

**BARCLAY  
FLORENCE  
LOUISA**

THE WHITE LADIES OF  
WORCESTER: A ROMANCE  
OF THE TWELFTH  
CENTURY

Florence Barclay

**The White Ladies of Worcester: A  
Romance of the Twelfth Century**

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## Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	9
CHAPTER IV	12
CHAPTER V	13
CHAPTER VI	20
CHAPTER VII	26
CHAPTER VIII	28
CHAPTER IX	31
CHAPTER X	33
CHAPTER XI	35
CHAPTER XII	40
CHAPTER XIII	44
CHAPTER XIV	46
CHAPTER XV	50
CHAPTER XVI	53
CHAPTER XVII	54
CHAPTER XVIII	56
CHAPTER XIX	59
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	60

# Florence L. Barclay

## The White Ladies of Worcester: A Romance of the Twelfth Century

### CHAPTER I THE SUBTERRANEAN WAY

The slanting rays of afternoon sunshine, pouring through stone arches, lay in broad, golden bands, upon the flags of the Convent cloister.

The old lay-sister, Mary Antony, stepped from the cool shade of the cell passage and, blinking at the sunshine, shuffled slowly to her appointed post at the top of the crypt steps, up which would shortly pass the silent procession of nuns returning from Vespers.

Daily they went, and daily they returned, by the underground way, a passage over a mile in length, leading from the Nunnery of the White Ladies at Whytstone in Claines, to the Church of St. Mary and St. Peter, the noble Cathedral within the walls of the city of Worcester.

Entering this passage from the crypt in their own cloisters, they walked in darkness below the sunny meadows, passed beneath the Fore-gate, moving in silent procession under the busy streets, until they reached the crypt of the Cathedral.

From the crypt, a winding stairway in the wall led up to a chamber above the choir, whence, unseeing and unseen, the White Ladies of Worcester daily heard the holy monks below chant Vespers.

To Sister Mary Antony fell the task of counting the five-and-twenty veiled figures, as they passed down the steps and disappeared beneath the ground, and of again counting them as they reappeared, and moved in stately silence along the cloister, each entering her own cell, to spend, in prayer and adoration, the hours until the Refectory bell should call them to the evening meal.

This counting of the White Ladies dated from the day, now more than half a century ago, when Sister Agatha, weakened by prolonged fasting, and chancing to walk last in the procession, fainted and, falling silently, remained behind, unnoticed, in the solitude and darkness.

It was the habit of this saintly lady to abide in her own cell after Vespers, dispensing with the evening meal; thus her absence was not discovered until the following morning when Mary Antony, finding the cell empty, hastened to report that Sister Agatha having long, like Enoch, walked with God, had, even, as Enoch, been translated!

The nuns who flocked to the cell, inclining to Mary Antony's view of the strange happening, kneeled upon the floor before the empty couch, and worshipped.

The Prioress of that time, however, being of a practical turn of mind, ordered the immediate lighting of the lanterns, and herself descended to search the underground way.

She did not need to go far.

The saintly spirit of Sister Agatha had indeed been translated.

They found her frail body lying prone against the door, the hands broken and torn by much wild beating upon its studded panels.

She had run to and fro in the dank darkness, beating first upon the door beneath the Convent cloisters, then upon the door, a mile away, leading into the Cathedral crypt.

But the nuns were shut into their cells, beyond the cloister; the good people of Worcester city slept peacefully, not dreaming of the despairing figure running to and fro beneath them—tottering, stumbling, falling, arising to fall again, yet hurrying blindly onwards; and the Cathedral Sacristan, when questioned, confessed that, hearing cries and rappings coming from the crypt at a late hour, he

speedily locked the outer gate, said an "Ave," and went home to supper; well knowing that, at such a time, none save spirits of evil would be wandering below, in so great torment.

Thus, through much tribulation, poor Sister Agatha entered into rest; being held in deepest reverence ever after.

More than fifty years had gone by. The Prioress of that day, and most of those who walked in that procession, had long lain beside Sister Agatha in the Convent burying-ground. But Mary Antony, now oldest of the lay-sisters, never failed to make careful count, as each veiled figure passed, nor to impart the mournful reason for this necessity to all new-comers. So that the nun whose turn it was to walk last in the procession, prayed that she might not hear behind her the running feet of Sister Agatha; while none went alone into the cloisters after dark, lest they should hear the poor thin hands of Sister Agatha beating upon the panels of the door.

Thus does the anguish of a tortured brain leave its imperishable impress upon the surroundings in which the mind once suffered, though the freed spirit may have long forgotten, in the peace of Paradise, that slight affliction, which was but for a moment, through which it passed to the eternal weight of glory.

Of late, the old lay-sister, Mary Antony, had grown fearful lest she should make mistake in this solemn office of the counting. Therefore, in the secret of her own heart, she devised a plan, which she carried out under cover of her scapulary. Twenty-five dried peas she held ready in her wallet; then, as each veiled figure, having mounted the steps leading from the crypt doorway, moved slowly past her, she dropped a pea with her right hand into her left. When all the holy Ladies had passed, if all had returned, five-and-twenty peas lay in her left hand, none remained in the wallet.

This secret dropping of peas became a kind of game to Mary Antony. She kept the peas in a small linen bag, and often took them out and played with them when alone in her cell, placing them all in a row, and settling, to her own satisfaction, which peas should represent the various holy Ladies.

A large white pea, of finer aspect than the rest, stood for the noble Prioress herself; a somewhat shrivelled pea, hard, brown, and wizened, did duty as Mother Sub-Prioress, an elderly nun, not loved by Mary Antony because of her sharp tongue and strict fault-finding ways; while a pale and speckled pea became Sister Mary Rebecca, held in high scorn by the old lay-sister, as a traitress, sneak, and liar, for if ever tale of wrong or shame was whispered in the Convent, it could be traced for place of origin to the slanderous tongue and crooked mind of Sister Mary Rebecca.

When all the peas in line upon the floor of her cell were named, old Mary Antony marked out a distant flagstone, on which the sunlight fell, as heaven; another, partially in shadow, purgatory; a third, in a far corner of exceeding darkness, hell. She then proceeded, with well-directed fillip of thumb and middle finger, to send the holy Ladies there where, in her judgment, they belonged.

If the game went well, the noble Prioress landed safely in heaven, without even the most transitory visit to purgatory; Mother Sub-Prioress, rolling into purgatory, remained there; while the pale and speckled pea went straight to hell!

When these were safely landed, Mary Antony rubbed her hands and, chuckling gleefully, finished the game at gay hap-hazard, it being of less importance where the rest of the holy Ladies chanced to go.

## CHAPTER II

### SISTER MARY ANTONY DISCOURSES

As Mary Antony shuffled slowly from the shadow into the sunshine, a gay little flutter of wings preceded her, and a robin perched upon the parapet behind the stone seat upon which it was the lay-sister's custom to await the sound of the turning of the key in the lock of the heavy door beneath the cloisters.

"Thou good-for-nothing imp!" exclaimed Mary Antony, her old face crinkling with delight. "Thou little vain man, in thy red jerkin! Beshrew thine impudence, intruding into a place where women alone do dwell, and no male thing may enter. I would have thee take warning by the fate of the baker's boy, who dared to climb into a tree, so that he might peep over the wall and spy upon the holy Ladies in their garden. Boasting afterward of that which he had done, and making merry over that which he pretended to have seen, our great Lord Bishop heard of it, and sent and took that baker's boy, and though he cried for mercy, swearing the whole tale was an empty boast, they put out his bold eyes with heated tongs, and hanged him from the very branches he had climbed. They'd do the like to thee, thou little vain man, if Mary Antony reported on thy ways. Wouldst like to hang, in thy red doublet?"

The robin had heard this warning tale many times already, told by old Mary Antony with infinite variety.

Sometimes the tongue of the baker's boy was cut out at the roots; sometimes he lost his ears, or again, he was tied to a cart-tail, and flogged through the Tything. Often he became a pieman, and once he was a turnspit in the household of the Lord Bishop himself. But, whatever the preliminaries, and whether baker, pieman, or turnspit, his final catastrophe was always the same: he was hanged from a bough of the very tree into which, impious and greatly daring, he had climbed.

This was an ancient tale. All who might vouch for it, saving the old lay-sister, had passed away; and, of late, Mary Antony had been strictly forbidden by the Reverend Mother, to tell it to newcomers, or to speak of it to any of the nuns.

So, daily, she told it to the robin; and he, being neither baker's lad, pieman, nor turnspit, and having a conscience void of offence, would listen, wholly unafraid; then, hopping nearer to Mary Antony, would look up at her, eager inquiry in his bright eyes.

On this particular afternoon he flew up into the very tree climbed by the prying and ill-fated baker's lad, settled on a bough which branched out over the Convent wall, and poured forth a gay trill of song.

"Ha, thou little vain man, in thy brown and red suit!" chuckled Mary Antony, leaning her gnarled hands on the stone parapet, as she stood framed in one of the cloister arches overlooking the garden. "Is that thy little 'grace before meat'? But, I pray thee, Sir Robin, who said there was cheese in my wallet? Nay, is there like to be cheese in a wallet already containing five-and-twenty holy Ladies on their way back from Vespers? Out upon thee for a most irreverent little glutton! I fear me thou hast not only a high look, thou hast also a proud stomach; just the reverse of the great French Cardinal who came, with much pomp, to visit us at Easter time. He had a proud look and a— Come down again, thou little naughty man, and I will tell thee what the Lord Cardinal had under his crimson sash. 'Tis not a thing to shout to the tree-tops. I might have to recite ten Paternosters, if I let thee tempt me so to do. For whispering it in thine ear, I should but say one; for having remarked it, none at all. Facts are facts; and, even in the case of so weighty a fact, the responsibility rests not upon the beholder."

Mary Antony leaned over the parapet, looking upward. The afternoon sunlight fell full upon the russet parchment of her kind old face, shewing the web of wrinkles spun by ninety years of the gently turning wheel of time.

But the robin, perched upon the bough, trilled and sang, unmoved. He was weary of tales of bakers and piemen. He was not at all curious as to what had been beneath the French Cardinal's crimson sash. He wanted the tasty morsels which he knew lay concealed in Sister Mary Antony's leathern wallet. So he stayed on the bough and sang.

The old face, peering up from between the pillars, softened into tenderness at the robin's song. "I cannot let thy little grace return unto thee void," she said, and fumbled at the fastenings of her wallet.

A flick of wings, a flash of red. The robin had dropped from the bough, and perched beside her. She doled out crumbs, and fragments of cheese, pushing them toward him along the parapet; leaving her fingers near, to see how close he would adventure to her hand.

She watched him peck a morsel of cheese into five tiny pieces, then fly, with full beak, on eager wing, to the hidden nest, from which five gaping mouths shrieked a shrill and hungry welcome. Then, back again—swift as an arrow from the archer's bow—noting, with bright eye, and head turned sidewise, that the hand resting on the coping had moved nearer; yet brave to take all risks for the sake of those yellow beaks, which would gape wide, in expectation, at sound of the beat of his wings.

"Feed thyself, thou little worldling!" chuckled old Antony, and covered the remaining bits of cheese with her hand. "Who art thou to come here presuming to teach thy betters lessons of self-sacrifice? First feed thyself; then give to the hungry, the fragments that remain. Had I five squealing children here—which Heaven forbid—I should eat mine own mess, and count myself charitable if I let them lick the dish. The holy Ladies give to the poor at the Convent gate, that for which they have no further use. Does thy jaunty fatherhood presume to shame our saintly celibacy? Mother Sub-Prioress did chide me sharply because, to a poor soul with many hungry mouths to feed, I gave a good piece of venison, and not the piece which was tainted. Truth to tell, I had already made away with the tainted piece; but Mother Sub-Prioress was pleased to think it was in the pot, seething for the holy Ladies' evening meal; and wherefore should Mother Sub-Prioress not think as she pleased?"

"'Woman!' she cried; 'Woman!'—and when Mother Sub-Prioress says 'Woman!' the woman she addresses feels her estate would be higher had God Almighty been pleased to have let her be the Man, or even the Serpent, so much contempt does Mother Sub-Prioress infuse into the name—'Woman!' said Mother Sub-Prioress, 'wouldst thou make all the Ladies of the Convent ill?'"

"'Nay,' said I, 'that would I not. Yet, if any needs must be ill, 'twere easier to tend the holy Ladies in their cells, than the Poor, in humble homes, outside the Convent walls, tossing on beds of rushes.'"

"'Tush, fool!' snarled Mother Sub-Prioress. "'The Poor are not easily made ill.'"

"'Tush indeed! I tell thee, little bright-eyed man, old Antony, can 'tush' to better purpose! That night there were strong purging herbs in the broth of Mother Sub-Prioress. Yet she did but keep her bed for one day. Like the Poor, she is not easily made ill! . . . Well, have thy way; only peck not my fingers, Master Robin, or I will have thee flogged through the Tything at the cart-tail, as was done to a certain pieman, whose history I will now relate.

"Once upon a time, when Sister Mary Antony was young, and fair to look upon—Nay, wink not thy naughty eye—"

At that moment came the sound of a key turning slowly in the lock of the door at the bottom of the steps leading from the crypt to the cloister.

## CHAPTER III

### THE Prioress Passes

A key turned slowly in the lock of the oaken door at the entrance to the underground way.

The old lay-sister seized her wallet and pulled out the bag of peas.

Below, the heavy door swung back upon its hinges.

Mary Antony dropped upon her knees to the right of the steps, her hands hidden beneath her scapulary, her eyes bent in lowly reverence upon the sunlit flagstones, her lips mumbling chance sentences from the Psalter.

The measured sound of softly moving feet drew near, slightly shuffling as they reached the steps and began to mount, up from the mile-long darkness, into the sunset light.

First to appear was a young lay-sister, carrying a lantern. Hastening up the steps, she extinguished the flame, grown sickly in the sunshine, placed the lantern in a niche, and, dropping upon her knees, opposite old Mary Antony, sought to join in the latter's pious recitations.

"*Adhaesit pavimento anima mea,*" chanted Mary Antony. "Wherefore are the holy Ladies late to-day?"

"One fell to weeping in the darkness," intoned the young lay-sister, "whereupon Mother Sub-Prioress caused all to stand still while she strove, by the light of my lantern held high, to discover who had burst forth with a sob. None shewing traces of tears, she gave me back the lantern, herself walking last in the line, as all moved on."

"*Convertentur ad vesperam,* and the devil catch the hindmost," chanted Mary Antony, with fervour.

"Amen," intoned Sister Abigail, eyes bent upon the ground; for the tall figure of the Prioress, mounting the steps, now came into view.

The Prioress passed up the cloister with a stately grace of motion which, even beneath the heavy cloth of her white robe, revealed the noble length of supple limbs. Her arms hung by her sides, swaying gently as she walked. There was a look of strength and of restfulness about the long fingers and beautifully moulded hands. Her face, calm and purposeful, was lifted to the sunlight. Suffering and sorrow had left thereon indelible marks; but the clear grey eyes, beneath level brows, were luminous with a light betokening the victory of a pure and noble spirit over passionate and most human flesh.

No sinner, in her presence, ever felt crushed by hopeless weight of sin; no saint, before the gaze of her calm eyes, felt sure of being altogether faultless.

So truly was she woman, that all humanity seemed lifted to her level; so completely was she saint, that sin did slink away abashed before her coming.

They who feared her most, were most conscious of her kindness. They who loved her best, were least able to venture near.

In the first bloom of her womanhood she had left the world, resigning high rank, fair lands, and the wealth which makes for power. Her faith in human love having been rudely shattered, she had sought security in Divine compassion, and consolation in the daily contemplation of the Man of Sorrows. In her cell, on a rough wooden cross, hung a life-size figure of the dying Saviour.

She had not reached her twenty-fifth year when, fleeing from the world, she joined the Order of the White Ladies of Worcester, and passed into the seclusion and outward calm of the Nunnery at Whytstone.

Five years later, on the death of the aged Prioress, she was elected, by a large majority, to fill the vacant place.

She had now, during two years, ruled the Nunnery wisely and well.

She had ruled her own spirit, even better. She had won the victory over the World and the Flesh; there remained but the Devil. The Devil, alas, always remains.

As she moved, with uplifted brow and mien of calm detachment, along the sunlit cloister to the lofty, stone passage, within, the Convent, she was feared by many, loved by most, and obeyed by all.

And, as she passed, old Mary Antony, bowing almost to the ground, dropped a large white pea, from between her right thumb and finger, into the horny palm of her left hand.

Behind the Prioress there followed a nun, tall also, but ungainly. Her short-sighted eyes peered shiftily to right and left; her long nose went on before, scenting possible scandal and wrong-doing; her weak lips let loose a ready smile, insinuating, crafty, apologetic. She walked with hands crossed upon her breast, in attitude of adoration and humility. As she moved by, old Mary Antony let drop the pale and speckled pea.

Keeping their distances, mostly with shrouded faces, bent heads, and folded hands, all the White Ladies passed.

Each went in silence to her cell, there kneeling in prayer and contemplation until the Refectory bell should call to the evening meal.

