

Gytha's Message

Chapter I

The English Slaves



WEARY little crowd of wayfarers was approaching the town of Bristol, or Bricstowe, one bright spring morning in the year 1053. Most of them were tired, footsore, and ready to faint with hunger, and the boys and girls of the party would have lingered behind the rest had not their flagging footsteps been urged forward by the frequent crack of the driver's whip.

They were a party of slaves on their way to the famous Bricstowe slave-market—a motley crowd of men, women, and children collected from all parts of England. Fierce and savage many of the men looked, with their ragged unshorn sheepskin garments and unkempt hair. The women and children looked even more forlorn in their

helpless misery. Some appeared to be swineherds and farm-servants of the meaner kind, while a few were evidently sailors and passengers who had escaped from the wrecks of vessels cast ashore during the winter gales.

Among the crowd, and apparently the weakest and most weary of them all, walked a boy and girl. Their feet were swollen and bleeding from their long walk over the rugged ill-kept roads, and several times they would have fallen to the ground but for the kindly help of a rough-looking sailor who walked by their side.

“Nay, nay, keep a good heart, my young seaking; the wattled roofs of Bricstowe town are within sight, and—and then—”

“We shall be sold like cattle in the market,” fiercely interrupted the boy.

“We will forget that, and think only of the good cheer the monks will bring us and the healing lotions to cure our blistered feet.”

“I want not their food, nor their medicaments either; I hate all monks,” answered the boy, while his sister looked from her brother to their friend with a puzzled look in her white weary face.

“The saints hate all our race,” she ventured to say at length, rather timidly.

“Then thy race, little maiden, must be bad indeed or the saints harder-hearted than I have thought them, or they could not but have mercy

MEANER: *poorer, lowlier*

WATTLED ROOFS: *roofs built with woven poles supporting straw or other plant material*

on such as thee;" and he looked pityingly at the white worn face of the girl.

"Mercy!" repeated the boy scornfully; "our race asks not mercy at the hands of God or man—if there be a God," he added.

"Well, it is not our concern to ask too much about the business of priests and monks. I wonder what they will make of thee, boy," he added, with a faint attempt to laugh, as he glanced at the delicately reared lad.

"Set us both to tend swine, with an iron collar about our necks," answered the boy in the same tone of scornful defiance.

"Oh, Leofric, they will not put the slave's collar upon thee," said his sister with a burst of anguish. "We will tell them we are free-born, and English, like themselves, only shipwrecked as we returned from our long stay in Flanders."

"And did we not tell them this before, Gytha? I tell thee the saints and White Christ, as well as Thor and Odin, are revenging themselves upon us, the last of our race, for all that our fathers have done."

"Nay, nay, my young sea-king; I doubt me whether the old gods trouble themselves about such as we, whatever the saints may do," said his friend.

The boy's eyes flashed with angry scorn. "My fathers were mighty men, Vikings and Berserkers, and as great as the upstart Godwins of Wessex

about whom we heard so much as we came through London.” At this moment the miserable crowd was brought to a sudden standstill by a gay cavalcade sweeping through the gates of Bricstowe, and the slaves were huddled together at the side of the road to make room for the prancing steeds and ambling palfreys of the hunting party.

As they were passing near where Leofric and Gytha stood some mischance befell one of the hawks, and he slipped from his owner’s wrist and would have fallen helpless under the horses’ feet had not Leofric started forward and rescued him.

“Now that was right deftly done,” said the gay young hunter as he received the bird from Leofric; and he would have slipped a piece of silver he had taken from his pouch into the boy’s hand. But at the sight of the money Leofric started back with an angry flush upon his face that the hunter should think of paying him for the slight service.

Only two or three had noticed what had taken place, but the sailor seemed vexed that the money had been refused. “She needs it sorely enough,” he said, as he looked at Gytha, “and since thou wilt not accept the aid of holy church and the good brethren, what wilt thou do for food now thou hast rejected this gift?”

