

The Iron Coffin

From "Faust," A Romance.

By G. W. M. Reynolds

Otto Pianalla had strolled forth, shortly after sunset, from the house in which the shipwrecked party had been lodged by order of the Duke of Ferrara; and he bent his steps towards the shore to enjoy the refreshing breeze which the wings of the evening wafted over the deep blue waters of the Adriatic.

He was standing in a contemplative mood, upon a low reef which jutted out into the sea, when the sounds of footsteps fell upon his ears. He looked back, and beheld three men advancing towards him.

Not suspecting treachery, he again turned his eyes upon the broad expanse which lay at his feet, and in whose bosom was now reflected the gem-like lustre of a thousand stars.

But in a few moments he was seized rudely from behind: he attempted to resist—the effort was vain, for his arms were pinioned with cords in an instant;—he demanded the cause of this outrage—and his question elicited no answer.

The three men performed their work in dogged silence. Having securely bound Otto's arms, they led him away along the seashore for a considerable distance, so as to avoid the outskirts of the town; and at length they turned abruptly into a narrow path which ran through a thick grove situated upon a somewhat steep acclivity.

Otto endeavoured to learn the motive of his arrest: and he appealed to the men to satisfy him upon that head.

But they uttered not a word in reply!

When the uppermost verge of the grove was gained, the black and gloomy towers of the Castle of Solitude were seen at a short distance, standing out in dark relief against the star-lit horizon.

Otto sighed as he beheld that sombre fortress of which he had already heard enough to arouse the worst fears in his mind;—and a tear trembled upon his dark lash as he thought of his wife and children.

Then he reproached himself for giving way to that temporary depression, instead of putting his faith in the supreme power which had so often led him safely through dangers of a menacing and even an appalling nature.

The ominous silence in which his guards thus shrouded themselves was calculated to inspire the prisoner with the most gloomy fore bodings; and he prayed inwardly, as he accompanied them along a series of stone passages, lighted only by the lurid glare of the torch—he prayed, to prepare himself for death!

At the end of the last passage which they thus traversed Schurmann opened a low door, which was provided outside with massive bolts, padlocks, and chains.

The cords were now removed from Otto's arms; and he was thrust into the dungeon to which that well-defended door gave admittance.

A moment afterwards, and the ominous clanking of the bolts and chains fell upon his ears.

He sat down on the straw which littered the floor of the dungeon, and, amidst the almost total darkness in which he was plunged, began to meditate sorrowfully upon his condition.

What would his beloved wife and darling children think of his sudden and unaccountable absence? Oh! the idea of their terrible suspense was almost insupportable; and even the virtuous—the heaven-confiding Otto was now reduced to the brink of despair.

And for what fate was he reserved? For death, perhaps! But by what means was his end to be accomplished? Not by sudden violence—not by the bravo's knife;—or else wherefore should his enemies have conveyed him thither? Alas! was famine—was starvation to be his doom? He feared so!

But who were his enemies? Had he only one, or many? He knew that Lucrezia Borgia was the Duchess of Ferrara, and that she was then at the palace of Lissa with the royal court;—but surely—surely she could not be his persecutress? Had he not saved her brother from a dungeon—at the peril of finding one himself? No—Lucrezia could not be his enemy! And yet—and yet, who would date to perpetrate this outrage beneath the very eyes, as it were, of the Duke and Duchess to whose rule the island, with its fortress, belonged!

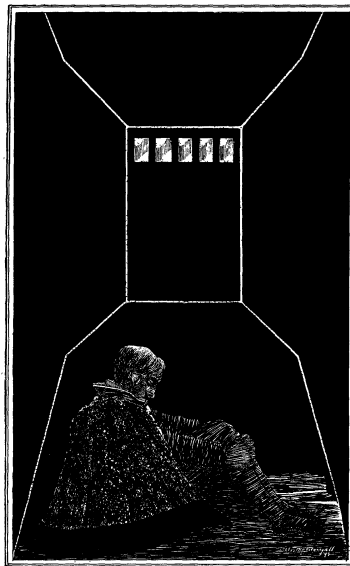
Terrible uncertainty!—bewildering suspense!

