

FREEDOM AT LAST

History of a Man Who Lived in Misery and Torture

CHAPTER XI.—(Cont'd)

The relief to Cerdic was extreme. They had tied his wrists so tightly that the thongs had cut deep into the flesh. For a moment or two his hands were quite lifeless and he could not move them. Then as the blood came flowing back into the stiffened fingers, pricking as though it were full of powdered glass, his mind also began to recover from its torpor and fear. He became alert, and his thoughts moved rapidly. He reached down cautiously for his knife, and inch by inch, withdrew it from the sheath. The jerkins which covered him were so thickly spread that more vigorous movements could hardly have been seen, but he trusted nothing to chance.

Soon Hyla's hands were free, and the thongs binding his ankles severed. They began to whisper a plan of escape.

Hyla was a good swimmer, and Cerdic a poor one, but death in the lake or the deep fen pools was far better than death with all the hideousness that would attend it at Hilgay Castle. The plan was this: When the men rested for a morning meal, which, they calculated would be at sunrise, they would make a sudden dash for freedom. By that time the lake would have been traversed, and the boat slowly threading the mazy waterways of the fen. It would go hard with them if they could not get away from the heavily clad men-at-arms, all unused as they were to the country.

Meanwhile the rowers had got three parts of the way over the water. The sky was quite light now, with that cold grey-green which lasts for a few minutes before the actual sunrise.

"Sun will soon rise," said Hyla; "it's colder now, I will put on my jerkin."

"And I also," said several others and the pile of clothes began to be lifted from the serfs.

It was a terribly anxious moment for them. If it was seen that bonds were cut, then they must risk everything and jump into the lake, for they knew the boat could not have won the fen as yet.

Once in the lake their chance was small, unless it might happen that they were near the reeds which bordered it, and could swim to them and be lost in the fen. The boat could go far more swiftly than they could swim. In all probability there were cross-bows in it; they would be hunted through the water like drowned puppies. One by one the rowers, chilled by their exertions, lifted the heavy leather garments from the two men. Cerdic continued to push his knife under him, and both men lay upon their stomachs, with their hands placed in the position they would have occupied had the thongs remained uncut.

Fortune was kind to them. When they at length lay bare to view, and the cold air came gratefully to their sweating bodies, the soldiers saw nothing. Hyla was the last man to take his coat, and he smote the back of Hyla's head heavily with his clenched fist.

The sudden pain and the foul words which accompanied the blow made the prostrate man quiver with rage. For a moment an impulse to fly at the throat of the man-at-arms, and risk everything in one wild exultation of combat shook him through and through. He quivered with hatred and desire. But a low sibilant warning from Cerdic kept him fast, and with a mighty effort he restrained his passion.

Somewhat to the dismay of the serfs, the boat was stopped, and the soldiers produced food and beer from a basket and began to make a meal. Although they did not dare raise their heads to see, Cerdic and Hyla could hear from the talk of the men above them that they were yet a good half mile or more from the fen. The air began to grow a little warmer, and the sky to be painted in long crimson and golden streaks towards the East. Above their heads the heavy beating of great wings told them that the huge fowl of the fen were changing out over the marshes for food.

Suddenly one of the soldiers, who was in the act of raising an apple to his mouth, began to snigger with amusement. The others followed the direction of his ex-

tended finger with their glance. He was pointing at Hyla. "Well, Jocular," snarled that worthy, "what be you a-mouthing at me for?"

"It's your face, Hyla," spluttered Huber. "By St. Simoun, but I never thought of it till now. Should'st have washed it off!"

"Pardieu!" said Hyla, "it be the minter's paint which I had forgot. A mis-begotten wretch I must look and no lesing! I will to the water and wash me like a Christian."

The man presented a curious and laughable appearance. Lewin had disguised him well, so that he might spy out where Hyla lay, but the exertion of rowing had induced perspiration, and the dusky coloring and painted eyebrows trickled down his hot, tired face in streaks. A black stubble of newly sprouting beard and moustache added to the comic effect.

"Ne'er did I see such a figure of fun as thou art, comrade!" said Huber in an ecstasy of mirth.

"Then, by Godis rood, I will make me clean," said Hyla good-humoredly. With that he got him to the boatside, and leaning over the gunwale began to lave himself vigorously in the fresh water.

In an earlier part of this book occurs a passage which is at some little trouble to explain that these men-at-arms were little more than ferocious unthinking children. The kneeling man presented a mark not only for quips of tongue but for a rougher and more physical wit.

With a meaning wink at the others, John Pikeman withdrew a tholepin, about a foot long, from its socket, and with that stick did give Hyla a most sounding thwack upon the most exposed part of him.

With a sudden yell the unlucky wretch, as might have been foreseen, threw up his legs, and, with a loud gurgle, disappeared into the water. Now to these men, water was a thing somewhat out of experience. Not one in a hundred of them could swim; they were seldom put in the way of it, and a lake or river presented far more terrors to them than any walled town or field of battle.

The fact induces a reflection. Courage is purely relative. All of us can be brave in dangers we know, few of us but are not cowed in perils which are new. Poor Hyla was a striking example of the sententious truth. He rose choking, and his face was so white with fear, his eyes so pleading, his strong arms beat the water in such agony that every rough heart in that boat was filled with anguish.

With one accord they rushed to the side of the boat, and immediately the inevitable happened.

The gunwale sank lower and lower, the cruel lip of black water rose hungrily to meet it, there was a sound like a man swallowing oil, a swirl, a rush of black water creamed into foam at its edge, and with a loud shout of dismay and terror the whole crew were struggling furiously in the water.

In a second the overturned boat had drifted yards away, and only the slimy green bottom projected above the flood.

