

FREEDOM AT LAST

History of a Man Who Lived in
Misery and Torture

CHAPTER XII.

They won to land, with the aid of a floating oar. Hyla and Cerdic were for getting back to Icomb and explaining what had befallen them to the fathers, but Huber flatly refused to accompany them. He said it was his duty to go back to Hilgay and say what had become of his comrades, and how they had met their end.

"But if you tell Lord Foulke how you have eaten and slept in friendship—for we must rest and eat before we go—with those that did kill his father, what then?" said Cerdic.

"Lord Fulke would not dare harm me for that, even were I to tell him. I am too well liked among the men. Nateless, I shall say nothing. I shall say that I clomb on the boat, and won the shore, and so made my way home. Look you to this. Can I give up the only life I know, and my master, or live hunted and outlaw in the fens with you?" He argued it out with perfect fairness and good sense, and, with a sinking of the heart, they saw that their ways must indeed lie very far apart.

Material considerations made the whole thing difficult. They were in an unenviable position, and one of great danger, and their only means of transport was the one boat. "There is only one way," said Cerdic, "and that is this: we must row over the lake to the Priory first, and then leave the boat with Huber to make his own way back over the lake and through the fenways."

"Not I," he said. "I would not venture again upon that accursed lake for my life. It is cursed. You have heard of the Great Black Hand? It is an evil place, and has taken many of my good comrades. Leave you me here and go your ways. I will try to get back through the fen."

"Art no fenman, Huber, and canst scarcely swim. Also, that is the most dangerous part of the fen, the miles between the river and this lake. It's nought but pools, waterways, and bog. You could not go a mile."

"Then I will stay here and rot. There is no mortal power that shall make me upon that water more."

There was such genuine superstitious terror in his face and voice that they felt it useless to attempt persuasion, and they cast about in their minds for some other solution of the difficulty. It was long in coming, for in truth the problem was very difficult. At last it was solved, poorly enough, but with a certain possibility of safety.

The three men had landed but a few hundred yards from the opening of the waterway which led to Hilgay, winding in devious routes among the fen. To reach the monastery there were two ways—one, the obvious route, by simply crossing the great lake, for the Abbey was almost exactly opposite, and the other, most difficult and dangerous, to skirt the lake side, where there was but little firm ground, and go right round it to the Priory.

Seeing no help for it, they decided on attempting that. Huber was to have the big, heavy boat, and as best he could, make his way back to Hilgay. It was a curious decision to have arrived at. By all possible rights, Hyla and Cerdic should have kept the boat for their own use, and let Huber shift as best he could. He was, or rather had been, an enemy; they had not only treated him with singular kindness, but he owed his very life to them. It is difficult to exactly gauge their motive. Probably their long slavery had something of its influence with them. Despite their new ideals and the stupendous upheaval of their lives, it is certain that they could hardly avoid regarding Huber from the standpoint of their serfdom. He had been one of their rulers, and there still clung to him some savor of authority. Yet it was not all this feeling that influenced them. Some nobler and deeper instinct of self-denial and kindness had made them do this thing.

In a closed locker, in the stern of the boat, they found some fishing lines, and a flint for making fire. It was easy to get food, and they spent the day resting and fishing. At length night fell softly over the wanderers, and they fell asleep round the fire, while the

other went scraping among the reeds searching for fresh-water mussels, and the night wind sent black ripples over all the pools and the great lake beyond.

They were early up, catching more fish for breakfast, and, rather curiously for those times, they bathed in the fresh cold water, whereby they were most heartily refreshed and put into good courage. Then came the time of parting. It was fraught with a certain melancholy, for they had seemed very close together in their common danger.

"I doubt we shall ever clasp eyes on you again, Huber," Hyla said. "Cerdic and I are not likely to trouble Hilgay again, unless indeed my lord catch us again, and I think there is but little fear of that."

"No, friend Hyla," said the man-at-arms; "we must say a long good-bye this morn."

"You will get back in a day," said Cerdic, "though boat be heavy and the way not easy. What tale will you tell Lord Fulke?"

"Just truth, Cerdic, though indeed I shall not tell all the truth. I shall tell how my good comrades died, and how I did win to land with you two, and left you by the mere. I shall tell Lord Fulke that I could not overcome you, for that you were two to my one, and eke armed. That you saved me from the water I must not say, though well I should like to do so. They would think that I was in league with you, and had fallen in my duty, if I say anything to your credit."

"Without doubt," said Hyla. "You are right, Huber. But I do not look to see Hilgay again."

