

FREEDOM AT LAST

History of a Man Who Lived in
Misery and Torture

CHAPTER XIII.

There is a wonderful steadfast courage about men of Hyla's breed. Even though the object they pursue has lost its value, they go on in a dogged relentless "following up" from which nothing can turn them.

For two hours or more he mourned and thought of old times, gazing in a kind of strange wonder at the silent carpet of grass. The shrewd weatherworn face, the twinkling eager eyes, the nasal drawl which so glibly offered up petitions to heaven, all came back to him with a singular vividness. He was surprised to find how actual and clear his friend's personality was to him. It almost frightened him. He glanced round once or twice uneasily. Cercic seemed so real and near, an unseen partner in the silence.

When one has heard bells tolling for a long time, and suddenly they stop, the brain is still conscious of the regular lin-lan-lone.

While this psychic influence eddied round him, and the kindly old face, ploughed deep with toil and sorrow, was still a veritable possession of his brain, there was a certain comfort.

As it began to fade, as day from the sky, his loneliness came upon him like death. The real agony of his loss began, and it tortured him until he could feel no more. Pain is its own anodyne in the end.

The cordage of his brave heart was so racked and strained by all he had endured that its capacity for sensation was over. So he mourned Cercic dead no longer, his heart was dead.

But we know nothing of this poor brother, if not that in him was a sound piece of manhood, hardened, tempered, and strong. His soul was sweet and healthy, his rough-built body proud of blood and powerful. He must go on and fear nothing. Once more he must rise from his fall and try fortune with a stout sad heart, proving his own Godhead and the glory of his will, over which Fate could have no lordship.

In this only, as the poet sang, are men akin to gods, and in all life there is no glory like the "glory of going on."

Then did Hyla the invincible, rise from the ground to breast circumstance—to seek his Latium once more.

He fell to eating cold roast fish.

When he set out again, he had to make a long detour. The sounding pole still remained to him, and he probed every step as he slowly skirted the treacherous green. It was characteristic of him that as he left the fatal spot where the dead Cercic lay deep down in the mud he never looked round or gazed sadly at the place. He had no thought of sentimental leave-taking, no little poetic luxury of grief moved him. It was an action for a slighter brain than this.

It began to be late afternoon, as Hyla made a slow and difficult progress. He had got round the swamp, and pushed on over the fen. Sometimes he waded through stagnant pools fringed with rushes and covered with brilliant copper-colored water plants. Once, pushing his pole before him, he swam over a wide black pond in which the sun was mirrored all blood red. Often he broke his way through forests of reeds which spiked up far above his head. Everywhere before him the creatures of the fen ran trembling.

Sometimes the firmer ground he came to was as brilliant as old carpets from the house of an Eastern king. The yellow broom moss was maturing, and bright chestnut-colored capsules curved among it. The wild thyme crisped under his feet. The fairy down of the cotton grass floated round them. Little tufts of pale sea-lavender nestled among the long leaves of the marsh zosteria, plump, rank, and full of moisture. The fox-tail grass and the cat's-tail grass flourished everywhere.

We of to-day can have but a faint idea of that wonderful and luxuriant carpet over which he trod. The fair yellow corn now stands straight and tall over those solitudes. The broad dyke cut deep in the brown peat now straightly cleaves the fen, still beautiful and rich in life, but changed for ever from its ancient magic.

By night the lone sprites of the marsh with their ghostly lamps flit disconsolate, for the hand of man has come and tamed that teeming wilderness which was once so strange and alien from Man. Man was not wanted there in those old days, and the cruel swamps claimed a life-sacrifice as the price of their invasion.

Hyla's hard brown feet were all stained by the living carpet on which they walked. His advancing tread broke down the great vivid crimson balls of the agaricus fungus, and spit its fat milk-white stem into creamy flakes. The crimson poison painted his instep, and the bright orange chanterelle mingled its harmless juice with that of its deadly cousin. His ankles were powdered with the dull pink-white of the hydnum, that strong mushroom on which they say the hedgehog feeds greedily at midnight, the tiny fruit of the "witches' butter" crumbled at his touch.

Over all, the fierce dragon-fly swung its mailed body, the Geoffroi of the fen insects.

The light and shadow sweeping over the wheat in its ordered planting are beautiful, but Hyla saw with his steadfast, regardless eyes more natural beauties than we can ever see again.

In every clump that fringed the pool, he came suddenly upon some old pike basking in the sun, like a mitred bishop in his green and gold. The green water flags trembled as he sunk away.

