

FREEDOM AT LAST

History of a Man Who Lived in
Misery and Torture.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

From the castle there now came the shrill notes of a tucket, and the castle bell began to toll furiously, and a confused noise of shouting floated down the hill. When they hurried to the landing-stage they found that the boats had been duly scuttled. Here and there a gunwale projected out of the water, and on the stones lay the windac of a cross-bow with which holes had been made in the boats.

Hyla gave a long, low whistle, and waited for Gurth to glide out of the reeds bordering the great fen. There was no reply, and the two fugitives looked at each other in alarm. Then Cerdic whistled rather louder, but still the welcome sight of the boat did not come to them.

"Something has happened to the boat," Cerdic said, "I am sure that he would not forswore us like this if a were safe."

"What shall we do?" asked Hyla. "I do not know," said Cerdic, his courage oozing out of him every moment. Their position was certainly sufficiently perilous. There was, as yet, nothing to connect them with the crime, but half-an-hour might alter everything. It was, moreover, quite certain that in a search, one party at least would be sent down to the river.

They stood there gazing at each other in great alarm. "I have a great fear that we are lost," Hyla said. "Indeed, I believe so," answered the other, with strained, terrified eyes.

Both of them felt that they were hard in the very grip of unkind circumstance. They shook like river-side willows when the wind blows.

Now as they stood together communing as to what they should do, and with a great sinking of heart it chance that their faces were turned towards the river, away from the castle. They looked most eagerly towards the reeds upon the other side.

The river ran sluggishly like oil, and there was no breaking up of its surface. Here and there some dancing water-flies made a tiny ripple, but that was all.

Suddenly a great fish leapt out of the middle water high into the air. A flash of silver, a glimpse of white belly, and with a loud report it was gone. Sullen circles widened out and broadened towards them. Then they saw at the very place where the bream had disappeared the still surface of the water was violently agitated. They watched in amazement. A great black object heaved slowly up into view, full six feet long. It was the body of Pierce, the man-at-arms, all swollen by water. The face was puffed into an enormous grotesque and the open eyes seemed cognisant of them.

The faces of the two serfs became ashen white, and they looked at each other in terrible fear.

"What a visomie!" said Cerdic. "God shows us that we are to die. My lord will be ywrocken," said Hyla.

"See how it seems alive." "Yes, that does it. I can see the hole in's neck. The fishes have been at it."

"Oh, courage, courage! Whistle for Gurth once more. Perchance he is nearer now, perchance he is nearer, and, not knowing we are here, cometh not."

"I cannot sound a note, my breath is hot and my lips are very dry. Whistle you for me."

Just then a noise of shouting behind their backs made them both wheel round swiftly. Half-way down the hill a group of men-at-arms were running towards them.

Cerdic gave a great wail of despair. One of the soldiers dropped upon his knee, and a long arrow came past them singing like a great wasp. It ricocheted over the water into the reeds beyond. The soldiers were now a hundred and fifty yards away, shouting fiercely as they came on.

Hyla turned a last hopeless glance to the river. Just as he did so a long nose shot out of the reeds, and the punt they had waited for glided swiftly towards them.

"Hallo, hallo!" Cerdic yelled in an agony of excitement. "Quick, quick, else we die!"

There was a sudden jar as the prow of the punt collided with the masonry. The two serfs leapt into it. Gurth took the long pole and plunged it deep into the water. The muscles grew rigid on his bare back and stood out upon his arms as he bent for one mighty stroke. The soldiers were only twenty yards away. With an incredible slowness, so it seemed to the fugitives, the arms of the punter began to lengthen as the boat moved. In another second the propelling impulse gathered force and speed, and just as the first man arrived upon the landing-stage it glided rapidly over the water. There was a thud as it struck the floating body, and a horrid liquid bubbling, and then in another second they entered the passage and the reeds hid them from view. Gurth sank down, deadly sick, upon the floor of the punt, and the pole, held by one hand only, dragged among the rushes with a sound like a sickle in corn.

The three men crouched in the bottom of the boat, listening to the angry clamor on the opposite shore. An arrow or two passed over their heads, and one fell from a height into the very prow of the boat, but none of them were touched. There was not an ounce of courage among them. They had no strength to go on.

The castle bell away on the hill-top still rang loudly, and the shrill metallic notes of the tuckets called and answered to each other all round.

As they lay in the reeds not thirty yards from their pursuers, these noises of alarm filled them with fear. A voice rang out from the excited babble across the river and flung an echoing and malignant threat at them.

Although they could see nothing, the whole scene was painted for them with noise. They heard the voices sink into a quick murmur of conversation, and then hurried footsteps sped up the hill with messages for the castle.

Still they stayed trembling in the punt and made no effort to escape. All the weight of the terrible traditions that overhung their class was upon them. The great effort they had made, their incredible boldness, now left them with little more spirit, in spite of their good fortune, than whipped dogs. The moment was enough, for the moment they were safe from capture, and the voices of the soldiers—how terribly near!—did not stir them to action.

