hung over the valley, making it look like a lake; an industrious spider was spinning his marvellous net in the casement; a drop of dew glittered like a jewel on a blade of grass springing out of the moss-covered parapet. These things were observed by the young girl as she stood by the open window, and gave her a new zest for life.

It was quite early—only seven o'clock. She shrewdly guessed that Mrs. Redmond was not the kind of a woman who rises early, and would not be down to breakfast before ten o'clock, or thereabouts; so she would have three hours for exploring the old house and looking about her. After all, she reflected, it was not so bad. She was free to do what she liked for the time. It was wonderfully romantic; and the prospect of a severe tussle with Mr. Redmond was rather cheerful than depressing. She did not bear much malice in her young heart. It was pretty clear he had misappropriated some money; but every one is liable to get into difficulties, and we have all faults to be forgiven. Very likely she and he would dislike each other at first; but if they both gave way, and showed forbearance, they might in the end settle down comfortably. In three years she would have more money than ever she could know what to do with, and she should not miss, and certainly would not begrudge, the sum necessary to put the old house in order, and make some provisions for Mr. and Mrs. Redmond without hurting that poor lady's feelings.

With these charitable intentions she occupied her thoughts while she dressed, and that took no time. Then she began to explore the house, admiring the wonderful old furniture, and the pictures on the noble staircase, which looked all the finer for the dim light percolating through the ivy-screened windows. Going no further than the threshold of the very dark rooms, from a fear of rats and rotten floors, and shrinking back with a shiver from the black soil on the other side of the heavy iron-bound door on the landing, which undoubtedly must be the floorless tower that Mrs. Redmond had spoken about in the night, she went down through the old hall, with its trophies of antlers and armour, pausing before the modern sword and plumed hat hung between tiger's skins with the proud conception that her father had worn that hat and carried that sword into battle and then she passed out through the open door into the open air.

How fresh and sweet and bracing the morning breeze seemed after the musty smell of those dark old rooms! She got her feet wet in the rank grass crossing to have a full view of the house. It was a grand old building—that it was. No wonder she exulted in the knowledge that it belonged to her; that she would be sole mistress there in a few years, with the possession of all the grounds about, with their magnificent acres. She spent a good ten minutes trying to settle how she would have the buildings and grounds arranged so that their character might be retained, at the same time that they would be a cheerful residence for herself, where she might invite all her school friends to come, and Tinkleton, and old Mrs. Vic as well. Her bosom swelled with the most delicious plans of entertaining every one she knew in the most magnificent style—always, of course, without pretentious ostentation on her own part. And then she ran in to write to all those friends and tell them all about it, feeling, as she ran, that it was good to live.

Heaven knows how many letters she had written when Mrs. Redmond came down—and then there was a still a forgotten script to put in one of them. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and she had been writing all the time; but she was not a bit fatigued, and could have found twice as much to say.

Mrs. Redmond was astonished to find her so fresh and bright after what had happened in the night. She was disposed to regard it as a very serious matter. Nessa laughed at it.

"You must lock me up, and then I shan't frighten you any more," she said.

But Mrs. Redmond would not treat the affair lightly. She knew so many instances—mostly drawn from works of fiction—in which sleep walking had led to fatal consequences; and gave them in such lengthy detail that it seemed she could think of nothing else. Nessa would have given anything for a slice of bread and butter.

"Is Mr. Redmond coming down to breakfast?" she asked, on the first opportunity, by way of changing the subject.

"My dear, I haven't seen him since we met in the park yesterday," Mrs. Redmond replied, with the utmost coolness. "When there's anything unpleasant at home he generally finds business to keep him away. And knowing what he has to expect from us, it's very likely that he won't show his face here for a week. We certainly will not wait breakfast for him." She rang the bell, to Nessa's hearty satisfaction, but turning, she asked, "Did you ever see the opera of *Somnambula*, dear?"

Nessa shook her head.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she said to herself. "Now she's got on to plays, I shall hear all about Lady Macbeth, and nobody knows who else!"

