

Chapter XV. Tom as King.

The next day the foreign ambassadors came, with their gorgeous trains; and Tom, throned in awful state, received them. The splendours of the scene delighted his eye and fired his imagination at first, but the audience was long and dreary, and so were most of the addresses --wherefore, what began as a pleasure grew into weariness and home-sickness

by-and-by. Tom said the words which Hertford put into his mouth from time to time, and tried hard to acquit himself satisfactorily, but he was too new to such things, and too ill at ease to accomplish more than a tolerable success. He looked sufficiently like a king, but he was ill able to feel like one. He was cordially glad when the ceremony was ended.

The larger part of his day was 'wasted'--as he termed it, in his own mind--in labours pertaining to his royal office. Even the two hours devoted to certain princely pastimes and recreations were rather a burden to him than otherwise, they were so fettered by restrictions and ceremonious observances. However, he had a private hour with his whipping-boy which he counted clear gain, since he got both entertainment and needful information out of it.

The third day of Tom Canty's kingship came and went much as the others

had done, but there was a lifting of his cloud in one way--he felt less uncomfortable than at first; he was getting a little used to his circumstances and surroundings; his chains still galled, but not all the time; he found that the presence and homage of the great afflicted and embarrassed him less and less sharply with every hour that drifted over his head.

But for one single dread, he could have seen the fourth day approach without serious distress--the dining in public; it was to begin that day. There were greater matters in the programme--for on that day he would have to preside at a council which would take his views and commands concerning the policy to be pursued toward various foreign nations scattered far and near over the great globe; on that day, too, Hertford would be formally chosen to the grand office of Lord Protector; other things of note were appointed for that fourth day, also; but to Tom they were all insignificant compared with the ordeal of dining all by himself with a multitude of curious eyes fastened upon him and a multitude of mouths whispering comments upon his performance,--and upon his mistakes, if he should be so unlucky as to make any.

Still, nothing could stop that fourth day, and so it came. It found poor Tom low-spirited and absent-minded, and this mood continued; he could not shake it off. The ordinary duties of the morning dragged upon his hands,

and wearied him. Once more he felt the sense of captivity heavy upon him.

Late in the forenoon he was in a large audience-chamber, conversing with the Earl of Hertford and dully awaiting the striking of the hour appointed for a visit of ceremony from a considerable number of great officials and courtiers.

After a little while, Tom, who had wandered to a window and become interested in the life and movement of the great highway beyond the palace gates--and not idly interested, but longing with all his heart to take part in person in its stir and freedom--saw the van of a hooting and shouting mob of disorderly men, women, and children of the lowest and poorest degree approaching from up the road.

"I would I knew what 'tis about!" he exclaimed, with all a boy's curiosity in such happenings.

"Thou art the King!" solemnly responded the Earl, with a reverence.

"Have I your Grace's leave to act?"

"O blithely, yes! O gladly, yes!" exclaimed Tom excitedly, adding to himself with a lively sense of satisfaction, "In truth, being a king is not all dreariness--it hath its compensations and conveniences."

The Earl called a page, and sent him to the captain of the guard with the order--

"Let the mob be halted, and inquiry made concerning the occasion of its movement. By the King's command!"

A few seconds later a long rank of the royal guards, cased in flashing steel, filed out at the gates and formed across the highway in front of the multitude. A messenger returned, to report that the crowd were following a man, a woman, and a young girl to execution for crimes committed against the peace and dignity of the realm.

Death--and a violent death--for these poor unfortunates! The thought wrung Tom's heart-strings. The spirit of compassion took control of him, to the exclusion of all other considerations; he never thought of the offended laws, or of the grief or loss which these three criminals had inflicted upon their victims; he could think of nothing but the scaffold and the grisly fate hanging over the heads of the condemned. His concern made him even forget, for the moment, that he was but the false shadow of a king, not the substance; and before he knew it he had blurted out the command--

"Bring them here!"

Then he blushed scarlet, and a sort of apology sprung to his lips; but observing that his order had wrought no sort of surprise in the Earl or the waiting page, he suppressed the words he was about to utter. The page, in the most matter-of-course way, made a profound obeisance and retired backwards out of the room to deliver the command. Tom experienced a glow of pride and a renewed sense of the compensating advantages of the kingly office. He said to himself, "Truly it is like what I was used to feel when I read the old priest's tales, and did imagine mine own self a prince, giving law and command to all, saying 'Do this, do that,' whilst none durst offer let or hindrance to my will."

