

FREEDOM AT LAST

History of a Man Who Lived in
Misery and Torture

CHAPTER I.

A man sat in a roughly-constructed punt or raft, low down among the rushes, one hot evening in June. The sun was setting in banks of blood-red light, which turned all the innumerable waterways and pools of the fen from black to crimson. In the fierce light the tall reeds and grasses rose high into the air, like spears stained with blood.

Although there was no wind to play among the rushes and give the reeds a voice, the air was full of sound, and an enormous life palpitated and moved all round.

The marsh frogs were barking to each other with small elfin voices, and diving into the pools in play. There was a continual sucking sound, as thousands of great eels drew in the air with their heads just rising from the water. Now and again some heavy fish would leap out of the pools with a great noise, and the bitterns called to each other like copper gongs.

Very high in the air a few birds of the plover species wailed sadly to their mates, grieving that day was over.

These sounds of busy life were occasionally mingled with noises which came from the castle and village on the high grounds which bordered the fen on the south. Now and again the sound of hammers beating upon metal floated over the water, showing that they were working in the armorer's shop. A bell rang frequently, and some one was learning to blow calls upon a horn for occasionally the clear, sweet notes abruptly changed into a windy howling, like a bull in pain.

The man in the punt was busy catching eels with a pronged pole, tipped with iron. He drove the pole through the water again and again till a fish was transfixed, and added to the heap in the bottom of the boat. He was a short, thick-set fellow, with arms which were too long for his body, and huge hands and feet. No hair grew upon his face, which was heavy and without expression, though there was evidence of intelligence in the light green-grey eyes.

Round his neck a thin ring of iron was soldered, and where the two ends had been joined together another and smaller ring had been fixed. He was dressed in a coat of leather, black with age and dirt, but strong and supple. This descended almost to his knees, and was caught in round the middle by a leather strap, which was fastened with an iron pin.

His arms were bare, and on one of them, just below the forearm, was a red circle the size of a penny burnt into the flesh, and bearing some marks arranged in a regular pattern.

This was Hyla, one of the serfs belonging to Geoffroi de la Bourne, Baron of Hilgay, and the holder of lands near Mortain, in France.

The absolute anarchy of the country in 1136—the dark age in which this story of Hyla begins—secured to each petty baron an overwhelming power, and Geoffroi de la Bourne was king, in all but name, of the fens, hills, and corn-lands, from Thorney to Thetford, and the undoubted lord of the Southfolk.

For many miles the fens spread under the sky from Ely to King's Lynn, then but a few fisher huts. Hilgay itself rose up on an eminence towards the south of the Great Fen. At the bottom of the hill ran the wide river Ouse, and beyond it stretched the treacherous wastes.

The castle of Hilgay stood on the hill itself, and was surrounded by a small village, built in the latter years of Henry's reign. It was one of the most modern buildings in East Anglia. Here, surrounded by his men-at-arms, villeins, and serfs, Geoffroi de la Bourne lived secure, and kept the country-side in stern obedience. The Saxon Chronicle, which at the time was being written in the Monastery of Peterborough, says of him: "He took all those he thought had any goods, both by night and day, men and women alike, and put them in prison to get their gold and silver, and tortured them with tortures unspeakable."

Of he and his kind it says: "Never yet was there such misery in the land; never did heathen men worse than they. Christ slept, and all

His saints."

Hyla had been spearing his eels in various backwaters and fens, which wound in and out from the great river. When his catch was sufficient, he laid down the trident, and, taking up the punt pole, set seriously about the business of return. The red lights of the sky turned opal and grew dim as he sent his punt gliding swiftly in and out among the rushes.

After several minutes of twisting and turning, the ditch widened into a large, still pool, over which the flies were dancing, and beyond it was the black expanse of the river itself. As the boat swung out into the main stream, the castle came plain to the view. A well-beaten road fringed with grass, among which bright golden king-cups were shining, led up to the walls. Clustered round the walls was a little village of sheds, huts, and houses, where the laborers and serfs who were employed on the lands lived.

The castle itself was a massive and imposing place, of great strength and large area. At one corner of the keep stood a great tower, the highest for many miles round, which was covered with a pointed roof of tiles, like that of a French chateau. This was known as the Outfangthef Tower, and Geoffroi and his daughter, Lady Alice, had their private chambers in it.

