

RALPH HARDELOT'S MEDIATION

BY WILLIAM MINTO.

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

At last she met Reinald, and what she heard from him gave body to her vague fears. He could tell her nothing about Ralph, except that once he had ventured to ask the chancellor whether anything had resulted from his mission to Stourbridge Fair, and had been sharply commanded never to open his mouth on the subject again. "I desire never to hear his name again," the chancellor had said, with frowning emphasis.

What had he done? What had become of him? Why had he sent no message to her?

The London residence of the princess at this time was the house known as the King's Wardrobe, on St. Andrew's Hill, between the Back Friars and St. Paul's.

One afternoon, in the second week of December, the princess came in from vespers at St. Paul's, and found Clara seated in the embrasure of a window, looking out dreamily at the dying day. A pile of embroidery lay in her lap, and opposite her, on a low stand, was an open book, but the light had failed, and now she lay back with her eyes fixed on the cross of St. Paul's, which stood out clear above the dark tops of the intervening houses. She had been dreaming thus since the vesper bells of St. Paul's began to ring.

Clara rose hastily when the princess entered, but the princess kindly bade her be seated, and sat down beside her. "You look sad, my child," she said. "What is it that troubles you?"

"Nay, madame," answered Clara, "I have no reason to be sad. You are very kind to me."

The princess looked at her face for a moment with thoughtful interest. "Why, child," she said, "your eyes are glistening. They are full of tears."

"I was listening to the bells, madame," said Clara, evasively. "They have a mournful sound in the falling light. And the footsteps in the street, too."

"Only if the heart is mournful," said the princess, cheerfully. "We do not think of such things when we are happy."

"I have no reason to be unhappy, madame," said Clara again. "You are very kind to me."

"But sometimes we are unhappy without reason. I must send Father William to you. Is it the book that has moved you? Let me see what it is."

It was Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess," that exquisitely tender poem in which the first wife of John of Gaunt has a more lasting memorial than any other of the Plantagenet ladies, with all the glory of their richly carved tombs.

The widow of the Black Prince and mother of the young Richard was not over-pleased when she saw what the book was. The aspiring Duke of Lancaster, a man of many ambitions, was suspected, with or without reason, of designs upon the throne. It was natural, at least, that the young king's mother should distrust and dislike him, and it was with some dryness in her tones that she asked, when she saw that Clara had been reading the "Book of the Duchess," "Where did you get this?"

"It was a New Year's gift from a friend when I was at Camelot Hall." The princess still looked inquiringly, though she said nothing, as if wondering how the book could have reached Camelot. There was a touch of defiance in Clara's voice, as she answered the suppressed inquiry.

"Ralph Hardelet copied it for me. His brother is in the service of the archbishop, and obtained a copy when he was at Bruges with the archbishop, and the Duke of Lancaster and his retinue were also there."

Clara gave this information in a hard, matter-of-fact tone, as if challenging any one to say that it was more than an ordinary matter of fact that she should have received a present from Ralph Hardelet.

The princess repeated the name with a smile. "Ah, Ralph Hardelet! The young clerk who fought so well at Castle Hedingham, and who helped you to escape from Sturmer?"

"Yes, madame," assented Clara. "And what of that?" she would have added, but for her respect for the princess. It was with difficulty that she kept her voice from suggesting the defiant question.

The princess looked sadly and thoughtfully for a minute cut into the deepening twilight. "Ah, I see now," she said at last, "why you look sad. Do you know I am rather glad to see some of the world in your eyes?"

Clara would fain have disclaimed sentimentality, but she was too much in awe of the princess. But she could not suppress a look of demure mockery which would have been visible in a clearer light.

The princess went on: "Do you know why? Lady Cavendish has told me that you have a heart of flint, that she never saw you betray the least symptom of pity or tenderness. And that, my child, is not a good character for a woman. Nothing, she said, would move you."

"Lady Cavendish," said Clara, in a lower tone, and with a slight quiver of the lip, "never tried the effect of kindness."

"But I fear," answered the princess, with a smile, "that the good princess of Dartford gives you no better a character. She tells me that you almost frightened to death a gentle creature of

a nun there; that you appeared at her bedside in the middle of the night with a knife in your hand and commanded her to tell her beads, for her last hour had come."

