

EDWARD'S ATONEMENT.

STORY FOR YOUNG FOLKS.

CHAPTER III.

Roger was far away, for in the morning he had requested and obtained permission to absent himself from the castle on a visit to his mother, whom he affirmed to be dying. This was untrue; his object was to betray his generous patrons to their enemies. It was not without some bitter pangs that he had resolved to act so dastardly a part; but he was the victim of that superstitious and tyrannical hierarchy which does not allow its disciples the luxury following the dictates of conscience.

Philip opened his eyes precisely at the same time as he had done the night before. All was still. Nothing but the throbbing of his own heart, and his cousin's regular breathing, disturbed the silence.

When the first stroke of the clock resounded through the castle, Philip's heart gave such a leap that he felt as if he must choke. But he determined not to awaken Edward till the rustling noise he had heard the night before should announce the advent of the presence he still dreaded so horribly, in spite of the vaunted amulet his trembling fingers grasped with such desperate energy.

With all his senses preternaturally quickened by terror, he listened in silence for some minutes; but now, just as his pulses have dropped to a more regular and placid beat, they are all set bounding again with renewed violence. A soft footfall on the corridor—nearer—now the door opens—and it enters the chamber! Philip is in such agony of fear that he forgets even to wake Edward, and only lies gasping, with his head under the clothes.

"I am not sleeping," says Edward, when at last Philip touches his arm. "Heard you aught? I have but this instant awakened."

"Yes! yes!" gasped Philip. "Come then—hasten; the mystery will soon be solved."

And Edward was out of bed, and in the corridor the next instant, to the full as excited as his cousin, though not at all frightened. For his curiosity was stimulated; his mother had owned that some one was concealed in the castle, but Edward had visited the only chamber which he could occupy in that part of it the night before, and had found it empty. In the excitement of the adventure he forgot the disobedience of his act, and the reliance his mother had placed in his discretion—nay, more, in his honor! He had remembered it at first, but had quieted his conscience by the thought that "it was but to his cousin Philip he had spoken, and he was silent enough, so no harm was done." But he forgot that if his kind mother had not wished him to know nothing further of the matter, she would not have told him to ask no questions. But he was doing far worse than that. How disgusted he had felt with himself had he suddenly realised at that moment, that he was playing the spy! dogging his mother's footsteps in order to discover what she wished to keep concealed from! But God, and God only, is all-powerful to bring good out of even the evil and wrong actions his creatures commit.

Philip followed his more courageous companion along the corridor, heartily wishing he had never come to this dreadful place, as he termed it in his own mind.

They were just in time. Lady Beaufort's figure could be dimly discerned a few yards in advance of them.

She stopped, stood a moment, with her face turned to the wall, placed her hand on the oaken panelling, and, as if by magic, it yielded to her touch. To Edward's utter amazement, the wall had opened, and she had disappeared.

With a warning pressure of his cousin's hand, he crept cautiously forward. A faint ray of light struggled through the nearly-closed aperture into

the corridor, but Edward could see nothing, although he could hear the low tones of his mother's gentle voice, and the deeper whisper of her hidden guest.

Feeling all at once very guilty, Edward turned, and cautiously retraced his steps. When the two lads were once more in their own chamber, he exclaimed—

"Thy fears are over now; but, methinks, my lady mother would be deeply grieved. We should not have watched her, cousin Philip."

"No harm hath come of it," replied Philip, "and none can; but I thought—said you not there were no other chambers there than that we entered last night?"

"In truth I thought so till now," replied Edward; "but see thou keep silence, and thou wouldst not bring us both into disgrace."

Philip muttered some sleepy reply, for, overpowering fear he had been enduring, he was already fast asleep; and although Edward's mind was now the disturbed one, before ten minutes had elapsed, he had followed his cousin's example.

"Dighton hath arrived, madam, and craves instant speech with your ladyship," announced Lady Beaufort's tire-woman, entering her mistress's withdrawing-room two days later.

"Admit him instantly, Annis," said Lady Beaufort, looking surprised; for Master Dighton had accompanied her lord, and she wondered that he should have dispensed with his steward's attendance, as it was partly on account of business matters that he had undertaken the journey.

"Yet stay," she added, ever considerate to all around her; "tell him that when he hath rested and eaten he may attend me here."

Annis withdrew; and a few minutes later Master Dighton was ushered into Lady Beaufort's presence.

"Welcome, good Dighton; thou bringest news of thy lord?" she asked, as he bowed low before her.

"Mine honored lady, yes—so far, at least, if my tidings be not good, yet they might be worse, far worse."

"Something is amiss!" exclaimed Lady Beaufort, with a paling cheek. "Keep me not in suspense; thine eyes speak what tongue refuses to utter. My dear lord is in danger—ill!"

"In truth, my lord is in some difficulty; but never saw I a more brave and cheerful spirit, and a livelier aspect, than he bore when I quitted him," replied Master Dighton, glad to preface his message with some pleasant and comfortable words. "He is detained in London by the Queen's command. I had just returned from the City to the hostelry at which my lord was resting only a few hours, intending to return home speedily, when I heard a great gossiping, and 'my lord of Beaufort is suspected,' said one. So I listened without saying aught, and I presently learnt that my kind patron had been carried before 'His Eminence,' as they named him, on suspicion of harboring and concealing heretics. I came hither instantly—"

"And left thy lord in peril?" asked Lady Beaufort, reproachfully.

