

Chapter XIX. The Prince with the peasants.

When the King awoke in the early morning, he found that a wet but thoughtful rat had crept into the place during the night and made a cosy bed for itself in his bosom. Being disturbed now, it scampered away. The boy smiled, and said, "Poor fool, why so fearful? I am as forlorn as thou. 'Twould be a sham in me to hurt the helpless, who am myself so helpless. Moreover, I owe you thanks for a good omen; for when a king has fallen so low that the very rats do make a bed of him, it surely meaneth that his fortunes be upon the turn, since it is plain he can no lower go."

He got up and stepped out of the stall, and just then he heard the sound of children's voices. The barn door opened and a couple of little girls came in. As soon as they saw him their talking and laughing ceased, and they stopped and stood still, gazing at him with strong curiosity; they presently began to whisper together, then they approached nearer, and stopped again to gaze and whisper. By-and-by they gathered courage and began to discuss him aloud. One said--

"He hath a comely face."

The other added--

"And pretty hair."

"But is ill clothed enow."

"And how starved he looketh."

They came still nearer, sidling shyly around and about him, examining him minutely from all points, as if he were some strange new kind of animal, but warily and watchfully the while, as if they half feared he might be a sort of animal that would bite, upon occasion. Finally they halted before him, holding each other's hands for protection, and took a good satisfying stare with their innocent eyes; then one of them plucked up all her courage and inquired with honest directness--

"Who art thou, boy?"

"I am the King," was the grave answer.

The children gave a little start, and their eyes spread themselves wide open and remained so during a speechless half minute. Then curiosity broke the silence--

"The KING? What King?"

"The King of England."

The children looked at each other--then at him--then at each other again--wonderingly, perplexedly; then one said--

"Didst hear him, Margery?--he said he is the King. Can that be true?"

"How can it be else but true, Prissy? Would he say a lie? For look you, Prissy, an' it were not true, it WOULD be a lie. It surely would be. Now think on't. For all things that be not true, be lies--thou canst make nought else out of it."

It was a good tight argument, without a leak in it anywhere; and it left Prissy's half-doubts not a leg to stand on. She considered a moment, then put the King upon his honour with the simple remark--

"If thou art truly the King, then I believe thee."

"I am truly the King."

This settled the matter. His Majesty's royalty was accepted without

further question or discussion, and the two little girls began at once to inquire into how he came to be where he was, and how he came to be so unroyally clad, and whither he was bound, and all about his affairs. It was a mighty relief to him to pour out his troubles where they would not be scoffed at or doubted; so he told his tale with feeling, forgetting even his hunger for the time; and it was received with the deepest and tenderest sympathy by the gentle little maids. But when he got down to his latest experiences and they learned how long he had been without food, they cut him short and hurried him away to the farmhouse to find a breakfast for him.

The King was cheerful and happy now, and said to himself, "When I am come to mine own again, I will always honour little children, remembering how that these trusted me and believed in me in my time of trouble; whilst they that were older, and thought themselves wiser, mocked at me and held me for a liar."

The children's mother received the King kindly, and was full of pity; for his forlorn condition and apparently crazed intellect touched her womanly heart. She was a widow, and rather poor; consequently she had seen trouble enough to enable her to feel for the unfortunate. She imagined that the demented boy had wandered away from his friends or keepers; so she tried to find out whence he had come, in order that she might take

measures to return him; but all her references to neighbouring towns and villages, and all her inquiries in the same line went for nothing--the boy's face, and his answers, too, showed that the things she was talking of were not familiar to him. He spoke earnestly and simply about court matters, and broke down, more than once, when speaking of the late King 'his father'; but whenever the conversation changed to baser topics, he lost interest and became silent.

The woman was mightily puzzled; but she did not give up. As she proceeded with her cooking, she set herself to contriving devices to surprise the boy into betraying his real secret. She talked about cattle--he showed no concern; then about sheep--the same result: so her guess that he had been a shepherd boy was an error; she talked about mills; and about weavers, tinkers, smiths, trades and tradesmen of all sorts; and about Bedlam, and jails, and charitable retreats: but no matter, she was baffled at all points. Not altogether, either; for she argued that she had narrowed the thing down to domestic service. Yes, she was sure she was on the right track, now; he must have been a house servant. So she led up to that. But the result was discouraging. The subject of sweeping appeared to weary him; fire-building failed to stir him; scrubbing and scouring awoke no enthusiasm. The goodwife touched, with a perishing hope, and rather as a matter of form, upon the subject of cooking. To her surprise, and her vast delight, the King's face lighted at once! Ah, she had hunted him down at last, she thought; and

she was right proud, too, of the devious shrewdness and tact which had accomplished it.