Hyla and Cerdic, not being at the side of the boat, were not flung some distance out by the force of its turning, but sank together directly beneath it.

They rose almost at once, and both received smart knocks on the head from the timber. With little difficulty they dived and came up by the boat side. Each put a hand upon the slippery curved timbers, only obtaining a rest for the tips of the fingers, and, treading water, looked towards the drowning crowd a few yards away. The water was lashed into foam, as if some huge fish were sporting itself upon the surface. Heads kept bobbing up like corks, and sinking with a gurgling noise. Now and then a hand rose clutching the air in a death convulsion.

Amid all the confusion and tumult the wicker basket, which had held food, floated serenely, and the oars clustered round about it.

Every second, with a long groan, some sturdy fellow would catch at an oar end, the water pouring from his mouth and dripping from his cap. The thin pole would tip up with a jerk, and he would sink gurgling and coughing to his death. Meanwhile, the sun came up the

sky with one red stride and illumined all the waters. The day broke cool and glorious, while these were dying. The day broke as it had done a thousand years before, and will a thousand years after you and I have sunk from one life and risen in another. Calm, glorious, unheeding, the sun rose over the waters, smiling inscrutably on those who were to know its secret so very soon.

In a few moments it was nearly over. Three heads remained above the water, as the serfs watched in fear. Huber swam round and round the other two, shouting directions and advice. One was Hyla, the other Jame, a cut-throat dog of no value. Both had but a few strokes, and their strength was falling fast.

The two heads sank lower and lower, the chins were submerged, the red line of the lips for a moment rested in line with the water and then, with no sign of cry, they sank gently out of sight. Bubbles came up to the surface from a ten-yard circle, burst, and disappeared, the last sign that ten good fighting men were sinking asleep, deep down in the mud below.

As he saw his two comrades go their death, Huber gave a loud despairing cry, wrung from his very heart. Then he started slowly and laboriously, for his strength was fast failing, to swim to the boat.

By this time Hyla and Cerdic were in a safer position. The long-armed little man had made a great leap out of the water from Cerdic's shoulders. He pushed his friend far down beneath the surface with the force of his spring, but the slight resistance of Cerdic's body gave him the necessary impetus, and his strong arms clutched the keel. He was very soon astride it, and when Cerdic came spluttering up again he too was easily assisted into comparative safety.

Suddenly Huber saw the two seated there, and his white face became drawn and furrowed with despair as he saw his last hope gone.

"Hyla! Cerdic!" he called quaveringly, "ye two have beaten twelve brave men, and me among 'em. Ye have Godis grace with you, curse you! and I am done and over. Give you good-day."

"You fool, Huber!" said Hyla in concern, "think you we are foes in this pass? Wait, man, keep heart a little while!" He lifted his leg from the other side of the keel and dived into the water, sending the boat rocking away for yards as he did so. He made the exhausted archer place two hands upon his shoulders, and in ten exhausting minutes the three were perched upon the boat keel, the sole survivors of that ill-fated crew. The sun began to be hot, and they saw they were near land by now.

(To be continued.)

On the Farm

THE USE OF FERTILIZERS.

That reliable fertilizers will not exhaust, but on the contrary will build up the poorest land into highest productivity, has now been proven beyond cavil or doubt, writes G. C. Miller, Middleton, N. S. The writer has used only chemical fertilizers for over thirty years, and those who adopted his system of fertilization 20 years ago are now corroborating his experience. In apples, the crops have been most satisfactory. There have been no off years, and the fruit has always been of first quality. While the crops have not been surprisingly large, they have been good compared with the quantity of the fertilizer used. A larger quantity would probably have insured heavier crops. This is now being tested. The quantity used has never exceeded \$8.00 or \$9.00 worth per acre, or less than 8 cents for each barrel of apples packed. During the past ten years there have been an average yield of 110 bbls. of packed fruit per acre, which means 1,100 bbls, from every acre under cultivation during that period. On a valuation of \$1,000 per acre the fruit has paid all the expenses incident to its production, and left for the owner a surplus of from 14 to 17½ per cent. Others report heavier crops than any I have grown, but large crops are often followed by a year of comparative barrenness, it is the long steady pull that counts.

Below is a brief report of the only 4 acres in full bearing in 1908. The balance of 30 acres is still in various stages below full production. The crop of 1909 is equally

good, but at this writing has not all been realized on.

Pruning	\$ 10 00
Fertilizers for 4 acres at \$9 ..	36 00
Hauling and sowing fertilizers	2 00
Discing 4 times at \$2	8 00
Vetch 2 bushels at \$2.10 ..	4 20
Buckwheat 2 bus. at 75c ..	1 50
Sowing cover crop	1 50
Spraying 3 times	22 40
Bbls., 45l at 25c	113 00
Picking, packing and trucking at 25c	113 00
Sundries	4 80
Total expenses	\$316 40
45l bbls. apples, net proceeds	\$701 34
Balance	\$384 94

This is about 17½ per cent. for the owner on a valuation of \$1,000.00 per acre, and reckoned as though all the work had been done by hired help. There are many orchards doing much better than this, and solely because they get better care; but this moderate result shows most clearly the possibilities of scientific orchard culture in the Annapolis Valley.

"I haven't seen Jones in a long time. What's he doing now?" "Sixty days!"

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Canadian Appreciation

Langham Hotel, London.

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My petrol consumption was 16 miles to the gallon, including a great deal of driving in traffic. The tyres show no appreciable signs of wear, and I think it will prove light on tyres.

I am really delighted with the car.—Yours sincerely,
(Signed) C. A. BOONE, of Toronto, Canada.



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