The herons paddled in the shallow pools, and tossed the little silver fish from them to each other, the cold-eyed hawk dropped like a shooting star, and fought the stoat for his new-killed prey.

The shadows lengthened and lay in patches over the wild world of water. The blue mists began to rise from a hundred pools, and the bats to flicker through them. The sunlight faded rapidly away, the world became greyish ochre color then grey, a soft cobweb grey, through which fell the hooting of an owl, and the last call of a plover.

Resolute, though wearied and faint, firm in resolve, though with a bitter loneliness at his heart, Hyla plunged on through the twilight. For some little time the ground had been much firmer and a little raised above the level of the fen, but as day was dying he found he had entered upon a long and gradual slope, and that once more it behoved him to walk with infinite care.

Old rotting tree-trunks cropped up here and there, relics of some vast, ancient forest, which, mingling with rotting vegetation of all kinds, sent up a smell of decay in his nostrils. At every step he sank up to his knees, and brown water, the color of brandy, plashed up to his waist.

He seemed to have arrived at a more desolate evil part of the fen than before. The approaching night made his progress more and more difficult. It was here that the night herons had their nests and breeding-places, inaccessible to men. The ground was bespattered with their excrements, and with feathers, broken egg-shells, old nests, and half-eaten fish covered with yellow flies.

Then as he ploughed on he saw a sight at which even his stout heart failed him. His long struggle seemed suddenly all in vain. Right before him was a wide creek or arm of the lake, two hundred yards from reeds to reedy shore, entirely barring the way. Too far for him to swim, all dead-weary as he was, mysterious and ugly in the faint light, it gave him over utterly to despair.

It began to be cold, and the chilly marsh-vapor crept into his bones and turned the marrow of them to ice.

He sat on a mound formed by a great log and the debris of a mass of decayed roots, the whole damp and cold as a fish's belly, and covered with living and slimy moss. His feet were buried in the brown water.

It was now too dark to move in any direction with safety, and until day should break again he must remain where he was. He had

no more food of any kind, and was absolutely exhausted. So he moaned a little prayer, more from habit than from any comfort in the act, and stretching himself over the damp moss fell into a fitful sleep. He dreamed he was back at the Priory, and heard in his dreaming the distant sound of the monks singing prayers.

It was a picture of his own life, this sorry end to all his day's endeavor. It foreshadowed his career, so rapidly darkening down into death. His life-path, trod with such bitterness, growing ever more devious and painful, while the ignes fatui of hope danced round its closing miles!

CHAPTER XIV.

For a moment let us look into this so seeming-piteous a one of ours, on which soon the iron curtain is resonantly to fall.

It is a hard, stern story this of our poor serf. The rebel lifted his hand against an established force. For that he perished in bitter agony. But, going so soon to his death, he shows us a Man in spite of all his woes. And we can be uplifted in contemplating that. It is Hyla's message to us no less than to his scarred brethren on the castle hill.

The Lord of Hilgay could maim and kill his body, but the Manhood in him was a flame unquenchable, and burnt a mark upon his age. The clash of his battle rings through centuries.

His doings sowed a seed, and we ourselves sit to-day in that great blood-nourished tree of Freedom which sprang therefrom.

* * * * *

The stars that night were singularly bright and vivid. The sky was powdered with a dust of light, among which the greater stars burned like lamps.

Below that glorious canopy Hyla lay in an uneasy sleep. Every now and then he awoke, chilled to the bone. Though the stars were all so clear and bright they seemed very remote from this world and all its business, as he looked up with staring, miserable eyes. Hyla believed, as little children in Spain are taught to this day, that the stars were but chinks, holes, and gaps in the floor of heaven itself. He thought their bright white light but an overflow of the great white radiance of God's Home.

That comforted him but little as he lay cold and hungry in the swamp. Indeed it was easier to pray in the day-time, when even a hint of heaven was absent. The enormous radiance was so remote in its splendor. It accentuated his forlorn and forgotten state.

He was lying but a few yards from the edge of the broad pool which barred his progress, and as the hours wore on and the stars paled, the blackness of the water became grey and tremulous.

It was nearing dawn, though the sun had not yet risen, when he thought he saw a red flicker in the mist which lay over the lagoon. It

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was too ruddy and full-colored for a marsh light, and his hopes leapt up, half doubting, at the sight. In a moment or two, the light became plainer, and he knew he was not deceived. The thing was real. It advanced towards him, and seemed like a torch.