But Mrs. Redmond's solicitude took a new channel when the girl brought in the tea and eggs.

"How's your head this morning, Emma?" she asked.

The heavy, sallow-skinned young woman passed the back of her hand over her dull eyes, and replied that it was still "a-splitting fit to bust," and attributed her disorder to "the boil."

"It is nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Redmond, decisively. "The doctor must see you. I shall want it in an hour. I am sure that dreadful girl is sickening for something," she added to Nessa. "It may be scarlet fever or smallpox. We will go over to Lullingford, and call upon Dr. Shaw, if you would like the drive. I have a perfect horror of illness."

Nessa accepted the invitation readily.

"I shall be ready in about half an hour," said Mrs. Redmond, when they rose from the table. "Have you any letters for the post?"

"Yes; all these."

"Give them to me, and I will put them in the bag, dear."

Then there was some discussion about what they should wear, and Nessa ran up to her room to dress.

As soon as she was out of sight, Mrs. Redmond took the letters up to her room, where her husband was sitting in a dressing gown, with a bottle of whisky and a sporting paper for refreshment. She laid the letters side by side on the table with the flaps upward, soaked a handkerchief, and spread it carefully over them. Then she began to dress. Taking off the handkerchief ten minutes later, she found that the flaps yielded to the insertion of a knife blade.

"Open them and read what she has been writing about," she said in a whisper to her husband.

Redmond, who had been watching the proceeding in silence, obeyed.

"Does she talk about walking in her sleep?" the woman asked.

"Oh, yes; something about it in every one of them."

Mrs. Redmond expressed her satisfaction by a nod. "No suspicion that she has been deceived?"

"Not a word."

"That will all serve as evidence on our side there should be any question. Close the letters carefully, and send them to the post when we are gone. I'm going to take her over to Dr. Shaw. She must have something to take—a mixture of some kind."

She was standing beside Redmond, plaiting her hair, as he replaced the letters and closed the envelopes. He nodded without looking up.

"It will have to be done to-night for certain," she continued. "You can settle

sion for Mr. and Mrs. Redmond without hurting that poor lady's feelings.

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CHAPTER VI. AT HER MERCY.

Nessa enjoyed the drive to Lullingford intensely. The rapid movement, the fresh air, the beauty of the sky, and trees with their undergrowth of golden brake and red-denning bramble, together with a sense of freedom and nascent power, intoxicated her. Her exuberant gaiety and young enthusiasm made her the most delightful companion in the world, even to Mrs. Redmond, who detested the country, and saw nothing but horrid troadstoals and scraggy wild flowers in the coloured fungus and stray hairbells that drew exclamations of delight from the girl.

Mrs. Redmond allowed her to take the reins and whip while she changed her gloves as they neared the little town. That was a supreme joy—a foretaste of that delightful future when she would have such an equipage, but with two ponies, and all to her self.

They left the chaise at the hotel, where Mrs. Redmond ordered lunch to be prepared, and went through the High Street, and here Nessa had a glorious quarter of an hour before some drapery and millinery stores. Long ago she had successfully rebelled against walking out in procession with the young ladies of Eagle House, and obtained the privilege of going out with Miss Tinkleton alone, but that was a tame affair indeed in comparison with shop-gazing in the company of a woman of the world with expensive tastes, like Mrs. Redmond.

Poor old Tinkleton's taste was all for prints that would wash and stuffs that would turn, and she could look at nothing that was not marked, a bargain at something three farthings, whereas Mrs. Redmond had an eye for colour and effect, and fixed her critical choice upon the most delightfully delicate and ephemeral fabrics with a reckless regard to cost.

She laughed at Nessa's old-fashioned notions, and the girl, only too anxious to learn what was "correct" in this new world to which she was born, took the rebuke gratefully, and liked her friend all the better for it. Nessa, impulsive, affectionate, and utterly ignorant of evil, saw nothing in her new friend to dislike, and a great deal that struck her inexperienced mind with admiration. She clung to Mrs. Redmond's plump arm, and in the fulness of her heart could ill conceal the warmth of her feelings. Mrs. Redmond was not dull to this silent homage; it was a long time since she had encountered any one so fresh and naive and bright. She really liked the girl—as much as it was in her nature to like any one—and quite regretted her approaching loss. Nevertheless she did not for one instant hesitate to ring the bell when they came to Dr. Shaw's house at the bottom of the hill. By that time Nessa had entirely forgotten the ostensible object of their drive to Lullingford.

