

Chapter XIII. The disappearance of the Prince.

A heavy drowsiness presently fell upon the two comrades. The King said--

"Remove these rags."--meaning his clothing.

Hendon disapparelled the boy without dissent or remark, tucked him up in bed, then glanced about the room, saying to himself, ruefully, "He hath taken my bed again, as before--marry, what shall I do?" The little King observed his perplexity, and dissipated it with a word. He said, sleepily--

"Thou wilt sleep athwart the door, and guard it." In a moment more he was out of his troubles, in a deep slumber.

"Dear heart, he should have been born a king!" muttered Hendon, admiringly; "he playeth the part to a marvel."

Then he stretched himself across the door, on the floor, saying contentedly--

"I have lodged worse for seven years; 'twould be but ill gratitude to Him above to find fault with this."

He dropped asleep as the dawn appeared. Toward noon he rose, uncovered his unconscious ward--a section at a time--and took his measure with a string. The King awoke, just as he had completed his work, complained of the cold, and asked what he was doing.

"'Tis done, now, my liege," said Hendon; "I have a bit of business outside, but will presently return; sleep thou again--thou needest it. There--let me cover thy head also--thou'lt be warm the sooner."

The King was back in dreamland before this speech was ended. Miles slipped softly out, and slipped as softly in again, in the course of thirty or forty minutes, with a complete second-hand suit of boy's clothing, of cheap material, and showing signs of wear; but tidy, and suited to the season of the year. He seated himself, and began to overhaul his purchase, mumbling to himself--

"A longer purse would have got a better sort, but when one has not the long purse one must be content with what a short one may do--

"'There was a woman in our town, In our town did dwell--'

"He stirred, methinks--I must sing in a less thunderous key; 'tis not good to mar his sleep, with this journey before him, and he so wearied out, poor chap . . . This garment--'tis well enough--a stitch here and

another one there will set it aright. This other is better, albeit a stitch or two will not come amiss in it, likewise . . . THESE be very good and sound, and will keep his small feet warm and dry--an odd new thing to him, belike, since he has doubtless been used to foot it bare, winters and summers the same . . . Would thread were bread, seeing one getteth a year's sufficiency for a farthing, and such a brave big needle without cost, for mere love. Now shall I have the demon's own time to thread it!"

And so he had. He did as men have always done, and probably always will do, to the end of time--held the needle still, and tried to thrust the thread through the eye, which is the opposite of a woman's way. Time and time again the thread missed the mark, going sometimes on one side of the needle, sometimes on the other, sometimes doubling up against the shaft; but he was patient, having been through these experiences before, when he was soldiering. He succeeded at last, and took up the garment that had lain waiting, meantime, across his lap, and began his work.

"The inn is paid--the breakfast that is to come, included--and there is wherewithal left to buy a couple of donkeys and meet our little costs for the two or three days betwixt this and the plenty that awaits us at Hendon Hall--

"She loved her hus--'

"Body o' me! I have driven the needle under my nail! . . . It matters little--'tis not a novelty--yet 'tis not a convenience, neither. . . . We shall be merry there, little one, never doubt it! Thy troubles will vanish there, and likewise thy sad distemper--

"She loved her husband dearilee, But another man--'

"These be noble large stitches!"--holding the garment up and viewing it admiringly--"they have a grandeur and a majesty that do cause these small stingy ones of the tailor-man to look mightily paltry and plebeian--

"She loved her husband dearilee, But another man he loved she,--'

"Marry, 'tis done--a goodly piece of work, too, and wrought with expedition. Now will I wake him, apparel him, pour for him, feed him, and then will we hie us to the mart by the Tabard Inn in Southwark and --be pleased to rise, my liege!--he answereth not--what ho, my liege!--of a truth must I profane his sacred person with a touch, sith his slumber is deaf to speech. What!"

He threw back the covers--the boy was gone!

He stared about him in speechless astonishment for a moment; noticed for

the first time that his ward's ragged raiment was also missing; then he began to rage and storm and shout for the innkeeper. At that moment a servant entered with the breakfast.

"Explain, thou limb of Satan, or thy time is come!" roared the man of war, and made so savage a spring toward the waiter that this latter could not find his tongue, for the instant, for fright and surprise. "Where is the boy?"

In disjointed and trembling syllables the man gave the information desired.

"You were hardly gone from the place, your worship, when a youth came running and said it was your worship's will that the boy come to you straight, at the bridge-end on the Southwark side. I brought him hither; and when he woke the lad and gave his message, the lad did grumble some little for being disturbed 'so early,' as he called it, but straightway trussed on his rags and went with the youth, only saying it had been better manners that your worship came yourself, not sent a stranger--and so--"

"And so thou'rt a fool!--a fool and easily cozened--hang all thy breed! Yet mayhap no hurt is done. Possibly no harm is meant the boy. I will go fetch him. Make the table ready. Stay! the coverings of the bed were

disposed as if one lay beneath them--happened that by accident?"

"I know not, good your worship. I saw the youth meddle with them--he that came for the boy."

"Thousand deaths! 'Twas done to deceive me--'tis plain 'twas done to gain time. Hark ye! Was that youth alone?"

"All alone, your worship."

"Art sure?"

"Sure, your worship."

"Collect thy scattered wits--bethink thee--take time, man."

After a moment's thought, the servant said--

"When he came, none came with him; but now I remember me that as the two

stepped into the throng of the Bridge, a ruffian-looking man plunged out from some near place; and just as he was joining them--"

"What THEN?--out with it!" thundered the impatient Hendon, interrupting.

"Just then the crowd lapped them up and closed them in, and I saw no more, being called by my master, who was in a rage because a joint that the scrivener had ordered was forgot, though I take all the saints to witness that to blame ME for that miscarriage were like holding the unborn babe to judgment for sins com--"

"Out of my sight, idiot! Thy prating drives me mad! Hold! Whither art flying? Canst not bide still an instant? Went they toward Southwark?"

"Even so, your worship--for, as I said before, as to that detestable joint, the babe unborn is no whit more blameless than--"

"Art here YET! And prating still! Vanish, lest I throttle thee!" The servitor vanished. Hendon followed after him, passed him, and plunged down the stairs two steps at a stride, muttering, "'Tis that scurvy villain that claimed he was his son. I have lost thee, my poor little mad master--it is a bitter thought--and I had come to love thee so! No! by book and bell, NOT lost! Not lost, for I will ransack the land till I find thee again. Poor child, yonder is his breakfast--and mine, but I have no hunger now; so, let the rats have it--speed, speed! that is the word!" As he wormed his swift way through the noisy multitudes upon the Bridge he several times said to himself--clinging to the thought as if it were a particularly pleasing one--"He grumbled, but he WENT--he went,

yes, because he thought Miles Hendon asked it, sweet lad--he would ne'er have done it for another, I know it well."