"And I pray that you never may, friend, for your end would be a very terrible and bloody one. And now hear me. You have taken me to your hearts that did come to use you shamefully. My life is your gift, and I will save pennies that prayer may be made for you, that you be kept from harm, and win quiet and safety. Moreover, never will I do ill to any serf again, for your sakes. For you are good and true men, and have my love. Often I shall remember you and the lake and all that has come about, when I am far away. And give me your hand and say farewell."

They said the saddest of all human words, "farewell," and turning he left them. The big boat moved slowly away among the reeds until it was hidden from their sight. Once they thought they heard his voice in a distant shout of farewell, and they called loudly in answer, but there was no response but the lapping of the water on the reeds.

"A true man," said Hyla sadly. "I think so," said Cerdic, "and there are many like him also. We have never known them, or they us, but chance has changed that for once. Nevertheless I am not sorry he has gone. We are of one kind and he of another, and best apart. Let us set out round the lake; we have a long task before us, and I fear dangerous."

They gathered up their fishing lines and the remaining fish, which they had cooked for their journey, and set out upon it.

They were full of hope and courage, resolute to surmount the perils and difficulties which were before them, and yet, all innocent of fate, one was going to a sudden death and the other was moving towards an adventure which would end in death and torture also.

It is surely a very good and wise ordering of affairs, that we do not often have a warning of what shall shortly befall us. Only rarely do we feel the cold air from the wings of death beat upon our doomed faces. Now and then, indeed, we get a glimpse of those unseen principalities and powers by whom we are for ever surrounded.

More often the black angel, who is to take us from one life to another, presses upon a man's brain that he may know his near translation. Visions are given to men who have lived as men should live, and have beaten down Satan under their feet.

A wise and awful hand moves the curtain aside for them. And it is sometimes so with a great sinner. When that arch scoundrel Geoffroi was close upon his end, he also had a solemn warning. Fear came to him in the night and whispered, as

you have heard, that he was doomed.

But these two children were given no sign. It was not for them; they could not have understood it. God is a psychologist, and He watched these two simple ones very tenderly.

A mile of heavy going lay behind them. Over the quaking fen bright with evil-looking flowers, they plodded their weary and complacent way.

Lean, brown, old Cerdic was to die. Radiance was waiting for this poor man, as the sun—how dull beside that greater radiance which was so soon to illuminate him!—clomb up the sky.

They crossed various ditches and waterways, leaping some and wading breast-high through others, covered with floating scum and weeds. Once or twice a wide pool of black water alive with fish brought them to a check, and they had to swim over it or make a long detour. After about three hours their journey became more easy. There was not so much water about and the ground, which was covered with fresh, vividly green grass in wide patches, was much firmer.

Cerdic went on in front with a willow-pole, probing the ground to see if it was safe for them to venture on, a most necessary precaution in that land of bog and morass.

They were passing a clump of reeds when, with a quick scurry, a large hare ran out almost under their feet. Something had happened to one of its forelegs, for it limped badly, and scrambled along at no great rate.

A hare's leg is a wonderfully fragile piece of mechanism, despite its enormous power. Often when the animal is leaping it overbalances itself in mid air, and coming down heavily breaks the thin bone. This is what had happened to the creature that startled them from the reeds.

The quick eye of the old lawyer-of-dogs saw at once that the animal was injured and could not go very fast. Here was a chance of food which would be very welcome. With a shout to Hyla he went leaping after it. His lean, brown legs spread over the ground, hardly seeming to touch it as he ran. He soon came up with the hare, but just as he was stopping to grasp it the creature doubled, and was off in a new direction. Hyla saw Cerdic pick himself up, stumble, recover, and flash away on the new track. In a minute a tall hedge of reeds, which seemed as if they might fringe a pool, hid him from view.

Hyla plodded slowly on, wondering if Cerdic would catch the hare, and thinking with a pleasant stomachic anticipation what a very excellent meal they might have if that were so. In about five minutes he came up to the reeds, and just as he approached them his heart gave a great leap of fear. Cerdic was calling him, but in a voice such as he had never heard him use before, it was so changed and terrible. Half shout, half whine, and wholly unnerving. He plunged through the cover, the wet splashing up round his feet in little jets as he did so, and then he came across his friend.

Six or more yards away there was a stretch of what at first glance appeared to be pleasant meadow land, so bright was the grass and so studded with flowers. In the center of the space, which might measure twenty square yards, Cerdic stood engulfed to the waist, and rapidly sinking deeper. He made superhuman efforts to extricate himself. His arms beat upon the sward, and his hands clutched terribly at the tufts of grass and marsh flowers. His face, under all its tan, became a dark purple, as the terrible pressure on his body increased, and he began to bleed violently from the nose, and to vomit. Hyla went cautiously towards him, but every step he took became more dangerous, and he was forced to stand still in an agony of helplessness. Even in his own comparative security he could feel the soft caressing ground sucking eagerly at his feet.

