

## Chapter XII. The Prince and his deliverer.

As soon as Miles Hendon and the little prince were clear of the mob, they struck down through back lanes and alleys toward the river. Their way was unobstructed until they approached London Bridge; then they ploughed into the multitude again, Hendon keeping a fast grip upon the Prince's --no, the King's--wrist. The tremendous news was already abroad, and the boy learned it from a thousand voices at once--"The King is dead!" The tidings struck a chill to the heart of the poor little waif, and sent a shudder through his frame. He realised the greatness of his loss, and was filled with a bitter grief; for the grim tyrant who had been such a terror to others had always been gentle with him. The tears sprang to his eyes and blurred all objects. For an instant he felt himself the most forlorn, outcast, and forsaken of God's creatures--then another cry shook the night with its far-reaching thunders: "Long live King Edward the Sixth!" and this made his eyes kindle, and thrilled him with pride to his fingers' ends. "Ah," he thought, "how grand and strange it seems--I AM KING!"

Our friends threaded their way slowly through the throngs upon the bridge. This structure, which had stood for six hundred years, and had been a noisy and populous thoroughfare all that time, was a curious affair, for a closely packed rank of stores and shops, with family quarters overhead, stretched along both sides of it, from one bank of the

river to the other. The Bridge was a sort of town to itself; it had its inn, its beer-houses, its bakeries, its haberdasheries, its food markets, its manufacturing industries, and even its church. It looked upon the two neighbours which it linked together--London and Southwark--as being well enough as suburbs, but not otherwise particularly important. It was a close corporation, so to speak; it was a narrow town, of a single street a fifth of a mile long, its population was but a village population and everybody in it knew all his fellow-townsmen intimately, and had known their fathers and mothers before them--and all their little family affairs into the bargain. It had its aristocracy, of course--its fine old families of butchers, and bakers, and what-not, who had occupied the same old premises for five or six hundred years, and knew the great history of the Bridge from beginning to end, and all its strange legends; and who always talked bridgy talk, and thought bridgy thoughts, and lied in a long, level, direct, substantial bridgy way. It was just the sort of population to be narrow and ignorant and self-conceited. Children were born on the Bridge, were reared there, grew to old age, and finally died without ever having set a foot upon any part of the world but London Bridge alone. Such people would naturally imagine that the mighty and interminable procession which moved through its street night and day, with its confused roar of shouts and cries, its neighings and bellowing and bleatings and its muffled thunder-tramp, was the one great thing in this world, and themselves somehow the proprietors of it. And so they were, in effect--at least they could exhibit it from their windows, and

did--for a consideration--whenever a returning king or hero gave it a fleeting splendour, for there was no place like it for affording a long, straight, uninterrupted view of marching columns.

Men born and reared upon the Bridge found life unendurably dull and inane elsewhere. History tells of one of these who left the Bridge at the age of seventy-one and retired to the country. But he could only fret and toss in his bed; he could not go to sleep, the deep stillness was so painful, so awful, so oppressive. When he was worn out with it, at last, he fled back to his old home, a lean and haggard spectre, and fell peacefully to rest and pleasant dreams under the lulling music of the lashing waters and the boom and crash and thunder of London Bridge.

In the times of which we are writing, the Bridge furnished 'object lessons' in English history for its children--namely, the livid and decaying heads of renowned men impaled upon iron spikes atop of its gateways. But we digress.

Hendon's lodgings were in the little inn on the Bridge. As he neared the door with his small friend, a rough voice said--

"So, thou'rt come at last! Thou'lt not escape again, I warrant thee; and if pounding thy bones to a pudding can teach thee somewhat, thou'lt not

keep us waiting another time, mayhap."--and John Canty put out his hand to seize the boy.

Miles Hendon stepped in the way and said--

"Not too fast, friend. Thou art needlessly rough, methinks. What is the lad to thee?"

"If it be any business of thine to make and meddle in others' affairs, he is my son."

"'Tis a lie!" cried the little King, hotly.

"Boldly said, and I believe thee, whether thy small headpiece be sound or cracked, my boy. But whether this scurvy ruffian be thy father or no, 'tis all one, he shall not have thee to beat thee and abuse, according to his threat, so thou prefer to bide with me."

"I do, I do--I know him not, I loathe him, and will die before I will go with him."

"Then 'tis settled, and there is nought more to say."

