

CHAPTER XXIX

A KING'S ROMANCE

THERE belongs to the history of fifteenth century English literature a very pretty story not to be found in literary text books, but important to know, because thousands of references are made to it year after year. The story is the story of a king's love, written by himself in a book well known to scholars, but scarcely known at all to the public, and entitled "The King's Quhair." This extraordinary word is only a corruption of a French word of which you know the modern form *cahier* very well. So the title means, "The King's Copy-book, or Writing-book."

This king was James I of Scotland, the son of king Robert III; and the story begins about the year 1402. Scotland was at that time in a very strange condition indeed. The country was almost without civilization; and its fierce people were divided into a number of clans which were perpetually at war with each other. Every clan had its chief; each chief had power of life and death over his people; and each clansman considered himself bound to obey only to his chief, and nobody else except God. As a matter of fact, the clansman did not even obey God. Much less did he obey his king, except when it seemed to him to his interest to do so. Besides being at war with England perpetually, and at war with each other, the clans would occasionally even make war against their king, when he tried to enforce his authority. This had been the way from very ancient times. Really the king was only the greatest of a number of feudal princes, and had never been strong enough—except in time of war against a common enemy—to enforce his authority. Such had been the condition when

England was under Roman rule; and the Romans did not try to conquer the Scotch, whom they called Picts: it would have been too difficult an undertaking. They simply built a great wall, like the wall of China, right across the northern part of England to defend themselves against the terrible mountaineers. Part of this wall still exists. The Norsemen were more successful; they established themselves along the Scotch coast and the outlying islands, and then shrewdly made friends with the Scotch and intermarried with them. For a time Northern rule welded the Scotch into a single people; but the primitive natural tendency soon reasserted itself, and the clans resumed their original savage independence of action. They could unite only for war against the English; and the English never succeeded in conquering them. There were some things in the social system of the Scotch—fine things—which remind us of conditions in feudal Japan. If they had not the refinement of Japanese civilization, they had at least some of its virtues. One of these was a loyalty of the most absolute and self-sacrificing kind to their chiefs. Another was irreproachable courage in battle; and you may be interested to know that the Scotch weapon of war,—even into the seventeenth century,—was the sword, used with both hands, very long and heavy. Many times a force of Scotch mountaineers, even without their arms, were able to defeat and to cut to pieces an invading force. The last example occurred in the time of Dr. Johnson, who was so moved by it that he actually wrote a Latin poem on the subject.

But in spite of these virtues, the Scotch were otherwise a very rude people in the year 1402. Their previous kings had been mostly unfortunate; and when the father of James I was about to ascend the throne, he determined to change his real name, because he thought it unlucky. His real name was John. But there had been so many unfortunate kings of that name in different countries, that he thought it would be better to call himself Robert; and he began his reign as Robert III. His family name was Stuart. Mis-

fortune, however, continued to pursue him through his whole life; and when he died, there was engraved upon his tomb at his own request the words "Here lies the most unfortunate of kings."

Now we come to our story proper. While King Robert was yet alive, he found that the lives of his own children were in danger by the jealousy of his own relatives, and by the political ambition of the clans. His own brother got one of the children into his power, and starved the boy to death. Other ill-fortune further diminished the king's household. In 1402 he had but one boy left, James; and he became so frightened lest somebody should kill James, that he put the boy into a monastery under the care of a pious bishop, rather than keep him at home in the palace, where he might have been poisoned at any moment. For some years the lad remained in the monastery; but then the king began to be afraid that means would be found to kill him even in the monastery—therefore he resolved to send him to France in 1405; accordingly the boy took passage aboard a ship for France, after many tender farewells with his father. But the king's enemies had been on the watch. They sent word overland to the English that the king's son had sailed for France; and an English ship attacked and captured the Scotch vessel, and brought the boy to England. The king of England at that time was Henry IV,—the strong usurper, not a man likely to be pitiful towards an enemy. He had the lad imprisoned in the Tower of London, and afterwards in different other places. James was not harshly treated;—he was not considered as a common, but as a princely captive, and his life was not without some pleasures and comforts. But he remained a prisoner for 19 years. He was a little boy when he entered England; he was a well grown man before he obtained his liberty.

