

Chapter XXVII. In prison.

The cells were all crowded; so the two friends were chained in a large room where persons charged with trifling offences were commonly kept. They had company, for there were some twenty manacled and fettered prisoners here, of both sexes and of varying ages,--an obscene and noisy gang. The King chafed bitterly over the stupendous indignity thus put upon his royalty, but Hendon was moody and taciturn. He was pretty thoroughly bewildered; he had come home, a jubilant prodigal, expecting to find everybody wild with joy over his return; and instead had got the cold shoulder and a jail. The promise and the fulfilment differed so widely that the effect was stunning; he could not decide whether it was most tragic or most grotesque. He felt much as a man might who had danced blithely out to enjoy a rainbow, and got struck by lightning.

But gradually his confused and tormenting thoughts settled down into some sort of order, and then his mind centred itself upon Edith. He turned her conduct over, and examined it in all lights, but he could not make anything satisfactory out of it. Did she know him--or didn't she know him? It was a perplexing puzzle, and occupied him a long time; but he ended, finally, with the conviction that she did know him, and had repudiated him for interested reasons. He wanted to load her name with curses now; but this name had so long been sacred to him that he found he could not bring his tongue to profane it.

Wrapped in prison blankets of a soiled and tattered condition, Hendon and the King passed a troubled night. For a bribe the jailer had furnished liquor to some of the prisoners; singing of ribald songs, fighting, shouting, and carousing was the natural consequence. At last, a while after midnight, a man attacked a woman and nearly killed her by beating her over the head with his manacles before the jailer could come to the rescue. The jailer restored peace by giving the man a sound clubbing about the head and shoulders--then the carousing ceased; and after that, all had an opportunity to sleep who did not mind the annoyance of the moanings and groanings of the two wounded people.

During the ensuing week, the days and nights were of a monotonous sameness as to events; men whose faces Hendon remembered more or less distinctly, came, by day, to gaze at the 'impostor' and repudiate and insult him; and by night the carousing and brawling went on with symmetrical regularity. However, there was a change of incident at last. The jailer brought in an old man, and said to him--

"The villain is in this room--cast thy old eyes about and see if thou canst say which is he."

Hendon glanced up, and experienced a pleasant sensation for the first time since he had been in the jail. He said to himself, "This is Blake

Andrews, a servant all his life in my father's family--a good honest soul, with a right heart in his breast. That is, formerly. But none are true now; all are liars. This man will know me--and will deny me, too, like the rest."

The old man gazed around the room, glanced at each face in turn, and finally said--

"I see none here but paltry knaves, scum o' the streets. Which is he?"

The jailer laughed.

"Here," he said; "scan this big animal, and grant me an opinion."

The old man approached, and looked Hendon over, long and earnestly, then shook his head and said--

"Marry, THIS is no Hendon--nor ever was!"

"Right! Thy old eyes are sound yet. An' I were Sir Hugh, I would take the shabby carle and--"

The jailer finished by lifting himself a-tip-toe with an imaginary halter, at the same time making a gurgling noise in his throat suggestive

of suffocation. The old man said, vindictively--

"Let him bless God an' he fare no worse. An' I had the handling o' the villain he should roast, or I am no true man!"

The jailer laughed a pleasant hyena laugh, and said--

"Give him a piece of thy mind, old man--they all do it. Thou'lt find it good diversion."

Then he sauntered toward his ante-room and disappeared. The old man dropped upon his knees and whispered--

"God be thanked, thou'rt come again, my master! I believed thou wert dead these seven years, and lo, here thou art alive! I knew thee the moment I saw thee; and main hard work it was to keep a stony countenance and seem to see none here but tuppenny knaves and rubbish o' the streets. I am old and poor, Sir Miles; but say the word and I will go forth and proclaim the truth though I be strangled for it."

"No," said Hendon; "thou shalt not. It would ruin thee, and yet help but little in my cause. But I thank thee, for thou hast given me back somewhat of my lost faith in my kind."

The old servant became very valuable to Hendon and the King; for he dropped in several times a day to 'abuse' the former, and always smuggled in a few delicacies to help out the prison bill of fare; he also furnished the current news. Hendon reserved the dainties for the King; without them his Majesty might not have survived, for he was not able to eat the coarse and wretched food provided by the jailer. Andrews was obliged to confine himself to brief visits, in order to avoid suspicion; but he managed to impart a fair degree of information each time --information delivered in a low voice, for Hendon's benefit, and interlarded with insulting epithets delivered in a louder voice for the benefit of other hearers.

So, little by little, the story of the family came out. Arthur had been dead six years. This loss, with the absence of news from Hendon, impaired the father's health; he believed he was going to die, and he wished to see Hugh and Edith settled in life before he passed away; but Edith begged hard for delay, hoping for Miles's return; then the letter came which brought the news of Miles's death; the shock prostrated Sir Richard; he believed his end was very near, and he and Hugh insisted upon the marriage; Edith begged for and obtained a month's respite, then another, and finally a third; the marriage then took place by the death-bed of Sir Richard. It had not proved a happy one. It was whispered about the country that shortly after the nuptials the bride found among her husband's papers several rough and incomplete drafts of

the fatal letter, and had accused him of precipitating the marriage--and Sir Richard's death, too--by a wicked forgery. Tales of cruelty to the Lady Edith and the servants were to be heard on all hands; and since the father's death Sir Hugh had thrown off all soft disguises and become a pitiless master toward all who in any way depended upon him and his domains for bread.