He sent a husky shout out over the water. Whether the light be-tokened advance of friend or foe he did not know or care.

No answer came to his call, but he saw the red light become stationary immediately, and cease to flicker.

He shouted again louder than before, standing up on the rotting log, and filling his lungs with air. An answering voice came out of the mist at this, and the light moved again.

And now the grey waste began to tremble with light. The sun was rising, and at the first hint of his approach, the mists began to sway and dissolve.

Coming straight towards the bank, Hyla saw a fen punt urged by a tall, thin man dressed in skins like a serf. He used the long pole with skill, and seemed thoroughly at home in the management of his boat.

About six yards from the shore, he dug his pole deep down and checked the motion of the punt. Hyla waded down among the mud as far as was safe, and hailed him. "For the love of God, sir," he said, "take me from this swamp."

The stranger regarded him fixedly for a moment, without answering. Then he spoke in a slow, deliberate, but resonant voice.

"Who are you? How have you come here in this waste? I thought no man could come where you are."

"I am starving for food," said Hyla, "and like to die in the marsh an you do not take me in your boat. I am of Icomb, thrall to the Prior Sir Richard. The Lord of Hilgay's men took me and another who lies dead in the swamp. They were upon the big lake when the boat upset, and all were drowned save one. He has got him back to the castle, and I am journeying to Icomb, if perchance I may come there safely."

"You tell of strange things," said

the tall man, "and I will presently ask you more of them. Now hear-ken. I am not one of those who give, taking nothing in return. I will take you safe back to the Fath-ers, and feed you with food. But for three days you must labor for me in work that waits to be done in my field. I need a man's arm."

"For a week. If by that you will save me from this."

"So be it," said the tall man with great promptness. "You shall work for a week, and then I will take you to Icomb."

With that he loosened the dripping pole, drove it again into the water, and the nose of the punt glided up to Hyla.

He clambered carefully on board and sat dripping.

"I have no food here," said the man, "for I live hard by, and did but come out to look at some limes I set down overnight, but we shall soon be there."

As he spoke he was poling vigorously, and they were already half way over the pool.

As they neared the opposite shore Hyla saw the reeds grew to a great height above them, forming a thick screen with apparently an unbroken face. But he knew that suddenly they would come upon an opening which would be quite imperceptible to the ordinary eye, and so it proved.

(To be continued.)

NOT THAT MEANING.

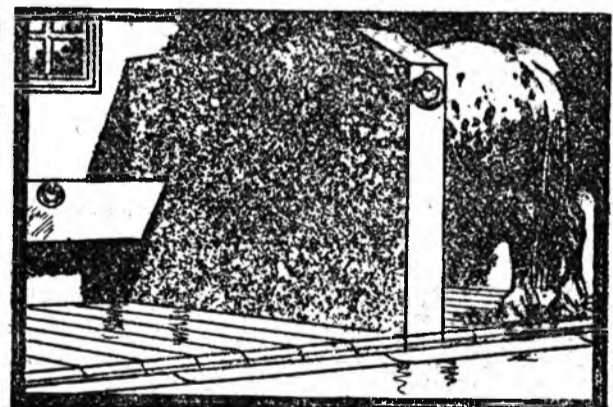
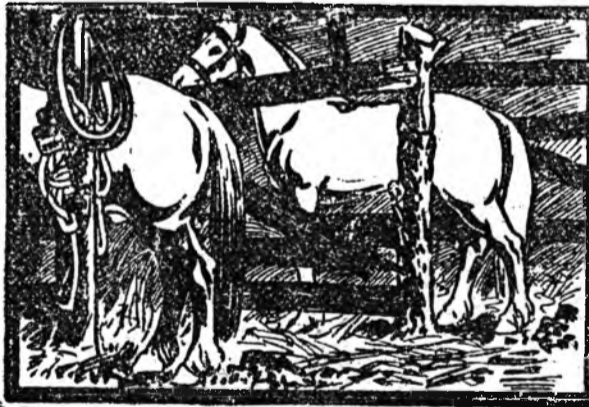
"The doctor said that Bill was drunk when we took the poor fellow to have his head attended to last night after he fell."

"Doctor never said anything of the kind!"

"Didn't I hear him? Said it was a jagged cut."

"What made you so late?" "I met Jinx." "Well, that's no reason why you should be an hour late getting home to supper." "I know, but I asked him how he was feeling, and the fool insisted on telling me."

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