He watched in horror. Slowly now, though with horrible distinctness, the body of his friend was going from him. The green grass lay round his arm-pits, and his arms were extended upon it at right angles like the arms of a man crucified. His fingers kept jumping up and down as if he were playing upon some instrument.

Then there came a gleam of hope. The motion ceased, and the head and upper part of the shoulders remained motionless.

"Have you touched bottom, Cerdic?" Hyla called in a queer, high-pitched voice that startled himself.

"No, Hyla," came in thick, difficult reply, "and I die. I am going away from you, and must say farewell. I have loved you very well, and now good-bye. I am not afraid.

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Good-bye. I will pray to God as I die. Do you also pray, and farewell, farewell!"

He closed his staring eyes, and very gradually the sucking motion recommenced.

Hyla stared stupidly at this slow torture, unable to move or think. It was soon over now, and the body sank very quickly away, and left the survivor gazing without thought at the spot where nothing marked a grave.

As he watched, a hare with a broken leg began to hobble across the vivid greenness.

(To be continued.)

On the Farm

SHELTER FOR HENS.

The purpose of all poultry houses is to protect the fowls from rain, sun and wind. Fowls can stand a great deal of cold if they are kept dry. Wet fowls with the water changing to ice on them are the picture of wretchedness. Under these conditions their usefulness is destroyed for many a day. All houses should be built so as to confine the fowls on wet days in winter.

The house should always be built with a southern exposure, not only to give the advantage of as much sunshine as possible, but also to dry the houses. For the same reason the house should be located on as dry ground as possible with good drainage. It should be built tight on the north, east and west, but so as to admit an abundance of fresh air without drafts. If it is possible to use some other building for a windbreak on the north or west, so much the better, since this helps to keep the house warm. If the poultry is to be kept in yards, then the yard should be built to include enough trees or shrubbery to make ample shade, for shade is as essential in summer as sunshine in winter.

If a farmer is a lover of fowls it is a great advantage to have the poultry house near the barn, then the fowls can have more liberty. The barnyard makes the best scratching shed that can be devised; besides the fowls clear up a great deal of waste and do little or no harm. There are farmers who allow their place to become infested with rats and mice, yet they would take a fit of they saw half a dozen hens in their feed lot or horse stalls. Other farmers watch without concern a flock of three hundred crows on their corn piles, yet if he notice three hens in a corn pile they would call the dog and give chase. The poultry house for this class should be as far as

possible from the barn and feed lots so that the fowls can be out of reach of temptation.

There is but one remedy for the fowl hater, and that is for the good wife to get some eggs or fowls of good breed stock and then keep an accurate account of the proceeds and expenditures. Then when the farmer is shown that as a revenue getter the despised hen is second to no animal on the farm, he may experience a change of heart.

BUTTERMILK FOR PIGS.

The amount of flesh produced by a pig fed on buttermilk will depend upon the age of the pig or hog to which it is fed, its condition, the feed which has been used prior to that time, etc. Buttermilk should not be fed alone. It will not pay to try to raise a pig or to maintain an old hog on buttermilk. Its value is greatest when fed in connection with grain, and corn is the best grain to feed it with. Experiments conducted at several stations indicate that buttermilk has the same value for feeding as skim milk for pig feeding. A series of experiments conducted at the Massachusetts station placed the value of 15 cents per hundred pounds on milk when corn was worth more than 28 cents per bushel, provided not more than three pounds of milk are fed with each pound of corn. When nine pounds of milk were fed with each pound of corn the milk was worth but 9 cents per hundred pounds. Skim milk and buttermilk both contain too great a percentage of water in comparison with the dry matter available for nourishing the animal's system. When fed with corn they serve to balance the corn ration and increase the value of the corn. When fed alone the pig is required to drink so much milk to get the solids necessary to maintain the system that the digestive organs are thrown out of condition and he becomes pot-bellied and stunted. Neither buttermilk nor skim milk should be fed in greater quantities than three parts of milk to one part of grain.

A WONDERFUL EXPLOSIVE.

"What would be the consequences of firing a barrelful of nitrogen iodide it would be impossible to say," declares a writer in the Strand Magazine, "simple because the stuff is too awful to be made in such quantities. It may sound like a joke, but it is nevertheless the truth, that the tread of a housefly is sufficient to explode this dangerous material. It is not necessary that a fly should walk over the compound. It has only to let one foot come into contact with the explosive, when the jolt causes it to explode and to blow the insect into the air.

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