As the last, save one, went by, the keen eyes of the old lay-sister noted that her hands were clenched against her breast, that she stumbled at the topmost step, and caught her breath with a half sob.

Behind her, moving quickly, came the spare form of the Sub-Prioress, ferret-faced, alert, vigilant; fearful lest sin should go unpunished; wishful to be the punisher.

She must have heard the half-strangled sob burst from the slight figure stumbling up the steps before her, had not old Mary Antony been suddenly moved at that moment to uplift her voice in a cracked and raucous "Amen."

Startled, and vexed at being startled, the Sub-Prioress turned upon Mary Antony.

"Peace, woman!" she said. "The Convent cloister is not a hen-yard. Such ill-timed devotion well-nigh merits penance. Rise from thy knees, and go at once about thy business."

The Sub-Prioress hastened on.

Scowling darkly, old Antony bent forward, looking, past Mother Sub-Prioress, up the cloister to the distant passage.

Sister Mary Seraphine had reached her cell. The door was shut.

Old Antony's knees creaked as she arose, but her wizened face was once more cheerful.

"Beans in her broth to-night," she said. "One for 'woman'; another for the hen-yard; a third for threatening penance when I did but chant a melodious 'Amen.' I'll give her beans—castor beans!"

Down the steps she went, pushed the heavy door to, locked it, and drew forth the key; then turned her steps toward the cell of the Reverend Mother.

On her way thither, she paused at a certain door and listened, her ear against the oaken panel. Then she hurried onward, knocked upon the door of the Reverend Mother's cell and, being bidden to enter, passed within, closed the door behind her, and dropped upon her knees.

The Prioress stood beside the casement, gazing at the golden glory of the sunset. She was, for the moment, unconscious of her surroundings. Her mind was away behind those crimson battlements.

Presently she turned and saw the old woman, kneeling at the door.

"How now, dear Antony?" she said, kindly. "Get up! Hang the key in its appointed place, and make me thy report. Have all returned? As always, is all well?"

The old lay-sister rose, hung the massive key upon a nail; then came to the feet of the Prioress, and knelt again.

"Reverend Mother," she said, "all who went forth have returned. But all is not well. Sister Mary Seraphine is uttering wild cries in her cell; and much I fear me, Mother Sub-Prioress may pass by, and hear her."

The face of the Prioress grew stern and sad; yet, withal, tender. She raised the lay-sister, and gently patted the old hands which trembled.

"Go thy ways, dear Antony," she said. "I myself will visit the little Sister in her cell. None will attempt to enter while I am there."

## CHAPTER IV

### "GIVE ME TENDERNESS," SHE SAID

The Prioress knelt before a marble group of the Virgin and Child, placed where the rays of evening sunshine, entering through the western casement, played over its white beauty, shedding a radiance on the pure face of the Madonna, and a halo of golden glory around the Infant Christ.

"Mother of God," prayed the Prioress, with folded hands, "give me patience in dealing with wilfulness; grant me wisdom to cope with unreason; may it be given me to share the pain of this heart in torment, even as—when thou didst witness the sufferings of thy dear Son, our Lord, on Calvary—a sword pierced through thine own soul also.

"Give me this gift of sympathy with suffering, though the cross be not mine own, but another's.

"But give me firmness and authority: even as when thou didst say to the servants at Cana: 'Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.'"

The Prioress waited, with bowed head.

Then, of a sudden she put forth her hand, and touched the marble foot of the Babe.

"Give me tenderness," she said.

## CHAPTER V

### THE WAYWARD NUN

Sister Mary Seraphine lay prone upon the floor of her cell.

Tightly clenched in her hands were fragments of her torn veil.

She beat her knuckles upon the stones with rhythmic regularity; then, when her arms would lift no longer, took up the measure with her toes, in wild imitation of a galloping horse.

As she lay, she repeated with monotonous reiteration: "Trappings of crimson, and silver bells: mane and tail, like foam of the waves; a palfrey as white as snow!"

The Prioress entered, closed the door behind her, and looked searchingly at the prostrate figure; then, lifting the master-key which hung from her girdle, locked the door on the inside.

Sister Mary Seraphine had been silent long enough to hear the closing and locking of the door. Now she started afresh.

"Trappings of crimson, and silver bells—"

The Prioress walked over to the narrow casement, and stood looking out at the rosy clouds wreathing a pale green sky.

"Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Oh! . . ." wailed Sister Mary Seraphine, writhing upon the floor; "mane and tail, like foam of the waves; a palfrey as white as snow!"

The Prioress watched the swallows on swift wing, chasing flies in the evening light.

So complete was the silence, that Sister Mary Seraphine—notwithstanding that turning of the key in the lock—fancied she must be alone.

"Trappings of crimson, and silver bells!" she declaimed with vehemence; then lifted her face to peep, and saw the tall figure of the Prioress standing at the casement.

Instantly, Sister Mary Seraphine dropped her head.

"Mane and tail," she began—then her courage failed; the "foam of the waves" quavered into indecision; and indecision, in such a case, is fatal.

For a while she lay quite still, moaning plaintively, then, of a sudden, quivered from head to foot, starting up alert, as if to listen.

"Wilfred!" she shrieked; "Wilfred! Are you coming to save me?"

Then she opened her eyes, and peeped again.

The Prioress, wholly unmoved by the impending advent of "Wilfred," stood at the casement, calmly watching the swallows.

Sister Mary Seraphine began to weep.

At last the passionate sobbing ceased.

Unbroken silence reigned in the cell.

From without, the latch of the door was lifted; but the lock held.

Presently Sister Mary Seraphine dragged herself to the feet of the Prioress, seized the hem of her robe, and kissed it.

Then the Prioress turned. She firmly withdrew her robe from those clinging hands; yet looked, with eyes of tender compassion, upon the kneeling figure at her feet.

"Sister Seraphine," she said, "—for you must shew true penitence e'er I can permit you to be called by our Lady's name—you will now come to my cell, where I will presently speak with you."

Sister Seraphine instantly fell prone.

"I cannot walk," she said.

"You will not walk," replied the Prioress, sternly. "You will travel upon your hands and knees."

She crossed to the door, unlocked and set it wide.

"Moreover," she added, from the doorway, "if you do not appear in my presence in reasonable time, I shall be constrained to send for Mother Sub-Prioress."

The cell of the Prioress was situated at the opposite end of the long, stone passage; but in less than reasonable time, Sister Seraphine crawled in.

The unwonted exercise had had a most salutary effect upon her frame of mind.

Her straight habit, of heavy cloth, had rendered progress upon her knees awkward and difficult. Her hands had become entangled in her torn veil. Each moment she had feared lest cell doors, on either side, should open; old Antony might appear from the cloisters, or—greatest disaster of all—Mother Sub-Prioress might advance toward her from the Refectory stairs! In order to attain a greater rate of speed, she had tried lifting her knees, as elephants lift their feet. This mode of progress, though ungainly, had proved efficacious; but would have been distinctly mirth-provoking to beholders. The stones had hurt her hands and knees far more than she hurt them when she beat upon the floor of her own cell.

She arrived at the Reverend Mother's footstool, heated in mind and body, ashamed of herself, vexed with her garments, in fact in an altogether saner frame of mind than when she had called upon "Wilfred," and made reiterated mention of trappings of crimson and silver bells.

Perhaps the Prioress had foreseen this result, when she imposed the penance. Leniency or sympathy, at that moment, would have been fatal and foolish; and had not the Prioress made special petition for wisdom?

She was seated at her table, when Sister Seraphine bumped and shuffled into view. She did not raise her eyes from the illuminated missal she was studying. One hand lay on the massive clasp, the other rested in readiness to turn the page. Her noble form seemed stately calm personified.

When she heard Sister Seraphine panting close to her foot, she spoke; still without lifting her eyes.

"You may rise to your feet," she said, "and shut to the door."

Then the waiting hand turned the page, and silence fell.

"You may arrange the disorder of your dress," said the Prioress, and turned another page.

When at length she looked up, Sister Seraphine, clothed and apparently in her right mind, stood humbly near the door.

The Prioress closed the book, and shut the heavy clasps.

Then she pointed to an oaken stool, signing to the nun to draw it forward.

"Be seated, my child," she said, in tones of infinite tenderness. "There is much which must now be said, and your mind will pay better heed, if your body be at rest."

With her steadfast eyes the Prioress searched the pretty, flushed face, swollen with weeping, and now gathering a look of petulant defiance, thinly veiled beneath surface humility.

"What was the cause of this outburst, my child?" asked the Prioress, very gently.

"While in the Cathedral, Reverend Mother, up in our gallery, I, being placed not far from a window, heard, in a moment of silence, the neighing of a horse in the street without. It was like to the neighing of mine own lovely palfrey, waiting in the castle court at home, until I should come down and mount him. Each time that steed neighed, I could see Snowflake more clearly, in trappings of gay crimson, with silver bells, amid many others prancing impatiently, champing their bits as they waited; for it pleased me to come out last, when all were mounted. Then the riders lifted their plumed caps when I appeared, while Wilfred, pushing my page aside, did swing me into the saddle. Thus, with shouting and laughter and winding of horn, we would all ride out to the hunt or the tourney; I first, on Snowflake; Wilfred, close behind."

Very quietly the Prioress sat listening. She did not take her eyes from the flushed face. A slight colour tinged her own cheeks.

"Who was Wilfred?" she asked, when Sister Seraphine paused for breath.

"My cousin, whom I should have wed if—"

"If?"

"If I had not left the world."

The Prioress considered this.

"If your heart was set upon wedding your cousin, my child, why did you profess a vocation and, renouncing all worldly and carnal desires, gain admission to our sacred Order?"

"My heart was not set on marrying my cousin!" cried Sister Seraphine, with petulance. "I was weary of Wilfred. I was weary of everything! I wanted to profess. I wished to become a nun. There were people I could punish, and people I could surprise, better so, than in any other way. But Wilfred said that, when the time came, he would be there to carry me off."

"And—when the time came?"

"He was not there. I never saw him again."

The Prioress turned, and looked out through the oriel window. She seemed to be weighing, carefully, what she should say.

When at length she spoke, she kept her eyes fixed upon the waving tree-tops beyond the Convent wall.

"Sister Seraphine," she said, "many who embrace the religious life, know what it is to pass through the experience you have now had; but, as a rule, they fight the temptation and conquer it in the secret of their own hearts, in the silence of their own cells.

"Memories of the life that was, before, choosing the better part, we left the world, come back to haunt us, with a wanton sweetness. Such memories cannot change the state, fixed forever by our vows; but they may awaken in us vain regrets or worldly longings. Therein lies their sinfulness.

"To help you against this danger, I will now give you two prayers, which you must commit to memory, and repeat whenever need arises. The first is from the Breviary."

The Prioress drew toward her a black book with silver clasps, opened it, and read therefrom a short prayer in Latin. But seeing no light of response or of intelligence upon the face of Sister Seraphine, she slowly repeated a translation.

*Almighty and Everlasting God, grant that our wills be ever meekly subject to Thy will, and our hearts be ever honestly ready to serve Thee. Amen.*

Her eyes rested, with a wistful smile, upon the book.

"This prayer might suffice," she said, "if our hearts were truly honest, if our wills were ever yielded. But, alas, our hearts are deceitful above all things, and our wills are apt to turn traitor to our good intentions.

"Therefore I have found for you, in the Gregorian Sacramentary, another prayer—less well-known, yet much more ancient, written over six hundred years ago. It deals effectually with the deceitful heart, the insidious, tempting thoughts, and the unstable will. Here is a translation which I have myself inscribed upon the margin."

The Prioress laid her folded hands upon the missal and as she repeated the ancient sixth-century prayer, in all its depth of inspired simplicity, her voice thrilled with deep emotion, for she was giving to another that which had meant infinitely much to her own inner life.

*Almighty God, unto Whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The Prioress turned her face from Sister Seraphine's unresponsive countenance and fixed her eyes once more upon the tree-tops. She was thinking of the long years of secret conflict, known only to Him from Whom no secrets are hid; of the constant cleansing of her thoughts, for which she had so earnestly pleaded; of the fear lest she should never worthily magnify that Holy Name.

Presently—her heart filled with humble tenderness—she turned to Sister Seraphine.

"These prayers, my child, which you will commit to memory before you sleep this night, will protect you from a too insistent recollection of the world you have resigned; and will assist you, with

real inward thoroughness, to die daily to self, in order that the Holy Name of our dear Lord may be more worthily magnified in you."

But, alas! this gentle treatment, these long silences, this quiet recitation of holy prayers, had but stirred the naughty spirit in Sister Seraphine.

Her shallow nature failed to understand the depths of the noble heart, dealing thus tenderly with her. She measured its ocean-wide greatness, by the little artificial runnels of her own morbid emotions. She mistook gentleness for weakness; calm self-control, for lack of strength of will. Her wholesome awe of the Prioress was forgotten.

"But I do not want to die!" she exclaimed. "I want to live—to live—to live!"

The Prioress looked up, astonished.

The surface humility had departed from the swollen countenance of Sister Seraphine. The petulant defiance was plainly visible.

"Kneel!" commanded the Prioress, with authority.

The wayward nun jerked down upon her knees, upsetting the stool behind her.

The Prioress made a quick movement, then restrained herself. She had prayed for patience in dealing with wilfulness.

"We die that we may live," she said, solemnly. "Sister Seraphine, this is the lesson your wayward heart must learn. Dying to self, we live unto God. Dying to sin, we live unto righteousness. Dying to the world, we find the Life Eternal."

On her knees upon the floor, Sister Seraphine felt her position to be such as lent itself to pathos.

"But I want to *live* to the world!" she cried, and burst into tears.

Now Convent life does not tend to further individual grief. Constant devout contemplation of the Supreme Sorrow which wrought the world's salvation lessens the inclination to shed tears of self-pity.

The Prioress was startled and alarmed by the pathetic sobs of Sister Seraphine.

This young nun had but lately been sent on to the Nunnery at Whytstone from a convent at Tewkesbury in which she had served her novitiate, and taken her final vows. The Prioress now realised how little she knew of the inner working of the mind of Sister Seraphine, and blamed herself for having looked upon the outward appearance rather than upon the heart, taken too much for granted, and relied too entirely upon the reports of others. Her sense of failure, toward the Community in general, and toward Seraphine in particular, lent her a fresh stock of patience.

She raised the weeping nun from the floor, put her arm around her, with protective gesture, and led her before the Shrine of the Madonna.

"My child," she said, "there are things we are called upon to suffer which we can best tell to our blessed Lady, herself. Try to unburden your heart and find comfort . . . Does your mind hark back to the thought of the earthly love you resigned in order to give yourself solely to the heavenly? . . . Are you troubled by fears lest you wronged the man you loved, when, leaving him, you became the bride of Heaven?"

Sister Seraphine smiled—a scornful little smile. "Nay," she said, "I was weary of Wilfred. But—there were others."

The voice of the Prioress grew even graver, and more sad.

"Is it then the Fact of marriage which you desired and regret?"

Sister Seraphine laughed—a hard, self-conscious, little laugh.

"Nay, I could not have brooked to be bound to any man. But I liked to be loved, and I liked to be First in the thought and heart of another."

The Prioress looked at the pretty, tear-stained face, at the softly moulded form. Then an idea came to her. To voice it, lifted the veil from the very Holy of Holies of her own heart's sufferings; but she would not shrink from aught which could help this soul she was striving to uplift.

With her eyes resting upon the Babe in the arms of the Virgin Mother, she asked, gravely and low:

"Is it the ceaseless longing to have had a little child of your own to hold in your arms, to gather to your breast, to put to sleep upon your knees, which keeps your heart turning restlessly back to the world?"

Sister Seraphine gazed at the Prioress, in utter amazement.

"Nay, then, indeed!" she replied, impatiently. "Always have I hated children. To escape from the vexations of motherhood were reason enough for leaving the world."

Then the Prioress withdrew her protective arm, and looked sternly upon Sister Seraphine.

"You are playing false to your vows," she said; "you are slighting your vocation; yet no worthy or noble feeling draws your heart back to the world. You do but desire vain pomp and show; all those things which minister to the enthronement of self. Return to your cell and spend three hours in prayer and penitence before the crucifix."

The Prioress lifted her hand and pointed to the figure of the Christ, hanging upon the great rugged cross against the wall, facing the door. The sublimity of a supreme adoration was in her voice, as she made her last appeal.

"Surely," she said, "surely no love of self can live, in view of the death and sacrifice of our blessèd Lord! Kneel then before the crucifix and learn—"

But the over-wrought mind of Sister Seraphine, suddenly convinced of the futility of its hopeless rebellion, passed, in that moment, altogether beyond control.

With a shout of wild laughter, she flung back her head, pointing with outstretched finger at the crucifix.

"Death! Death! Death!" she shrieked, "helpless, hopeless, terrible! I ask for life, I want to live; I am young, I am gay, I am beautiful. And they bid—bid—bid me kneel—long hours—watching death." Her voice rose to a piercing scream. "Ah, HA! That will I NOT! A dead God cannot help me! I want life, not death!"

Shrieking she leapt to her feet, flew across the room, beat upon the sacred Form with her fists; tore at It with her fingers.

One instant of petrifying horror. Then the Prioress was upon her.