“Take whatever is given me—the slave’s portion,” said Leofric, in proud defiance.

GAY: *light-hearted*

CAVALCADE: *a procession of riders on horses*

PALFREYS: *saddle horses other than war horses*

His friend laughed. "Thou wilt soon find what that is—nothing or rather less."

"Nay, but they will not let us starve; we are of some value as merchandise at least," said the boy.

"Such merchandise is left to the care of the monks, I tell thee; a meal more or less will not alter our market-value enough to make them feed this hungry troop, now that our journey is over."

Leofric groaned and would have grasped Gytha's hand, but at this moment she slipped from his side and fell to the ground just as they got inside the gates of the city. The driver thundered and cracked his whip in vain this time. Poor Gytha lay unconscious of it all and heedless of the driver or his threatenings. Leofric dragged the unconscious form of his sister to the shelter of a high wall, for fear she should be trampled to death.

He had scarcely laid her down when a gentle-looking woman, in the dress of a nun, stepped out of a narrow gateway close by. "Poor thing, poor thing," she said in a tone of tender pity, and raising Gytha's head she took a little bottle of cordial from a large pouch at her side, and poured a few drops down the girl's throat.

"She is very ill; I will have her carried inside and put to bed;" and without waiting for Leofric to speak, the nun hurried back to the little gate, and in a few moments Gytha was carried in, her

brother still standing in speechless, helpless bewilderment.

The kind sister noticed the dazed look in the boy's face, and spoke a few words of comfort. "I cannot stay to ask all I would fain know about this girl, for each hour brings a fresh crowd of slaves for the spring sales, each crowd more miserable and hungry than the last."

"We too are slaves,—Gytha is my sister," said Leofric in a subdued voice.

The nun looked surprised. "But it matters not," she hastened to add, "the Church knoweth no distinction between slave or free so they be needy and she can help them; but I must away, for others need my tendance I doubt not as sorely as thy sister, and thou hadst better follow thy master, or thou wilt be in worse case;" and the nun hurried away on her errand of mercy, while Leofric slowly limped after the crowd of slaves that were still within sight.

Leofric might not have been allowed to linger so long, but here in the narrow crowded streets of the city, the slave-driver had all his work to do to thread his way between the horses and litters and little groups of other slaves, while to stand still and wait was almost out of the question; so he had to content himself with an occasional backward glance, and when at last he saw Leofric slowly limping after them, but without his sister, he poured forth a volley of oaths.

“Where is the girl?” he shouted as he at last joined the party.

“At the convent,” sullenly spoke the boy.

The information was received with a storm of invectives. “Why can’t the Church leave men to mind their own business? I would soon have roused her up with this;” and he cracked his whip as he spoke.

For the first time in his life Leofric felt thankful for the Church that could succour the helpless, down-trodden, ill-used slave and come between him and the lawless brutality of a cruel master. Gytha was safe for a little while at least, and he could not altogether repress a smile of triumph at the thought, while his master continued to curse the Church and all monks and nuns.

“The meddling hooded crows come feeding and pampering a herd of slaves, pitying them and preaching to them, until the lazy knaves believe they are as good as their masters. But I won’t be cheated this time. I’ll have the girl out of their old nest and in the market tomorrow or I’ll pull the nest about their ears. Last year they robbed me of a woman—it was a clear robbery, I know, in spite of what the bishop said about the right of sanctuary; and they think to do the same again and take the girl that will fetch the highest price of the lot.” So he continued to rail and grumble until the slave pen was reached, where they would all be huddled together until the next day.

INVECTIVES: *insulting or abusive language*

SUCCOUR: *give relief to someone in want or distress*

RAIL: *use harsh or abusive language*

Just as they reached this, the end of their journey, they were met by a monk and a couple of lay brothers bearing a basket of bread between them, which they at once began to distribute among the hungry crowd.

But this work of mercy was speedily stopped, for no sooner did the driver see what was going on than he kicked over the basket of bread and began to belabour the two younger brethren with his whip.