They were shown into the consulting room. Presently the inner door opened, and Dr. Shaw came in—a meagre, elderly man, with dark, penetrating eyes, deep-sunk under a broad white forehead. He bowed stiffly to Mrs. Redmond, and smiled on Nessa as he took his seat. People smiled on her as one does instinctively upon a beautiful child.

"I've come to see you again about that dreadful girl, Emma," said Mrs. Redmond. The doctor inclined his head, and resigned himself to the inevitable. Not a week passed without a visit from this woman upon some imaginary ailment of her own or Emma's. He listened, his eyes resting on the paper knife he toyed in his long fingers, but his thoughts were chiefly occupied with Nessa. Who was she? How had she fallen into the hands of Mrs. Redmond? What was the painted woman doing with this fresh, innocent girl? What on earth were the girl's friends about to let her associate with an unwholesome woman? He disliked Mrs. Redmond. He knew her and her vices, and wondered how any one else could fail to see her physical and moral unhealthiness through the palpable mask of paint and dye and society manners.

"It's an ordinary bilious attack—nothing more," he said, looking up, his eyes resting first on Nessa, as Mrs. Redmond concluded her account of Emma's symptoms.

"I believe it is the beginning of fever. I must beg you to come and see her. If it is anything catching I must send her away to her friends at once."

"I am very much occupied. However, if you insist, I will do my best to call in the course of the day."

"Oh, thanks, awfully—thanks! And now, doctor, I wish you to prescribe for this young lady," Mrs. Redmond said, laying her hand on Nessa's arm.

Dr. Shaw looked sharply at the girl, who seemed no less astonished than himself by this demand. He smiled, as Nessa's surprise gave away to uncontrollable mirth.

"There's nothing whatever to laugh at," said Mrs. Redmond. "It is not natural, and it is certainly dangerous for a young girl to walk in her sleep."

The doctor assented to this, and listened with serious attention to Mrs. Redmond's account of the affair, while Nessa sat with bent head, amused and vexed by turns. It was so ridiculous to make a fuss about such a trifle. She raised her head, and met the doctor's eyes, blushing as if she had committed a fault when he spoke to her.

"You do not look a likely subject for nervous disorders of this kind," he said, kindly.

"I am sure I have never misbehaved myself before—in that way," she replied, with a laugh.

"You have never been so violently excited as you were yesterday and the day before," suggested Mrs. Redmond.

Nessa admitted that this was true.

"Of course," said Dr. Shaw, "great and unusual mental excitement might account for

a case of this kind, but I really see no cause for serious alarm. There is no reason to fear a repetition of the attack, especially if the excitement abates."

"But the excitement may not abate—the attack may be repeated," insisted Mrs. Redmond.

"Then you had better have some one to sleep in the same room for a few nights."

"I couldn't. I should never be able to close my eyes for fear of something happening. And you cannot expect me to put a servant in the room who is probably sickening for some horrid infectious complaint. Surely you can give something to produce sleep."

The doctor reflected a moment. What was he to do with this obstinate fool of a woman? It was impossible to convince her that Nessa would be better without the use of drugs. If he refused to administer anything, he was perfectly sure that she would go to the chemist and procure some poisonous stuff, such as she herself was in the habit of taking—a concoction strong enough to half kill a young girl unaccustomed to the use of narcotics. The best way was to comply with the request, and practise a harmless deception. With this conclusion he rose, saying that possibly a mild sedative might have a good effect, and left the ladies for a few minutes.

"It will do you no harm to take this before going to bed," he said, putting a bottle wrapped in white paper into Nessa's hand.

That was true enough; the bottle contained nothing but pure water tintured with cochineal and disguised with peppermint.