Seizing her by both wrists she flung her to the floor, then pulled a rope passing over a pulley in the wall, which started the great alarm-bell, in the passage, clanging wildly.

At once there came a rush of flying feet; calls for the Sub-Prioress; but she was already there.

When they flung wide the door, lo, the Prioress stood—with white face and blazing eyes, her arms outstretched—between them and the crucifix.

Upon the floor, a crumpled heap, lay Sister Mary Seraphine.

The nuns, in a frightened crowd, filled the doorway, none daring to speak, or to enter; till old Mary Antony, pushing past the Sub-Prioress, kneeled down beside the Reverend Mother, and, lifting the hem of her robe, kissed it and pressed it to her breast.

Slowly the Prioress let fall her arms.

"Enter," she said; and they flocked in.

"Sister Seraphine," said the Prioress, in awful tones, "has profaned the crucifix, reviling our blessèd Lord, Who hangs thereon."

All the nuns, falling upon their knees, hid their faces in their hands.

There was a terrifying quality in the silence of the next moments.

Slowly the Prioress turned, prostrated herself at the foot of the cross, and laid her forehead against the floor at its base. Then the nuns heard one deep, shuddering sob.

Not a head was lifted. The only nun who peeped was Sister Mary Seraphine, prone upon the floor.

After a while, the Prioress arose, pale but calm.

"Carry her to her cell," she said.

Two tall nuns to whom she made sign lifted Sister Seraphine, and bore her out.

When the shuffling of their feet died away in the distance, the Prioress gave further commands.

"All will now go to their cells and kneel in adoration before the crucifix. Doors are to be left standing wide. The *Miserere* is to be chanted, until the ringing of the Refectory bell. Mother Sub-Prioress will remain behind."

The nuns dispersed, as quickly as they had gathered; seeking their cells, like frightened birds fleeing before a gathering storm.

The tall nuns who had carried Sister Seraphine returned and waited outside the Reverend Mother's door.

The Prioress stood alone; a tragic figure in her grief.

Mother Sub-Prioress drew near. Her narrow face, peering from out her veil, more than ever resembled a ferret. Her small eyes gleamed with a merciless light.

"Is mine the task, Reverend Mother?" she whispered.

The Prioress inclined her head.

Mother Sub-Prioress murmured a second question.

The Prioress turned and looked at the crucifix.

"Yes," she said, firmly.

Mother Sub-Prioress sidled nearer; then whispered her third question.

The Prioress did not answer. She was looking at the carved, oaken stool, overthrown. She was wondering whether she could have acted with better judgment, spoken more wisely. Her heart was sore. Such noble natures ever blame themselves for the wrong-doing of the worthless.

Receiving no reply, Mother Sub-Prioress whispered a suggestion.

"No," said the Prioress.

Mother Sub-Prioress modified her suggestion.

The Prioress turned and looked at the tender figure of the Madonna, brooding over the blessed Babe.

"No," said the Prioress.

Mother Sub-Prioress frowned, and made a further modification; but in tones which suggested finality.

The Prioress inclined her head.

The Sub-Prioress, bowing low, lifted the hem of the Reverend Mother's veil, and kissed it; then passed from the room.

The Prioress moved to the window.

The sunset was over. The evening star shone, like a newly-lighted lamp, in a pale purple sky. The fleet-winged swallows had gone to rest.

Bats flitted past the casement, like homeless souls who know not where to go.

Low chanting began in the cells; the nuns, with open doors, singing *Miserere*.

But, as she looked at the evening star, the Prioress heard again, with startling distinctness, the final profanity of poor Sister Seraphine: "I want life—not death!"

Along the corridor passed a short procession, on its way to the cell of Mary Seraphine.

First went a nun, carrying a lighted taper.

Next, the two tall nuns who had borne Mary Seraphine to her cell.

Behind them, Mother Sub-Prioress, holding something beneath her scapulary which gave to her more of a presence than she usually possessed.

Solemn and official,—nay, almost sacrificial—was their measured shuffle, as they moved along the passage, and entered the cell of Mary Seraphine.

The Prioress closed her door, and, kneeling before the crucifix, implored forgiveness for the sacrilege which, all unwittingly, she had provoked.

The nuns, in their separate cells, chanted the *Miserere*. But—suddenly—with one accord, their voices fell silent; then hastened on, in uncertain, agitated rhythm.

Old Mary Antony below, playing her favourite game, also paused, and pricked up her ears: then filliped the wizen pea, which stood for Mother Sub-Prioress, into the darkest corner, and hurried off to brew a soothing balsam.

So, when the Refectory bell had summoned all to the evening meal, the old lay-sister crept to the cell of Mary Seraphine, carrying broth and comfort.

But Sister Seraphine was better content than she had been for many weeks.

At last she had become the centre of attention; and, although, during the visit of Mother Sub-Prioress to her cell, this had been a peculiarly painful position to occupy, yet to the morbid mind of Mary Seraphine, the position seemed worth the discomfort.

Therefore, her mind now purged of its discontent, she cheerfully supped old Antony's broth, and applied the soothing balsam; yet planning the while, to gain favour with the Prioress, by repeating to her, at the first convenient opportunity, the naughty remarks concerning Mother Sub-Prioress, now being made for her diversion, by the kind old woman who had risked reproof, in order to bring to her, in her disgrace, both food and consolation.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE KNIGHT OF THE BLOODY VEST

"Nay, I have naught for thee this morning," said Mary Antony to the robin; "naught, that is, save spritely conversation. I can tell thee a tale or two; I can give thee sage advice; but, in my wallet, little Master Mendicant, I have but my bag of peas."

The old lay-sister sat resting in the garden. She had had a busy hour, yet complicated in its busyness, for, starting out to do weeding, she had presently fancied herself intent upon making a posy, and now, sat upon the stone seat beneath the beech tree, holding a large nosegay made up of many kinds of flowering weeds, arranged with much care, and bound round with convolvulus tendrils.

Keen and uncommon shrewd though old Antony certainly was in many ways, her great age occasionally betrayed itself by childish vagaries. Her mind would start off along the lines of a false premise, landing her eventually in a dream-like conclusion. As now, when waking from a moment's nodding in the welcome shade, she wondered why her old back seemed well-nigh broken, and marvelled to find herself holding a big posy of dandelions, groundsel, plantain, and bindweed.

On the other end of the seat, stood the robin. The beech was just near enough to the cloisters, the pieman's tree, and his own particular yew hedge, to come within his little kingdom.

Having mentioned her bag of peas, Mary Antony experienced an irresistible desire to view them and, moreover, to display them before the bright eyes of the robin.

She laid the queer nosegay down upon the grass at her feet, turned sidewise on the stone slab, and drew the bag from her wallet.

"Now, Master Pieman!" she said. "At thine own risk thou doest it; but with thine own bright eyes thou shalt see the holy Ladies; the Unnamed, all like peas in a pod, as the Lord knows they do look, when they walk to and fro; but first, if so be that I can find them, the Few which I distinguish from among the rest."

Presently, after much peering into the bag, the fine white pea, the wizened pea, and the pale and speckled pea, lay in line upon the stone.

"This," explained Mary Antony, pointing, with knobby forefinger, to the first, "is the Reverend Mother, Herself—large, and pure, and noble. . . . Nay, hop not too close, Sir Redbreast! When we enter her chamber we kneel at the threshold, till she bids us draw nearer. True, *we* are merely soberly-clad, holy women, whereas *thou* art a gay, gaudy man; bold-eyed, and, doubtless, steeped in sin. But even thou must keep thy distance, in presence of this most Reverend Pea of great price.

"This," indicating the shrivelled pea, "is Mother Sub-Prioress, who would love to have the whipping of thee, thou naughty little rascal!

"This is Sister Mary Rebecca who daily grows more crooked, both in mind and body; yet who ever sweetly smileth.

"Now will I show thee, if so be that I can find her, Sister Teresa, a kindly soul and gracious, but with a sniff which may be heard in the kitchens when that holy Lady taketh her turn at the Refectory reading. And when, the reading over, having sniffed every other minute, she at length, feels free to blow, beshrew me, Master Redbreast, one might think our old dun cow had just been parted from a newly-born calf. Yea, a kind, gracious soul; but noisy about the nose, and forgetful of the ears of other people, her own necessity seeming excuse enough for veritable trumpet blasts."

Mary Antony, half turning as she talked, peered into the open bag in search of Sister Teresa.

Then, quick as thought, the unexpected happened.

Three rapid hops, a jerky bend of the red breast, a flash of wings—

The robin had flown off with the white pea! The shrivelled and the speckled alone remained upon the seat.

Uttering a cry of horror and dismay, the old lay-sister fell upon her knees, lifting despairing hands to trees and sky.

Down by the lower wall, in earnest meditation, the Prioress moved back and forth, on the Cypress Walk.

Mary Antony's shriek of dismay, faint but unmistakable, reached her ears. Turning, she passed noiselessly up the green sward, on the further side of the yew hedge; but paused, in surprise, as she drew level with the beech; for the old lay-sister's voice penetrated the hedge, and the first words she overheard seemed to the Prioress wholly incomprehensible.

"Ah, thou Knight of the Bloody Vest!" moaned Mary Antony. "Heaven send thy wicked perfidy may fall on thine own pate! Intruding thyself into our most private places; begging food, which could not be refused; wheedling old Mary Antony into letting thee have a peep at the holy Ladies—thou bold, bad man!—and then carrying off the Reverend Mother, Herself! Ha! Hadst thou but caught away Mother Sub-Prioress, she would have reformed thy home, whipped thy children, and mended thine own vile manners, thou graceless churl! Or hadst thou taken Sister Mary Rebecca, *she* would have brought the place about thine ears, telling thy wife fine tales of thine unfaithfulness; whispering that Mary Antony is younger and fairer than she. But, nay, forsooth! Neither of these will do! Thou must needs snatch away the Reverend Mother, Herself! Oh, sacrilegious fiend! Stand not there mocking me! Where is the Reverend Mother?"

"Why, here am I, dear Antony," said the Prioress, in soothing tones, coming quickly from behind the hedge.

One glance revealed, to her relief, that the lay-sister was alone. Tears ran down the furrows of her worn old face. She knelt upon the grass; beside her a large nosegay of flowering weeds; upon the seat, peas strewn from out a much-used, linen bag. Above her on a bough, a robin perched, bending to look, with roguish eye, at the scattered peas.

To the Prioress it seemed that indeed the old lay-sister must have taken leave of her senses.

Stooping, she tried to raise her; but Mary Antony, flinging herself forward, clasped and kissed the Reverend Mother's feet, in an abandonment of penitence and grief.

"Nay, rise, dear Antony," said the Prioress, firmly. "Rise! I command it. The day is warm. Thou hast been dreaming. No bold, bad man has forced his way within these walls. No 'Knight of the Bloody Vest' is here. Rise up and look. We are alone."

But Mary Antony, still on her knees, half raised herself, and, pointing to the bough above, quavered, amid her sobs: "The bold, bad man is there!"

Looking up, the Prioress met the bright eye of the robin, peeping down.

Why, surely? Yes! There was the "Bloody Vest."

The Prioress smiled. She began to understand.

The robin burst into a stream of triumphant song. At which, old Mary Antony, still kneeling, shook her uplifted fist.

The Prioress raised and drew her to the seat.

"Now sit thee here beside me," she said, "and make full confession. Ease thine old heart by telling me the entire tale. Then I will pass sentence on the robin if, true to his name, he turns out to be a thief."

So there, in the Convent garden, while the robin sang overhead, the Prioress listened to the quaint recital; the dread of making mistake in the daily counting; the elaborate plan of dropping peas; the manner in which the peas became identified with the personalities of the White Ladies; the games in the cell; the taming of the robin; the habit of sharing with the little bird, interests which might not be shared with others, which had resulted that morning in the display of the peas, and this undreamed of disaster—the abduction of the Reverend Mother.

The Prioress listened with outward gravity, striving to conceal all signs of the inward mirth which seized and shook her. But more than once she had to turn her face from the peering eyes of

Mary Antony, striving anxiously to gather whether her chronicle of sins was placing her outside the pale of possible forgiveness.

The Prioress did not hasten the recital. She knew the importance, to the mind with which she dealt, of even the most trivial detail. To be checked or hurried, would leave Mary Antony with the sense of an incomplete confession.

Therefore, with infinite patience the Prioress listened, seated in the sunlit garden, undisturbed, save for the silent passing, once or twice, of a veiled figure through the cloisters, who, seeing the Reverend Mother seated beneath the beech, did reverence and hastened on, looking not again.

When the garrulous old voice at last fell silent, the Prioress, with kind hand, covered the restless fingers—clasping and unclasping in anxious contortions—and firmly held them in folded stillness.

Her first words were of a thing as yet unmentioned.

"Dear Antony," she said, "is that thy posy lying at our feet?"

"Ah, Reverend Mother," sighed the old lay-sister, "in this did I again do wrong meaning to do right. Sister Mary Augustine, coming into the kitchens with leave, from Mother Sub-Prioress, to make the pasties, and desiring to be free to make them heavy—unhampered by my advice which, of a surety, would have helped them to lightness—bade me go out and weed the garden.

"Weeding, I bethought me how much liefer I would be gathering a posy of choicest flowers for our sweet Lady's shrine; and, thus thinking, I began to do, not according to Sister Mary Augustine's hard task, but according to mine own heart's promptings. Yet, when the posy was finished, alack-a-day! it was a posy of weeds!"

Tears filled the eyes of the Prioress; at first she could not trust her voice to make reply.

Then, stooping she picked up the nosegay.

"Our Lady shall have it," she said. "I will place it before her shrine, in mine own cell. She will understand—knowing how often, though the hands perforce do weeding, yet, all the time, the heart is gathering choicest flowers.

"Aye, and sometimes when we bring to God offerings of fairest flowers, He sees but worthless weeds. And, when we mourn, because we have but weeds to offer, He sees them fragrant blossoms. Whatever, to the eye of man, the hand may hold, God sees therein the bouquet of the heart's intention."

The Prioress paused, a look of great gladness on her face; then, as she saw the old lay-sister still eyeing her posy with dissatisfaction: "And, after all, dear Antony," she said, "who shall decide which flowers shall be dubbed 'weeds'? No plant of His creation, however humble, was called a 'weed' by the Creator. When, for man's sin, He cursed the ground, He said: 'Thorns also and thistles shall it cause to bud.' Well? Sharpest thorns are found around the rose; the thistle is the royal bloom of Scotland; and, if our old white ass could speak her mind, doubtless she would call it King of Flowers.

"Nowhere in Holy Books, is any plant named a 'weed.' It is left to man to proclaim that the flowers he wants not, are weeds.

"Look at each one of these. Could you or I, labouring for years, with all our skill, make anything so perfect as the meanest of these weeds?"

"Nay; they are weeds, because they grow, there where they should not be. The gorgeous scarlet poppy is a weed amid the corn. If roses overgrew the wheat, we should dub them weeds, and root them out.

"And some of us have had, perforce, so to deal with the roses in our lives; those sweet and fragrant things which overgrew our offering of the wheat of service, our sacrifice of praise and prayer.

"Perhaps, when our weeds are all torn out, and cast in a tangled heap before His Feet, our Lord beholds in them a garland of choice blossoms. The crown of thorns on earth, may prove, in Paradise, a diadem of flowers."

The Prioress laid the posy on the seat beside her.

"Now, Antony, about thy games with peas. There is no wrong in keeping count with peas of those who daily walk to and from Vespers; though, I admit, it seems to me, it were easier to count one, two, three, with folded hands, than to let fall the peas from one hand to the other, beneath thy scapulary. Howbeit, a method which would be but a pitfall to one, may prove a prop to another. So I give thee leave to continue to count with thy peas. Also the games in thy cell are harmless, and lead me to think, as already I have sometimes thought, that games with balls or rings, something in which eye guides the hand, and mind the eye, might be helpful for all, on summer evenings.

"But I cannot have thee take upon thyself to decide the future state of the White Ladies. Who art thou, to send me to Paradise with a fillip of thine old finger-nail, yet to keep our excellent Sub-Prioress in Purgatory? Shame upon thee, Mary Antony!" But the sternness of the Reverend Mother's tone was belied by the merriment in her grey eyes.

"So no more of that, my Antony; though, truth to tell, thy story gives me relief, answering a question I was meaning to put to thee. I heard, not an hour ago, that Sister Antony had boasted that with a turn of her thumb and finger she could, any night, send Mother Sub-Prioress to Purgatory."

"Who said that of me?" stuttered Mary Antony. "Who said it, Reverend Mother?"

"A little bird," murmured the Prioress. "A little bird, dear Antony; but not thy pretty robin. Also, the boast was taken to mean poison in the broth of Mother Sub-Prioress. Hast thou ever put harmful things in the broth of Mother Sub-Prioress?"

Mary Antony slipped to her knees.

"Only beans, Reverend Mother, castor beans; and, when her temper was vilest, purging herbs. Nothing more, I swear it! Old Antony knows naught of poisons; only of mixing balsams—ah, ha!—and soothing ointments! Our blessèd Lady knows the tale is false."

Hastily the Prioress lifted the nosegay and buried her face in bindweed and dandelions.

