

He glided about his hovel, gathering a rag here, a thong there, and another one yonder; then he returned, and by careful and gentle handling he managed to tie the King's ankles together without waking him. Next he essayed to tie the wrists; he made several attempts to cross them, but the boy always drew one hand or the other away, just as the cord was ready to be applied; but at last, when the archangel was almost ready to despair, the boy crossed his hands himself, and the next moment they were bound. Now a bandage was passed under the sleeper's chin and brought up over his head and tied fast--and so softly, so gradually, and so deftly were the knots drawn together and compacted, that the boy slept peacefully through it all without stirring.

Chapter XXI. Hendon to the rescue.

The old man glided away, stooping, stealthy, cat-like, and brought the low bench. He seated himself upon it, half his body in the dim and flickering light, and the other half in shadow; and so, with his craving eyes bent upon the slumbering boy, he kept his patient vigil there, heedless of the drift of time, and softly whetted his knife, and mumbled and chuckled; and in aspect and attitude he resembled nothing so much as a grizzly, monstrous spider, gloating over some hapless insect that lay bound and helpless in his web.

After a long while, the old man, who was still gazing,--yet not seeing, his mind having settled into a dreamy abstraction,--observed, on a sudden, that the boy's eyes were open! wide open and staring!--staring up in frozen horror at the knife. The smile of a gratified devil crept over the old man's face, and he said, without changing his attitude or his occupation--

"Son of Henry the Eighth, hast thou prayed?"

The boy struggled helplessly in his bonds, and at the same time forced a smothered sound through his closed jaws, which the hermit chose to interpret as an affirmative answer to his question.

"Then pray again. Pray the prayer for the dying!"

A shudder shook the boy's frame, and his face blanched. Then he struggled again to free himself--turning and twisting himself this way and that; tugging frantically, fiercely, desperately--but uselessly--to burst his fetters; and all the while the old ogre smiled down upon him, and nodded his head, and placidly whetted his knife; mumbling, from time to time, "The moments are precious, they are few and precious--pray the prayer for the dying!"

The boy uttered a despairing groan, and ceased from his struggles, panting. The tears came, then, and trickled, one after the other, down his face; but this piteous sight wrought no softening effect upon the savage old man.

The dawn was coming now; the hermit observed it, and spoke up sharply, with a touch of nervous apprehension in his voice--

"I may not indulge this ecstasy longer! The night is already gone. It seems but a moment--only a moment; would it had endured a year! Seed of the Church's spoiler, close thy perishing eyes, an' thou fearest to look upon--"

The rest was lost in inarticulate mutterings. The old man sank upon his knees, his knife in his hand, and bent himself over the moaning boy.

Hark! There was a sound of voices near the cabin--the knife dropped from the hermit's hand; he cast a sheepskin over the boy and started up, trembling. The sounds increased, and presently the voices became rough and angry; then came blows, and cries for help; then a clatter of swift footsteps, retreating. Immediately came a succession of thundering knocks upon the cabin door, followed by--

"Hullo-o-o! Open! And despatch, in the name of all the devils!"

Oh, this was the blessedest sound that had ever made music in the King's ears; for it was Miles Hendon's voice!

The hermit, grinding his teeth in impotent rage, moved swiftly out of the bedchamber, closing the door behind him; and straightway the King heard a talk, to this effect, proceeding from the 'chapel':--

"Homage and greeting, reverend sir! Where is the boy--MY boy?"

"What boy, friend?"

"What boy! Lie me no lies, sir priest, play me no deceptions!--I am not in the humour for it. Near to this place I caught the scoundrels who I judged did steal him from me, and I made them confess; they said he was at large again, and they had tracked him to your door. They showed me his very footprints. Now palter no more; for look you, holy sir, an' thou produce him not--Where is the boy?"

"O good sir, peradventure you mean the ragged regal vagrant that tarried here the night. If such as you take an interest in such as he, know, then, that I have sent him of an errand. He will be back anon."

"How soon? How soon? Come, waste not the time--cannot I overtake him?"

How soon will he be back?"

"Thou need'st not stir; he will return quickly."

"So be it, then. I will try to wait. But stop!--YOU sent him of an errand?--you! Verily this is a lie--he would not go. He would pull thy old beard, an' thou didst offer him such an insolence. Thou hast lied, friend; thou hast surely lied! He would not go for thee, nor for any man."

"For any MAN--no; haply not. But I am not a man."

"WHAT! Now o' God's name what art thou, then?"

"It is a secret--mark thou reveal it not. I am an archangel!"

There was a tremendous ejaculation from Miles Hendon--not altogether unprofane--followed by--

"This doth well and truly account for his complaisance! Right well I knew he would budge nor hand nor foot in the menial service of any mortal; but, lord, even a king must obey when an archangel gives the word o' command! Let me--'sh! What noise was that?"

All this while the little King had been yonder, alternately quaking with terror and trembling with hope; and all the while, too, he had thrown all the strength he could into his anguished moanings, constantly expecting them to reach Hendon's ear, but always realising, with bitterness, that they failed, or at least made no impression. So this last remark of his servant came as comes a reviving breath from fresh fields to the dying; and he exerted himself once more, and with all his energy, just as the hermit was saying--

"Noise? I heard only the wind."

"Mayhap it was. Yes, doubtless that was it. I have been hearing it faintly all the--there it is again! It is not the wind! What an odd sound! Come, we will hunt it out!"

Now the King's joy was nearly insupportable. His tired lungs did their utmost--and hopefully, too--but the sealed jaws and the muffling sheepskin sadly crippled the effort. Then the poor fellow's heart sank, to hear the hermit say--

"Ah, it came from without--I think from the copse yonder. Come, I will lead the way."

The King heard the two pass out, talking; heard their footsteps die

quickly away--then he was alone with a boding, brooding, awful silence.

It seemed an age till he heard the steps and voices approaching again
--and this time he heard an added sound,--the trampling of hoofs,
apparently. Then he heard Hendon say--

"I will not wait longer. I CANNOT wait longer. He has lost his way in
this thick wood. Which direction took he? Quick--point it out to me."

"He--but wait; I will go with thee."

"Good--good! Why, truly thou art better than thy looks. Marry I do not
think there's not another archangel with so right a heart as thine. Wilt
ride? Wilt take the wee donkey that's for my boy, or wilt thou fork thy
holy legs over this ill-conditioned slave of a mule that I have provided
for myself?--and had been cheated in too, had he cost but the indifferent
sum of a month's usury on a brass farthing let to a tinker out of work."

"No--ride thy mule, and lead thine ass; I am surer on mine own feet, and
will walk."

"Then prithee mind the little beast for me while I take my life in my
hands and make what success I may toward mounting the big one."

Then followed a confusion of kicks, cuffs, trappings and plungings, accompanied by a thunderous intermingling of volleyed curses, and finally a bitter apostrophe to the mule, which must have broken its spirit, for hostilities seemed to cease from that moment.

With unutterable misery the fettered little King heard the voices and footsteps fade away and die out. All hope forsook him, now, for the moment, and a dull despair settled down upon his heart. "My only friend is deceived and got rid of," he said; "the hermit will return and--" He finished with a gasp; and at once fell to struggling so frantically with his bonds again, that he shook off the smothering sheepskin.

And now he heard the door open! The sound chilled him to the marrow --already he seemed to feel the knife at his throat. Horror made him close his eyes; horror made him open them again--and before him stood John Canty and Hugo!

He would have said "Thank God!" if his jaws had been free.

A moment or two later his limbs were at liberty, and his captors, each gripping him by an arm, were hurrying him with all speed through the forest.