"In truth I should have but added to his peril. But I must be brief—before now a party of soldiers armed with a search-warrant are on the way to the castle. The guest, if guest there still be, must fly, and I, if not required here, will return to aid my lord."

"Go, go at once, good Dighton," said the agitated wife, "but how—how could it have been known? Surely Roger—Nay, I cannot believe that."

"What is it you fear, my mother?" asked Edward, who, sitting in the embrasure of the window, had, unperceived, been an auditor in the conversation.

"Ah, Edward, I saw you not. My son, they will kill him. My dear brother!" And Lady Beaufort hurried away.

Edward followed his mother.

What was the import of her hurried ejaculation? "My dear brother!" Could she mean that the mysterious inmate of the secret chamber was her brother? and if so, why should any one wish to kill him?

As he began to ascend the stairs he met Philip.

"Philip," he whispered hurriedly, "something dreadful is happening, and I much fear that I am the cause. I pray you tell me, hast said aught to any one concerning—"

At this moment Lady Beaufort came towards them in great agitation, and exclaimed, "Go, Philip, to my withdrawing-room, and remain there till I send. Merciful heavens!" she exclaimed, turning to Dighton, who hurried up to the spot, and said in a low tone—

"They come, madam!"

"T is as I thought. Edward, come with me;" and, swiftly preceding him, she led the way to his sleeping chamber.

"Edward," she continued, "your uncle is betrayed—he it is, my own dear brother, whose life they seek. I tell you, because I would not have his presence betrayed by your inadvertence."

"Indeed I will be silent; yet should they question me—"

"They will doubtless enter and pass through thy sleeping chamber; hasten, that thou mayst be a-bed and feigning sleep when they arrive. I will send Philip; and Lady Beaufort hurried again to her withdrawing-room, and, having dismissed Philip to rest, assumed an appearance of calmness, in order to meet the unwelcome visitors."

She had commanded Dighton to set off again on his return to London, which he had already done, but, perceiving the soldiers approaching, had turned to give notice of the arrival.

Her ladyship had two reasons for sending Master Dighton away. The first was her anxiety concerning her lord, and the second was that, believing the former to be the only person in the household who shared her knowledge of the fugitive's place of concealment, she thought it would be safer that he should be beyond the reach of their questioning.

By the time Edward and Philip had reached their chamber, the bustle of the soldiers' arrival was plainly audible.

"Philip, get to rest as quick as may be—for me, I must hear more of this matter," said Edward, and, leaving the room, he bent his steps towards the great hall, where the servants were being questioned by the officer who commanded the expedition. The lad stopped at the entrance, and, keeping well in the shadow, heard all that passed between his mother and the officer.

"Sir officer," she was saying, "whatever your business may be, I judge that it hardly falls within the limit of your duty to threaten me. As to your questions, I scorn to answer them—question my household as you will."

"Nay, fair lady, I waste no time in words; here is my warrant," showing her a document with official seals attached. "I will at once, under favor, proceed in my search. The entrance to the castle is guarded, for I am well assured he whom we seek is here: and now, madam, I will trouble you to conduct me to the secret chamber in the wall which terminates in the West Tower."

"Secret chamber!" gasped Lady Beaufort; but Edward stayed to hear no more. The next instant he was on his way to it; oh, the intense excitement and agonising anxiety of the moment during which he stood in the corridor, and passed his fingers firmly along the toppling of the panel in the wall.

How fortunate! he has touched the spring. "Come with me, this instant!" he whispered, "they will seek you here. Hasten, sir, I pray you!"

"Whither shall I go then?" asked the fugitive, rising, and standing calmly ready for whatever might happen.

"Follow me, and nothing!" exclaimed Edward, hurriedly, and he led the way to the untenanted chamber, which was situated a few steps farther, at the end of the corridor.

"I will see they disturb you not," he exclaimed, "hide, and stir not." And he rushed back to the corridor, entered the chamber, closed the aperture, and drew a heavy bolt before it just in time, for the pursuers were at that moment entering the apartment, where Philip, trembling with fear and something like remorse, tried vainly to wear the semblance of slumber.

They had evidently been informed by some one of the situation of the secret room, for they immediately began hammering at the wall with the end of their harquebusses.

"Ha, ha, our search is ended!" cried one of the two men who had accompanied the officer; the others had been left behind in the hall and at the drawbridge to prevent the fugitives escaping by that way. The panel had moved slightly under the weight of his weapon, just sufficient for him to perceive that it was movable; but, as you will remember, Edward had drawn the bolt on entering.

Since then he had not been idle. "Now," thought he, "I will give them a little sport," and, with a smile of mischief in his merry blue eyes, he uttered a dismal half-stifled moan.

"We have him safe!" cried the officer exultingly, and poor Lady Beaufort wrung her hands in despair.

(To be continued.)

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