As Otto sate, thus ruminating, upon the straw of his cell, his eyes gradually became more accustomed to the obscurity; and a light dawned upon him by very slow degrees, and so faintly that when its presence first struck him he doubted whether it was not an optical delusion.

But, as he gazed—and gazed with straining eyes, he became convinced that there were really windows along the top of that side or wall of the dungeon towards which his face was turned.

Yes—he could now count those windows, guarded with their massive iron bars.

There were five; and they formed a range, separated only from each other by very narrow divisions.



The door was in the side facing the windows.

Otto rose from his straw, and endeavoured to raise himself up to the casements; but they were too high to reach with a spring, and there was not a single projection to break the surface of the wall.

And that wall—and the other walls of the dungeon—oh! there was no possibility of mistaking the nature of the material of which they were made; for as Otto passed his hand over them, the cold touch of iron sent a chill to his very heart's core!

In what kind of a place, then, was he? He examined it more closely with his eyes and hands; and he was speedily struck by the extraordinary shape of that dungeon.

Very long and very narrow, it at first appeared to him a section cut off from a passage by building two partition walls across it; but, no—the side walls were not straight!

More closely—more attentively still did he examine the dungeon; and at last—with his blood curdling in his veins—was he forced to stop at the horrible conviction that the dungeon was built in the shape of a coffin!

Yes: he was enclosed in an iron coffin—at one end of which was the door, and at the other the five windows!

“Oh! my beloved wife—my dearest children, am I separated from you for ever?” exclaimed Otto Pianalla, falling upon his knees in the midst of that dungeon of a shape so appallingly foreboding. “Great Father of Mercy, wilt thou make her so soon a widow—and them fatherless so young? But in thee I place my trust: thy will be done!”

Then from his bosom he drew forth a small box of sandal-wood, and piously kissed the relic which it contained.

That relic was the wood of the Ark!

Then he lay down, and endeavoured to court slumber; for he was fearful of trusting himself alone with his thoughts. Sleep soon fell upon him; and his dreams were to some extent cheering. The nature of those visions was pervaded by the idea of his confinement in that horrible dungeon; but amidst the gloom of this strange and mysterious immurement, his imagination caught glimpses of hope and scintillations of eventual facility.

He was thus hovering, in his slumbers, between the sad reality of the present and the brighter anticipations of the future, when the loud crashing sound of a bell awoke him with a terrific start

That bell appeared to ring upon the very roof of the iron dungeon, the metallic echoes of which responded with a din as if the sides—the floor—and the ceiling vibrated long and perceptibly to the sudden clang.

The bell, however, beat but once; though the humming sound continued to ring for more than a minute in the artist’s ear.

It was morning; and the interior of the dungeon was now plainly visible in respect to all the ominous features of its shape. The light that prevailed within was of that dim nature which precedes the sunrise by nearly half-an-hour. Yet the sun has already risen;—but then the windows were so small, the horn of which the panes were made was so dull in hue, and the iron bars were so thick, that even at midday no better light could penetrate into that living tomb!

When the first bewildering effects of the sudden clang of the bell had passed away, Otto’s eyes wandered round and round the dungeon—as if he could scarcely believe that a portion of what had followed him in his dreams was really true,—as if the horrors of his position had just burst upon him for the first time, in all their appalling forms and colours!

But when he had poured forth his matin-prayer he grew calmer, and then surveyed the dungeon with more tranquil attention.

Glancing first towards the door, he beheld some light object projecting as it were from the middle: he approached that point, and, to his surprise and joy, discovered a small loaf and a pitcher of water standing upon a sort of shelf attached to the door. On a closer examination, he observed that there was a small trap, or wicket, in the door, opening just above the shelf and by means of which the food had been introduced from outside.

“Heaven be thanked!” cried Otto: “then I am not doomed to die of famine!”

Returning, with the loaf and the jug, to his straw in the middle of the dungeon, the artist sate down, and ate and drank sparingly—for he knew not how long a period might elapse ere the provision would be renewed.

But as his eyes wandered round the horrible place from time to time, he was suddenly startled by a circumstance which he had not before noticed during the half hour that had now elapsed since he was awakened by the bell.