“Hold, hold!” shouted the monk; “lift not thy hand against the Lord’s servants.” But the man had worked himself into such a fury concerning his supposed wrong in the detention of Gytha at the convent, that, instead of desisting, he turned and struck the monk, dragging his cowl from his head, so that the few locks of gray hair were blown about by the wind. The sight of the hoary-headed monk thus assailed because he was doing a work of mercy and charity roused the anger of the bystanders; but before a blow could be struck the driver reeled and fell to the ground, while the blood poured from his nose and mouth.

The crowd of slaves and citizens started back in horror as the stricken man fell to the ground, and looked from one to another as they whispered, “The saints have cursed him for lifting his hand against the holy father.”

No one ventured to go near him but the old monk, and he instantly stooped, and raising the

man's head, loosened the blue tunic that was fastened about his throat, and then dispatched one of the younger brethren to the monastery for a famous potion, considered quite efficacious in such attacks in those days. But the crowd shook their head at the idea of a potion being given. "Tis the curse of God and St. Peter, and naught will mend that, I trow," said one of the more outspoken of the bystanders.

"Doubtless he hath offended the saints," said the monk; "but he may desire to make restitution if he be but restored, and it is nathless our duty to do all we can to assist the saints in their work of mercy. Thou mayst give forth the bread, my brother," he said, turning to his other young helper, who was still rubbing himself where the whip had fallen hardest, leaving the citizens to pick up the bread and put it in the basket.

The lay brother cast a look of something like disgust at the swollen discoloured face of the prostrate driver. "Suppose he comes to himself again directly?" he said.

"He will desire that the hungry should be fed, my brother," quietly answered the monk; and he asked the crowd to stand aside and give the stricken man more air.

What the nature of his seizure was he did not say, but it was evident that he understood it; and the crowd were satisfied that if anyone could pene-

EFFICACIOUS: *effective*

TROW: *believe or think*

NATHLESS: *nevertheless*

trate into such a mystery Father Dunstan could do it, for he was the most skillful leech in Bricstowe as well as the most learned and holy monk in his monastery, so that the combined power this spiritual and physical knowledge gave him would certainly restore this slave-driver if anything could. But still the crowd was only half satisfied that the monk had interfered and stopped the saints in their work of vengeance.

Father Dunstan was too much absorbed in watching the stertorous breathing of his patient and the other symptoms that now began to develop themselves to pay much heed to the various whispers that were going on around him; and when at last the potion was brought he gave only a small quantity of it to the man, but once more sent back the messenger for help to the monastery that he might be carried thither without delay.

“Bid the brethren use all dispatch in sending needful bearers, and do thou go with all speed,” commanded the old man. He seemed as anxious and interested in his patient as it was possible to be; and when at last four lay brethren came bearing a litter for the sick man he helped to raise him as tenderly as a nurse would raise a favourite child; and as he was borne towards the monastery he walked close at the side, still watching most anxiously every change in the breathing.

Meanwhile the bread had been distributed, and

LEECH: *physician or surgeon*

STERTOROUS: *with harsh snoring or gasping*

a pail of broth had followed to the slave-pen, all of which had quickly disappeared; and before their master had been carried away some of the slaves had sought a temporary forgetfulness of their misery in sleep. But Leofric was not of this number. He had taken his share of food with the rest, swallowing his pride at the sight of the bread, and now strengthened and refreshed he could think more calmly of what had befallen his sister and their master.

For once he was quite willing to believe in the power of God and rejoice in it, for He had justly punished their oppressor; but then came the puzzling mystery—if it was God's work to curse as He had cursed this man, how was it that the monks and the Church, who did their work in the name of God, tried to reverse it and take the curse away?

It was a puzzle—and think of it how he might and as long as he might, Leofric could not understand. At last he gave up the attempt and fell asleep, worn out with his long march, and for a time forgetting all his troubles and sorrows.