Now the doors swung open; one high-sounding title after another was announced, the personages owning them followed, and the place was quickly half-filled with noble folk and finery. But Tom was hardly conscious of the presence of these people, so wrought up was he and so intensely absorbed in that other and more interesting matter. He seated himself absently in his chair of state, and turned his eyes upon the door with manifestations of impatient expectancy; seeing which, the company forbore to trouble him, and fell to chatting a mixture of public business and court gossip one with another.

In a little while the measured tread of military men was heard

approaching, and the culprits entered the presence in charge of an under-sheriff and escorted by a detail of the king's guard. The civil officer knelt before Tom, then stood aside; the three doomed persons knelt, also, and remained so; the guard took position behind Tom's chair. Tom scanned the prisoners curiously. Something about the dress or appearance of the man had stirred a vague memory in him. "Methinks I have seen this man ere now . . . but the when or the where fail me."-- Such was Tom's thought. Just then the man glanced quickly up and quickly dropped his face again, not being able to endure the awful port of sovereignty; but the one full glimpse of the face which Tom got was sufficient. He said to himself: "Now is the matter clear; this is the stranger that plucked Giles Witt out of the Thames, and saved his life, that windy, bitter, first day of the New Year--a brave good deed--pity he hath been doing baser ones and got himself in this sad case . . . I have not forgot the day, neither the hour; by reason that an hour after, upon the stroke of eleven, I did get a hiding by the hand of Gammer Canty which was of so goodly and admired severity that all that went before or followed after it were but fondlings and caresses by comparison."

Tom now ordered that the woman and the girl be removed from the presence for a little time; then addressed himself to the under-sheriff, saying--

"Good sir, what is this man's offence?"

The officer knelt, and answered--

"So please your Majesty, he hath taken the life of a subject by poison."

Tom's compassion for the prisoner, and admiration of him as the daring rescuer of a drowning boy, experienced a most damaging shock.

"The thing was proven upon him?" he asked.

"Most clearly, sire."

Tom sighed, and said--

"Take him away--he hath earned his death. 'Tis a pity, for he was a brave heart--na--na, I mean he hath the LOOK of it!"

The prisoner clasped his hands together with sudden energy, and wrung them despairingly, at the same time appealing imploringly to the 'King' in broken and terrified phrases--

"O my lord the King, an' thou canst pity the lost, have pity upon me! I am innocent--neither hath that wherewith I am charged been more than but lamely proved--yet I speak not of that; the judgment is gone forth against me and may not suffer alteration; yet in mine extremity I beg a

boon, for my doom is more than I can bear. A grace, a grace, my lord the King! in thy royal compassion grant my prayer--give commandment that I be hanged!"

Tom was amazed. This was not the outcome he had looked for.

"Odds my life, a strange BOON! Was it not the fate intended thee?"

"O good my liege, not so! It is ordered that I be BOILED ALIVE!"

The hideous surprise of these words almost made Tom spring from his chair. As soon as he could recover his wits he cried out--

"Have thy wish, poor soul! an' thou had poisoned a hundred men thou shouldst not suffer so miserable a death."

The prisoner bowed his face to the ground and burst into passionate expressions of gratitude--ending with--

"If ever thou shouldst know misfortune--which God forefend!--may thy goodness to me this day be remembered and requited!"

Tom turned to the Earl of Hertford, and said--

"My lord, is it believable that there was warrant for this man's ferocious doom?"

"It is the law, your Grace--for poisoners. In Germany coiners be boiled to death in OIL--not cast in of a sudden, but by a rope let down into the oil by degrees, and slowly; first the feet, then the legs, then--"

"O prithee no more, my lord, I cannot bear it!" cried Tom, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the picture. "I beseech your good lordship that order be taken to change this law--oh, let no more poor creatures be visited with its tortures."

The Earl's face showed profound gratification, for he was a man of merciful and generous impulses--a thing not very common with his class in that fierce age. He said--

"These your Grace's noble words have sealed its doom. History will remember it to the honour of your royal house."

