

Chapter VIII.A Joyous Reunion with the King.

At last the Earl of Northumberland was able to tell the children that the plea for a meeting between them and their Father had been granted, and that they were to see him on July 16th. But it seemed to them as if that great day would never dawn, for ever since they had heard of what was in store for them, they could not think of anything else. When at last it came, they were all up very early and ready for the journey before seven o'clock.

Three coaches drove into the great courtyard of St. James' for the conveyance of themselves and their train to the Greyhound Inn, Maidenhead, where they were to meet the King. In the first rode the Princess and her brothers with their governor; in the second, their gentlewomen attendants; in the third their gentlemen, the whole being accompanied by a strong guard of city militia. Henry was so excited that the Earl had difficulty in keeping him from falling out of the carriage, but the Princess' rapturous anticipations of seeing her Father were too deep for any outward expression of them.

News of the royal meeting had been noised abroad for some days in Maidenhead and the surrounding villages, and the loyal inhabitants, determined to show their sympathy, had decked the streets with green boughs and strewn the approaches to the Inn with flowers and sweet herbs. They themselves flocked in from all quarters on the auspicious morning, and in their welcoming, raised cheer after cheer as the royal cavalcade swung up to the Inn door about ten o'clock.

Many a "God bless your Royal Highnesses!" and "God Save His Majesty" rang out in the air, as the children, shyly acknowledging these greetings, were handed out of their coach by Northumberland. In their anxiety not to be a moment late for the meeting, however, they had arrived too early, and, as regards the Princess, impatiently endured an hour's wait before a clatter of horses announced the arrival of the King. His heavily armed escort galloped up to the door of the Inn, and in their eagerness to embrace him, and delirious with delight, even Elizabeth forgot their customary obeisance.

Many a tear coursed down the cheeks of the waiting women as they saw one after the other of the royal children locked in the embrace of their Father before they all entered the Inn. There, seated with the Princess and Henry on either knee, James nestling into his side, the King tenderly questioned them as to how they had fared, whilst he stroked Elizabeth's hair. The King's heart leaped out to his daughter, as he marked that during the five years since he had last seen her, she seemed even closer drawn to him than before. Her delicate face shewed great thoughtfulness, but a sorrow sat upon it which, though it was akin to his own habit of mind, smote him as pitiful in one so young. He was grieved, too, to note her crippled leg, for he had never heard of the accident which had caused it.

Upon the sturdy little Henry, now aged seven, Charles looked with pride, so alert and bright-eyed, was the boy. It was five years since they had last met, and though he had heard constantly about his Father and of this meeting, Henry had not visualised the King as a melancholy gentleman so plainly dressed. Addressing him, Charles asked :

"Do you know me, child?" to which Henry simply and directly replied: "No".

With a sigh, the King returned :

"I am your Father, child: and it is not one of the least of my misfortunes that I have brought you and your brothers and sisters into the world to share my miseries".

As he said this with a sigh, Elizabeth and James burst out into tears, but concerned at having so upset them, Charles quickly recovered his composure and succeeded in comforting them.

Soon afterwards, the door was opened, and a tall dark man of notable address was ushered in with every mark of respect. The royal children had never seen him before, but it was obvious to the Princess that he was a gentleman of consequence, and she enquired who it was. When she was told he was General Fairfax, she at once turned herself to address him :-

"Sir, it is to you that my brothers and I owe this priceless boon of meeting His Majesty! No thanks of mine could be adequate to express the joy you have brought to us by arranging this meeting with our beloved Father, for

we know that we owe it mainly to your influence. Be assured that you have accepted no risk in securing for us this high privilege, for which I can never cease to be grateful. Should it be in my power at any time to attempt to repay you for this great service, I pray you command me".

Both amused and charmed by this dignified and graceful speech, Fairfax replied :

"It was the least thing I could do, Madam, in duty to my Sovereign's children. Have I your Highness' permission to kiss your hand?"

In answer, the little Elizabeth, with simple grace, at once extended it to him, and after pressing it to his lips, the General took his departure. Left alone with his children, Charles inaugurated a pleasureable conversation with them. He found great entertainment in the lively interjections of Henry who had soon felt at home with his stranger Father.

Then dinner was announced, and after it the royal party were escorted to Lord Craven's lovely house on the banks of the Thames at Caversham. The Royalist owner had gladly put his mansion at the disposal of Parliament, ~~and at their expense~~, for the royal accommodation, and every thought had been taken for their comfort in the apartments selected for them.

During the two days the little party were together, Charles learnt all he could from the Princess of her life with the Duke of Gloucester. He was glad to hear how highly they both spoke of the kindness of the Earl of Northumberland and his wife, and, sighing, remarked:

"Alas, that he should ever have left my side!"

The King then told his two younger children more particularly of the causes of the Rebellion than what they had been able to gather from James. Charles related all that Parliament had demanded of him: to dethrone the Church and establish Presbyterianism in place of it: to relinquish control of the Army and Navy to them, and to surrender a number of his followers for punishment. All these demands he had absolutely refused to consider. He further told them that ~~now~~ the rebel Army, of which he was now the prisoner, in which the sect of the Independents predominated were seeking to obtain the upper hand of Parliament, mainly Presbyterian.

"Would that the rebels might fall between their two sectarian stools!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"Amen to that!" replied her Father, but added :
 "Yet dear children, I would have you know that I see in my defeats on the field of battle and in all I have suffered, God's chastening hand for my sinful compliance in the death of my faithful servant Strafford".

He greatly sympathised with the children in the ordeals to which the Presbyterian chaplains subjected them - their one complaint - for the Princess said she found the matter of their preachments very difficult to support, quite apart from their length.

"Just imagine, Father", interjected Henry, "those preachers call the day on which Jesus Christ was born 'the idolatrous feast of Yule', and they would have us keep it as a fast day! Last year, if it had not been for our Earl we should have had neither plum-porridge nor Christmas pies. And when we had them, Bess did not want to eat any when we had no Christmas services".

"But I am sure, Sweetheart", rejoined the King, "that she kept Christmas with you from the Prayer Book", to which Henry nodded assent.

The children realised how fully their Father felt with them when he told them that he had similarly suffered at the hands of the Presbyterians when he was the Scots' prisoner, being forced to listen to lengthy abuse of himself and of Episcopacy from their pulpits. He also told them that, following the hypocritical National Covenant of 1638, they had, five years later, the even more hypocritical and ~~ferocious~~ ~~ferocious~~ Solemn League and Covenant.

"They who raged against me for restoring Episcopacy to Scotland", he said, "now seek to force their bloodthirsty engagement upon England as well as upon all in Scotland who oppose it. For this latter Covenant, going beyond its predecessor, binds all who sign it to the extirpation of prelacy, thus aiming at the destruction of the Church in England. And, withal, there goes the pretence of defending the King's Majesty's person and authority".

In such questionings and talk the two days flew swiftly past, and at the close of the second, when the parting came, the children all cried bitterly whilst Charles sought to comfort them with the prospect of further meetings. Little hands waved kerchiefs from the windows of the first coach as it drove away from the King on its return to St. James.