"I believe thee," she said, in a voice not over steady. "Rise from thy knees. But, remember, I forbid thee to put aught into Mother Sub-Prioress's broth, save things that soothe and comfort. Give me thy word for this, Antony."

The old woman humbly lifted the hem of the Prioress's robe, and pressed it to her lips.

"I promise, Reverend Mother," she said, "and I do repent me of my sin."

"Sit beside me," commanded the Prioress. "I have more to say to thee. . . . Think not hard thoughts of the Sub-Prioress. She is stern, and extreme to mark what is done amiss, but this she conceives to be her duty. She is a most pious Lady. Her zeal is but a sign of her piety."

Mary Antony's keen eyes, meeting those of the Prioress, twinkled.

Once again the Prioress took refuge in the posy. She was beginning to have had enough of the scent of dandelions.

"Mother Sub-Prioress is sick," she said. "The cold struck her last evening, after sunset, in the orchard. I have bidden her to keep her bed awhile. We must tend her kindly, Antony, and help her back to health again.

"Sister Mary Rebecca is also sick, with pains in her bones and slight fever. She too keeps her bed to-day. Strive to feel kindly toward her, Antony. I know she oft thinks evil where none was meant, telling tales of wrong which are mostly of her own imagining. But, in so doing, she harms herself more than she can harm others.

"By stirring up the mud in a dark pool, you dim the reflection of the star which, before, shone bright within it. But you do not dim the star, shining on high.

"So is it with the slanderous thoughts of evil minds. They stir up their own murkiness; but they fail to dim the stars.

"We must bear with Sister Mary Rebecca."

"Go not nigh them, Reverend Mother," begged old Antony. "I will tend them with due care and patience. These pains in bones, and general shiverings, are given quickly from one to another. I pray you, go not near. Remember—you were taken—alas! alas!—and *they* were left!"

At this the Prioress laughed, gaily.

"But I was not taken decently, with pains in my bones and a-bed, dear Antony. I was carried off by a bold, bad man—thy Knight of the Bloody Vest."

"Oh, pray!" cried the old lay-sister. "I fear me it is an omen. The angel Gabriel, Reverend Mother, sent to bear you from earth to heaven. 'The one shall be taken, and the other left.' Ah, if he had but flown off with Mother Sub-Prioress!"

The Prioress laughed again. "Dear Antony, thy little bird took the first pea he saw. Had there but been a crumb, or a morsel of cheese, he would have left thee thy white pea. . . Hark how he sings his little song of praise! . . . Is it not wonderful to call to mind how, centuries ago, when white-robed Druids cut mistletoe from British oaks, the robin redbreast hopped around, and sang; when, earlier still, men were wild and savage, dwelling in holes and caves and huts of mud, when churches and cloisters were unknown in this land and the one true God undreamed of, robins mated and made their nests, the speckled thrushes sang, 'Do it now—Do it now,' as they sought food for their young, the blackbirds whistled, and the swallows flashed by on joyous wing. Aye, and when Eve and Adam walked in Eden, amid strange beasts and gaily plumaged birds, here—in these Isles—the robin redbreast sang, and all our British birds busily built their nests and reared their young; living their little joyous lives, as He Who made them taught them how to do.

"And, in the centuries to come, when all things may be changed in this our land, when we shall long have gone to dust, when our loved cloisters may have crumbled into ruin; still the hills of Malvern will stand, and the silvery Severn flow along the valley; while here, in this very garden—if it be a garden still—the robin will build his nest, and carol his happy song.

"Mark you this, dear Mary Antony: all things made by man hold within them the elements of change and of decay. But nature is at one with God, and therefore immutable. Earthly kingdoms may rise and wane; mighty cities may spring up, then fall into ruin. Nations may conquer and, in their turn, be conquered. Man may slay man and, in his turn, be slain. But, through it all, the mountains stand, the rivers flow, the forests wave, and the redbreast builds his nest in the hawthorn, and warbles a love-song to his mate."

The Prioress rose and stretched wide her arms to the sunlit garden, to the bough where the robin sang.

"Oh, to be one with God and with Nature!" she cried. "Oh, to know the essential mysteries of Life and Light and Love! This is Life Eternal!"

She had forgotten the old lay-sister; aye, for the moment she had forgotten the Convent and the cloister, the mile-long walk in darkness, the chant of the unseen monks. She trod again the springy heather of her youth; she heard the rush of the mountain stream; the sigh of the great forest; the rustle of the sunlit glades, alive with, life. These all were in the robin's song. Then—

Within the Convent, the Refectory bell clanged loudly.

The Prioress let fall her arms.

She picked up the nosegay of weeds.

"Come, Antony," she said, "let us go and discover whether Sister Mary Augustine hath contrived to make the pasties light and savoury, even without the aid of the advice she might have had from thee."

Old Mary Antony, gleeful and marvelling, followed the stately figure of the Prioress. Never was shriven soul more blissfully at peace. She had kept back nothing; yet the Reverend Mother had imposed no punishment, had merely asked a promise which, in the fulness of her gratitude, Mary Antony had found it easy to give.

Truly the broth of Mother Sub-Prioress should, for the future, contain naught but what was grateful and soothing.

But, as she entered the Refectory behind the Reverend Mother and saw all the waiting nuns arise, old Mary Antony laid her finger to her nose.

"That 'little bird' shall have the castor beans," she said, "That 'little bird' shall have them. Not my pretty robin, but the other!"

And, sad to say, poor Sister Seraphine was sorely griped that night, and suffered many pangs.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MADONNA IN THE CLOISTER

The Prioress knelt, in prayer and meditation, before the figure of the Virgin Mother holding upon her knees the holy Babe.

Moonlight flooded the cell with a pure radiance.

Mary Antony's posy of weeds, offered, according to promise, at the Virgin's shrine, took on, in that silver splendour, the semblance of lilies and roses.

The Prioress knelt long, with clasped hands and bowed head, as white and as motionless as the marble before her. But at length she lifted her face, and broke into low pleading.

"Mother of God," she said, "help this poor aching heart; still the wild hunger at my breast. Make me content to be at one with the Divine, and to let Nature go. . . . Thou knowest it is not the *man* I want. In all the long years since he played traitor to his troth to me, I have not wanted the man. The woman he wed may have him, unbegrudged by me. I do not envy her the encircling of his arms, though time was when I felt them strong and tender. I do not want the man, but—O, sweet Mother of God—I want the man's little child! I envy her the motherhood which, but for her, would have been mine. . . . I want the soft dark head against my breast. . . . I want sweet baby lips drawing fresh life from mine. . . . I want the little feet, resting together in my hand. . . . All Nature sings of life, and the power to bestow life. Yet mine arms are empty, and my strength does but carry mine own self to and fro. . . . Oh, give me grace to turn my thoughts from Life to Sacrifice."

The Prioress rose, crossed the floor, and knelt long in prayer and contemplation before the crucifix.

The moonlight fell upon the dying face of the suffering Saviour, upon the crown of thorns, the helpless arms out-stretched, the bleeding feet.

O, Infinite Redeemer! O, mighty Sacrifice! O, Love of God, made manifest!

The Prioress knelt long in adoring contemplation. At intervals she prostrated herself, pressing her forehead against the base of the cross.

At length she rose and moved toward the inner room, where stood her couch.

But even as she reached the threshold she turned quickly back, and kneeling before the Virgin and Child clasped the little marble foot of the Babe, covered it with kisses, and pressed it to her breast.

Then, lifting despairing eyes to the tender face of the Madonna: "O, Mother of God," she cried, "grant unto me to love the piercèd feet of thy dear Son crucified, more than I love the little, baby feet of the Infant Jesus on thy knees."

A great calm fell upon her after this final prayer. It seemed, of a sudden, more efficacious than all the long hours of vigil. She felt persuaded that it would be granted.

She rose to her feet, almost too much dazed and too weary to cross to the inner cell.

A breath of exquisite fragrance filled the air.

At the feet of the Madonna stood a wondrous bouquet of lilies of the valley and white roses.

Pale but radiant, the Prioress passed into her sleeping-chamber. The loving heart of old Mary Antony had been full of lilies and roses. It was not her fault that her old hands had been filled with weeds. Divine Love, understanding, had wrought this gracious miracle.

As the Prioress stretched herself upon her couch, she murmured softly: "The Lord seeth not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

"And, after all, this miracle of the Divine perception doth take place daily.

"Alas, when our vaunted roses and lilies appear, in His sight, as mere worthless weeds.

"The Lord looketh on the heart."

\* \* \* \* \*

When the Prioress awoke, the sunlight filled her chamber.  
She hastened to the archway between the cells, and looked.  
The dandelions seemed more gaily golden, in the morning light. The bindweed had faded.  
The Prioress was disappointed. She had counted upon sending early for old Mary Antony. She had pictured her bewildered joy. Yet now the nosegay was as before.  
Morning light is ever a test for transformations. Things are apt to look again as they were.  
But a fragrance of roses and lilies still lingered in the chamber.  
The blessed Virgin smiled upon the Babe.  
And there was peace in the heart of the Prioress. Her long vigil, her hours of prayer, had won for her the sense of a calm certainty of coming victory.  
Strong in that certainty, she bent, and gently kissed the little feet of the holy Babe.  
Then, as was her wont, she sounded the bell which called the entire community to arise, and to begin a new day.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ON THE WINGS OF THE STORM

In the afternoon of that day, Mary Antony awaited, in the cloisters, the return of the White Ladies from Vespers. Twenty only, had gone; and, fearful lest she should make mistake with the unusual number, the old lay-sister spent the time of waiting in counting the twenty peas afresh, passing them back and forth from one hand to the other.

Mother Sub-Prioress was still unable to leave her bed.

Sister Mary Augustine stayed to tend her.

Sister Teresa was in less pain, but fevered still, and strangely weak. The Reverend Mother forbade her to rise.

Shortly before the bell rang calling the nuns to form procession in the cloisters, Sister Seraphine declared herself unable for the walk, and begged to be allowed to remain behind. The Prioress found herself misdoubting this sudden indisposition of Sister Seraphine who, though flushed and excited, shewed none of the usual signs of sickness.

Not wishing, however, to risk having a third patient upon her hands, the Reverend Mother gave leave for her to stay, but also elected to remain behind, herself; letting Sister Mary Rebecca, who had recovered from her indisposition, lead the procession.

Thus the Reverend Mother contrived to keep Sister Seraphine with her during the absence of the other nuns, giving her translations from the Sacramentaries to copy upon strips of vellum, until shortly before the hour when the White Ladies would return from Vespers, when she sent her to her cell for the time of prayer and meditation.

Left alone, the Prioress examined the copies, fairly legible, but sadly unlike her own beautiful work. She sighed and, putting them away, rose and paced the room, questioning how best to deal with the pretty but wayward young nun.

Two definite causes led the Prioress to mistrust Sister Seraphine: one, that she had called upon "Wilfred" to come and save her, and had admitted having expected him to appear and carry her off before she made her final profession; the other, that she had tried to start an evil report concerning the old lay-sister, Mary Antony. The Prioress pondered what means to take in order to bring Sister Seraphine to a better mind.

As the Prioress walked to and fro, unconsciously missing the daily exercise of the passage to the Cathedral, she noted a sudden darkening of her chamber. Going to the window, she saw the sky grown black with thunder clouds. So quickly the storm gathered, that the bright summer world without seemed suddenly hung over with a deep purple pall.

Birds screamed and darted by, on hurried wing; then, reaching home, fell silent. All nature seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the first flash, and the first roll of thunder.

Still standing at her window, the Prioress questioned whether the nuns were returned, and safely in their cells. While underground they would know nothing of it; but they loved not passing along the cloisters in a storm.

The Prioress wondered why she had not heard the bell announcing their return, and calling to the hour of prayer and silence. Also why Mary Antony had not brought in the key and her report.

Thinking to inquire into this, she turned from the window, just as a darting snake of fire cleft the sky. A crash of thunder followed; and, at that moment, the door of the chamber bursting open, old Mary Antony, breathless, stumbled in, forgetting to knock, omitting to kneel, not waiting leave to speak, both hands outstretched, one tightly clenched, the other holding the great key: "Oh, Reverend Mother!" she gasped. Then the stern displeasure on that loved face silenced her. She dropped upon her knees, ashen and trembling.

Now the Prioress held personal fear in high scorn; and if, after ninety years' experience of lightning and thunder, Mary Antony was not better proof against their terrors, the Prioress felt scant patience with her. She spoke sternly.

"How now, Mary Antony! Why this unseemly haste? Why this rush into my presence; no knock; no pause until I bid thee enter? Is the storm-fiend at thy heels? Now shame upon thee!"

For only answer, Mary Antony opened her clenched hand: whereupon twenty peas fell pattering to the floor, chasing one another across the Reverend Mother's cell.

The Prioress frowned, growing suddenly weary of these games with peas.

"Have the Ladies returned?" she asked.

Mary Antony grovelled nearer, let fall the key, and seized the robe of the Prioress with both hands, not to carry it to her lips, but to cling to it as if for protection.

With the clang of the key on the flags, a twisted blade of fire rent the sky.

As the roar which followed rolled away, echoed and re-echoed by distant hills, the old lay-sister lifted her face.

Her lips moved, her gums rattled; the terror in her eyes pleaded for help.

This was the moment when it dawned on the Prioress that there was more here than fear of a storm.

Stooping she laid her hands firmly, yet with kindness in their strength, on the shaking shoulders.

"What is it, dear Antony?" she said.

"Twenty White Ladies went," whispered the old lay-sister. "I counted them. Twenty White Ladies went; but—"

"Well?"

"*Twenty-one* returned," chattered Mary Antony, and hid her face in the Reverend Mother's robe.

Two flashes, with their accompanying peals of thunder passed, before the Prioress moved or spoke. Then raising Mary Antony she placed her in a chair, disengaged her robe from the shaking hands, passed out into the cell passage, and herself sounded the call to silence and prayer.

Returning to her cell she shut the door, poured out a cordial and put it to the trembling lips of Mary Antony. Then taking a seat just opposite, she looked with calm eyes at the lay-sister.

"What means this story?" said the Prioress.

"Reverend Mother, twenty holy Ladies went—"

"I know. And twenty returned."

"Aye," said the old woman more firmly, nettled out of her speechlessness; "twenty returned; and twenty peas I dropped from hand to hand. Then—when no pea remained—yet another White Lady glided by; and with her went an icy wind, and around her came the blackness of the storm.

"Down the steps I fled, locked the door, and took the key. How I mounted again, I know not. As I drew level with the cloisters, I saw that twenty-first White Lady, for whom—Saint Peter knows—I held no pea, passing from the cloisters into the cell passage. As I hastened on, fain to see whither she went, a blinding flash, like an evil twisting snake, shot betwixt her and me. When I could see again, she was gone. I fled to the Reverend Mother, and ran in on the roar of the thunder."

"Saw you her face, Mary Antony?"

"Nay, Reverend Mother. But, of late, the holy Ladies mostly walk by with their faces shrouded."

"I know. Now, see here, dear Antony. Two peas dropped together, the while you counted one."

"Nay, Reverend Mother. Twenty peas dropped one by one; also I counted twenty White Ladies. And, after I had counted twenty, yet another passed."

"But how could that be?" objected the Prioress. "If twenty went, but twenty could return. Who should be the twenty-first?"

Then old Mary Antony leaned forward, crossing herself.

"Sister Agatha," she whispered, tremulously. "Poor Sister Agatha returned to us again."

But, even as she said it, swift came a name to the mind of the Prioress, answering her own question, and filling her with consternation and a great anger. "Wilfred! Wilfred, are you come to save me?" foolish little Seraphine had said. Was such sacrilege possible? Could one from the outside world have dared to intrude into their holy Sanctuary?

Yet old Antony's tale carried conviction. Her abject fear was now explained.

That the Dead should come again, and walk and move among the haunts of men, seeking out the surroundings they have loved and left, seems always to hold terror for the untutored mind, which knows not that the Dead are more alive than the living; and that there is no death, saving the death of sin.

But to the Reverend Mother, guarding her flock from sin or shame, a visitor from the Unseen World held less of horror than a possible intruder from the Seen.

A rapid glance as she sounded the bell, had shown her that the passage was empty.

Which cell now sheltered two, where there should be but one?

The Prioress walked across to a recess near the south window, touched a spring, and slid back a portion of the oak panelling. Passing her hand into a secret hiding place in the wall, she drew forth a beautifully fashioned dagger, with carved ivory handle, crossed metal thumb-guard, blade of bevelled steel, polished and narrowing to a sharp needle point. She tested the point, then slipped the weapon into her belt, beneath her scapulary. As she closed the panel, and turned back into the chamber, a light of high resolve was in her eyes. Her whole bearing betokened so fine a fearlessness, such noble fixity of purpose that, looking on her, Mary Antony felt her own fears vanishing.

"Now listen, dear Antony," said the Prioress, holding the old woman with her look. "I must make sure that this twenty-first White Lady of thine is but a trick played on thee by thy peas. Should she be anywhere in the Convent I shall most certainly have speech with her.