Her tired tongue got a chance to rest, now; for the King's, inspired by gnawing hunger and the fragrant smells that came from the sputtering pots and pans, turned itself loose and delivered itself up to such an eloquent dissertation upon certain toothsome dishes, that within three minutes the woman said to herself, "Of a truth I was right--he hath holpen in a kitchen!" Then he broadened his bill of fare, and discussed it with such appreciation and animation, that the goodwife said to herself, "Good lack! how can he know so many dishes, and so fine ones withal? For these belong only upon the tables of the rich and great. Ah, now I see! ragged outcast as he is, he must have served in the palace before his reason went astray; yes, he must have helped in the very kitchen of the King himself! I will test him."

Full of eagerness to prove her sagacity, she told the King to mind the cooking a moment--hinting that he might manufacture and add a dish or two, if he chose; then she went out of the room and gave her children a sign to follow after. The King muttered--

"Another English king had a commission like to this, in a bygone time--it is nothing against my dignity to undertake an office which the great Alfred stooped to assume. But I will try to better serve my trust than

he; for he let the cakes burn."

The intent was good, but the performance was not answerable to it, for this King, like the other one, soon fell into deep thinkings concerning his vast affairs, and the same calamity resulted--the cookery got burned. The woman returned in time to save the breakfast from entire destruction; and she promptly brought the King out of his dreams with a brisk and cordial tongue-lashing. Then, seeing how troubled he was over his violated trust, she softened at once, and was all goodness and gentleness toward him.

The boy made a hearty and satisfying meal, and was greatly refreshed and gladdened by it. It was a meal which was distinguished by this curious feature, that rank was waived on both sides; yet neither recipient of the favour was aware that it had been extended. The goodwife had intended to feed this young tramp with broken victuals in a corner, like any other tramp or like a dog; but she was so remorseful for the scolding she had given him, that she did what she could to atone for it by allowing him to sit at the family table and eat with his betters, on ostensible terms of equality with them; and the King, on his side, was so remorseful for having broken his trust, after the family had been so kind to him, that he forced himself to atone for it by humbling himself to the family level, instead of requiring the woman and her children to stand and wait upon him, while he occupied their table in the solitary state due to his

birth and dignity. It does us all good to unbend sometimes. This good woman was made happy all the day long by the applauses which she got out of herself for her magnanimous condescension to a tramp; and the King was just as self-complacent over his gracious humility toward a humble peasant woman.

When breakfast was over, the housewife told the King to wash up the dishes. This command was a staggerer, for a moment, and the King came near rebelling; but then he said to himself, "Alfred the Great watched the cakes; doubtless he would have washed the dishes too--therefore will I essay it."

He made a sufficiently poor job of it; and to his surprise too, for the cleaning of wooden spoons and trenchers had seemed an easy thing to do. It was a tedious and troublesome piece of work, but he finished it at last. He was becoming impatient to get away on his journey now; however, he was not to lose this thrifty dame's society so easily. She furnished him some little odds and ends of employment, which he got through with after a fair fashion and with some credit. Then she set him and the little girls to paring some winter apples; but he was so awkward at this service that she retired him from it and gave him a butcher knife to grind. Afterwards she kept him carding wool until he began to think he had laid the good King Alfred about far enough in the shade for the present in the matter of showy menial heroisms that would read

picturesquely in story-books and histories, and so he was half-minded to resign. And when, just after the noonday dinner, the goodwife gave him a basket of kittens to drown, he did resign. At least he was just going to resign--for he felt that he must draw the line somewhere, and it seemed to him that to draw it at kitten-drowning was about the right thing--when there was an interruption. The interruption was John Canty--with a peddler's pack on his back--and Hugo.

The King discovered these rascals approaching the front gate before they had had a chance to see him; so he said nothing about drawing the line, but took up his basket of kittens and stepped quietly out the back way, without a word. He left the creatures in an out-house, and hurried on, into a narrow lane at the rear.