There was something very stately in the view from the river, all irradiated as it was by the ruddy evening light.

Hyla's punt glided over the still waters till it reached a well-built landing-stage of stone steps descending into the river. Several punts and boats were tied up to mooring stakes. Hard by, the sewage from the castle was carried down by a little brook, and the air all about the landing-place was stagnant and foul.

He moored the punt, and, stringing his eels upon an iron hook, carried them up the hill in the waning light. The very last lights of the day were now expiring, and the scene was full of peace and rest, as night threw her cloak over the world. A rabbit ran across Hyla's path from side to side of the road, a dusky flash; and, high up in the air, a bird suddenly began to thrill the night a welcome.

The man walked slowly, lurching along with his head bent down, and seeing nothing of the evening time. About half-way up the hill he heard someone whistling a comic song, with which a wandering minstrel had convulsed the inmates of the castle a night or two before.

Sitting by the roadside in the dusk, he could distinguish the figure of Pierce, one of the men-at-arms. He was oiling the trigger and barrel of a crossbow, and polishing the steel parts with a soft skin. The man-at-arms lived in the village with his wife, and was practically in the position of a villein, holding some fields from Lord Geoffroi in return for military service. He was from Boulogne, and had been in the garrison of one of Robert de Belleme's castles in Normandy.

The lessons learnt at Tenchebrai had sunk deep in the mind of this fellow; and when any dirty work was aloof or any foul deed to be done, to Pierce was given the doing of it. As Hyla approached, he stopped his whistling, and broke out into the words of the song, which, filthy and obscene as it was, had enormous popularity all over the countryside.

Then he noticed the serf's approach. "Who are you?" he called out in a patois of Norman-French and English, with the curious saw of French accentuation in his voice.

"Hyla!" came the answer, and there was strength and music in it. Something seemed to tickle the soldier to immediate merriment when he heard the identity of the man with the eels.

Hyla knew him well. When he was free from his duties in the castle, Hyla and his wife worked in this man's fields for a loaf of wastrel bread or a chance rabbit, and he was in a sense their immediate employer and patron.

It was at the order of Pierce that Hyla had been fishing that evening. The soldier chuckled on, re-

garding the serf with obvious amusement, though for what reason he could not imagine.

"Show your catch," he said at last.

He was shown the hook of great eels, some of which still writhed slowly in torture.

"Take them to my wife," said the soldier, "and take what you want of them for yourself and your people."

"Very gladly," said Hyla, "for there are many mouths to fill."

"Oh! that can be altered," said the soldier, with a grin; "your family can be used in other ways, and live in other houses than under your roof-tree."

"Duke Christ forbid!" said Hyla, giving the Saviour the highest name he knew; "had I not my children and my wife, I should be poor indeed."

"God's teeth!" cried the soldier, with a nasty snarl and complete change of tone, "your wife, your girls! Man, man! we have been too good to the serfs of late. See to this now, when I was in the train of my Lord de Belleme, both in France and here, we killed serfs like rabbits."

"Well I remember, in the Welsh March, how we hanged men like you up by the test, and smoked them with foul smoke. Some were hanged up by their thumbs, others by the head, and burning things were hung on to their feet. We put knotted strings about their heads, and writhed them till they went into the brain. We put men into prisons where adders, snakes and toads were crawling, and so we tormented them. And the whiles we took their wives and daughters for our own pleasure. Hear you that, Hyla, my friend! Get you off to my wife with the eels, you old dog."

He blazed his bold eyes at the serf, and his swarthy face and coal-black hair seemed bristling with anger and disdain. His face was deeply pitted with marks which one of the numerous varieties of the plague had left upon it, and as his white, strong teeth flashed in anger through the gloom, he looked, so Hyla thought, like the grinning devil-face of stone carved over the servants' wicket at Icombe Abbey.

He slunk away from the man-at-arms without a word, and toiled on up the hill. He fancied he could hear Pierce laughing down below him, and he spat upon the ground in impotent rage.