It was only when their peril became imminent that they were roused from their apathy. Sounds of activity floated over to them. A voice was giving directions, and there was a shout of "Now," followed by a harsh, grating noise. The serfs realized that the soldiers had been able to drag one of the sunken punts on to the landing-stage. Almost immediately a noise of hammering was heard. They were repairing the boat.

At that shrill, ominous sound Cerdic rose from the bottom of the punt trembling with excitement. "Men," he said in a deep, startled voice, "we have been here too long, and death is like to come our way. Oh, faint hearts that we have been! Come, silent now! take poles and let us get away. I know the fens better than those devils."

So confident was his voice and so burning with excitement, that in one moment it lashed their cowardice away. Hyla sprang towards the stern pole and Gurth lifted the other, then, with hardly a movement save a few tiny splashes, the boat glided slowly away into the heart of the fen. The voices of the soldiers became fainter and more faint till they could hear them no more.

The ringing blows of the hammer pursued them a little further, until in a few minutes those also died away, and they were alone in the fen.

All round them the great reeds rose and whispered, enormous bulrushes with furry heads like young water-rats nodded towards them as they raced for life down those dark mysterious waterways. Deeper and deeper into the heart of the great fen sped the boat. Gurth and Hyla worked with the precision of machines. There was a wonderfully stimulating effect in the rhythm

of the action. The water became a deep shining black, showing incalculable depths below. In order to propel the boat as all they had to skirt the very fringe of the morass, for there only could the poles find bottom. At each heave and life, under which the punt kicked forward like some living thing, the poles came up clotted and smeared with stinking black mud, undisturbed before for hundreds of years. Sometimes, at a deeper push, the mud was a greyish white and studded with tiny shells, tokens which the great sea had left behind to tell that once it had dominion there.

All wild nature fled before their racing approach. A hundred yards ahead, even in those tortuous ways, fat unclean birds of the fen rose heavily and clanged away over the marshes. As the throb of the poles came near them, the fish shouldered each other in flight. Every now and again they rushed over a still, wicked pool teeming with fish, and the rush of their passage made white-bellied fish leap out of the water in terror. Once they saw a great black vole, as large as a rabbit, swimming in the middle of the water. He heard them coming, and turned a wet smooth head to look; then with a twinkle of his eyes he dived and disappeared.

Gradually the speed of the boat slackened as the two men grew tired. The excitement of the day began to tell on them, and they felt in their arms how weary they were. Cerdic, who perhaps by virtue of his years or personal magnetism seemed to be indubitably their leader, saw it in their faces. He saw that not only were they physically worn out, but that energy was going from their brains also.

"Stop you," said this shrewd person. "We are far from them now. It is time for rest and food." Nothing loth, they put down the punt poles, and pushed the nose of the boat into a little bay of reeds, out of the main water.

"Food?" said Hyla, "with all my heart, I did not know you had any. Where is it pight?"

Cerdic gave a little superior grin. He took up a skin wallet which lay by his side and produced the materials for a feast. Six great green eggs, stolen from a sitting duck which had belonged to the ill-fated Pierce, were the staple food. Boiled hard and eaten with black bread and some scraps of cold meat, they were a banquet to the fugitives. For drink they had nothing but marsh water, which they sucked up through a hollow reed. It was blackish and rather stagnant, but it refreshed them mightily.

"And how far have you got now, do you think?" said Gurth.

"Near half way," answered Cerdic, "but it has been easy going, and we shall not get such free water now. It is a back way to Icomb that we have come by up till now. Whybeare there was a broad passage, a great stretch of water, but that was in King William's time, when boats brought corn from Edmundsbury. Now the monks have cornland of their own, and corn comes from Norwich also. The passage is all grown with weed and reeds, and no man may go up it in any vessel."

"Where must we go, then?" Hyla asked him.

"Norwards for some miles, taking any way we can that is open. Then we shall come to the lake of Wilfrid, and beyond that is the abbey."

"What is Wilfrid Lake, and who was he?" said Hyla. "I have been upon its water, but I do not know why it is called that. Also, it has a bad name, and they say spirits are seen upon it."

"Wilfrith was once Prior of Icomb," said Cerdic, "a good priest, and much loved by God. Up or a day he was walking by the lake side, when he was seized by lawless men and robbed of his gold cross, and left bound to a tree in the forest, near the monastery. It was evening, and he could see the robbers getting into their boats to cross the lake. So he prayed to God. 'Lord,' he cried, 'I have not loved Thee enough. Deliver me from my need, and with Thy help I will so correct and frame my life that hereafter I may serve Thee better.' As he prayed, and when the thieves were about half-way over the lake, there came a great black hand up out of the water and seized the boat and dragged it into the depths. At the same time his bonds fell from him, and he became free."

"A black hand," said Hyla uneasily, "that would be a fearful thing to meet with."