"We will see, as to that!" exclaimed John Canty, striding past Hendon to

get at the boy; "by force shall he--"

"If thou do but touch him, thou animated offal, I will spit thee like a goose!" said Hendon, barring the way and laying his hand upon his sword hilt. Canty drew back. "Now mark ye," continued Hendon, "I took this lad under my protection when a mob of such as thou would have mishandled him, mayhap killed him; dost imagine I will desert him now to a worser fate?--for whether thou art his father or no--and sooth to say, I think it is a lie--a decent swift death were better for such a lad than life in such brute hands as thine. So go thy ways, and set quick about it, for I like not much bandying of words, being not over-patient in my nature."

John Canty moved off, muttering threats and curses, and was swallowed from sight in the crowd. Hendon ascended three flights of stairs to his room, with his charge, after ordering a meal to be sent thither. It was a poor apartment, with a shabby bed and some odds and ends of old furniture in it, and was vaguely lighted by a couple of sickly candles. The little King dragged himself to the bed and lay down upon it, almost exhausted with hunger and fatigue. He had been on his feet a good part of a day and a night (for it was now two or three o'clock in the morning), and had eaten nothing meantime. He murmured drowsily--

"Prithee call me when the table is spread," and sank into a deep sleep immediately.

A smile twinkled in Hendon's eye, and he said to himself--

"By the mass, the little beggar takes to one's quarters and usurps one's bed with as natural and easy a grace as if he owned them--with never a by-your-leave or so-please-it-you, or anything of the sort. In his diseased ravings he called himself the Prince of Wales, and bravely doth he keep up the character. Poor little friendless rat, doubtless his mind has been disordered with ill-usage. Well, I will be his friend; I have saved him, and it draweth me strongly to him; already I love the bold-tongued little rascal. How soldier-like he faced the smutty rabble and flung back his high defiance! And what a comely, sweet and gentle face he hath, now that sleep hath conjured away its troubles and its griefs. I will teach him; I will cure his malady; yea, I will be his elder brother, and care for him and watch over him; and whoso would shame him or do him hurt may order his shroud, for though I be burnt for it he shall need it!"

He bent over the boy and contemplated him with kind and pitying interest, tapping the young cheek tenderly and smoothing back the tangled curls with his great brown hand. A slight shiver passed over the boy's form. Hendon muttered--

"See, now, how like a man it was to let him lie here uncovered and fill

his body with deadly rheums. Now what shall I do? 'twill wake him to take him up and put him within the bed, and he sorely needeth sleep."

He looked about for extra covering, but finding none, doffed his doublet and wrapped the lad in it, saying, "I am used to nipping air and scant apparel, 'tis little I shall mind the cold!"--then walked up and down the room, to keep his blood in motion, soliloquising as before.

"His injured mind persuades him he is Prince of Wales; 'twill be odd to have a Prince of Wales still with us, now that he that WAS the prince is prince no more, but king--for this poor mind is set upon the one fantasy, and will not reason out that now it should cast by the prince and call itself the king. . . If my father liveth still, after these seven years that I have heard nought from home in my foreign dungeon, he will welcome the poor lad and give him generous shelter for my sake; so will my good elder brother, Arthur; my other brother, Hugh--but I will crack his crown an HE interfere, the fox-hearted, ill-conditioned animal! Yes, thither will we fare--and straightway, too."

A servant entered with a smoking meal, disposed it upon a small deal table, placed the chairs, and took his departure, leaving such cheap lodgers as these to wait upon themselves. The door slammed after him, and the noise woke the boy, who sprang to a sitting posture, and shot a glad glance about him; then a grieved look came into his face and he

murmured to himself, with a deep sigh, "Alack, it was but a dream, woe is me!" Next he noticed Miles Hendon's doublet--glanced from that to Hendon, comprehended the sacrifice that had been made for him, and said, gently--

"Thou art good to me, yes, thou art very good to me. Take it and put it on--I shall not need it more."

Then he got up and walked to the washstand in the corner and stood there, waiting. Hendon said in a cheery voice--

"We'll have a right hearty sup and bite, now, for everything is savoury and smoking hot, and that and thy nap together will make thee a little man again, never fear!"

The boy made no answer, but bent a steady look, that was filled with grave surprise, and also somewhat touched with impatience, upon the tall knight of the sword. Hendon was puzzled, and said--

"What's amiss?"

"Good sir, I would wash me."

"Oh, is that all? Ask no permission of Miles Hendon for aught thou



cravest. Make thyself perfectly free here, and welcome, with all that are his belongings."

Still the boy stood, and moved not; more, he tapped the floor once or twice with his small impatient foot. Hendon was wholly perplexed. Said he--

"Bless us, what is it?"

"Prithee pour the water, and make not so many words!"