This circumstance was connected with the range of windows. He felt convinced that on the preceding night he had counted five—counted them over and over again,—remarked them, in a word, most attentively!

And now there were but four!

Was this possible? Could he have been deceived on the, previous night? or was he deluded now?

He advanced nearer to the wall which contained the windows—nearer to what might be called the head of the coffin;—and, surely enough, there were but four windows!

It was clear, then, that he had been deceived in his computation the night before: at least he thought so!

The four windows formed a range all across the top of the wall; and if there had been originally five, the removal or filling up of one must have caused a blank space somewhere along that range.

But there was no such space—the range was uniform, extending from angle to angle along the head of the coffin!

Oh! how shall we attempt to describe the gloom and weariness—the intervals of soul-crushing thoughts, succeeded by others of prayer and hope—which characterised the passage of that long, long day? Not a sound from without broke upon the awful silence of the dungeon; not a human voice, nor a human footstep—not even the notes of a bell proclaiming the hour,—no—nor the chirrup of a bird on the ledge of the casements, met the ear of the prisoner!

Night came at last—and he determined to watch at the door of the dungeon, to appeal to the person who might bring him food.

There he took his station, keeping his hand fixed upon the panel of the iron door, to ascertain the moment when the wicket was about to be opened—so fearful was he of losing the opportunity of addressing himself to a human soul.

But hour after hour passed; and no one came:—the panel moved not—his food was not renewed. And yet but a morsel of the loaf and but a drop of the water remained to him!

Wearied with watching—and reduced almost to despair by the thought of his wife and children—and now assailed by the horrible idea that his provisions were to be supplied so scantily and at such distant intervals, that a lingering death of slow famine must be his fate,—Otto Pianalla once more threw himself upon his knees, prayed fervently, and shortly after sank into a deep slumber.

His dreams were again to some degree of a cheering nature; and again were they suddenly and cruelly interrupted by the iron clang of deafening bell.

But this time it beat twice!

Otto started up, and glanced rapidly round the dungeon—or rather from end to end; for it seemed to have grown narrower!

Yes—and, as he gazed, it also appeared to have become shorter; for the straw in the middle struck him as being nearer to the walls every way.

But food—food!—for he was hungry! And, behold—upon the little shelf projecting from the door were a loaf and another pitcher of water.

“Again do I thank Heaven that famine is not to be my fate!” exclaimed Otto. “But for what purpose am I here? is it to linger in solitude, until the lonely captivity of long, long years shall hurl my reason from its seat? Oh! death were preferable to that! Ah!—what do I see?”

He uttered these last words with a species of agonising scream—for his eyes had wandered towards the windows, of which there were but three!

Starting from the straw, he hastened to examine the wall in which the windows were set. It was now so narrow that when he stretched out his arms, his hands touched the angles where the sides of the coffin joined the head.

But still the windows—the three remaining windows were uniform as a range: there was no blank space in any part. The sides, then, had grown closer to each other: yes—yes—he could now doubt the fact no longer!

And not only had the windows diminished in number;—they were lower than when he first entered that dreadful place! Still, the top of the range touched the ceiling—touched the lid of the iron coffin!

Could all this be a delusion? was he already turning mad?

No—no; he was sane—too sane to be deceived any longer as to the appearances which now struck terror to his inmost soul! For on the first night of his captivity, he was unable to reach the bottom of the windows even with a leap;—but at present he could touch the massive iron bars of the casements without so much as standing upon tip-toe.

And the roof—oh! that had become lower: it had descended with the windows!

Horrible ideas flashed to his mind:—those walls would collapse—that roof would descend—and his form was destined to be crushed to atoms in that iron coffin!—Or else the walls and the roof would only approach each other at such a distance, as to form the cell into the precise size, *as* it was already in the shape, of a coffin,—and thus would he be, as it were, buried alive!

Merciful God! was such to be his fate?

Recovering from the first access of despair, Otto Pianalla knelt down, and prayed fervently—fervently—more fervently, if possible, than he had ever yet prayed; and he rose in a state of mind considerably calmed—but, alas! calmed only with that resignation which nerves a good man to meet approaching death.

