

THE KING'S MESSENGER.

JEFFRY HAYES was a person of considerable importance to his little neighborhood, for not only was he the champion of every malcontent who braved a quarrel, and resolved to fight it out with the offender, but he had the first and surest news in days when armed horsemen did the work now performed by rail and telegraph, and when gossips, bursting with impatience, rushed to the blacksmith's forge to hear from his lips the last report left behind by some galloping rider who had been detained while his horse was shod.

Jeffry did not fail to make the most of such opportunities; and at a time when insurrection had disturbed a portion of the King's dominions, he was in the height of village popularity, dispensing news, and leading politics, and enjoying the well-earned distinction of being known as the best craftsman of his kind, and the most loyal to be found on the great London road.

One dark evening, as usual, the bright fire from the smithy of Jeffrey Hayes flung its ruddy glow across the highway; the sounds of labor had ceased, and several idle villagers were lounging round their oracle until he should think proper to put out his fire, and adjourn with them to the nearest ale house. The smith himself, with broad shoulders and muscular arm, was flourishing his great hammer to the eager narrative of an angry youth, who was telling of an insult he wished to avenge, and was enlisting the pugnacious sympathies of his athletic friend, who praised his courage, and promised all honorable assistance on the occasion.

"Ah, I was sure you would stand by me and see justice done," said the obliged challenger.

"That will I," said Hayes, warmly. "Fix time and place, and I'll be there to the minute, if the high-sheriff himself, on his majesty's errand, brought his horse to be shod, as no one but Jeffry Hayes can do it. But hark! here comes a horseman, and I hear by the foot-fall there's work to be done yet. Stand by my lads, and let the gentleman ride straight in."

In a few seconds more a horseman rode up, and asked if a lost shoe could be replaced at once.

"Just in time, sir," said Jeffry, stepping forward, and lifting the hoof, while the rider dismounted, and leaning against the door-post, surveyed by firelight the several persons in the shed.

"You've ridden hard and far, sir," remarked the smith, as he proceeded to work.

"Yes; and must go farther still before I rest, replied the stranger.

"Important business on hand, I suppose, sir," said Jeffry."

"Very. I am a King's messenger, and must not loiter on my way."

If hammer could speak, that of Jeffry Hayes' would have borne witness to the right royal grasp of its master's powerful hand, as he swung it with increased vehemence and precision on hearing this intelligence.

"Good news at court, I hope, sir," said he pompously.

"The very best. A free pardon for all rebels."

"A free pardon!" exclaimed all at once. "What! after all they have said and done."

"Free, unconditional pardon," repeated the traveler; "except it be considered a condition that they accept it."

"They can't, surely, but do that," exclaimed Jeffry; "the very thought of such clemency ought to make them lay down their arms, and be true subjects for the rest of their lives."

"Yet, strange to say, that the fact though quite certain, does not do it."

"What, are they going on in rebellion in the face of pardon, and with no hope, either, of success to their cause at last?"

"Even so, except here and there one who sees things in a better light."

"Well, then, they deserve execution; and why should not justice take its course?" said the blacksmith, fiercely. "My opinion is, that it's possible to be too lenient; and loyal men look to governments to do their duty without fear or favor."

"You would have me believe that you are not a rebel yourself, friend," said the stranger, in a low voice, to the smith.

"I! Yes, I would like to see the man who dares call me a rebel," said Jeffry Hayes, with the voice of a Stentor, and mingling his speech with many terrible oaths; "he should know something of this arm;" and down came the hammer upon the anvil with a blow that made the roof ring again.

"Then that dare I," said the traveler, boldly; "and your own lips have condemned you."

"You had better mount and begone," whispered a villager, at the sight of Jeffry's face like a thundercloud, as he slowly lifted himself from bending over the horse's hoof, and fixing a flashing eye on the stranger's face, who nevertheless stood unmoved and undismayed, adding deliberately—

“ ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.’ So runs the holy law, and I call you all to witness that no loyal man trifles with or profanes the name of the prince he loves and serves. How say you, friends; is it not rebellion against God wilfully and continually to break and despise his law?”

“There was no answer, and Jeffry was busy with the shoe again.

“But,” continued the stranger, “I told you that I am the King’s messenger, bearing unconditional free pardon to all who will accept it. All have sinned, all are rebels; but God who is rich in mercy, ‘so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ Is it not enough to silence the blasphemous tongue, and make him reverence the God who loves like this? Will you accept free pardon, and act out your own views of its consequences, my honest friend?”

“Why ask only me? there be others here who need it fully as much,” said the smith, in a surly tone.

“I do say it to all. ‘Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.’ I have no reserves on my list, but, according to my royal Master’s will, I repeat His own proclamation to every sinner—‘He that believeth on Him that sent me hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation.’”

“I thought you were on an errand from the real court, and not making up a tale to preach to us,” said Hayes.

“It is no made-up tale; it is solemn truth, as you will one day prove; and as God, the King of kings, is real—as heaven and hell are real—I beseech you, as though God Himself besought you by me, receive His offers of

pardon and grace, and be reconciled to Him. No man who is reconciled to God talks as you talk. Of your deeds and ways I know nothing; but your own conscience will tell you whether you live, and speak, and act, like a follower of the gentle, loving Saviour."