Hendon, suppressing a horse-laugh, and saying to himself, "By all the saints, but this is admirable!" stepped briskly forward and did the small insolent's bidding; then stood by, in a sort of stupefaction, until the command, "Come--the towel!" woke him sharply up. He took up a towel, from under the boy's nose, and handed it to him without comment. He now proceeded to comfort his own face with a wash, and while he was at it his adopted child seated himself at the table and prepared to fall to.

Hendon despatched his ablutions with alacrity, then drew back the other chair and was about to place himself at table, when the boy said, indignantly--

"Forbear! Wouldst sit in the presence of the King?"

This blow staggered Hendon to his foundations. He muttered to himself, "Lo, the poor thing's madness is up with the time! It hath changed with the great change that is come to the realm, and now in fancy is he KING! Good lack, I must humour the conceit, too--there is no other way--faith, he would order me to the Tower, else!"

And pleased with this jest, he removed the chair from the table, took his stand behind the King, and proceeded to wait upon him in the courtliest way he was capable of.

While the King ate, the rigour of his royal dignity relaxed a little, and with his growing contentment came a desire to talk. He said--"I think thou callest thyself Miles Hendon, if I heard thee aright?"

"Yes, Sire," Miles replied; then observed to himself, "If I MUST humour the poor lad's madness, I must 'Sire' him, I must 'Majesty' him, I must not go by halves, I must stick at nothing that belongeth to the part I play, else shall I play it ill and work evil to this charitable and kindly cause."

The King warmed his heart with a second glass of wine, and said--"I would know thee--tell me thy story. Thou hast a gallant way with thee, and a noble--art nobly born?"

"We are of the tail of the nobility, good your Majesty. My father is a baronet--one of the smaller lords by knight service {2}--Sir Richard Hendon of Hendon Hall, by Monk's Holm in Kent."

"The name has escaped my memory. Go on--tell me thy story."

"'Tis not much, your Majesty, yet perchance it may beguile a short half-hour for want of a better. My father, Sir Richard, is very rich, and of a most generous nature. My mother died whilst I was yet a boy. I have two brothers: Arthur, my elder, with a soul like to his father's; and Hugh, younger than I, a mean spirit, covetous, treacherous, vicious, underhanded--a reptile. Such was he from the cradle; such was he ten years past, when I last saw him--a ripe rascal at nineteen, I being twenty then, and Arthur twenty-two. There is none other of us but the Lady Edith, my cousin--she was sixteen then--beautiful, gentle, good, the daughter of an earl, the last of her race, heiress of a great fortune and a lapsed title. My father was her guardian. I loved her and she loved me; but she was betrothed to Arthur from the cradle, and Sir Richard would not suffer the contract to be broken. Arthur loved another maid, and bade us be of good cheer and hold fast to the hope that delay and luck together would some day give success to our several causes. Hugh loved the Lady Edith's fortune, though in truth he said it was herself he loved--but then 'twas his way, alway, to say the one thing and mean the other. But he lost his arts upon the girl; he could deceive my father,

but none else. My father loved him best of us all, and trusted and believed him; for he was the youngest child, and others hated him--these qualities being in all ages sufficient to win a parent's dearest love; and he had a smooth persuasive tongue, with an admirable gift of lying --and these be qualities which do mightily assist a blind affection to cozen itself. I was wild--in troth I might go yet farther and say VERY wild, though 'twas a wildness of an innocent sort, since it hurt none but me, brought shame to none, nor loss, nor had in it any taint of crime or baseness, or what might not beseem mine honourable degree.

"Yet did my brother Hugh turn these faults to good account--he seeing that our brother Arthur's health was but indifferent, and hoping the worst might work him profit were I swept out of the path--so--but 'twere a long tale, good my liege, and little worth the telling. Briefly, then, this brother did deftly magnify my faults and make them crimes; ending his base work with finding a silken ladder in mine apartments--conveyed thither by his own means--and did convince my father by this, and suborned evidence of servants and other lying knaves, that I was minded to carry off my Edith and marry with her in rank defiance of his will.

"Three years of banishment from home and England might make a soldier and a man of me, my father said, and teach me some degree of wisdom. I fought out my long probation in the continental wars, tasting sumptuously of hard knocks, privation, and adventure; but in my last battle I was

taken captive, and during the seven years that have waxed and waned since then, a foreign dungeon hath harboured me. Through wit and courage I won to the free air at last, and fled hither straight; and am but just arrived, right poor in purse and raiment, and poorer still in knowledge of what these dull seven years have wrought at Hendon Hall, its people and belongings. So please you, sir, my meagre tale is told."