In the Tower, and in other prisons, he had a comfortable room, with permission to exercise himself as much as he pleased in the garden of the castle, under guard. Also he was allowed books to read. There were plenty of books, con-

sidering that it was the fifteenth century—books in manuscript mostly; but what a delight to a prisoner! There was Chaucer, whose English is now almost impossible to read without a glossary; but the language of Chaucer was at that time the language of James. There were also many translations from the Latin authors. There were French romances of the kind we should now find enormously prolix and tiresome; but they were not tiresome in that age. Then there were the wonderful book, “Gesta Romanorum”, which we still read with delight. And there were the poems of Gower,—the great successor of Chaucer.

Next to books, the greatest comfort of solitude is music; and the prisoner was furnished with musical instruments, which privilege must have been a very great pleasure for him. He had a natural taste for music, and had been taught to play a little while he was studying at the monastery in Scotland. Now in the prison, by constant practice, he made himself one of the most skilful players of his time. One of his chroniclers compares him to Orpheus; and behind the flattery we have reason to believe that there was a good deal of truth.

James was too vigorous a youth to be physically injured by imprisonment. He had inherited the great strength of the Scotch mountaineer; and instead of moping all day in his room, or fretting about his fate, he gave a great deal of his time to exercise,—riding (at which he became famous even in a country of horsemen), playing ball, throwing heavy weights, and developing his muscles in every possible way. Thus he converted his imprisonment into a long term of mental and physical education. By the time he became a man, he could hold his own with almost any knight in manly exercises as well as in other accomplishments.

Some of these accomplishments were of rare kind. The youth had a natural taste for poetry as well as for music; and he gave a part of his time of literary study to the composition of poetry. Chaucer’s work especially fired and influenced his imagination; but he had too much good

judgment and independence to make himself only an imitator of Chaucer. He had studied also many other forms of verse, and eventually, as we shall see, invented a form of his own which is still known to this day by the name of "Royal Rhyme" (*Rime Royal*),—because it was the royal poet who first imagined it.

So, many years passed; and he began to feel his imprisonment weighing more upon him. From home he learned that his father had died of grief after hearing of his son's imprisonment. He also heard of many wicked things that his wicked uncle had been doing. Presently also he had news from other directions, brought to him by fellow-prisoners; for at Windsor, his most agreeable place of imprisonment, he was allowed to have companions. One of these companions was the French prince Charles of Orleans, who had been at the terrible battle of Agincourt, where the flower of the French army was destroyed by a small determined band of Englishmen. This was bad news for James—since France was the friend of Scotland. And other bad news was given to him by the son of a Welsh prince, kept as a hostage. England had everywhere triumphed; and Scotland was in a state of hopeless disorder. But James felt that he must have patience, and wait for his time. He tried to keep from thinking about misfortune, by reading and writing and self-training of all kinds.

Yet he found this, all of a sudden, become a little more difficult than formerly. Other things were entering his mind with his advent to manhood. Dreams of women and of love were beginning to haunt him. Hitherto he had only had men for companions. Of women he knew absolutely nothing except what he had been reading in books. But these women of the romances and the poems, how adorable they were! If he could only become the happy lover of some such lady, he would be willing to give up everything for the privilege—except his duty to his country. And he would never treat the woman whom he loved unkindly—no, not even by one cross-word. He would be always her

devoted knight, and love to the very end of his existence just as truly as on the day of betrothal.

These were his fancies; but they were not fancies likely to make a prisoner happy. He was wishing exactly for the one thing that his position as well as his rank rendered impossible. He could not marry; he could not even talk to ladies; he was a prisoner.

It was his custom to get up very early in the morning, in order to enjoy the pleasure of seeing the early sunrise from the window of his room. One morning, as he opened the window and looked out, he felt such a shock of pleasure and surprise as he had never experienced before. There, in the garden, under his window, in the first gold-light of the sun, stood a being that more than realized all his dreams and wishes. Not even any of the ladies sung by Chaucer, could have been half so beautiful. Was she really a woman,—or a fairy,—or a dream? He did not know until she looked up the window, and smiled at him. Then, after picking a few flowers in the garden, she turned and went away—he could not tell where; leaving him absolutely enamoured and utterly bewildered.

Really James had seen a very beautiful girl—though he may have imagined her more beautiful than she was. She was only a visitor at Windsor. Her name was Jeanne de Beaufort, according to the aristocratic French form of the original name: in plainer English Jane Beaufort;—and she was a niece of King Henry IV—the same terrible king that had been keeping James in prison. She was accomplished, amiable, and of strong character notwithstanding—just the girl for a king's wife. She belonged to the great family of Lancaster; and one of her grand-nephews was to become Henry VII. But the house of Lancaster was not lucky. During nearly one hundred years all the male representatives of that house had either been killed in battle, or executed upon the scaffold. Jane herself was not to be altogether happy.