The impenitent Clara could not keep from laughing at the reminiscence, and the princess caught the infection and laughed too.

"It was so dull in the priory, madame," pleaded Clara, in an apologetic tone, recovering herself.

The princess shook her head. "And that was your way of amusing yourself?"

"I was very sorry afterwards," said Clara, with an effort to assume an air of penitence. "The dear old sister was so frightened I could hardly persuade her I was not in earnest. When I stooped down to kiss her, she screamed. I did not think she would go into such a panic."

"Well, I hope the prioress gave you a proper penance. She seemed to be glad you were not going back to the priory."

"Sister Anne forgave me," said Clara. "The prioress would never have known if she had not screamed. The dear old thing cried about it afterwards, and begged me to forgive her for screaming."

Clara's eyes were glistening again, though there was a smile upon her lips. "Well, then, child," said the princess, "I know now that you have a better heart than they think."

"Ugly women are always spiteful," said Clara, in indirect compliment to her patroness.

"Let us see," said she, smiling at a flattery which was evidently sincere. "Let us see, if we can, what you have been reading. I believe I can guess. The tale of Ceyx and Alcione."

She took the book close to the window, and read:

"Ah mercy, sweet lady dear! Quod she, to Juno her goddess. 'Help me out of this distress, And give me grace my lord to see Soon, or wit where'er he be, Or how he fareth, or in what wise.'"

"It is a very touching tale," said Clara, with a sigh.

"Yes," answered the princess, smiling, and Alcione is not the only lady who longs to know where her lord is."

"My lord, madame, though I have never admitted him as such, is in Brittany, I hope," said Clara, in a subdued voice.

"From which," said the princess, impatiently, "we both hope he will never return. But this Ralph Hardelet—is that not his name?"

"Yes, madame."

"Have you no desire to know what has become of him?"

Clara was silent.

"Answer me, child," said the princess, imperiously.

"Has he never come back to report to the king?" asked Clara, in a hesitating voice.

"That is not an answer," said the princess. "You love him, do you not?"

"I do not know whether he loves me," said Clara, bursting into tears, "and I do not know where he is."

CHAPTER XIX.

The result of the conversation between Clara and the princess was that the princess spoke to the king and the king spoke to Sir Simon Burley. Sir Simon told the king that Ralph had been arrested; that he had turned traitor and had been arrested, but had escaped. This had been duly reported to Clara, and she wondered much why, if Ralph had escaped, he did not communicate with her in some way. She asserted boldly to the king and to the princess that she did not believe that Ralph was guilty of treachery. But it was several months before she knew where Ralph was, and then the information came through a most unexpected source. About noon, one day not long after Christmas one of the squire of the princess' household reported that a Flemish merchant wished to submit to her inspection some wonderful bargain in gold and silver work, which he had purchased cheap in Ghent in consequence of the troubles there. The princess had some scruples, but they gave way before the irresistible temptation of a bargain. She would buy some trifle for Clara at least, and consented that the merchant should be admitted. To Clara's astonishment, she recognized in him one of Ralph's associates, the benchmark Lawrence.

Fortunately all eyes were bent upon the pack which he carried in his arms, and proceeded at once deferentially to open, so that Clara's astonished look passed unobserved. All the ladies of the household gathered in a flutter to examine the merchant's wares, which consisted chiefly of clasps, brooches and earrings in gold and silver filigree. He had not many things, but they were of the most delicate workmanship, and soon there was a lively buzz of criticism and haggling.

In the midst of this excitement, Lawrence, who had not shown the slightest sign of recognizing Clara, contrived to say to her two words, to nobody but her would have attached any meaning, if they had happened to overhear. These words were—"Blackfriars—vespers."

When the hour for vespers came, Clara excused herself from attending the princess and St. Paul's, and hurried down to the church of the Black Friars, then one of the finest in London, though all trace of it has now disappeared.

It was but a stone's throw from the Wardrobe. In the north aisle she found Lawrence waiting for her.

"You understood me, madame!" he said, saluting her respectfully.

"Perfectly."