"Thou hast been shamefully abused!" said the little King, with a flashing eye. "But I will right thee--by the cross will I! The King hath said it."

Then, fired by the story of Miles's wrongs, he loosed his tongue and poured the history of his own recent misfortunes into the ears of his astonished listener. When he had finished, Miles said to himself--

"Lo, what an imagination he hath! Verily, this is no common mind; else, crazed or sane, it could not weave so straight and gaudy a tale as this out of the airy nothings wherewith it hath wrought this curious romaunt. Poor ruined little head, it shall not lack friend or shelter whilst I bide with the living. He shall never leave my side; he shall be my pet, my little comrade. And he shall be cured!--ay, made whole and sound --then will he make himself a name--and proud shall I be to say, 'Yes, he is mine--I took him, a homeless little ragamuffin, but I saw what was in him, and I said his name would be heard some day--behold him, observe

him--was I right?"

The King spoke--in a thoughtful, measured voice--

"Thou didst save me injury and shame, perchance my life, and so my crown. Such service demandeth rich reward. Name thy desire, and so it be within the compass of my royal power, it is thine."

This fantastic suggestion startled Hendon out of his reverie. He was about to thank the King and put the matter aside with saying he had only done his duty and desired no reward, but a wiser thought came into his head, and he asked leave to be silent a few moments and consider the gracious offer--an idea which the King gravely approved, remarking that it was best to be not too hasty with a thing of such great import.

Miles reflected during some moments, then said to himself, "Yes, that is the thing to do--by any other means it were impossible to get at it--and certes, this hour's experience has taught me 'twould be most wearing and inconvenient to continue it as it is. Yes, I will propose it; 'twas a happy accident that I did not throw the chance away." Then he dropped upon one knee and said--

"My poor service went not beyond the limit of a subject's simple duty, and therefore hath no merit; but since your Majesty is pleased to hold it

worthy some reward, I take heart of grace to make petition to this effect. Near four hundred years ago, as your grace knoweth, there being ill blood betwixt John, King of England, and the King of France, it was decreed that two champions should fight together in the lists, and so settle the dispute by what is called the arbitrament of God. These two kings, and the Spanish king, being assembled to witness and judge the conflict, the French champion appeared; but so redoubtable was he, that our English knights refused to measure weapons with him. So the matter, which was a weighty one, was like to go against the English monarch by default. Now in the Tower lay the Lord de Courcy, the mightiest arm in England, stripped of his honours and possessions, and wasting with long captivity. Appeal was made to him; he gave assent, and came forth arrayed for battle; but no sooner did the Frenchman glimpse his huge frame and hear his famous name but he fled away, and the French king's cause was lost. King John restored De Courcy's titles and possessions, and said, 'Name thy wish and thou shalt have it, though it cost me half my kingdom;' whereat De Courcy, kneeling, as I do now, made answer, 'This, then, I ask, my liege; that I and my successors may have and hold the privilege of remaining covered in the presence of the kings of England, henceforth while the throne shall last.' The boon was granted, as your Majesty knoweth; and there hath been no time, these four hundred years, that that line has failed of an heir; and so, even unto this day, the head of that ancient house still weareth his hat or helm before the King's Majesty, without let or hindrance, and this none other may do. {3}

Invoking this precedent in aid of my prayer, I beseech the King to grant to me but this one grace and privilege--to my more than sufficient reward--and none other, to wit: that I and my heirs, for ever, may SIT in the presence of the Majesty of England!"

"Rise, Sir Miles Hendon, Knight," said the King, gravely--giving the accolade with Hendon's sword--"rise, and seat thyself. Thy petition is granted. Whilst England remains, and the crown continues, the privilege shall not lapse."

His Majesty walked apart, musing, and Hendon dropped into a chair at table, observing to himself, "'Twas a brave thought, and hath wrought me a mighty deliverance; my legs are grievously wearied. An I had not thought of that, I must have had to stand for weeks, till my poor lad's wits are cured." After a little, he went on, "And so I am become a knight of the Kingdom of Dreams and Shadows! A most odd and strange position, truly, for one so matter-of-fact as I. I will not laugh--no, God forbid, for this thing which is so substanceless to me is REAL to him. And to me, also, in one way, it is not a falsity, for it reflects with truth the sweet and generous spirit that is in him." After a pause: "Ah, what if he should call me by my fine title before folk!--there'd be a merry contrast betwixt my glory and my raiment! But no matter, let him call me what he will, so it please him; I shall be content."