He soon came to a few pasture fields on the outskirts of the village, some parts of them all silver-white with "lady-smocks." Hardy little cows, goats, and sheep roamed in the meadows, which were enclosed with rough stone walls. A herd of pigs were wallowing in the mud which lined the banks of the sewage stream, for, with their usual ignorance, the castle architects allowed this to run right through the pastures on the hill slope.

The cows were lowing uneasily to each other, for they were tormented by hosts of gnats and marsh-begotten flies which rose up from the fen below.

Past the fields the road widened out into a square of yellow dust-powdered grass—the village green—and round this were set some of the principal houses.

There was no room for comfortable dwelling-places inside the castle itself for the crowd of inferior officers and men-at-arms. Accordingly they made their home in the village at its walls, and could retreat into safety in times of war.

Eustace, the head armorer, had a house here, the best in the village, roofed with shingle and built of solid timber. The men-at-arms, Pierce among them, who were married, or lived with women taken in battle, had their dwellings there; and one thatched Saxon house belonged to Lewin, the worker in metal, and chief of Baron Geoffroi's mint.

Hyla was a laborer in the mint, and under the orders of Lewin the Jew.

In 1133 it was established as a general truth and legal adage, by the Justiciar of England himself, that no subject might coin silver money. The adulteration practised in the baronial mints had reduced coins, which pretended to be of silver, into an alloy which was principally composed of a bastard copper. A few exceptions were made to the law, but all private mints were supposed to be under the direct superintendence of crown officials. In the anarchy of Stephen's reign this rule became inoperative, and many barons and bishops coined money for themselves.

Few did this so completely and well as Geoffroi de la Bourne. (To be continued.)

BAD TRADE PERIODS.

Pinch of Poverty and Unemployment Cause Crime.

Much light on the growth of crime in periods of bad trade is given in British criminal statistics. It is clear that there are thousands whom the pinch of poverty and unemployment drives to pilfering, but the number of habitual criminals is remarkably low.

The increase in indictable offences in 1908 was 6,735, the total being 68,116. Such a rate of increase has not been exceeded since 1861. More than half of the increase occurred in Lancashire, Durham, and the East and West Ridings; less than one-sixth of it in the London district; and nearly all the rest in the mining and manufacturing regions. It has only to be recalled that 1908 was a year of great depression, of mining, shipbuilding and cotton disputes, as well as prolonged cold and wet. The criminal authorities are driven to connect these facts.

They submit the following classification of criminals:—

1. The "habituals," who live on crime. The latest police estimate of their total number is 4,255. There are reasons for thinking that they are decreasing.

2. The ordinarily good character, who succumb to temptation, such as the thieving servant, the shoplifter, and those guilty of embezzlement. Their number remains fairly constant. There is no good reason to suppose that the stand-

ard of honesty among respectable people is being lowered.

3. The inefficient and hangers-on to the fringe of industry, who can earn a living honestly in good times but are the first to feel the pinch of poverty and distress, and are then easily driven to crime. Their offences are small as to the extent of poverty involved; for instance, the amount of 214 larcenies in Warrington was only £389. It is notable that vagrancy increased and drunkenness diminished.

There is within the last fifty years a substantial reduction in offences against the person, showing the improvement in manners. Probably most of the crimes of passion are by the section of the people responsible for offences against property.

But the increase in the number of cases of burglary, robbery, receiving, and coining is very marked. It seems to indicate recruits from the class who in better times live honestly.

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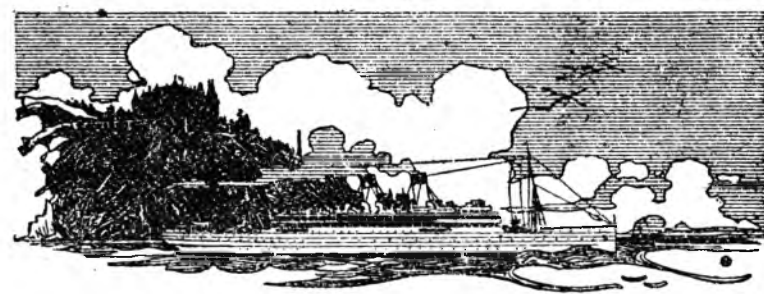
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