"Meanwhile, go thou to thy kitchens, and give thy mind to the preparing of the evening meal. But ring not the Refectory bell until I bid thee. Nay, I myself will sound it this evening. It may suit me to keep the nuns somewhat longer at their devotions.

"Should I sound the alarm bell, let all thy helpers run up here; but go thou to the cell of Mother Sub-Prioress and persuade her not to rise. If needful say that it is my command that she keep her bed. . . . Great heavens! What a crash! May our Lady defend us! The lightning inclines to strike. I shall pass to each cell and make sure that none are too greatly alarmed."

"Now, haste thee, Antony; and not a word concerning thy fears must pass thy lips to any; no mention of a twenty-first White Lady nor"—the Prioress crossed herself—"of Sister Agatha, to whom may our Lord grant everlasting rest."

Mary Antony, kneeling, kissed the hem of the Prioress's robe. Then, rising, she said—with unwonted solemnity and restraint: "The Lord defend you, Reverend Mother, from foes, seen and unseen," and, followed by another blinding flash of lightning, she left the cell.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PRIORESS SHUTS THE DOOR

The Prioress waited until the old lay-sister's shuffling footsteps died away.

Then she passed out into the long, stone passage, leaving her own door open wide.

Into each cell the Prioress went.

In each she found a kneeling nun, absorbed in her devotions. In no cell were there two white figures. So simple were the fittings of these cells, that no place of concealment was possible. One look, from the doorway, sufficed.

Outside the cell of Sister Seraphine the Prioress paused, hearing words within; then entered swiftly. But Sister Seraphine was alone, reciting aloud, for love of hearing her own voice.

The Prioress now moved toward the heavy door in the archway leading into the cloisters. It opened inwards, and had been left standing wide, by Mary Antony. Indeed, in summer it stood open day and night, for coolness.

As the Prioress walked along the dimly lighted passage, she could see, through the open door, sheets of rain driving through the cloisters. The storm-clouds had burst, at last, and were descending in floods.

The Prioress stood in the shelter of the doorway, looking out into the cloisters. The only places she could not view, were the entrance to the subterranean way, and the flight of steps leading thereto. She would have wished to examine these; but it seemed scarcely worth passing into the driving rain, now sweeping through the cloister arches. After all, whatever possible danger lurked down those steps, the safety of the Convent would be assured if she closed this door, between the passage and the cloisters, and locked it.

Stepping back into the passage, she seized the heavy door and swung it to, noting as she did so, how far too heavy it was for the feeble arms of old Mary Antony, and deciding for the future to allot the task of closing it to a young lay-sister, leaving to Mary Antony merely the responsibility of turning the key in the lock.

This the Prioress was herself proceeding to do, when something impelled her to turn her eyes to the angle of wall laid bare by the closing of the door.

In that dark corner, motionless, with shrouded face, stood a tall figure, garbed in the dress of the nuns of the Order of the White Ladies of Worcester.

Perhaps the habit of silence is never of greater value than in moments of sudden shock and horror.

One cry from the Prioress would have meant the instant opening of many doors, and the arrival, on flying feet, of a score of frightened nuns.

Instead of screaming, the Prioress stood silent and perfectly still; while every pulse in her body ceased beating, during one moment of uncontrollable, cold horror. Then, with a leap, her heart went on; pounding so loudly, that she could hear it in the silence. Yet she kept command of every impulse which drove to sound or motion.

Before long her pulses quieted; her heart, beating steadily, was once again the well-managed steed upon which her high courage could ride to victory.

And, all the while, her eyes never left the white figure; knowing it knew itself discovered and observed.

Her hand was still upon the key.

She turned it, and withdrew it from the lock.

A deafening crash of thunder shook the walls. A swirl of wind and rain beat on the door.

When the last echo of the thunder had died away, the Prioress spoke; and that calm voice, sounding amid the storm, fell on the only ears that heard it, like the Voice of Power on Galilee, which bid the tempest cease, and the wild waves be still.

"Who art thou, and what doest thou here?"

The figure answered not.

"Art thou a ghostly visitor come back amongst us, from the Realm of the Unseen?"

The figure made no sign. "Art thou then flesh and blood, and mortal as ourselves?"

Slowly the figure bowed its head.

"Now I adjure thee by our blessèd Lady to tell me truly. Art thou, in very deed a holy nun, a member of our sacred Order? Answer me, yea or nay?"

The figure shook its head.

The Prioress advanced a step, passed the key into her left hand and, slipping her right beneath her scapulary, took firm grip of the dagger at her girdle.

"Then, masquerader in our sacred dress," she said, "to me you have to answer for double sacrilege: the wearing of these robes, and your presence here, unbidden. I warn you that your life has never hung by frailer thread than now it hangs. Your only hope of safety lies in doing as I bid you. Pass before me along this passage until you reach a chamber on the right, of which the door stands open. Enter, and place yourself against the wall on the side farthest from the door. There I will speak with you."

With the shuffling steps of a woman, and the bent shoulders of the very old, the figure moved slowly forward, stepped upon the front of the white robe, stumbled, but recovered.

The Prioress watching, laughed—a short scornful laugh, holding more of anger than of merriment.

With an abrupt movement the figure straightened, stood at its full height, and strode forward. The Prioress marked the squaring of the broad shoulders; the height, greater than her own, though she was more than common tall; the stride, beneath the folds of the long robe; and she knit her level brows, for well she knew with whom she had to deal. She was called to face a desperate danger. Single-handed, she had to meet a subtle foe. She asked no help from others, but she took no needless risks.

As she passed the cell of Mary Seraphine, using her master-key, she locked that lady in!

## CHAPTER X

### "I KNOW YOU FOR A MAN"

Entering her cell, the Prioress saw at once that her orders had been obeyed.

The hooded figure stood on the far side of the chamber, leaning broad shoulders against the wall. Under the cape, the arms were folded; she could see that the feet were crossed beneath the robe. The dress was indeed the dress of a White Lady, but the form within it was so obviously that of a man—a big man, at bay, and inclined to be defiant—that, despite the strange situation, despite her anger, and her fears, the contrast between the holy habit and its hidden wearer, forced from the Prioress an unwilling smile.

Closing the door, she drew forward a chair of dark Spanish wood, the gift of the Lord Bishop; a chair which well betokened the dignity of her high office.

Seating herself, she laid her left hand lightly upon the mane of one of the carved lions which formed, on either side, the arms of the chair; but her right hand still gripped unseen the ivory hilt; while leaning slightly forward, with feet firmly planted, she was ready at any moment to spring erect.

"I know you for a man," she said.

The thunder rumbled far away in the distance.

The rain still splashed against the casement, but the storm had spent itself; the sky was brightening. A pale slant of sunshine broke through the parting clouds and, entering the casement, gleamed on the jewelled cross at the breast of the Prioress, and kindled into peculiar radiance the searching light of her clear eyes.

"I know you for a man," she said again. "You stand there, revealed; and surely you stand there, shamed. By plotting and planning, by assuming our dress, you have succeeded in forcing your undesired presence into this sacred cloister, where dwells a little company of women who have left the world, never to return to it again; who have given up much in order to devote themselves to a life of continual worship and adoration, gaining thereby a power in intercession which brings down blessing upon those who still fight life's battles in the world without.

"But it has meant the breaking of many a tender tie. There are fathers and brothers dear to them, whom the nuns would love to see again; but they cannot do so, save, on rare occasions, in the guest-room at the gate; and then, with the grille between.

"Saving Bishop or Priest, no foot of man may tread our cloisters; no voice of man may be heard in these cells.

"Yet—by trick and subterfuge—you have intruded. Methinks I scarce should let you leave this place alive, to boast what you have done."

The Prioress paused.

The figure stood, with folded arms, immovable, leaning against the wall. There was a quality in this motionless silence such as the Prioress had not connected with her idea of Mary Seraphine's "Cousin Wilfred."

This was not a man to threaten. Her threat came back to her, as if she had flung it against a stone wall. She tried another line of reasoning.

"I know you, Sir Wilfred," she said. "And I know why you are here. You have come to tempt away, or mayhap, if possible, to force away one of our number who but lately took her final vows. There was a time, not long ago, when you might have thwarted her desire to seek and find the best and highest. But now you come too late. No bride of Heaven turns from her high estate. Her choice is made. She will abide by it; and so, Sir Knight, must you."

The rain had ceased. The storm was over. Sunshine flooded the cell.

Once more the Prioress spoke, and her voice was gentle.

"I know the disappointment to you must be grievous. You took great risks; you adventured much. How long you have plotted this intrusion, I know not. You have been thwarted in your evil purpose by the faithfulness of one old woman, our aged lay-sister, Mary Antony, who never fails to count the White Ladies as they go and as they return, and who reported at once to me that one more had returned than went.

"Do you not see in this the Hand of God? Will you not bow in penitence before Him, confessing the sinfulness of the thing you had in mind to do?"

The shrouded head was lifted higher, as if with a proud gesture of disavowal. At the same time, the hood slightly parting, the hand of a man, lean and brown, gripped it close.

The Prioress looked long at that lean, brown hand.

Then she rose slowly to her feet.

"Shew me—thy—face," she said; and the tension of each word was like a naked blade passing in and out of quivering flesh.

At sound of it the figure stood erect, took one step forward, flung back the hood, tore open the robe and scapulary, loosing his arms from the wide sleeves.

And—as the hood fell back—the Prioress found herself looking into a face she had not thought to see again in life—the face of him who once had been her lover.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE YEARS ROLL BACK

"Hugh!" exclaimed the Prioress.

And again, in utter bewilderment: "Hugh?"

And yet a third time, in a low whisper of horror, passing her left hand across her eyes, as if to clear from her outer vision some nightmare of the inner mind: "Hugh!"

The silent Knight still made no answer; but he flung aside the clinging robes, stepped from out them, and strode forward, both arms outstretched.

"Back!" cried the Prioress. But her hand had left the hilt of the dagger. "Come no nearer," she commanded.

Then she sank into her chair, spreading her trembling hands upon the carven manes of the lions.

The Knight, still silent, folded his arms across his breast.

Thus for a space they gazed on one another—these two, who had parted, eight years before, with clinging lips and straining arms, a deep, pure passion of love surging within them; a union of heart, made closer by the wrench of outward separation.

The Knight looked at the lips of the noble woman before him; and as he looked those firm lips quivered, trembled, parted—

Then—the years rolled back—

\* \* \* \* \*

It was moonlight on the battlements. The horses champed in the courtyard below. They two had climbed to the topmost turret, that they might part as near the stars as possible, and that, unseen by others, she might watch him ride away.

How radiant she looked, in her robe of sapphire velvet, jewels at her breast and girdle, a mantle of ermine hanging from her shoulders. But brighter than any jewels were the eyes full of love and tears; and softer than softest velvet, the beautiful hair which, covered her, as with a golden veil. Standing with his arms around her, it flowed over his hands. Silent he stood, looking deep into her eyes.

Below they could hear Martin Goodfellow calling to the men-at-arms.

Her lips being free, she spoke.

"Thou wilt come back to me, Hugh," she said. "The Saracens will not slay thee, will not wound thee, will not touch thee. My love will ever be around thee, as a silver shield."

She flung her strong young arms about him, long and supple, enfolding him closely, even as his enfolded her.

He filled his hands with her soft hair, straining her closer.

"I would I left thee wife, not maid. Could I have wed thee first, I would go with a lighter heart."

"Wife or maid," she answered, her face lifted to his, "I am all thine own. Go with a light heart, dear man of mine, for it makes no difference. Maid or wife, I am thine, and none other's, forever."

"Let those be the last words I hear thee say," he murmured, as his lips sought hers.

So, a little later, standing above him on the turret steps, she bent and clasped her hands about his head, pushing her fingers into the thickness of his hair. Then: "Maid or wife," she said, and her voice now steady, was deep and tender; "Maid or wife, God knows, I am all thine own." Then she caught his face to her breast. "Thine and none other's, forever," she said; and he felt her bosom heave with one deep sob.

Then turning quickly he ran down the winding stair, reached the courtyard, mounted, and rode out through the gates of Castle Norelle, and into the fir wood; and so down south to follow the King, who already had started on the great Crusade.

And, as he rode, in moonlight or in shadow, always he saw the sweet lips that trembled, always he felt the soft heave of that sob, and the low voice so tender, said: "Thine and none other's, forever."

\* \* \* \* \*

And now—

The Prioress sat in her chair of state.

Each moment her face grew calmer and more stern.

The Knight let his eyes dwell on the fingers which once crept so tenderly into his hair.

She hid them beneath her scapulary, as if his gaze scorched them.

He looked at the bosom against which his head had been pressed.

A jewelled cross gleamed, there where his face had laid hidden.

Then the Knight lifted his eyes again to that stern, cold face. Yet still he kept silence.

At length the Prioress spoke.

"So it is you," she said.

"Yes," said the Knight, "it is I."

Wroth with her own poor heart because it thrilled at his voice, the Prioress spoke with anger.

"How did you dare to force your way into this sacred cloister?"

The Knight smiled. "I have yet to find the thing I dare not do."

"Why are you not with your wife?" demanded the Prioress; and her tone was terrible.

"I am with my wife," replied the Knight. "The only wife I have ever wanted, the only woman I shall ever wed, is here."

"Coward!" cried the Prioress, white with anger. "Traitor!" She leaned forward, clenching her hands upon the lions' heads. "Liar! You wedded your cousin, Alfrida, less than one year after you went from me."

"Cease to be angry," said the Knight. "Thine anger affrights me not, yet it hurts thyself. Listen, mine own belovèd, and I will tell thee the cruel, and yet blessèd, truth.

"Seven months after I left thee, a messenger reached our camp, bearing letters from England; no word for me from thee; but a long missive from thy half-sister Eleanor, breaking to me the news that, being weary of my absence, and somewhat over-persuaded, thou hadst wedded Humphry; Earl of Carnforth.

"It was no news to me, that Humphry sought to win thee; but, that thou hadst let thyself be won away from thy vow to me, was hell's own tidings.

"In my first rage of grief I would have speech with none. But, by-and-by, I sought the messenger, and asked him casually of things at home. He told me he had seen thy splendid nuptials with the lord of Carnforth, had been present at the marriage, and joined in the after revels and festivities. He said thou didst make a lovely bride, but somewhat sad, as if thy mind strayed elsewhere. The fellow was a kind of lawyer's clerk, but lean, and out at elbow.

"Then I sought 'Frida, my cousin. She too had had a letter, giving the news. She told me she long had feared this thing for me, knowing the heart of Humphry to be set on winning thee, and that Eleanor approved his suit, and having already heard that of late thou hadst inclined to smile on him. She begged me to do nothing rash or hasty.

"'What good were it,' she said, 'to beg the King for leave to hasten home? If you kill Humphry, Hugh, you do but make a widow of the woman you have loved; nor could you wed the widow of a man yourself had slain. If Humphry kills you—well, a valiant arm is lost to the Holy Cause, and other hearts, more faithful than hers, may come nigh to breaking. Stay here, and play the man.'

"So, by the messenger, I sent thee back a letter, asking thee to write me word how it was that thou, being my betrothed, hadst come to do this thing; and whether Humphry was good to thee, and making thy life pleasant. To Humphry I sent a letter saying that, thy love being round him as a silver shield, I would not slay him, wound him, or touch him! But—if he used thee ill, or gave thee any grief or sorrow, then would I come, forthwith, and send him straight to hell.

"These letters, with others from the camp, went back to England by that clerkly messenger. No answers were returned to mine.

"Meanwhile I went, with my despair, out to the battlefield.

"No tender shield was round me any more. I fought, like a mad wild beast. So often was I wounded, that they dubbed me 'The Knight of the Bloody Vest.'

"At last they brought me back to camp, delirious and dying. My cousin 'Frida, there biding her time, nursed me back to life, and sought to win for herself (I shame to say it) the love which thou hadst flouted. I need not tell thee, my cousin 'Frida failed. The Queen herself as good as bid me wed her favourite Lady. The Queen herself had to discover that she could command an English soldier's life, but not his love.

"Back in the field again, I found myself one day, cut off, surrounded, hewn down, taken prisoner; but by a generous foe.

"Thereafter followed years of much adventure; escapes, far distant wanderings, strange company. Many months I spent in a mountain fastness with a wise Hebrew Rabbi, who taught me his sacred Scriptures; going back to the beginning of all things, before the world was; yet shrewd in judgment of the present, and throwing a weird light forward upon the future. A strange man; wise, as are all of that Chosen Race; and a faithful friend. He did much to heal my hurt and woo me back to sanity.

"Later, more than a year with a band of holy monks in a desert monastery, high among the rocks; good Fathers who believed in Greek and Latin as surest of all balsams for a wounded spirit, and who made me to become deeply learned in Apostolic writings, and in the teachings of the Church. But, for all their best endeavours, I could not feel called to the perpetual calm of the Cloister. We are a line of fighters and hunters, men to whom pride of race and love of hearth and home, are primal instincts.

"Thus, after many further wanderings and much varying adventure, having by a strange chance heard news of the death of my father, and that my mother mourned. In solitude, the opening of this year found me landed in England—I who, by most, had long been given up for dead; though Martin Goodfellow, failing to find trace of me in Palestine, had gone back to Cumberland, and staunchly maintained his belief that I lived, a captive, and should some day make my escape, and return.