Wearily, wearily, passed the second day; and the third night arrived.

So overcome with the fatigue of intense meditation was he, that—abandoning the idea of again watching at the wicket—he threw himself upon the straw, and slept profoundly.

But, in his slumbers, a strange vision visited him.

He thought that some being, of undefined shape and mien, appeared to him—there, in that dungeon—and offered him liberty—long life—pleasure—power—happiness of all kinds, upon one condition, which this mysterious, vague, and dream-like visitant hesitated to name. But Otto pressed him to declare the terms on which these boons were offered; for the artist longed to embrace his wife and children again. Then it seemed to him as if the being leant over him, and whispered in his ear words of so terrible—so appalling a nature,—conditions of so fearful a kind,—that he started up wildly, and commanded the fiend to begone. Yet the shade appeared to linger; whereupon Otto instinctively drew forth a holy relic of the Ark, and by that precious symbol of God’s mercy adjured the demon to depart.

At that instant the dreadful bell upon the roof sounded,—once—twice—thrice!

Otto's senses were so bewildered that for some minutes he knew not where he was—what that deafening clang, three times sent forth, could mean.

But as his ideas gradually became more clear and collected, all the horrors of his situation and all the details of his dream recurred to his memory.

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Had he really been the object of hell's temptation? Had it indeed been proposed to him to barter his soul for liberty, power, and long life?

He entertained a horrible suspicion—almost amounting to a conviction—that such was the fact; and he thanked Heaven for having provided him with the means to repel the advances of the Tempter.

Then he glanced towards the windows, and averted his eyes with a cold shudder—averted his eyes from the two remaining windows!

He rose from the straw—but his head came in contact with the ceiling, which had now sunk so low, that he could not stand upright in the dungeon!

There, however, upon the little shelf of the door, were the loaf and the pitcher of water, which had been supplied to him while he slept.

“Two windows remaining!” mused Otto to himself, while his heart seemed ready to burst as the images of his wife and children flitted before him. “The bell struck once when the first disappeared—twice when two were gone—and three times when the collapsing walls Covered the third! To-morrow it will strike four—and the morning after, five; and then doubtless my doom will be sealed! By whose command do I thus suffer? who is the enemy that has destined me thus to die? Surely no human being possesses a heart so fiend-like—unless it be indeed the Borgia? Yes—yes; Lucrezia, this is your work:—you seek to punish me for the firmness with which I refused to become the slave of your passions at Rosenthal Castle long ago! Oh! I comprehend it all;—for thou, Lucrezia, art the only living being capable of such atrocity as this! But, if it be the will of Heaven that I die thus, prayers, and not curses, shall mark my last agonising moments!”

It was not, however, without feelings of ineffable horror that Otto surveyed the limited dimensions of that dungeon which now seemed more coffin-like than ever. By whatever strange contrivance it were that those walls were thus made to collapse, and that roof to fall lower, it was impossible to deny that never had infernal cruelty designed a more ingenious method of crushing the spirit by degrees, and the body perhaps in an instant when the time should come.

In the widest part of the iron coffin Otto could now easily touch each side with his extended arms; and at the foot, or lower end, it was so narrow that the door alone at present occupied that space.

The fourth night came; and Otto feared to sleep, lest the temptations of hell should be renewed. But he could not walk about—for his head touched the ceiling when he stood upright. He therefore sate upon the straw, and passed the weary, tedious hours in prayer. When, according to the calculation which he made of the lapse of time, light was approaching, he maintained his eyes steadily fixed upon the point where the two remaining windows had stood on the previous day. And soon—by degrees a faint glimmer was perceptible at the head of the iron coffin: then, when the dim ray had somewhat increased in power, the bell suddenly beat—sounding now as if it were just over the hapless prisoner's head, while the iron walls and roof vibrated terrifically with the rebound.

One—two—three—four;—and as the fourth clang fell on Otto's ear, the side against which he was leaning moved noiselessly, but firmly and steadily, inwards. He uttered a loud cry, and flung up his arms in terror;—but his hands encountered the roof, which had now sunk to the level of his head, even as he sat upon the straw.

Instinctively his eyes, a moment averted, were turned again towards the head of the coffin; and the dim light shone upon him through the one remaining window!