"Your horse is shod, sir."

"I thank you, heartily, for good speed and good work," said the stranger, placing the charge in the hands of the smith, "and I pray that, by the operation of the grace of God upon your heart, your feet may soon be shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. You carry on more than your mere trade in this workshop, friend; see to it that the record be written by Him who keeps a book of remembrances of them that fear the Lord and think upon His name. What a messenger you might be of love and mercy from the Prince of peace to those who come to talk with you here."

"They would not come for a sermon, I reckon," said Jeffry, attempting to laugh, as he looked round.

"Try it; and the next piece of iron you mould by yonder fire, liken it in your mind to a hard human heart, cast under the softening influence of Divine love, and re-shaped by the omnipotent Creator for holy and happy uses. Good night, friends all, and the Lord be with you."

"Stop, sir," said the smith, stepping after the traveler, "who are you that talks to Jeffry Hayes in this uncommon way?"

"One who had a message from God unto you, and has delivered it," replied the stranger, as he rode quickly away.

About half an hour afterwards, as Mary Hayes sat knitting by her cottage fire, she was surprised by the arrival of her husband full two hours before his usual

time. Being a person of good sense, she offered no comment, but set his chair, and, while he washed away the marks of his daily toil, prepared supper. Hayes did not seem to have much appetite, nor disposed to be very communicative, but after looking at the fire for some time, he suddenly spoke.

"Mary," said he, "have we got a Bible?"

"A Bible! Oh, yes; don't you remember the big book that mistress gave me when we were married?"

"Ah, to be sure! Get it, will you? I want to find something in it."

But leaf after leaf was turned over in vain; the Bible to Jeffry Hayes was like a foreign land to one ignorant of geography.

"I can't find it," said he; "can you, Mary? Something about feet shod with the gospel of peace."

Alas, Mary was not much better informed than her husband, until she remembered that there was a passage about armour in one of the Epistles, whereupon, with her knitting-needle to guide before her eyes down the pages, verse by verse, she finally settled it triumphantly upon the 15th verse of the last chapter in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

"That's it!" said her husband; and having read the verse, he read the chapter, and afterwards the Epistle too.

"Mary," said he again after another reverie, "there is to be a fight between Young Moss of the Dell, and Will Croft of our village."

"A fight!" exclaimed Mary; "and are you to be in the thick of it as usual?"

"I promised to be with them, and see fair play, and I must keep my word."

"Then what have you to do with the Bible and the gospel of peace?" asked Mary, quickly.

"I want to see if we can't have fair play, and yet no fighting," said Hayes thoughtfully, "and I shall search here for a way till I find one."

Mary marvelled greatly, as her husband regularly came home every evening to pursue that search, and she remarked how much fewer were the profane or angry expressions which now mingled with his conversation.

The day fixed for the fight at last arrived, and Jeffry Hayes, standing between the waiting combatants, and surrounded by an eager ring of village gazers, took a hand of each. "Well," said he, looking from one to the other, "which of you is the most like Cain? which is prepared to show himself a murderer?"

The young men, surprised and sullen, sought to withdraw their hands from the blacksmith's grasp.

"Look you, my friends," said he, "I promised to come to see fair play; and as I helped on the quarrel in the beginning, it is fit I should see the end of it. I tell you both, that fair play is to forgive one another, and the bravest of you is he who dares to forgive first. Come down, now, and talk it over with me at the forge, and I'll prove to you that this is the right way of thinking. Good-morrow, friends; there will be no fighting here to-day, I promise you."

"You are making fools of us, smith," said one of the youths, angrily.

"No, no, you did that for yourselves when you quarreled about nothing, and I want to see you wise men again."

"What a queer end to a fight!" exclaimed the disappointed villagers, as Jeffry Hayes marched triumphantly off the ground, with a stout, sheepish-looking youth on either side. "Only to think of great Jeffry Hayes turning

peace-maker ; it's as good as a fight to see it, so we haven't altogether lost our time." * * * * *

Some four or five years afterwards, a passing visitor at the Hall was walking through the village with the squire. The evening was drawing on, and the blacksmith's forge was becoming conspicuous in the deepening twilight. "You must just look in here for a moment before we re-return," said the squire, "for I am proud of our village smith—he is a tamed lion ; once the most fiery, quarrelsome fellow in the county, and a violent politician, too, with a frame strong enough to enforce any argument and carry any bad majority ; but now the quietest, soberest, and most Christian man I know of."

Here they reached the forge, and were respectfully greeted by Jeffry Hayes.

"My friend," said the visitor, after looking at him for a few moments, as if endeavoring to recall some recollections of the past, "if I mistake not, you once shod my horse on a dark wintry evening, and I—"

"Sir, if I mistake not," exclaimed Jeffry, with a glow of pleasure on his face, after an equally searching look at the stranger's countenance, and an attentive ear to his voice, "if I mistake not, you are the King's messenger who bore the pardon for guilty rebels on that night. It was 'a word in season,' sir, and I have proved how good it was. It led me to turn from darkness to light, and changed the village firebrand into a meeker, happier man, and now, by God's mercy, the rebel blacksmith seeks to be a King's messenger himself."

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