The under-sheriff was about to remove his prisoner; Tom gave him a sign to wait; then he said--

"Good sir, I would look into this matter further. The man has said his deed was but lamely proved. Tell me what thou knowest."

"If the King's grace please, it did appear upon the trial that this man entered into a house in the hamlet of Islington where one lay sick--three witnesses say it was at ten of the clock in the morning, and two say it was some minutes later--the sick man being alone at the time, and sleeping--and presently the man came forth again and went his way. The sick man died within the hour, being torn with spasms and retchings."

"Did any see the poison given? Was poison found?"

"Marry, no, my liege."

"Then how doth one know there was poison given at all?"

"Please your Majesty, the doctors testified that none die with such symptoms but by poison."

Weighty evidence, this, in that simple age. Tom recognised its formidable nature, and said--

"The doctor knoweth his trade--belike they were right. The matter hath an ill-look for this poor man."

"Yet was not this all, your Majesty; there is more and worse. Many

testified that a witch, since gone from the village, none know whither, did foretell, and speak it privately in their ears, that the sick man WOULD DIE BY POISON--and more, that a stranger would give it--a stranger with brown hair and clothed in a worn and common garb; and surely this prisoner doth answer woundily to the bill. Please your Majesty to give the circumstance that solemn weight which is its due, seeing it was FORETOLD."

This was an argument of tremendous force in that superstitious day. Tom felt that the thing was settled; if evidence was worth anything, this poor fellow's guilt was proved. Still he offered the prisoner a chance, saying--

"If thou canst say aught in thy behalf, speak."

"Nought that will avail, my King. I am innocent, yet cannot I make it appear. I have no friends, else might I show that I was not in Islington that day; so also might I show that at that hour they name I was above a league away, seeing I was at Wapping Old Stairs; yea more, my King, for I could show, that whilst they say I was TAKING life, I was SAVING it. A drowning boy--"

"Peace! Sheriff, name the day the deed was done!"

"At ten in the morning, or some minutes later, the first day of the New Year, most illustrious--"

"Let the prisoner go free--it is the King's will!"

Another blush followed this unregal outburst, and he covered his indecorum as well as he could by adding--

"It enrageth me that a man should be hanged upon such idle, hare-brained evidence!"

A low buzz of admiration swept through the assemblage. It was not admiration of the decree that had been delivered by Tom, for the propriety or expediency of pardoning a convicted poisoner was a thing which few there would have felt justified in either admitting or admiring--no, the admiration was for the intelligence and spirit which Tom had displayed. Some of the low-voiced remarks were to this effect--

"This is no mad king--he hath his wits sound."

"How sanely he put his questions--how like his former natural self was this abrupt imperious disposal of the matter!"

"God be thanked, his infirmity is spent! This is no weakling, but a

king. He hath borne himself like to his own father."

The air being filled with applause, Tom's ear necessarily caught a little of it. The effect which this had upon him was to put him greatly at his ease, and also to charge his system with very gratifying sensations.

However, his juvenile curiosity soon rose superior to these pleasant thoughts and feelings; he was eager to know what sort of deadly mischief the woman and the little girl could have been about; so, by his command, the two terrified and sobbing creatures were brought before him.

"What is it that these have done?" he inquired of the sheriff.

"Please your Majesty, a black crime is charged upon them, and clearly proven; wherefore the judges have decreed, according to the law, that they be hanged. They sold themselves to the devil--such is their crime."

Tom shuddered. He had been taught to abhor people who did this wicked thing. Still, he was not going to deny himself the pleasure of feeding his curiosity for all that; so he asked--

"Where was this done?--and when?"

"On a midnight in December, in a ruined church, your Majesty."

Tom shuddered again.

"Who was there present?"

"Only these two, your grace--and THAT OTHER."

"Have these confessed?"

"Nay, not so, sire--they do deny it."

"Then prithee, how was it known?"

"Certain witness did see them wending thither, good your Majesty; this bred the suspicion, and dire effects have since confirmed and justified it. In particular, it is in evidence that through the wicked power so obtained, they did invoke and bring about a storm that wasted all the region round about. Above forty witnesses have proved the storm; and sooth one might have had a thousand, for all had reason to remember it, sith all had suffered by it."