“To-morrow—to-morrow!” he cried, clasping his hands together;—“and all will be over! Oh! my dear, dear wife—my beloved sons!”

And he wept bitterly.

Those tears relieved him—as much as a man in his awful situation could be relieved; and, perceiving that his food had not been forgotten, he crept along the coffin to the door, now so narrow that a stout person could not have passed through it.

The shelf was still precisely in the middle—for so admirably arranged seemed the fearful mechanism which produced those strange collapses of the coffin's sides and lid, that the precise position of its salient features remained unchanged in reference to each diminished shape

Firmly impressed with the idea that this was his last day, Otto passed it in the way which the reader, who has studied his character, may conceive; and when night—the fifth night—came, he no longer feared to lie down to rest; for he felt himself nerved to resist all the temptations of hell—were they never so powerful!

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Yes—the fifth night had arrived; and Otto Pianalla lay down upon his straw, with the conviction that when the bell should ring in the morning as a signal for the fifth window to disappear, the walls and roof would grasp him in their arms of iron, and enclose him in that coffin of diabolical contrivance.

It was not death that he feared;—but he sorrowed to think that his family was destined to remain in a frightful state of ignorance as to his real fate,—perhaps supported for years and years upon the hope that he might return to them,—until, the heart becoming sick, the very duties of life would seem poisoned, and the end of those whom he loved so devotedly might become painful in the extreme.

In the midst of such reflections as these, he was suddenly startled by a sound—the first save that of the bell and of his own cries which had yet met his ear in the dungeon—emanating from the door.

He listened—listened in the most acute suspense.

Yes; it was indeed a sound as of a trap opening;—and immediately afterwards a strong current of air dissipated the almost stifling heat of the iron coffin.

“Otto Pianalla!” said a melodious voice.

Years had passed since the artist had heard those tones;—but he remembered them well—for the voice of Lucrezia Borgia was one of silvery softness.

“Am I indeed, then, the victim of your Highness?” asked Otto. “Oh! is human nature capable of such black ingratitude? Hast thou forgotten, false woman, all I did for thy brother Cmsar?”

“Lucrezia Borgia forgets nothing,” was the calm reply; “not even how Otto Pianalla scorned her love in the Castle of Rosenthal. Proud and obdurate man! didst thou not then see me at thy feet—and didst thou not shrink from me as from a viper? Didst thou not even take upon thyself

to reproach me for my crimes? But enough of that:—I am not come to reproach—I am here to save thee, if thou wilt”

“Can you ask me if I wish to escape from this horrible prison?” exclaimed Otto, joyfully. “Oh! release me, madam—restore me to my wife and children—let me embrace them once more—and I will pray for thee—I will even speak of thee with gratitude!”

“It is not gratitude that I seek at the hands of Otto Pianalla,” answered Lucrezia; “it is love!”

“Oh I would you impose conditions upon me as the price of my release?” cried the artist “Then know, bad woman, that sooner shall these walls crush me to a shapeless mass,—sooner shall this roof fall down this instant on the head which it already touches, even as I speak to thee,—yes—sooner will I die the most horrible of deaths than yield to thy desires!”

“Think not, haughty man,” returned Lucrezia, “that your death there will be immediate! Oh no!—that were a mercy too great for those whom the state-vengeance of Ferrara or my own private hatred sends to this living tomb! No!—shouldst thou scorn me now, as thou didst sixteen years ago in the Castle of Rosenthal, prepare thyself for a fate the horrors of which no tongue can describe! For when the fifth sound of to-morrow’s bell falls on thine ears, the walls and the roof will move so near each other that they will enclose thee in a space neither a whit larger nor a tittle smaller than thy coffin would be were it duly prepared to receive thy corpse. Therein wilt thou linger for days and days—a prey to starvation—feeding on the flesh of thine hands and arms—and with all the terrific consciousness which can aggravate the hellish torments of thy doom. Otto Pianalla, have I moved thee now?”

“No—no—fiend, and not woman, as thou art!” was the agonising reply. “Avaunt—leave me! I will not yield to thee—go!”

“Then perish in thine obstinacy!” replied Lucrezia; and the trap was immediately closed in the door.