"I passed with all speed to our Castle on the moors, knowing a mother's heart waited here, for mothers never cease to watch and hope. And, sure enough, as I rode up, the great doors flew wide; the house waited its master; the mother was on the threshold to greet her son. Aye! It was good to be at home once more—even in the land where *my* woman was bearing children to another man.

"We spent a few happy days, I and my mother, together. Then—the joy of hope fulfilled being sometimes a swifter harbinger to another world than the heaviest load of sorrow—she passed, without pain or sickness, smiling, in her sleep; she passed—leaving my home desolate indeed.

"Not having known of my betrothal to thee, because of the old feud between our families, and my reluctance to cross her wish that I should wed Alfrida, thy name was not spoken between us; but I learned from her that my cousin 'Frida lay dying at her manor, nigh to Chester, of some lingering disease contracted in eastern lands."

"With the first stirrings of Spring in forest and pasture, I felt moved to ride south to the Court, and report my return to the King; yet waited, strangely loath to go abroad where any turn of the road might bring me face to face with Humphry. I doubted, should we meet, if I could pass, without slaying him, the man who had stolen my betrothed from me. So I stayed in my own domain, bringing

things into order, working in the armoury, and striving by hard exercise to throttle the grim demon of despair.

"April brought a burst of early summer; and, on the first day of May, I set off for Windsor.

"Passing through Carnforth on my way, I found the town keeping high holiday. I asked the reason, and was told of a Tourney now in progress in the neighbourhood, to which the Earl had that morning ridden in state, accompanied by his Countess, who indeed was chosen Queen of Beauty, and was to sit enthroned, attended by her little daughter, two tiny sons acting as pages.

"A sudden mad desire came on me, to look upon thy face again; to see thee with the man who stole thee from me; with the children, who should have been mine own.

"Ten minutes later, I rode on to the field. Pushing in amid the gay crowd, I seemed almost at once to find myself right in front of the throne.

"I saw the Queen of Beauty, in cloth of gold. I saw the little maiden and the pages in attendance. I saw Humphry, proud husband and father, beside them. All this I saw, which I had come to see. But—the face of Humphry's Countess was not thy face! In that moment I knew that, for seven long years, I had been fooled!

"I started on a frenzied quest after the truth, and news of thee.

"Thy sister Eleanor had died the year before. To thy beautiful castle and lands, so near mine own, Eleanor's son had succeeded, and ruled there in thy stead. He being at Court just then, I saw him not, nor could I hear direct news of thee, though rumour said a convent.

"Then I remembered my cousin, Alfrida, lying sick at her manor in Chester. To her I went; and, walking in unannounced—I, whom she had long thought dead—I forced the truth from her. The whole plot stood revealed. She and Eleanor had hatched it between them. Eleanor desiring thy lands for herself and her boy, and knowing children of thine would put hers out of succession; Alfrida—it shames me to say it—desiring for herself, thy lover.

"The messenger who brought the letters was bribed to give details of thy supposed marriage. On his return to England, my letters to thee and to Humphry he handed to Eleanor; also a lying letter from 'Frida, telling of her marriage with me, with the Queen's consent and approval, and asking Eleanor to break the news to thee. The messenger then mingled with thy household, describing my nuptials in detail, as, when abroad, he had done thine. Hearing of this, my poor Love did even as I had done, sent for him, questioned him, heard the full tale he had to tell, and saw, alas! no reason to misdoubt him.

"By the way, my cousin 'Frida knew where to lay her hand upon that clerkly fellow. Therefore we sent for him. He came in haste to see the Lady Alfrida, from whom, during all the years, he had extorted endless hush-money.

"I and my men awaited him.

"He had fattened on his hush-money! He was no longer lean and out at elbow.

"He screeched at sight of me, thinking me risen from the dead.

"He screeched still louder when he saw the noose, flung over a strong bough.

"We left him hanging, when we rode away. That Judas kind will do the darkest deeds for greed of gain. The first of the tribe himself shewed the way by which it was most fitting to speed them from a world into which it had been good for them never to have been born.

"From Alfrida I learned that, as Eleanor had foreseen, thy grief at my perfidy drove thee to the Cloister. Also that thy Convent was near Worcester.

"To Worcester I came, and made myself known to the Lord Bishop, with whom I supped; and finding him most pleasant to talk with, and ready to understand, deemed it best, in perfect frankness, to tell him the whole matter; being careful not to mention thy name, nor to give any clue to thy person.

"Through chance remarks let fall by the Bishop while giving me the history of the Order, I learned that already thou wert Prioress of the White Ladies. 'The youngest Prioress in the kingdom,' said the Bishop, 'yet none could be wiser or better fitted to hold high authority.' Little did he dream that any mention of thee was as water to the parched desert; yet he talked on, for love of speaking

of thee, while I sat praying he might tell me more; yet barely answering yea or nay, seeming to be absorbed in mine own melancholy thoughts.

"From the Bishop I learned that the Order was a strictly close one, and that no man could, on any pretext whatsoever, gain speech alone with one of the White Ladies.

"But I also heard of the underground way leading from the Cathedral to the Convent, and of the daily walk to and from Vespers.

"I went to the crypt, and saw the doorway through which the White Ladies pass. Standing unseen amid the many pillars, I daily watched the long line of silent figures, noted that they all walked veiled, with faces hidden, keeping a measured distance apart. Also that several were above usual height. Then I conceived the plan of wearing the outer dress, and of stepping in amongst those veiled figures just at the foot of the winding stair in the wall, leading down from the clerestory to the crypt. I marked that the nun descending, could not keep in view the nun in front who had just stepped forth into the crypt; while she, moving forward, would not perceive it if, slipping from behind a pillar, another white figure silently joined the procession behind her. Once within the Convent, I trusted to our Lady to help me to speech alone with thee; and our blessed Lady hath not failed me.

"Now I have told thee all."

With that the Knight left speaking; and, after the long steady recitation, the ceasing of his voice caused a silence which, seemed, to hold the very air suspended.

Not once had the Prioress made interruption. She had sat immovable, her eyes upon his face, her hands gripping the arms of her chair. Long before the tale was finished her sad eyes had overflowed, the tears raining down her cheeks, and falling upon the cross at her breast.

When he had told all, when the deep, manly voice—now resolute, now eager, now vibrant with fierce indignation, yet tender always when speaking of her—at last fell silent, the Prioress fought with her emotion, and mastered it; then, so soon as she could safely trust her voice, she spoke.

## CHAPTER XII

### ALAS, THE PITY OF IT!

At length the Prioress spoke.

"Alas," she said, "the pity of it! Ah, the cruel, *cruel* pity of it!"

Her voice, so sweet and tender, yet so hopeless in the unquestioning finality of its regret, struck cold upon the heart of the Knight.

"But, my belovèd, I have found thee," he said, and dropping upon one knee at her feet, he put out his hands to cover both hers. But the Prioress was too quick for him. She hid her hands beneath her scapulary. The Knight's brown fingers closed on the lions' heads.

"Touch me not," said the Prioress.

The Knight flushed, darkly.

"You are mine," he said. "Mine to have and to keep. During these wretched years we have schooled ourselves each to think of the other as wedded. Now we know that neither has been faithless. I have found thee, my belovèd, and I will not let thee go."

"Hugh," said the Prioress, "I *am* wedded. You come too late. Saw you not the sacred ring upon my hand? Know you not that every nun is the bride of Christ?"

"You are mine!" said the Knight, fiercely; and he laid his great hand upon her knee.

From beneath her scapulary, the Prioress drew the dagger.

"Before I went to the cloister door," she said, "I took this from its hiding-place, and put it in my girdle. I guessed I had a man to deal with; though, Heaven knows, I dreamed not it was thou! But I tell thee, Hugh, if thou, or any man, attempt to lay defiling touch upon any nun in this Priory—myself, or another—I strike, and I strike home. This blade will be driven up to the hilt in the offender's heart."

The Knight rose to his feet, stepped to the window and leaned, with folded arms, against the wall.

"Put back thy weapon," he said, sternly, "into its hiding-place. No other man is here; yet, should another come, my sword would well suffice to guard thine honour, and the honour of thy nuns."

She looked at his dark face, scornful in its pain; then went at once, obedient, to the secret panel.

"Yes, Hugh," she said. "That much of trust indeed I owe thy love."

As she placed the dagger in the wall and closed the panel, something fell from her, intangible, yet real.

For so long, she had had to command. Bowing, kneeling, hurrying women flew to do her behests. Each vied with the others to magnify her Office. Often, she felt lonely by reason of her dignity.

And now—a man's dark face frowned on her in scornful anger; a man's stern voice flung back her elaborate threat with a short command, which disarmed her, yet which she obeyed. Moreover, she found it strangely sweet to obey. Behind the sternness, behind the scornful anger, there throbbed a great love. In that love she trusted; but with that love she had to deal, putting it from her with a finality which should be beyond question.

Yet the "Prioress" fell from her, as she closed the panel. It was the Woman and the Saint who moved over to the window and stood beside the Knight, in the radiance of a golden sunset after storm.

There was about her, as she spoke, a wistful humbleness; and a patient sadness, infinitely touching.

"Sir Hugh," she said, "my dear Knight, whom I ever found brave and tender, and whom I now know to have been always loyal and true—there is no need that I should add a word to your recital. The facts you wrung from Alfrida—God grant forgiveness to that tormented heart—are all true. Believing the messenger, not dreaming of doubting Eleanor, my one thought was to hide from the

world my broken heart, my shattered pride. I hastened to offer to God the love and the life which had been slighted by man. I confess this has since seemed to me but a poor second-best to have brought to Him, Who indeed should have our very best. But, daily kneeling at His Feet, I said: 'A broken and a contrite heart, Lord, Thou wilt not despise.' My heart was 'broken,' when I brought it here. It has been 'contrite' since. And well I know, although so far from worthy, it has not been despised."

She lifted her eyes to the golden glory behind the battlements of purple cloud.

"Our blessèd Lady interceded," she said, simply; "she, who understands a woman's heart."

The Knight was breathing hard. The folded arms rose and fell, with the heaving of his chest. But he kept his lips firm shut; though praying, all the while, that our Lady might have, also, some understanding of the heart of a man!

"I think it right that you should know, dear Hugh," went on the sad voice, gently; "that, at first, I suffered greatly. I spent long agonizing nights, kneeling before our Lady's shrine, imploring strength to conquer the love and the longing which had become sin."

A stifled groan broke from the Knight.

The golden light shone in her steadfast eyes, and played about her noble brow.

"And strength was given," she said, very low.

"Mora!" cried the Knight—She started. It was so long since she had heard her own name—"You prayed for strength to conquer, when you thought it sin; just as I rode out to meet the foe, to fight and slay, and afterward wrestled with unknown tongues, doing all those things which were hardest, while striving to quench my love for you. But when I knew that no other man had right to you or ever had had right, why then I found that nothing had slain my love, nor ever could. And Mora, now you know that I am free, is your love dead?"

She clasped her hands over the cross at her breast. His voice held a deep passion of appeal; yet he strove, loyally, to keep it calm.

"Listen, Hugh," she said. "If, thinking me faithless, you had turned for consolation to another; if, though you brought her but your second best, you yet had won and wed her; now, finding after all that I had not wedded Humphry, would you leave your bride, and try to wake again your love for me?"

"You seek to place me," he said, "in straits in which, by mine own act, I shall never be. Loving you as I love you, I could wed no other while you live."

She paled, but persisted.

"But, *if*, Hugh? *If*?"

"Then, no," he said. "I should not leave one I had wed. But—"

"Hugh," she said, "thinking you faithless, I took the holy vows which wedded me to Heaven. How can I leave my heavenly Bridegroom, for love of any man upon this earth?"

"Not 'any man,'" he answered; "but your betrothed, returned to claim you; the man to whom you said as parting words: 'Maid or wife, I am all thine own; thine and none other's forever.' Ah, that brings the warm blood to thy cheek! Oh, my Heart's Life, if it was true then, it is true still! God is not a man that he should lie, or rob another of his bride. If I had wed another woman, I should have done that thing, honestly believing thee the wife of another man. But, all these years, while thou and I were both deceived, He, Who knoweth all, has known the truth. He knew thee betrothed to me. He heard thee say, upon the battlements, when last we stood together: 'God knows, I am all thine own.' He knew how, when I thought I had lost thee, I yet lived faithful to the pure memory of our love. The day thy vows were made, He knew that I was free, and thou, therefore, still pledged to me. Shall a man rob God? Ay, he may. But shall God rob a man? Nay, then, never!"

She trembled, wavered; then fled to the shrine of the Virgin, kneeling with hands outstretched.

"Holy Mother of God," she sobbed, "teach him that I dare not do this thing! Shew him that I cannot break my vows. Help him to understand that I would not, if I could."

He followed, and kneeled beside her; his proud head bent; his voice breaking with emotion.

"Blessèd Virgin," he said. "Thou who didst dwell in the earthly home at Nazareth, help this woman of mine to understand, that if she break her troth to me, holding herself from me, now when I am come to claim her, she sends me forth to an empty life, to a hearth beside which no woman will sit, to a home forever desolate."

Together they knelt, before the tender image of Mother and Child; together, yet apart; he, loyally mindful not so much as to brush against a fold of her veil.

The dark face, and the fair, were lifted, side by side, as they knelt before the Madonna. For a while so motionless they kneeled, they might have been finely-modelled figures; he, bronze; she, marble.

Then, with a sudden movement, she put out her right hand, and caught his left.

Firmly his fingers closed over hers; but he drew no nearer.

Yet as they knelt thus with clasped hands, his pulsing life seemed to flow through her, undoing, in one wild, sweet moment, the work of years of fast and vigil.

"Ah, Hugh," she cried, suddenly, "spare me! Spare me! Tempt me not!"

Loosing her hand from his, she clasped both upon her breast.

The Knight rose, and stood beside her.

"Mora," he said, and his voice held a new tone, a tone of sadness and solemnity; "far be it from me to tempt you. I will plead with you but once again, in presence of our Lady and of the Holy Child; and, having so done, I will say no more.

"I ask you to leave this place, which you would never have entered had you known your lover was yours, and needing you. I ask you to keep your plighted word to me, and to become my wife. If you refuse, I go, returning not again. I leave you here, to kneel in peace, by night or day, before the shrine of the Madonna. But—I bid you to remember, day and night, that because of this which you have done, there can be no Madonna in my home. No woman will ever sit beside my hearth, holding a little child upon her knees.

"You leave to me the crucifix—heart broken, love betrayed; feet and hands nailed to the wood of cruel circumstance; side pierced by spear of treachery—lonely, forsaken. But you take from me all the best, both in life and in religion; all that tells of love, of joy, of hope for the years to come.

"Oh, my belovèd, weigh it well! There are so many, with a true vocation, serving Heaven in Convent and in Cloister. There is but one woman in the whole world for me. In the sight of Heaven, nothing divides us. Convent walls now stand between—but they were built by man, not God. Vows of celibacy were not meant to sunder loving hearts. Mora? . . . Come!"

The Prioress rose and faced him.

"I cannot come," she said. "That which I have taught to others, I must myself perform. Hugh, I am dead to the world; and if I be dead to the world, how can I live to you? Had I, in very deed, died and been entombed, you would not have gone down into the vaults and forced my resting-place, that you might look upon my face, clasp my cold hand, and pour into deaf ears a tale of love. Yet that is what, by trick and artifice, you now have done. You come to a dead woman, saying; 'Love me, and be my wife.' She must, perforce, make answer: 'How shall I, who am dead to the world, live any longer therein?' Take a wife from among the Living, Hugh. Come not to seek a bride among the Dead."

"Mother of God!" exclaimed the Knight, "is this religion?"

He turned to the window, then to the door. "How can I go from here?"

The stifled horror in his voice chilled the very soul of the woman to whom he spoke. She had, indeed at last made him to understand.

"I must get you hence unseen," she said. "I dare not pass you out by the Convent gate. I fear me, you must go back the way you came; nor can you go alone. We hold the key to unlock the door leading from our passage into the Cathedral crypt. I will now send all the nuns to the Refectory. Then I myself must take you to the crypt."

"Can I not walk alone," asked the Knight, brusquely; "returning you the key by messenger?"

"Nay," said the Prioress, "I dare run no risks. So quickly rumours are afloat. To-morrow, this strange hour must be a dream; and you and I alone, the dreamers. Now, while I go and make safe the way, put you on again the robe and hood. When I return and beckon, follow silently."

The Prioress passed out, closing the door behind her.

## CHAPTER XIII

### "SEND HER TO ME!"

The Prioress stood for a moment outside the closed door. The peaceful silence of the passage helped her to the outward calm which must be hers before she could bring herself to face her nuns.

Moving slowly to the farther end, she unlocked the cell of Sister Mary Seraphine, feeling a shamed humility that she should have made so sure she had to deal with "Wilfred," and have thought such scorn of him and Seraphine. Alas! The wrong deeds of those they love, oft humble the purest, noblest spirits into the soiling dust.

Next, the Prioress herself rang the Refectory bell.

The hour for the evening meal was long passed; the nuns hastened out, readily.