The king had been, nevertheless, fortunate in his choice.

The next thing to do was to make his love known to the object of it. But how? Between himself and the rest of the world were the walls of his prison, and guards set to watch his movements. Doubtless, also, so beautiful a person as the woman he had seen must have already many admirers; and his rivals would be no common men—but princes, dukes, and barons of high degree. Yet there was one chance for him—that she might approve of him as a man, and that his kingship would offset the claims of other adorers. Full of courage in a situation that would have made other men despair, he quietly sat down to make known to the unknown lady his hopes and fears in the form of a poem. He had read that the troubadours did such things; he had read also about kings in prison—like Richard I of England—composing and singing poems. He thought that he could do perhaps a little better than these singers of long ago, because he had studied Chaucer. Chaucer would inspire him; and he wrote his poem in imitation of Chaucer—all in stanzas of seven lines each.

As a matter of fact he really surpassed Chaucer. Chaucer never wrote anything so tender, so pretty as some of this king's verses. Chaucer had written wonderfully natural pen-pictures of persons and places,—of character and contrasts of character; but Chaucer never had the deep strength of affection which belonged to James. In some respects we may say that the king's poem was the very finest composition of its kind that appeared in English before the age of Elizabeth.

The poem begins with an account of James' early misfortunes, capture, and imprisonment. Then he tells of his life in confinement; the ways in which he tried to occupy his time and forget his sorrow. Then he speaks of the first enchanting vision of the young lady in the garden of Windsor Castle; and this is very beautiful indeed. He asks her, in a burst of song,—

“Ah! sweet, are ye a worldly creature,
Or heavenly thing in form of nature?”

He envies the little pet dog that he saw trotting after her, with a bell round its neck. When she vanished, he says that the world became dark for him. He remained at his window thinking. Sleep came to him; and in a dream he ascended to heaven to ask the help of the gods in obtaining the love of the charming creature that he had seen. Naturally he goes first to the court of Queen Venus—as poets of the Middle Ages were wont to call the goddess of love. He gives a very curious description of Venus and of her attendants, according to the imagination of his time; and he makes some amusing mythological mistakes, quite in keeping with the imperfect scholarship of the century. But the whole effect is quaintly pretty to an astonishing degree. Venus says in answer to his prayer, that she will help him on condition that he promises to be a very faithful lover—and never to cause pain or sorrow to his lady. She also tells him that he must take an oath to this effect before the goddess of wisdom, Minerva;—and then we have a description of Minerva, very amusing and mediæval—the goddess replying to the king's words by quoting from "The Proverbs of Solomon" and other parts of the Bible. The thing is a medley of ancient and mediæval beliefs and fancies,—some-what as Tennyson's "Princess" is a medley. Next the king visits the terrible goddess of Fortune, who receives him with every kindness, and assures him that she is going to make him truly a king, by restoring him to the throne of his fathers. (This was James' delicate way of hinting to the lady of his love that she might become a queen by marrying him.) At last the dreamer returns from heaven to earth, and finds himself in a wonderful garden,—full of beautiful flowers of strange forms, and watered by streams of crystal in which are swimming marvellous fish with scales of rubies and gold. Is it a fairy garden? No, it is only the garden of Windsor Castle; but it seems a very garden of Eden, because it was here that he saw first the lady of his heart. Suddenly a white dove brings him in its beak a little branch covered with leaves and flowers; and he finds that there are

characters upon the leaves which he can read. These characters suggest that all his desires will be fulfilled; the dove was a messenger from his beloved.

So much for the poem. It was placed in the hands of the fair one for whom it had been written; and the wished-for message, imagined in the poem, was really sent to the prisoner—not by a dove, indeed, but by a letter from which James learned that the girl loved him and would marry. In one instant he had passed, as he says himself, “from hell to heaven.” In the year 1423, not long after the events here described, the English government was induced to release James. Of course the government had heard of his wooing, and approved of it. The lady was a woman of strong character; and it was believed that she could influence her husband, as king of Scotland, to keep peace with England—which actually she did. Immediately after leaving the prison James was married to his betrothed, and allowed to return to Scotland on promise of paying the sum of sixty thousand marks in gold. He paid down nine thousand, and agreed to pay the rest; several Scottish noblemen offering themselves as hostages for the discharge of the king's debt. It is, unfortunately, not to James' credit that this debt was never paid. It is one of a few stains upon his reputation for integrity.