"We shall not do so," said Cerdic, "for I believe that the Great Ones are helping us to-day. Who knows that they are not with us now? We have killed Lord Geof-

froi for his cruelty and sins, for all he was a lord."

They prattled there a little longer, willing that their rest should be complete.

Now, at eventide, all the fishes began to rise at the flies, and the waters became like stained glass, and peace was over all that wild scene.

The voices of the serfs insensibly dropped, and made low murmurs, no louder than the sounds of the creekchafers and long-mailed water-fies that now boomed and danced over the fen.

The moon was slowly rising when they put out again on the last stage of their journey, punting with less haste, but making good going, nevertheless. They were in excellent spirits.

(To be continued.)

On the Farm

FRUIT-PACKING PRIZES.

The Department of Agriculture for the Province of British Columbia has decided to encourage good fruit-packing throughout the Province. Last winter, in many of the fruit districts, packing schools were conducted, and at that time it was stated that the Department would issue diplomas to those attaining a certain standard of proficiency. This proficiency will be estimated on the following basis:

1. At each packing-school the instructor gives each student a grading based on proficiency acquired in packing.

2. Each student working as a packer is asked to notify the Department of the name and address of the packing concern employing him. The employer will be asked to furnish a statement regarding the proficiency and speed of the student as a practical packer during the season.

3. Packing contests will be held at many of the agricultural fairs for packing-school students. Packed fruit, exhibited by them will be judged by an expert packer, and their proficiency in show-packing judged.

Fifteen, ten and five dollars will be given as first, second and third prizes. The conditions are: Each exhibit must consist of five boxes of apples; five or fewer varieties; five packs; all layers, except face, wrapped; box need not be nailed; fruit may be wiped; no layer papers.

Score as follows: Grading of fruit, 20; packing, 20; bulge, 20; height of ends, 20; firmness, 20; total points, 100. Maximum points obtainable by pupils: Proficiency in packing school, 200; practical packing, 100; packed-fruit contest, 100; total, 400. Packers scoring 300 points (or 75 per cent.) will be awarded diplomas by the Department of Agriculture.

It is believed that, in setting such a high standard of proficiency, the effort necessary will be well worth making. The increased demand for

good packers in British Columbia in the immediate future will make such a certificate valuable. R. M. Winslow, Provincial Horticulturist, is looking after the contests.

WEANING THE LAMBS.

When lambs are four months old, they will, as a rule, do better weaned than running with the ewes, if a fresh clover pasture is provided for them. This is generally available very soon after the hay crop has been gathered. Fresh, clean water should also be provided for the lambs, and salt, either kept in a covered box, where they may take it at will, or a little dropped in bunches on the grass, near the water or feed troughs, once or twice a week. Ordinarily, on good fresh grass, the lambs will do very well without additional feeding, but if they are intended for show or selling early for breeding, they will be better for a feed of oats or oats and bran once or twice a day, fed in troughs in the field. For show lambs, the addition of a little ground oil cake will help to improve their condition.

When the lambs are weaned, the shears should be used to shorten the wool on the ends of their docked tails, and to clip off any tags of dirt which may be present. Later, they will do well on a stubble field where a new seeding of clover has grown well, or, if a piece of rape has been sown, the lambs will do remarkably well on this after becoming used to it. They should not be put upon this at first when it is wet from rain or dew, but in the afternoons on fine days, and they will be better at first for the run of a grass pasture, as well, though when used to the rape, they will thrive satisfactorily confined on this alone, and will fatten faster on rape late in the fall than on any other pasture, even when the rape has been repeatedly frozen, and, indeed, when partially covered with snow. When the lambs are being weaned, the ewes should be kept in a field as far distant from them as can be arranged, and should be kept on short or dry pasture for a few days in order to dry up the milk. If any udders are noticed very full, they should be relieved by hand milking two or three times, at intervals of a couple of days, to avoid injury. For security from attacks by dogs, it is well to have a small cow-bell or two on members of each branch of the flock. *Farmers' Advocate.*

A sliced banana added to a grape fruit salad is considered an improvement by some housewives.

Brush the top of bread loaves when put to rise with melted butter or lard and the crust will be very tender.

In making curtains of swiss or any other material that will shrink when washed, buy one-half yard more than the desired length. In making the heading to put the rod through turn the extra length over on the front of curtain, hem with a narrow hem, and when gathered on the rod it makes a valance ruffle which is attractive; then when curtains need washing let out the heading and if they shrink much the extra length can be used to lengthen the curtain.

MAPLEINE

A flavoring used the same as lemon or vanilla. By dissolving granulated sugar in water and adding Mapleine, a delicious syrup is made and a syrup better than maple. Mapleine is sold by grocers. If not send 50c for 1 oz. bottle and recipe book. Crescent Mfg. Co., Seattle, Wa.

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I am really delighted with the car.—Yours sincerely,

(Signed) C. A. BOONE, of Toronto, Canada.

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