There was a bit of Andrew's gossip which the King listened to with a lively interest--

"There is rumour that the King is mad. But in charity forbear to say I mentioned it, for 'tis death to speak of it, they say."

His Majesty glared at the old man and said--

"The King is NOT mad, good man--and thou'lt find it to thy advantage to busy thyself with matters that nearer concern thee than this seditious prattle."

"What doth the lad mean?" said Andrews, surprised at this brisk assault from such an unexpected quarter. Hendon gave him a sign, and he did not pursue his question, but went on with his budget--

"The late King is to be buried at Windsor in a day or two--the 16th of

the month--and the new King will be crowned at Westminster the 20th."

"Methinks they must needs find him first," muttered his Majesty; then added, confidently, "but they will look to that--and so also shall I."

"In the name of--"

But the old man got no further--a warning sign from Hendon checked his remark. He resumed the thread of his gossip--

"Sir Hugh goeth to the coronation--and with grand hopes. He confidently looketh to come back a peer, for he is high in favour with the Lord Protector."

"What Lord Protector?" asked his Majesty.

"His Grace the Duke of Somerset."

"What Duke of Somerset?"

"Marry, there is but one--Seymour, Earl of Hertford."

The King asked sharply--

"Since when is HE a duke, and Lord Protector?"

"Since the last day of January."

"And prithee who made him so?"

"Himself and the Great Council--with help of the King."

His Majesty started violently. "The KING!" he cried. "WHAT king, good sir?"

"What king, indeed! (God-a-mercy, what aileth the boy?) Sith we have but one, 'tis not difficult to answer--his most sacred Majesty King Edward the Sixth--whom God preserve! Yea, and a dear and gracious little urchin is he, too; and whether he be mad or no--and they say he mendeth daily --his praises are on all men's lips; and all bless him, likewise, and offer prayers that he may be spared to reign long in England; for he began humanely with saving the old Duke of Norfolk's life, and now is he bent on destroying the cruellest of the laws that harry and oppress the people."

This news struck his Majesty dumb with amazement, and plunged him into so deep and dismal a reverie that he heard no more of the old man's gossip.



He wondered if the 'little urchin' was the beggar-boy whom he left dressed in his own garments in the palace. It did not seem possible that this could be, for surely his manners and speech would betray him if he pretended to be the Prince of Wales--then he would be driven out, and search made for the true prince. Could it be that the Court had set up some sprig of the nobility in his place? No, for his uncle would not allow that--he was all-powerful and could and would crush such a movement, of course. The boy's musings profited him nothing; the more he tried to unriddle the mystery the more perplexed he became, the more his head ached, and the worse he slept. His impatience to get to London grew hourly, and his captivity became almost unendurable.

Hendon's arts all failed with the King--he could not be comforted; but a couple of women who were chained near him succeeded better. Under their gentle ministrations he found peace and learned a degree of patience. He was very grateful, and came to love them dearly and to delight in the sweet and soothing influence of their presence. He asked them why they were in prison, and when they said they were Baptists, he smiled, and inquired--

"Is that a crime to be shut up for in a prison? Now I grieve, for I shall lose ye--they will not keep ye long for such a little thing."

They did not answer; and something in their faces made him uneasy. He

said, eagerly--

"You do not speak; be good to me, and tell me--there will be no other punishment? Prithee tell me there is no fear of that."

They tried to change the topic, but his fears were aroused, and he pursued it--

"Will they scourge thee? No, no, they would not be so cruel! Say they would not. Come, they WILL not, will they?"

The women betrayed confusion and distress, but there was no avoiding an answer, so one of them said, in a voice choked with emotion--

"Oh, thou'lt break our hearts, thou gentle spirit!--God will help us to bear our--"

"It is a confession!" the King broke in. "Then they WILL scourge thee, the stony-hearted wretches! But oh, thou must not weep, I cannot bear it. Keep up thy courage--I shall come to my own in time to save thee from this bitter thing, and I will do it!"

When the King awoke in the morning, the women were gone.

"They are saved!" he said, joyfully; then added, despondently, "but woe is me!--for they were my comforters."

Each of them had left a shred of ribbon pinned to his clothing, in token of remembrance. He said he would keep these things always; and that soon he would seek out these dear good friends of his and take them under his protection.

Just then the jailer came in with some subordinates, and commanded that the prisoners be conducted to the jail-yard. The King was overjoyed--it would be a blessed thing to see the blue sky and breathe the fresh air once more. He fretted and chafed at the slowness of the officers, but his turn came at last, and he was released from his staple and ordered to follow the other prisoners with Hendon.