Mrs. Redmond went away triumphant. But she was not simple enough to believe that she had overcome the doctor's scruples. When they returned to the Towers, and she was alone in her room, she took the bottle from her sealskin bag, in which she had put it "for safety," removed the paper carefully, and poured away the pink liquid. She refilled the bottle from one of her own. The efficacy of that mixture in producing sleep she knew.

"Dr. Shaw is responsible for whatever happens now," she said to herself, as she wrapped the bottle in the paper she had taken it from.

They dined alone. Nessa tasted champagne for the first time and liked it. It looked so pretty in the delicate glass held up to the light, with the string of bubbles rising from the bottom, and it was quite as nice to the taste as lemonade—nicer, in fact. She agreed with Mrs. Redmond that it was the only thing a lady ought to drink at dinner, and resolved that when the time came she would fill her cellars with Cliquot and the Boy and Moet, and all the wines her friend talked about so glibly, and learn the difference between them. They lingered over dessert, Nessa listening with avidity to Mrs. Redmond's airy gossip about London, and that wonderful society in which lords and dukes seemed to be as plentiful as heart could desire. Oh what a contrast between this life of delicious trifling and the ponderous routine of her late existence, when one scuttled away from the table the moment a meal was finished, with nothing better than instructive recreation to look forward to! The girl thought that a butterfly must feel some such rich delight as hers in flitting aimlessly among bright flowers after its painful experiences as a caterpillar.

It was getting dusk when Mrs. Redmond rose from her chair and changed the subject. It was clear that Dr. Shaw would not come now. Emma had better go to bed; she was certainly sickening for something, and there was nothing else for her to do. She went into the kitchen and sent the heavy girl, nothing loath, to her room. Upstairs, Mrs. Redmond found her husband, with a face the colour of lead, pacing the bedroom.

"Are you ready?" she asked in a low tone, as she took up the sealskin bag.

He nodded in silence; and then, overcoming the difficulty of speaking, he faltered—"For God's sake, be quick! This is late!"

She scanned the quaking coward from head to foot, and, seeing his irresolution, thought it advisable on quitting the room to turn the key upon him.

Downstairs she found Nessa sitting in the gloaming by the open window, and for the first time that day looking grave. Her mind seemed to have taken on the subdued tone of the trees and sky. Night was falling upon her.

Mrs. Redmond sat down in the chair opposite, the bag in her lap.

"Why, how awfully solemn you look!" she exclaimed.

"I have been thinking," said Nessa; and then, in a tone of interrogation, she added, "Mr. Redmond has not come home?"

"No; surely that has nothing to do with your gravity."

"Yes, it has. I want to see him. I have something to say."

Mrs. Redmond laughed.

"Of course you have, my dear; so have I. He's perfectly aware of that, and keeps out of our way in consequence."

"But I want to apologise to him," said Nessa, quietly.

"Apologise?" exclaimed Mrs. Redmond with superb disdain. "I never apologised to any one in all my life!"

"Not when you had to acknowledge yourself in the wrong?"

"I never did have to acknowledge myself in the wrong, my dear."

"How nice!" said Nessa, naively, with a sigh. "I'm always doing wrong, and finding it out just when it's too late to be undone."

"I should like to know what wrong you've done my precious husband."

"I—I I have been thinking that I was very rude to him yesterday."

"Rude! Well, when you find a man robbing you—"

"But I'm not sure that he has robbed me. It's just like me to jump at a conclusion. I have no right to demand an account until I am twenty-one, and then he may be prepared to render it."

"If I tell you that he has spent every penny of the money entrusted to him for your maintenance; that he is hopelessly in debt; and is cutting down the timber to pay his current expenses; what then?"

"Then I am very sorry for him. He must have been very unfortunate to lose the money—he must have made some great mistake. I have made so many that I should be the last to think unkindly of him on that account."

"That's why I wanted to see him," the girl continued, in the same reflective tone. "I am so happy here that I should like to be at peace with every one. Surely we could live amicably together if we tried. After all, a few