"Certes this is a serious matter." Tom turned this dark piece of scoundrelism over in his mind a while, then asked--

"Suffered the woman also by the storm?"

Several old heads among the assemblage nodded their recognition of the wisdom of this question. The sheriff, however, saw nothing consequential in the inquiry; he answered, with simple directness--

"Indeed did she, your Majesty, and most righteously, as all aver. Her habitation was swept away, and herself and child left shelterless."

"Methinks the power to do herself so ill a turn was dearly bought. She had been cheated, had she paid but a farthing for it; that she paid her soul, and her child's, argueth that she is mad; if she is mad she knoweth not what she doth, therefore sinneth not."

The elderly heads nodded recognition of Tom's wisdom once more, and one individual murmured, "An' the King be mad himself, according to report, then is it a madness of a sort that would improve the sanity of some I wot of, if by the gentle providence of God they could but catch it."

"What age hath the child?" asked Tom.

"Nine years, please your Majesty."

"By the law of England may a child enter into covenant and sell itself,

my lord?" asked Tom, turning to a learned judge.

"The law doth not permit a child to make or meddle in any weighty matter, good my liege, holding that its callow wit unfitteth it to cope with the riper wit and evil schemings of them that are its elders. The DEVIL may buy a child, if he so choose, and the child agree thereto, but not an Englishman--in this latter case the contract would be null and void."

"It seemeth a rude unchristian thing, and ill contrived, that English law denieth privileges to Englishmen to waste them on the devil!" cried Tom, with honest heat.

This novel view of the matter excited many smiles, and was stored away in many heads to be repeated about the Court as evidence of Tom's originality as well as progress toward mental health.

The elder culprit had ceased from sobbing, and was hanging upon Tom's words with an excited interest and a growing hope. Tom noticed this, and it strongly inclined his sympathies toward her in her perilous and unfriended situation. Presently he asked--

"How wrought they to bring the storm?"

"BY PULLING OFF THEIR STOCKINGS, sire."

This astonished Tom, and also fired his curiosity to fever heat. He said, eagerly--

"It is wonderful! Hath it always this dread effect?"

"Always, my liege--at least if the woman desire it, and utter the needful words, either in her mind or with her tongue."

Tom turned to the woman, and said with impetuous zeal--

"Exert thy power--I would see a storm!"

There was a sudden paling of cheeks in the superstitious assemblage, and a general, though unexpressed, desire to get out of the place--all of which was lost upon Tom, who was dead to everything but the proposed cataclysm. Seeing a puzzled and astonished look in the woman's face, he added, excitedly--

"Never fear--thou shalt be blameless. More--thou shalt go free--none shall touch thee. Exert thy power."

"Oh, my lord the King, I have it not--I have been falsely accused."

"Thy fears stay thee. Be of good heart, thou shalt suffer no harm. Make a storm--it mattereth not how small a one--I require nought great or harmful, but indeed prefer the opposite--do this and thy life is spared --thou shalt go out free, with thy child, bearing the King's pardon, and safe from hurt or malice from any in the realm."

The woman prostrated herself, and protested, with tears, that she had no power to do the miracle, else she would gladly win her child's life alone, and be content to lose her own, if by obedience to the King's command so precious a grace might be acquired.

Tom urged--the woman still adhered to her declarations. Finally he said--

"I think the woman hath said true. An' MY mother were in her place and gifted with the devil's functions, she had not stayed a moment to call her storms and lay the whole land in ruins, if the saving of my forfeit life were the price she got! It is argument that other mothers are made in like mould. Thou art free, goodwife--thou and thy child--for I do think thee innocent. NOW thou'st nought to fear, being pardoned--pull off thy stockings!--an' thou canst make me a storm, thou shalt be rich!"

The redeemed creature was loud in her gratitude, and proceeded to obey, whilst Tom looked on with eager expectancy, a little marred by apprehension; the courtiers at the same time manifesting decided

discomfort and uneasiness. The woman stripped her own feet and her little girl's also, and plainly did her best to reward the King's generosity with an earthquake, but it was all a failure and a disappointment. Tom sighed, and said--

"There, good soul, trouble thyself no further, thy power is departed out of thee. Go thy way in peace; and if it return to thee at any time, forget me not, but fetch me a storm." {13}