But almost at the same moment the trampling of many feet and the sounds of angry voices fell upon Otto’s ears: the bolts and bars of the iron coffin were drawn back—the chains fell with a heavy clank upon the pavement outside—the door was thrown open—lights appeared in the passage—and a loud voice exclaimed, in a commanding tone, “Otto Pianalla, come forth! Thou art free!”

It is beyond the power of language to describe how joyously this invitation was obeyed—how the despair of Otto Pianalla was in a moment changed into the most fervent heart-thrilling delight!

Passing out from the iron coffin, the artist found himself in the presence of an elderly man of noble and imposing aspect, and in whom, by the star that he wore upon his breast, he had no difficulty in recognising the Duke of Ferrara.

The Duchess Lucrezia was a prisoner between two of the ducal guards.

Lucrezia’s countenance was ashy pale: but it was evident that she endeavoured as much as possible to conceal her emotions beneath an affectation of haughty indifference.

“Return at once to your family, excellent man,” cried the Duke, addressing himself to Pianalla; “but fear not that they have been in sorrow at your absence. Scarcely were you the inmate of this castle, when a message from me relieved them of all anxiety on your account; and an innocent falsehood conveyed to them a reasonable excuse for your separation from them for a few days.”

“A thousand thanks, my lord, for this kind consideration on your part!” cried Otto, overjoyed at intelligence so welcome.

“And pardon me,” continued the Duke, taking the artist’s hand, “if I have allowed you to languish thus long in such horrible suspense as you must have endured. But I required

confirmation of that profligacy which I had long suspected—a profligacy on the part of a woman whom, in spite of the ill report of her early life, I raised to be a partner of my ducal throne. Yes, Lucrezia—what have become of all the pledges of fidelity which you made me, when—dazzled by your beauty, overlooking your former errors, and willing to believe your representations that report had exaggerated your failings into enormous crimes—I led you to the altar? But know, vile woman, that you have been betrayed by your own bad agent—your own confidant; and that those words which you ere now uttered to this high-minded man, who nobly refused to purchase life with dishonour, have at length confirmed my long-existing suspicions!”

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“Messer Pianalla, I have naught more to say to you,” observed the Duke; “unless it be that I have placed at your disposal a vessel to convey yourself and family to any port whither it may suit your purposes to repair. Farewell—and forget what you have seen or endured within these walls!”

“Your Highness will pardon me,” said Otto, glancing towards Lucrezia, “if I venture to implore your mercy in favour of one who—wicked and depraved though she be—”

“Messer Pianalla,” interrupted the Duke, sternly, “seek not to place thyself between me and the execution of my sovereign justice.

“Again I bid thee farewell!”

But Otto still lingered—for, much as he had suffered at the hands of Lucrezia Borgia, he revolted from the idea of the punishment which he feared was in store for her. The Duke perceived his hesitation; and, stamping his foot with rage, cried, “Dost hear? Begone!”

The guards seized upon the artist, and conducted him through the long passages and windings that led to the gate of the Castle of Solitude.

A few minutes after he had thus been removed from the presence of the Duke, the iron coffin received another victim!

Unmoved by her prayers and entreaties—inexorable against her tears and supplications—for the haughty Lucrezia was humbled to the dust when the fiat of her husband went forth—the Duke remained upon the spot while the guards thrust the screaming, wretched, despairing woman into the horrible prison.

Yes—and with the true malignity of the dark Italian vengeance of that age, the Duke quitted not the entrance to the iron coffin throughout the night! And when the first beam of the sun appeared above the eastern hills and grove-topped heights of Lissa, the fearful machinery was set in motion.

Clang-clang went the deafening bell upon the dungeon roof:—five times it struck—while appalling shrieks came from within the living tomb.

And while the echoes of the fifth stroke were yet reverberating through the gloomy passages of the Castle of Solitude, the mysterious engine of death began its dreadful work.

On—on went the closing sides: down—down came the ponderous roof—the fatal machinery no longer moving noiselessly, but collapsing with a hideous crash—yet not so loud as to stifle the agonising screams and shrieks that echoed from the inmate of the iron coffin!