As they trooped toward the stairs leading down to the Refectory, they saw their Prioress, very pale, very erect, standing with her back to the door of her chamber.

Each nun made a genuflexion as she passed; and to each, the Prioress slightly inclined her head.

To Sister Mary Rebecca, who kneeled at once, she spoke: "I come not to the meal this evening. In the absence of Mother Sub-Prioress, you will take my place."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," said Sister Mary Rebecca, meekly, and kissed the hem of the robe of the Prioress; then rising, hastened on, charmed to have a position of authority, however temporary.

When all had passed, the Prioress went into the cloisters, walked round them; looked over into the garden, observing every possible place from which prying eyes might have sight of the way from the passage to the crypt entrance. But the garden, already full of purple shadows, was left to the circling swifts. The robin sang an evening song from the bough, of the pieman's tree.

The Prioress returned along the passage, looking into every cell. Each door stood open wide; each cell was empty. The sick nuns were on a further passage, round the corner, beyond the Refectory stairs. Yet she passed along this also, making sure that the door of each occupied cell was shut.

Standing motionless at the top of the Refectory steps, she could hear the distant clatter of platters, the shuffling feet of the lay-sisters as they carried the dishes to and from the kitchens; and, above it all, the monotonous voice of Sister Mary Rebecca reading aloud to the nuns while they supped.

Then the Prioress took down one of the crypt lanterns and lighted it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile the Knight, left alone, stood for a few moments, as if stunned.

He had played for a big stake and lost; yet he felt more unnerved by the unexpected finality of his own acquiescence in defeat, than by the firm refusal which had brought that defeat about.

It seemed to him, as he now stood alone, that suddenly he had realised the extraordinary detachment wrought by years of cloistered life. Aflame with love and longing he had come, seeking the Living among the Dead. It would have been less bitter to have knelt beside her tomb, knowing the heart forever still had, to the last, beat true with love for him; knowing the dead arms, lying cold and stiff, had he come sooner, would have been flung around him; knowing the lips, now silent in death, living, would have called to him in tenderest greeting.

But this cold travesty of the radiant woman he had left, said: "Touch me not," and bade him seek a wife elsewhere; he, who had remained faithful to her, even when he had thought her faithless.

And yet, cold though she was, in her saintly aloofness, she was still the woman he loved. Moreover she still had the noble carriage, the rich womanly beauty, the look of vital, physical vigour,

which marked her out as meant by Nature to be the mother of brave sons and fair daughters. Yet he must leave her—to this!

He looked round the room, noted the low archway leading to the sleeping chamber, took a step toward it, then fell back as from a sanctuary; marked the great table, covered with missals, parchments, and vellum. It might well have been the cell of a learned monk, rather than the chamber of the woman he loved. His eye, travelling round, fell upon the Madonna and Child.

In the pure evening light there was a strangely arresting quality about the marble group; something infinitely human in the brooding tenderness of the Mother, as she bent over the smiling Babe. It spoke of home, rather than of the cloister. It struck a chord in the heart of the Knight, a chord which rang clear and true, above the jangle of disputation and bitterness.

He put out his hand and touched the little foot of the Holy Babe.

"Mother of God," he said aloud, "send her to me! Take pity on a hungry heart, a lonely home, a desolate hearth. Send her to me!"

Then he lifted from the floor the white robe and hood, and drew them on.

## CHAPTER XIV

### FAREWELL—HERE, AND NOW

When the Prioress, a lighted lantern in her hand, opened the door of her chamber, a tall figure in the dress of the White Ladies of Worcester stood motionless against the wall, facing the door.

"Come!" she whispered, beckoning; and, noiselessly, it stood beside her. Then she closed the door and, using her master-key, locked it behind her.

Silently the two white figures passed along the passage, through the cloister, and down the flight of steps into the Convent crypt. The Prioress unlocked the door and stooping they passed under the arch, and entered the subterranean way.

Placing the lantern on the ground, the Prioress drew out the key, closed the door, and locked it on the inside.

She turned, and lifting the lantern, saw that the Knight had rid himself of his disguise, and now stood before her, very straight and tall, just within the circle of light cast by her lantern.

With the closing and locking of the door a strange sense came over them, as of standing together in a third world—neither his nor hers—tomblike in its complete isolation and darkness; heavy with a smell of earth and damp stones; the slightest sound reverberating in hollow exaggeration; yet, in itself, silent as the grave.

This tomblike quality in their surroundings seemed to make their own vitality stronger and more palpitating.

The seconds of silence, after the grating of the key in the lock ceased, seemed hours.

Then the Knight spoke.

"Give me the lantern," he said.

She met his eyes. Again the dignity of her Office slipped from her.

Again it was sweet to obey.

He held the lantern so that its light illumined her face and his.

"Mora," he said, "it is long since thou and I last walked together over the sunny fields, amid buttercups and cowslips, and the sweet-smelling clover. To-night we walk beneath the fields instead of through them. We are under the grass, my sweet. I seem to stand beside thee in the grave. And truly my hopes lie slain; the promise of our love is dead, and shall soon be buried. Yet thou and I still live, and now must walk together side by side, the sad ghosts of our former selves.

"So now I ask thee, Mora, for the sake of those past walks among the flowers, to lay thy hand within my arm and walk with me in gentle fellowship, here in this place of gloom and darkness, as, long ago, we walked among the flowers."

His dark eyes searched her face. An almost youthful eagerness vibrated in his voice.

She hesitated, lifting her eyes to his. Then slowly moved toward him and laid her hand within his arm.

Then, side by side, they paced on through the darkness; he, in his right hand, holding the lantern, swinging low, to light their feet; she, leaning on his left arm, keeping slow pace with him.

Over their heads, in the meadows, walked lovers, arm in arm; young men and maidens out in the gathering twilight. All nature, refreshed, poured forth a fragrant sweetness. But the rose, with its dewy petals, seemed to the youth less sweet than the lips of the maid. This, he shyly ventured to tell her; whereupon, as she bent to its fragrance, her cheeks reflected the crimson of those delicate folds.

So walked and talked young lovers in the Worcester meadows; little dreaming that, beneath their happy feet, the Knight and the Prioress paced slowly, side by side, through the darkness.

No word passed between them. With, her hand upon his arm, her face so near his shoulder, his arm pressing her hand closer and closer against his heart, silence said more than speech. And in silence they walked.

They passed beneath the city wall, under the Foregate.

The Sheriff rode home to supper, well pleased with a stroke of business accomplished in a house in which he had chanced to shelter during the storm.

The good people of Worcester bought and sold in the market. Men whose day's work was over, hastened to reach the rest and comfort of wife and home. Crowds jostled gaily through the streets, little dreaming that beneath their hurrying, busy feet, the Knight and the Prioress paced slowly, side by side, through the darkness.

Had the Knight spoken, her mind would have been up in arms to resist him. But, because he walked in silence, her heart had leisure to remember; and, remembering, it grew sorely tender.

At length they reached the doorway leading into the Cathedral crypt.

The Prioress carried the key in her left hand. Freeing her right from the grip of his arm, she slipped the key noiselessly into the lock; but, leaving it there unturned, she paused, and faced the Knight.

"Hugh," she said, "I beg you, for my sake and for the sake of all whose fair fame is under my care, to pass through quickly into the crypt, and to go from thence, if possible, unseen, or in such manner as shall prevent any suspicion that you come from out this hidden way. Tales of wrong are told so readily, and so quickly grow."

"I will observe the utmost caution," said the Knight.

"Hugh," she said, "I grieve to have had, perforce, to disappoint you." The brave voice shook. "This is our final farewell. Do you forgive me, Hugh? Will you think kindly, if you ever think on me?"

The Knight held the lantern so that its rays illumined both her face and his.

"Mora," he said, "I cannot as yet take thine answer as final. I will return no more, nor try to speak with thee again. But five days longer, I shall wait. I shall have plans made with the utmost care, to bear thee, in safety and unseen, from the Cathedral. I know the doors are watched, and that all who pass in and out are noted and observed. But, if thou wilt but come to me, beloved, trust me to know how to guard mine own. . . . Nay, speak not! Hear me out.

"Daily, after Vespers, I shall stand hidden among the pillars, close to the winding stair. One step aside—only one step—and my arm will be around thee. A new life of love and home will lie before us. I shall take thee, safely concealed, to the hostel where I and my men now lodge. There, horses will stand ready, and we shall ride at once to Warwick. At Warwick we shall find a priest—one in high favour, both in Church and State—who knows all, and is prepared to wed us without delay. After which, by easy stages, my wife, I shall take thee home."

He swung the lantern high. She saw the lovelight and the triumph, in his eyes. "I shall take thee home!" he said.

She stepped back a pace, lifting both hands toward him, palms outward, and stood thus gazing, with eyes full of sorrow.

"My poor Hugh," she whispered; "it is useless to wait. I shall not come."

"Yet five days," said the Knight, "I shall tarry in Worcester. Each day, after Vespers, I shall be here."

"Go to-day, dear Hugh. Ride to Warwick and tell thy priest, that which indeed he should know without the telling: that a nun does not break her vows. This is our final farewell, Hugh. Thou hadst best believe it, and go."

"Our last farewell?" he said.

"Our last."

"Here and now?"

"Here and now, dear Hugh."

Looking into that calm face, so lovely in its sadness, he saw that she meant it.  
Of a sudden he knew he had lost her; he knew life's way stretched lonely before him, evermore.  
"Yes," he said, "yes. It is indeed farewell—here and now—forever."

The dull despair in the voice which, but a few moments before, had vibrated with love and hope, wrung her heart.

She still held her hands before her, as if to ward him off.

"Ah, Hugh," she cried, sharply, "be merciful, and go! Spare me, and go quickly."

The Knight heard in her voice a tone it had not hitherto held. But he loved her loyally; therefore he kept his own anguish under strong control.

Placing the lantern on the ground, he knelt on one knee before her.

"Farewell, my Love," he said. "Our Lady comfort thee; and may Heaven forgive me, for that I have disturbed thy peace."

With which he lifted the hem of her robe, and pressed his lips upon it.

Thus he knelt, for a space, his dark head bent.

Slowly, slowly, the Prioress let drop her hands until, lightly as the fall of autumn leaves,—sad autumn leaves—they rested upon his head, in blessing and farewell.

But feeling his hair beneath her hands, she could not keep from softly smoothing it, nor from passing her fingers gently in and out of its crisp thickness.

Then her heart stood still, for of a sudden, in the silence, she heard a shuddering sob.

With a cry, she bent and gathered him to her, holding his head first against her knees, then stooping lower to clasp it to her breast; then as his strong arms were flung around her, she loosed his head, and, as he rose to his feet, slipped her arms about his neck, and surrendered to his embrace.

His lips sought hers, and at once she yielded them. His strong hands held her, and she, feeling the force of their constraint, did but clasp him closer.

Long they stood thus. In that embrace a life-time of pain passed from them, a life-time of bliss was born, and came with a rush to maturity, bringing with it a sense of utter completeness. A world of sweetest trust and certainty filled them; a joy so perfect, that the lonely vista of future years seemed, in that moment, to matter not at all.

All about them was darkness, silence as of the tomb; the heavy smell of earth; the dank chill of the grave.

Yet theirs was life more abundant; theirs, joy undreamed of; theirs, love beyond all imagining, while those moments lasted.

Then—

The hands about his neck loosened, unclasped, fell gently away.

He set free her lips, and they took their liberty.

He unlocked his arms, and stepping back she stood erect, like a fair white lily, needing no prop nor stay.

So they stood for a space, looking upon one another in silence. This thing which had happened, was too wonderful for speech.

Then the Prioress turned the key in the lock.

The heavy door swung open.

A dim, grey light, like a pearly dawn at sea, came downwards from the crypt.

Without a word the Knight, bending his head, passed under the archway, mounted the steps, and was lost to view among the many pillars.

She closed the door, locked it, and withdrawing the key, stood alone where they had stood together.

Then, sinking to the ground, she laid her face in the dust, there where his feet had been.

It was farewell, here and now; farewell forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a while the Prioress rose, took up the lantern, and started upon her lonely journey, back to the cloister door.

## CHAPTER XV

### "SHARPEN THE WITS OF MARY ANTONY"

When the Prioress started upon her pilgrimage to the Cathedral with the Knight, she locked the door of her chamber, knowing that thus her absence would remain undiscovered; for if any, knocking on the door, received no answer, or trying it, found it fast, they would hasten away without question; concluding that some special hour of devotion or time of study demanded that the Reverend Mother should be free from intrusion.

The atmosphere of the empty cell, charged during the past hour with such unaccustomed forces of conflict and of passion, settled into the quietude of an unbroken stillness.

The Madonna smiled serenely upon the Holy Babe. The dead Christ, with bowed head, hung forlorn upon the wooden cross. The ponderous volumes in black and silver bindings, lay undisturbed upon the table; and the Bishop's chair stood empty, with that obtrusive emptiness which, in an empty seat, seems to suggest an unseen presence filling it. The silence was complete.

But presently a queer shuffling sound began in the inner cell, as of something stiff and torpid compelling itself to action.

Then a weird figure, the wizen face distorted by grief and terror, appeared in the doorway—old Mary Antony, holding a meat chopper in her shaking hands, and staring, with chattering gums, into the empty cell.

That faithful soul, although dismissed, had resolved that the adored Reverend Mother should not go forth to meet dangers—ghostly or corporeal—alone and unprotected.

Hastening to the kitchens, she had given instructions that the evening meal was not to be served until the Reverend Mother herself should sound the bell.

Then, catching up a meat chopper, as being the most murderous-looking weapon at hand, and the most likely to strike terror into the ghostly heart of Sister Agatha, old Antony had hastened back to the passage.

Creeping up the stairs, hugging the wall, she had reached the top just in time to see, in the dim distance, the two tall white figures confronting one another.

Clinging to her chopper, motionless with horror, she had watched them, until they began, to come toward her, moving in the direction of the Reverend Mother's cell. They were still thirty yards away, at the cloister end of the passage. Old Antony was close to the open door.

Through it she had scurried, unheard, unseen, a terrified black shadow; yet brave withal; for with her went the meat chopper. Also she might have turned and fled back down the stairs, rather than into the very place whither she knew the Reverend Mother was conducting this tall spectre of the long dead Sister Agatha, grown to most alarming proportions during her fifty years' entombment! But being brave and faithful old Antony had sped into the inner cell, and crouched there in a corner; ready to call for help or strike with her chopper, should need arise.

Thus it came to pass that this old weaver of romances had perforce become a listener to a true romance so thrilling, so soul-stirring, that she had had to thrust the end of the wooden handle of the chopper into her mouth, lest she should applaud the noble Knight, cry counsel in his extremities, or invoke blessings on his enterprise. At each mention of the Ladies Eleanor and Alfrida, she shook her fist, and made signs with her old fingers, as of throttling, in the air. And when the clerkly messenger, arriving to speak with the Lady Alfrida—who, Saint Luke be praised, was by that time dying—found the Knight awaiting him with a noose flung over a strong bough, old Antony had laid down the chopper that she might the better hug herself with silent glee; and when the Knight rode away and left him hanging, she had whispered "Pieman! Pieman!" then clapped her hands over her mouth, rocking to and fro with merriment. When the Knight made mention that they called him "Knight of

the Bloody Vest," old Antony had started; then had shaken her finger toward the entrance, as she was used to shake it at the robin, and had opened her wallet to search for crumbs of cheese. But soon again the story held her and, oblivious of the present, she had been back in the realms of romance.

Not until the Knight ceased speaking and the Reverend Mother's sad voice fell upon her ear, had old Antony realised the true bearing of the tale. Thereafter her heart had been torn by grief and terror. When they kneeled together, before the Madonna, with uplifted faces, Mary Antony had crawled forward and peeped. She had seen them kneeling—a noble pair—had seen the Prioress catch at his hand and clasp it; then, crawling back had fallen prostrate, overwhelmed, a huddled heap upon the floor.

The ringing of the Refectory bell had roused her from her stupor in time to hear the impassioned appeal of the Knight, as he kneeled alone before the Virgin's shrine.

Then, the Knight and the Prioress both being gone, Mary Antony had arisen, lifted her chopper with hands that trembled, and now stood with distraught mien, surveying the empty cell.

At length it dawned upon her that she and her weapon were locked into the Reverend Mother's cell; she, who had been most explicitly bidden to go to the kitchens and to remain there. It had been a sense of the enormity of her offence in having disobeyed the Reverend Mother's orders which, unconsciously, had caused her to stifle all ejaculations and move without noise, lest she should be discovered.

Yet now her first care was not for her own predicament, but for the two noble hearts, of whose tragic grief she had secretly been a witness.

Her eye fell on the Madonna, calmly smiling.

She tottered forward, kneeling where the Prioress had knelt.

"Holy Mother of God," she whispered, "teach him that she cannot do this thing!"

Then, moving along on her knees to where the Knight had kneeled: "Blessèd Virgin!" she cried, "shew her that she cannot leave him desolate!"

Then shuffling back to the centre, and kneeling between the two places:

"Sweetest Lady," she said, "be pleased to sharpen the old wits of Mary Antony."