The court or quadrangle was stone-paved, and open to the sky. The prisoners entered it through a massive archway of masonry, and were placed in file, standing, with their backs against the wall. A rope was stretched in front of them, and they were also guarded by their officers. It was a chill and lowering morning, and a light snow which had fallen during the night whitened the great empty space and added to the general dismalness of its aspect. Now and then a wintry wind shivered through the place and sent the snow eddying hither and thither.

In the centre of the court stood two women, chained to posts. A glance showed the King that these were his good friends. He shuddered, and said to himself, "Alack, they are not gone free, as I had thought. To think that such as these should know the lash!--in England! Ay, there's the shame of it--not in Heathenness, Christian England! They will be scourged; and I, whom they have comforted and kindly entreated, must look on and see the great wrong done; it is strange, so strange, that I, the very source of power in this broad realm, am helpless to protect them. But let these miscreants look well to themselves, for there is a day coming when I will require of them a heavy reckoning for this work. For every blow they strike now, they shall feel a hundred then."

A great gate swung open, and a crowd of citizens poured in. They flocked around the two women, and hid them from the King's view. A clergyman entered and passed through the crowd, and he also was hidden. The King now heard talking, back and forth, as if questions were being asked and answered, but he could not make out what was said. Next there was a deal of bustle and preparation, and much passing and repassing of officials through that part of the crowd that stood on the further side of the women; and whilst this proceeded a deep hush gradually fell upon the people.

Now, by command, the masses parted and fell aside, and the King saw a spectacle that froze the marrow in his bones. Faggots had been piled

about the two women, and a kneeling man was lighting them!

The women bowed their heads, and covered their faces with their hands; the yellow flames began to climb upward among the snapping and crackling faggots, and wreaths of blue smoke to stream away on the wind; the clergyman lifted his hands and began a prayer--just then two young girls came flying through the great gate, uttering piercing screams, and threw themselves upon the women at the stake. Instantly they were torn away by the officers, and one of them was kept in a tight grip, but the other broke loose, saying she would die with her mother; and before she could be stopped she had flung her arms about her mother's neck again. She was torn away once more, and with her gown on fire. Two or three men held her, and the burning portion of her gown was snatched off and thrown flaming aside, she struggling all the while to free herself, and saying she would be alone in the world, now; and begging to be allowed to die with her mother. Both the girls screamed continually, and fought for freedom; but suddenly this tumult was drowned under a volley of heart-piercing shrieks of mortal agony--the King glanced from the frantic girls to the stake, then turned away and leaned his ashen face against the wall, and looked no more. He said, "That which I have seen, in that one little moment, will never go out from my memory, but will abide there; and I shall see it all the days, and dream of it all the nights, till I die. Would God I had been blind!"

Hendon was watching the King. He said to himself, with satisfaction, "His disorder mendeth; he hath changed, and groweth gentler. If he had followed his wont, he would have stormed at these varlets, and said he was King, and commanded that the women be turned loose unscathed. Soon his delusion will pass away and be forgotten, and his poor mind will be whole again. God speed the day!"

That same day several prisoners were brought in to remain over night, who were being conveyed, under guard, to various places in the kingdom, to undergo punishment for crimes committed. The King conversed with these --he had made it a point, from the beginning, to instruct himself for the kingly office by questioning prisoners whenever the opportunity offered --and the tale of their woes wrung his heart. One of them was a poor half-witted woman who had stolen a yard or two of cloth from a weaver --she was to be hanged for it. Another was a man who had been accused of stealing a horse; he said the proof had failed, and he had imagined that he was safe from the halter; but no--he was hardly free before he was arraigned for killing a deer in the King's park; this was proved against him, and now he was on his way to the gallows. There was a tradesman's apprentice whose case particularly distressed the King; this youth said he found a hawk, one evening, that had escaped from its owner, and he took it home with him, imagining himself entitled to it; but the court convicted him of stealing it, and sentenced him to death.

The King was furious over these inhumanities, and wanted Hendon to break jail and fly with him to Westminster, so that he could mount his throne and hold out his sceptre in mercy over these unfortunate people and save their lives. "Poor child," sighed Hendon, "these woeful tales have brought his malady upon him again; alack, but for this evil hap, he would have been well in a little time."

Among these prisoners was an old lawyer--a man with a strong face and a dauntless mien. Three years past, he had written a pamphlet against the Lord Chancellor, accusing him of injustice, and had been punished for it by the loss of his ears in the pillory, and degradation from the bar, and in addition had been fined 3,000 pounds and sentenced to imprisonment for life. Lately he had repeated his offence; and in consequence was now under sentence to lose WHAT REMAINED OF HIS EARS, pay a fine of 5,000 pounds, be branded on both cheeks, and remain in prison for life.

"These be honourable scars," he said, and turned back his grey hair and showed the mutilated stubs of what had once been his ears.

The King's eye burned with passion. He said--

"None believe in me--neither wilt thou. But no matter--within the compass of a month thou shalt be free; and more, the laws that have dishonoured thee, and shamed the English name, shall be swept from the

statute books. The world is made wrong; kings should go to school to their own laws, at times, and so learn mercy." {1}