***The Scoundrel’s Son***

**By Frederic Fahey**

In the ancient city of London, on a certain autumn day in the second quarter

of the sixteenth century, a boy was born to a poor family of the name of Canty, who did not want

him. On the same day another English child was born to a rich family of the name of Tudor,

who did want him.

*The Prince and the Pauper*, Mark Twain

**Chapter 1**

I had the adventures of a lifetime by the time I was ten years old, but the events around my sixteenth birthday were even more astounding and more than a young man should have to bear. Now that more than twenty years have passed, and I have found you, my lady, the time is right to share this tale. Whether you believe me or not, I still have the desire--no, the need to tell it to you as best I can.

Tom Canty is my name and maybe you remember me. When I was nine years old, I found myself embroiled in one of the great masquerades of English history along with my good friend, Edward. By some stroke of fortune, Edward and I were born on the exact same day and looked remarkably alike, and so I came to often refer to him as my “twin.” But our birthdays and physical appearances were where our similarities ended.

I was born in Offal Court, a vile and disreputable part of London not far from Pudding Lane. The children there, including my sisters and me, were very poor and exceedingly hungry at practically all times. On the other hand, the birth of my twin, Edward, was the most celebrated event of the time since he was born to King Henry and Queen Jane. Yes, Edward was born the Prince of Wales. On the day of his birth, bells throughout the kingdom rang with joy and throngs took to the streets to sing, dance, and revel in the most wonderful news.

One day, when I was nine years old and wandering about London, I found myself at Whitehall Palace in Westminster, hoping to catch a glimpse of the royal family, and there was Prince Edward in the courtyard right before my eyes. There was so much excitement to see the young prince that the crowd pushed me too close to the gate, and one of the royal guards proceeded to scold me and handle me a bit roughly. The prince took notice of this and objected to my harsh treatment. Before I knew it, I was within the palace walls in the presence of the prince. As we talked, I was surprised to find that Edward’s fascination with me and my simple life was at least as great as mine with his bestowed life. It also occurred to us that we looked amazingly alike.

A wild idea hatched. Edward proposed that we switch places temporarily so that we each could experience the other’s life. Certainly, it would be wonderful to be the prince for even a short time; however, I could not understand why Edward would want to spend even a minute in my sorry place. Still, like many schemes construed by nine-year-old boys, at that instant, it seemed like a marvelous idea.

We exchanged clothes, and Edward made his way out into the world while I remained at the palace pretending to be the prince. We spent about a fortnight living each other's life. However, during that short time, King Henry died, and, for a brief while, I became the king! As he would later relate to me, Edward’s adventures were quite harrowing. Luckily, he was befriended by a gallant soldier by the name of Miles Hendon, who rescued him on more than one occasion. On the very day of the coronation, good fortune prevailed, my twin and Miles found themselves back in the royal court, and Edward was crowned instead of me. He named me a ward of the king, and assigned my care to Father Andrew, a kindly priest I had known all my life. Being the king’s ward afforded me both protection and opportunities beyond those typically available to the sons of Offal Court.

This is truly a marvelous tale, and I hope that some good storyteller, one perhaps better than me, will one day happen upon this adventure and relate it in a way that does it justice. But, as extraordinary as this story is, it is not the one I intend to share with you today.

And so, my lady, I will tell you my tale from the beginning. I have waited a long time for this chance. The painful events of that time are as vivid in my mind’s eye as if they occurred yesterday. I share with you long-kept secrets of the wonder and fragile nature of young life and love. The words may stick in my throat or tear at my heart as I try to release them after all this time. Please be patient as I strive for the best way to relate it all to you.

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“Please come with me. His Majesty will be with you soon,” said the king’s head groom as he directed me through the door to the royal sitting room. Richard, his name as I recalled, had been kind and patient with me when I posed as prince during the masquerade, as I have come to refer to our earlier adventure.

“Thank you very much, sir,” I answered. I had not seen His Majesty or been to Whitehall Palace since the day of his coronation, over a year previously. Since then, our shared tenth birthday had passed in the fall, and winter was now reluctantly giving way to a burgeoning spring. My heart was jumpy. I was not sure what may lie ahead. For me, it would be wonderful to see His Majesty again, but I had to wonder why he would want to see me. The letter I received inviting me to meet with the king offered little clue except to say that he had something to ask of me. When His Majesty asks, is it truly a request or, in fact, a command? Was my fortunate position as ward of the king coming to an end? Was I going to be asked to train to serve in His Majesty’s army or be part of the royal guard? Or had I been chosen to serve as His Majesty’s new whipping boy?

In hopes of calming my reeling mind while I waited for His Majesty, I paced about and reacquainted myself with the royal sitting room. I had forgotten how large rooms in the palace were. This single room was almost as big as a church, and at least four times the size of an entire house in my parish of Offal Court. The walls were covered with a richly decorated purple tapestry. There were several portraits of the king’s ancestors hanging from the walls. The portrait of His Majesty’s mother, Queen Jane, had been there when I was here last, but the one of his father, King Henry, had been added since then. A display of crossed swords above a battle shield with the Tudor crest gave the room a regal and a bit of an intimidating feel. But the brightly painted figure of an armored knight next to an open book of tales of chivalry next to His Majesty’s seat was a reminder that the king was still a boy.

Just then the door opened, and Richard and a regimen of servants escorted His Majesty into the room. At first, I could barely see the ten-year old king amidst the collection of grown men about him.

“Behold His Royal Majesty, Edward, by the Grace of God, King of England, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith and of the Church of England,” Richard announced. I stood still, not entirely sure how to respond. Several servants looked at me and abruptly bent at the waist. I then understood and made a rather awkward bow towards His Majesty.

The king immediately broke with formality rushing to me and grasping my hand with both of his. A broad smile beamed across his face.

“It is so good to see you, Tom,” he greeted me. The breath I had been holding made a happy escape. “Richard, provide a chair for my ward, and place it close to mine. And bring some refreshments.”

“Certainly, Your Majesty,” Richard responded as he signaled to one of the many servants behind him. As if by magic, a chair appeared and was placed as His Majesty had commanded.

“Come, Tom. Please have a seat while we visit.” I allowed him to sit first. He gestured to the other chair, and so I sat. Richard excused himself and directed the many servants out of the room so that we might have a more private visit.

Once settled, I tried to ask a question but, in my nervousness, it sputtered forth like bubbled water from a faucet.

“Your Majesty … umm … is that right? … How should I refer to you? I mean Your Majesty? By Your Majesty?”

“Well, Tom, probably best for you to refer to me as ‘Your Majesty’ when in the company of others, I suppose. But in more private settings such as this, ‘Your Royal Majesty, defender of the realm and master of this humble servant’ might suffice.” He cleared his throat as he tried to maintain a straight face, but once he exploded in laughter, I knew he was joking with me. “Refer to me as Edward. We are merely Edward and Tom, two good chums.”

“Edward it is,” I responded, smiling back. I could sense my spine starting to loosen and my hands unclench. This was indeed to be a friendly visit. One of the servants brought some cider and gingerbread topped with cream. Edward took a nibble of the treat, but I devoured mine in two bites. He told me of his fencing lessons and how he loved to play a game called tennis. I spoke of my mother and sisters and thanked him for his kindness in providing for their care. My heart calmed as I gazed upon my twin. I hadn’t realized how much I had missed seeing him in the past year.

Right then Edward’s eyes darted about the room as if to make sure we were alone. My ears perked when he put his finger to his lips.

“Tom, I have a thought.” he leaned forward and spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. “I would like you to take my place again.”

“Are you serious, Edward?” was all I could think to say.