"I have been sent to speak with you about Ralph Hardelet."

"Where is he?" she asked.

He looked surprised. "I thought you knew," he said. "He is in prison in Cambridge Castle."

It was Clara's turn to express astonishment. "But we were told he had escaped."

"The king is under that belief?"

"Yes. This was told to the king as a proof that he was guilty of the charges made against him."

Lawrence informed her that for some time he and his fellows had suspected Ralph of treachery to them. Through a confederate in Cambridge Castle they had learned the truth of the case, that Ralph was kept a prisoner there on the charge of complicity in their designs. Then Lawrence had been sent to assist him to escape. But Ralph had refused to stir. He would listen to no argument; he was a prisoner by the king's orders on charges that he repudiated, and he would remain in prison till he was cleared of them. It was then that Lawrence had been commissioned to see Clara, and urge her to press for an inquiry.

"Surely," said Lawrence, when Clara had told him how matters stood, "surely when the king knows that Master Hardelet is still a prisoner, he will at once have him released?"

Clara's intelligence and practical instinct had developed wonderfully during her short experience of court life. She was able to correct Lawrence on this point. "That might be," she said, "if the king were free to follow his own inclination. But he must have been misinformed for a purpose. Those who misled him must have a reason for keeping Ralph out of sight, and—"

She shuddered at the conclusion to which her argument pointed. Lawrence saw it. "It might be better, after all, that he should escape," he said.

"If he does escape," said Clara, "I think he might be helped to an audience of the king."

Before they separated Clara told him what she knew about the espionage of Docket on himself and his master. "Then we had better make all haste from London," he said. "We have now learned all that we wished to know."

Clara left the church with a lighter heart than she had known for some months. A prettier or brighter figure you could not imagine than hers as she hurried up St. Andrew's Hill in the gathering dusk of the frosty January evening. Purple hood and mantle, the ground white with snow, big flakes beginning to fall from the dark sky fluttering down past the quaint gables and windows of the winding street. It was a pretty figure hurrying along, and if you had been near enough to see the sweet, oval, warm-tinted face and sparkling eyes looking out from the gray fur edging of the purple hood, the vision would have warmed your heart for hours.

Father William ascribed the change in her demeanor to the efficacy of his excellent counsels, and accepted the thanks of the princess with happy humility.

(To be continued.)

WOES OF A REPORTER.

Had a Hard Time Finding a Good Suit of Clothes in His Family.

"Talk about hard luck running in families," said the Brooklyn reporter at the city hall to a reporter for a New York paper. "Why, we get it in chunks."

"For instance, when I was told that I would have to handle some of the functions connected with the reception of Prince Henry, I dug out my evening clothes, for which I had found no use for several weeks. A family of healthy mice had made such havoc with the coat that it was no longer fit to wear."

"Says I to myself, 'I'll step around and borrow my brother's suit.' My brother looked pained when I announced the object of my visit."

"I'm real sorry, old man," he said, "but I'm afraid I can't accommodate you. You see, I let a friend have it a few weeks ago and he hasn't returned it."

"What's the matter with asking him to return it?" I said.

"Well, the fact is," said my brother, "the poor chap died before he had a chance to send it back and his folks, not knowing that the suit was a borrowed one, buried him in it."

Offended by Senator Lodge.

Members of the Somerset club, an aristocratic and famous organization of Boston, are much put out because United States Senator Lodge has fitted up some nearby buildings as stores. These are part of an estate which the senator's mother occupied until the time of her death. In one of the houses Mr. Lodge was born, which fact makes his conduct all the more flagrant in his townmen's eyes.

Might Settle Controversy.

The presence of a Shakespearean company in Kansas reminds us of a dramatic criticism once passed by a Kansas paper. "Mr. So-and-So played 'Hamlet' in this town last night," said the paper. "And right now is the time to settle that Shakespeare-Bacon controversy. Let the graves of both be dug up and see which of the two turned over."—Kansas City Journal.

George Bancroft's Big Estate.

It is ten years since George Bancroft died. Meanwhile the securities bequeathed to his estate, which is now about to be divided, have increased in value from about \$550,000 to \$650,000.

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