Now comes the third and saddest part of the romance.

James was received in Scotland with great rejoicing, and was crowned king. His wife was liked, and shared all the honours of the position of her husband. The promises that he had made to her were never broken. James was the best of husbands and fathers; he was invariably kind and loving at home, and a more romantic marriage life could not be imagined. The affection lasted until death. But James at home and James abroad were two entirely different persons. This difference constitutes a peculiarity of the race to which the king belonged—the unfortunate race of the Stuarts.

Under all the courtliness, affection, grace, and affability which the king had been showing during his youth, was

concealed a character of iron, a will that would brook no opposition, and a courage that was as rash as it was great. You will remember what I told you of the condition of Scotland at the outset of this little lecture. One might have supposed that James would have at least acted with caution when called to govern so savage a people. But it was quite otherwise. From the outset James determined to do what none of his predecessors had been strong enough to do—to master the clans, and to centralize all the power of the country under himself. He established the first Scotch parliament—a parliament of chiefs; but the reason that he did it was in order that the heads of the clans should not only be obliged to obey the laws devised by the king, but also be obliged to pass those laws themselves. Then he set to work to put an end to civil war. Knowing the character of his countrymen, he believed that kindness would be mistaken for cowardice; and he attempted no conciliation. When chiefs disobeyed him, he had them killed, or put into prison without ceremony. He avenged all the wrongs that had been done to his family. He was sometimes quite unscrupulous in his methods of dealing with refractory princes—using treachery when force could not be used. Counts, barons, petty kings of clans—he hanged them all when they declined to obey. And he succeeded in forcing his will upon the country. But it was inevitable in such a country, where men cared much more for liberty than they feared death, that strong measures would be met by attempt at assassination. The king was not afraid, and not cunning enough to deal with certain types of men. Men that he should have killed he only imprisoned; and men that he only imprisoned, he ought to have killed. Only a genius of the highest order could have attempted what James attempted without being killed; and it is a wonder that he was able to live so long. A chief of the name of Graham, whom he had treated rather too severely, boldly sent him word that he intended to kill him at the first opportunity. The opportunity occurred at the time of

Christmas holidays, when the king was accustomed to visit a certain monastery, for the purpose of celebrating the season. James was warned that treachery was impending; but he paid no attention to the warning. He went to the monastery; and at midnight Graham forced his way to the king's room. The locks and bars had previously been stolen from the doors. A brave girl named Douglas, one of the queen's attendants, put her own arm into the iron rings through which the door bar used to be pushed, and endeavoured to hold the door against the men; but the bones of her arm were immediately broken to pieces, and the murderers attacked the king. Although he had no weapon and was undressed, he fought them naked for a long time, throwing them down as fast as they approached him—for he was a great wrestler. But at last they wounded him in such a manner that he could not make further resistance and he fell covered with wounds. The queen in trying to protect him was herself wounded. It is a curious fact that in the king's poem, written so many years before, he had made a sort of prediction of the event, writing—

“Unto my help her heart hath tended
And even from death the man defended.”

Save him she could not; but she avenged him in the most terrible fashion long afterwards. This is the subject of Rossetti's Poem “The King's Tragedy”; and without knowing the story, you could not understand the poem.

In that poem we have Rossetti's own judgment of the king's composition:—

“And for her sake, to the sweet bird's note,
He framed a sweeter Song,
More sweet than ever a poet's heart
Gave yet to the English tongue.”

That is before the sixteenth century. It is certainly noteworthy that the best poem of love, in the form of narrative, written between the beginnings of English literature and the age of Elizabeth should have been by a king in exile; and

that its beauty should have been but a natural reflection of the beauties of a character superior to its time and country. Should one read, without knowing the historical truth of the incident, such a romance as the romance of King James might well seem only imagined — a poetical fable — a bit of clever emotional literature. But truth is much more strange than fiction. In this case the truth remains in the king's own handwriting — in the manuscript of his poem, and in the strange little pictures which he drew, in colours and gold, representing the young girl who became his wife as he first saw her in the garden of Windsor, among birds and flowers: very slender and pretty, in the quaint dress of the fifteenth century.