Looking furtively at the Madonna, she saw that our Lady smiled. The blessèd Infant, also, looked merry. Mary Antony chuckled, and took heart. When the Reverend Mother smiled, she always knew herself forgiven.

Moreover, without delay, her request was granted; for scarcely had she arisen from her knees, when she remembered the place where the Reverend Mother kept the key of her cell; and she, having locked the door, on leaving, with her own master-key, the other was quickly in old Antony's hand, and she out once more in the passage, locking the door behind her; sure of being able to restore the key to its place, before it should be missed by the Reverend Mother.

Sister Mary Antony slipped unseen past the Refectory and into the kitchens. Once there, she fussed and scolded and made her presence felt, implying that she had been waiting, a good hour gone, for the thing for which she had but that moment asked.

The younger lay-sisters might make no retort; but Sister Mary Martha presently asked: "What have you been doing since Vespers, Sister Antony?"

By aid of the wits our Lady had sharpened, old Antony, at that moment, realised that sometimes, when you needs must deceive, there is nothing so deceptive as the actual truth.

"Listening to a wondrous romantic tale," she made answer, "told by the Knight of the Bloody Vest."

"You verily are foolish about that robin, Sister Antony," remarked Mary Martha; "and you will take your death of cold, sitting out in the garden in the damp, after sunset."

"Well—so long as I take only that which is mine own, others have no cause to grumble," snapped Mary Antony, and turned her mind upon the making of a savoury broth, favoured by the Reverend Mother.

And all the while the Devil was whispering in the old woman's ear: "She will not return. . . . Make thy broth, fool; but she will not be here to drink it. . . . The World and the Flesh have called; the Reverend Mother will not come back. . . . Stir the broth well, but flavour it to thine own taste. Thou wilt sup on it thyself this night. When the World and the Flesh call loudly enough, the best of women go to the Devil."

"Liar!" said Mary Antony, brandishing her wooden spoon. "Get thee behind me—nay, rather, get thee in front of me! I have had thee skulking behind me long enough. Also in front of me, just now, being into the fire, thou wilt feel at home, Master Devil! Only, put not thy tail into the Reverend Mother's broth."

When the White Ladies passed up from the Refectory, Mary Antony chanced to be polishing the panelling around the picture of Saint Mary Magdalen, beside the door of the Reverend Mother's cell.

Presently Sister Mary Rebecca, arriving, lifted her hand to knock.

"Stay!" whispered Mary Antony. "The Reverend Mother may not be disturbed."

Sister Mary Rebecca veiled her scowl with a smile.

"And wherefore not, good Sister Antony?"

"'Wherefore not' is not my business," retorted old Antony, as rudely as she knew how. "It may be for special study; it may be for an hour of extra devotion; it may be only the very natural desire for a little respite from the sight of two such ugly faces as yours and mine. But, be the reason what it may, Reverend Mother has locked her door, and sees nobody this even." After which old Antony proceeded to polish the outside of the Reverend Mother's door panels.

Sister Mary Rebecca lifted her knuckles to rap; but old Antony's not over clean clout was pushed each time between Sister Mary Rebecca's tap, and the woodwork.

Muttering concerning the report she would make to the Prioress in the morning, Sister Mary Rebecca went to her cell.

When all was quiet, when every door was closed, the old lay-sister crept into the cloisters and, crouching in an archway just beyond the flight of steps leading to the underground way, watched and waited.

Storm clouds were gathering again, black on a purple sky. The after-glow in the west had faded. It was dark in the cloisters. Thunder growled in the distance; an owl hooted in the Pieman's tree.

Mary Antony's old bones ached sorely, and her heart failed her. She had sat so long in cramped positions, and she had not tasted food since the mid-day meal.

The Devil drew near, as he is wont to do, when those who have fasted long, seek to keep vigil.

"The Reverend Mother will not return," he whispered. "What wait you for?"

"Be off!" said Mary Antony. "I am too old to be keeping company, even with thee. Also Sister Mary Rebecca awaits thee in her cell."

"The Reverend Mother ever walked with her head among the stars," sneered the Devil. "Why do the highest fall the lowest, when temptation comes?"

"Ask that of Mother Sub-Prioress," said Mary Antony, "next time she bids thee to supper."

Then she clasped her old hands upon her breast; for, very softly, in the lock below, a key turned. Steps, felt rather than heard, passed up into the cloister.

Then, in the dim light, the tall figure of the Prioress moved noiselessly over the flagstones, passed through the open door and up the deserted passage.

Peering eagerly forward, the old lay-sister saw the Prioress pause outside the door of her chamber, lift her master-key, unlock the door, and pass within.

As the faint sound of the closing of the door reached her straining ears, old Mary Antony began to sob, helplessly.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ECHO OF WILD VOICES

When the Prioress entered her cell, she stood for a moment bewildered by the rapid walk in the darkness. She could hardly realise that the long strain was over; that she had safely regained her chamber.

All was as she had left it. Apparently she had not been missed, and had returned unobserved. Hugh was by now safely in the hostel at Worcester. None need ever know that he had been here.

None need ever know—Yet, alas, it was that knowledge which held the Prioress rooted to the spot on which she stood, gazing round her cell.

Hugh had been here; and when he was here, her one desire had been to get him speedily away. But now?

Dumb with the pain of a great yearning, she looked about her.

Yes; just there he had stood; here he had knelt, and there he had stood again.

This calm monastic air had vibrated to the fervour of his voice.

It had grown calm again.

Would her poor heart in time also grow calm? Would her lips stop trembling, and cease to feel the fire of his?

Yet for one moment, only, her mind dwelt upon herself. Then all thought of self was merged in the realisation of his loneliness, his suffering, his bitter disillusion. To have found her dead, would have been hard; to have lost her living, was almost past bearing. Would it cost him his faith in God, in truth, in purity, in honour?

The Prioress felt the insistent need of prayer. But passing the gracious image of the Virgin and Child, she cast herself down at the foot of the crucifix.

She had seen a strong man in agony, nailed, by the cruel iron of circumstance, to the cross-beams of sacrifice and surrender. To the suffering Saviour she turned, instinctively, for help and consolation.

Thus speedily had her prayer of the previous night been granted. The piercèd feet of our dear Lord, crucified, had become more to her than the baby feet of the Infant Jesus, on His Mother's knee.

Yet, even as she knelt—supplicating, interceding, adoring—there echoed in her memory the wicked shriek of Mary Seraphine: "A dead God cannot help me! I want life, not death!" followed almost instantly by Hugh's stern question: "Is this religion?"

Truly, of late, wild voices had taken liberty of speech in the cell of the Prioress, and had left their impious utterances echoing behind them.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DIMNESS OF MARY ANTONY

The Prioress had been back in her cell for nearly an hour, when a gentle tap came on the door. "Enter," commanded the Prioress, and Mary Antony appeared, bearing broth and bread, fruit and a cup of wine.

The Prioress sat at her table, parchment and an open missal before her.

Her face was very white; also there were dark shadows beneath her eyes.

She did not smile at sight of old Antony, thus laden.

"How now, Antony?" she said, almost sternly. "I did not bid thee to bring me food."

"Reverend Mother," said the old lay-sister, in a voice which strove to be steady, yet quavered; "for long hours you have studied, not heeding that the evening meal was over. Chide not old Antony for bringing you some of that broth, which you like the best. You will not sleep unless you eat."

The Prioress looked at her uncomprehendingly; as if, for the moment, words conveyed no meaning to her mind. Then she saw those old hands trembling, and a sudden flood of colour flushed the pallor of her face.

This sweet stirring of fresh life within her own heart gave her to see, in the old woman's untiring devotion, a human element hitherto unperceived. It brought a rush of comfort, in her sadness.

She closed the volume, and pushed aside the parchment. "How kind of thee, dear Antony, to take so much thought for me. Place the bowls on the table. . . . Now draw up that stool, and stay near me while I sup. I am weary this night, and shall like thy company."

Had the golden gates of heaven opened before her, and Saint Peter himself invited her to enter, Sister Mary Antony would not have been more astonished and certainly could hardly have been more gratified. It was a thing undreamed of, that she should be bidden to sit with the Reverend Mother in her cell.

Drawing the carven stool two feet from the wall, Mary Antony took her seat upon it.

"Nearer, Antony, nearer," said the Prioress. "Place the stool here, close beside the corner of my table. I have much to say to thee, and would wish to speak low."

Truly Sister Antony found herself in the seventh heaven!

Yet, quietly observing, the Prioress could not fail to note the drawn weariness on the old face, the yellow pallor of the wizen skin, which usually wore the bright tint of a russet apple.

The Prioress took a portion of the broth; then pushed the bowl from her, and turned to the fruit.

"There, Antony," she said. "The broth is excellent; but I have enough.

Finish it thyself. It will pleasure me to see thee enjoy it."

Faint and thankful, old Antony seized the bowl. And as she drank the broth, her shrewd eyes twinkled. For had not the Devil said she would sup on it herself; knowing that much, yet not knowing that she would receive it from the hand of the Reverend Mother?

It has been ever so, from Eden onwards, when the Devil tries his hand at prophecy.

For a while the Prioress talked lightly, of flowers and birds; of the garden and the orchard; of the gift of three fine salmon, sent to them by the good monks of the Priory at Worcester.

But, presently, when the broth was finished and a faint colour tinted the old cheeks, she passed on to the storm and the sunset, the rolling thunder and the torrents of rain. Then of a sudden she said:

"By the way, Antony, hast thou made mention, to any, of thy fearsome tale of the walking through the cloisters, in line with the White Ladies, of the Spectre of the saintly Sister Agatha?"

"Nay, Reverend Mother," said Mary Antony. "Did not you forbid me to speak of it?"

"True," said the Prioress. "Well, Antony, I went in the storm, to look for her; but—I found not Sister Agatha."

"That I already knew," said Mary Antony, nodding her head sagaciously.

The Prioress cast upon her a quick, anxious look.

"What mean you, Antony?"

Then old Mary Antony fell upon her knees, and kissed the hem of the Prioress's robe. "Oh, Reverend Mother," she stammered, "I have a confession to make!"

"Make it," said the Prioress, with white lips.

"Reverend Mother, when you sent me from you, after making my report, I went first, as commanded, to the kitchens. But afterward, in my cell, I found these."

Mary Antony opened her wallet and drew out the linen bag in which she kept her peas. Shaking its contents into the palm of her hand, she held out six peas to view.

"Reverend Mother," she said, "there were twenty-five in the bag. I thought I had counted twenty out into my hand; so when all the peas had dropped and yet another holy Lady passed, I thought that made twenty-one. But when I found six peas in my bag, I became aware of my folly. I had but counted nineteen, and had no pea to let fall for the twentieth holy Lady. Yet I ran in haste with my false report, when, had I but thought to look in my wallet, all would have been made clear. Will the Reverend Mother forgive old Mary Antony?"

She shot a quick glance at the Prioress; and, at sight of the immense relief on that loved face, felt ready for any punishment with which it might please Heaven to visit her deceit.

"Dear Antony," began the Reverend Mother, smiling.

"Dear Antony—" she said, and laughed aloud.

Then she placed her hand beneath the old woman's arm, and gently raised her. "Mistakes arise so easily," she said. "With the best of intentions, we all sometimes make mistakes. There is nothing to forgive, my Antony."

"I am old, and dim, and stupid," said the lay-sister, humbly; "but I have begged of our sweet Lady to sharpen the old wits of Mary Antony."

After which statement, made in a voice of humble penitence, Mary Antony, unseen by the thankful Prioress, did give a knowing wink with the eye next to the Madonna. Our blessed Lady smiled. The sweet Babe looked merry. The Prioress rose, a great light of relief illumining her weary face.

"Let us to bed, dear Antony; then, with the dawn of a new day we shall all arise with hearts refreshed and wits more keen. So now—God rest thee."

Left alone, the Prioress knelt long in prayer before the shrine of the Madonna. Once, she reached out her right hand to the empty space where Hugh had knelt, striving to feel remembrance of his strong clasp.

At length she sought her couch. But sleep refused to come, and presently she crept back in the white moonlight, and kneeling pressed her lips to the stone on which Hugh had kneeled; then fled, in shame that our Lady should see such weakness; and dared not glance toward the shadowy form of the dead Christ, crucified. For with the coming of Love to seek her, Life had come; and where Life enters, Death is put to flight; even as before the triumphant march of the rising sun, darkness and shadows flee away.

Yet, even then, our Lady gently smiled, and the Babe on her knees looked merry.

## CHAPTER XVIII IN THE CATHEDRAL CRYPT

On the day following, in the afternoon, shortly before the hour of Vespers, a stretcher was carried through the streets of Worcester, by four men-at-arms wearing the livery of Sir Hugh d'Argent. Beside it walked the Knight, with bent head, his eyes upon the ground.

The body of the man upon the stretcher was covered by a fine linen sheet, over which lay a blue cloak, richly embroidered with silver. His head was swathed in a bandage of many folds, partially concealing the face.

The little procession passed through the Precincts; then entered the Cathedral by the great door leading into the nave.

Here a monk stood, taking careful note of all who passed in or out of the building. As the stretcher approached, he stepped forward with hand upraised.

There was a pause in the measured tramp of the bearers' feet.

The Knight lifted his eyes, and seeing the monk barring the way, he drew forth a parchment and tendered it.

"I have the leave of the Lord Bishop, good father," he said, "to carry this man upon the stretcher daily into the crypt, and there to let him lie before the shrine of Saint Oswald, during the hour of Vespers; from which daily pilgrimage and prayer, we hope a great recovery and restoration."

At sight of the Lord Bishop's signature and seal, the monk made deep obeisance, and hastened to call the Sacristan, bidding him attend the Knight on his passage to the crypt and give him every facility in placing the sick man there where he might most conveniently lie before the holy altar of the blessed Saint Oswald.

So presently, the stretcher being safely deposited, the men-at-arms stood each against a pillar, and the Knight folded back the coverings, in order that the man who lay beneath, might have sight of the altar and the shrine.

As the Knight stood gazing through the vista of many columns, he found the old Sacristan standing at his elbow.

"Most worshipful Knight," said the old man, with deference, "our Lord Bishop's mandate supersedes all rules. Were it not so, it would be my duty to clear the crypt before Vespers. See you that stairway yonder, beneath the arch? Not many minutes hence, up those steps will pass the holy nuns from the Convent of the White Ladies at Whytstone—noble ladies all, and of great repute for saintliness. Daily they come to Vespers by a secret way; entering the crypt, they pass across to a winding stair in the wall, and so arrive at a gallery above the choir, from which they can, unseen, hear the chanting of the monks. I must to my duties above. Will you undertake, Sir Knight, that your men go not nigh where the White Ladies pass, nor in any way molest them?"

"None shall stir hand or foot, as they pass, nor in any way molest them," said the Knight.

Hugh d'Argent was kneeling before the altar, his folded hands resting upon the cross on the hilt of his sword, when the faint sound of a key turning in a distant lock, caught his ear.

Then up the steps and across the crypt passed, in silent procession, the White Ladies of Worcester.

There was something ghostly and awe-inspiring about those veiled figures, moving noiselessly among the pillars in the dimly-lighted crypt; then vanishing, one by one, up the winding stairway in the wall.

The Knight did not stir. He stayed upon his knees, his hands clasped upon his sword-hilt; but he followed each silent figure with his eyes.

The last had barely disappeared from view when, from above, came the solemn chanting of monks and choristers.

This harmony, descending from above, seemed to uplift the soul all the more readily, because the sacred words and noble sounds reached the listener, unhampered by association with the personalities, either youthful or ponderous, of the singers. All that was of the earth remained unseen; while that which was so near akin to heaven, entered the listening ear.

Kneeling in lowly reverence with bowed head, the Knight found himself wondering whether the ascending sounds reached that distant gallery in the clerestory where the White Ladies knelt, as greatly softened, sweetened, and enriched, as they now came stealing down into the crypt. Were the hearts of those veiled worshippers also lifted heavenward; or—being already above the music—did the ascending voices rather tend to draw them down to earth?

Upon which the Knight fell to meditating as to whether that which is higher always uplifts; whereas that which is lower tends to debase. Certainly the upward look betokens hope and joy; while the downward casting of the eye, is sign of sorrow and despondency.

"*Levavi oculos meos in montes*"—chanted the monks, in the choir above.

He certainly looked high when he lifted the eyes of his insistent desire to the Prioress of the White Ladies. So high did he lift them, and so unattainable was she, that most men would say he might as well ask the silvery moon, sailing across the firmament, to come down and be his bride!

He had held her high, in her maiden loveliness and purity. But now that he had found her, a noble woman, matured, ripened by sorrow rather than hardened, yet firm in her determination to die to the world, to deny self, crucify the flesh, and resist the Devil—he felt indeed that she walked among the stars.

Yet he could not bring himself to regard her as unattainable. It had ever been his firm belief that a man could win any woman upon whom he wholly set his heart—always supposing that no other man had already won her. And this woman had been his own betrothed, when treachery intervened and sundered them. Yet that did not now count for much.

He had left a girl; he had come back to find a woman. That woman had infinitely more to give; but it would be infinitely more difficult to persuade her to give it.

At the close of their interview in her cell, the day before, all hope had left him. But later, as they paced together in the darkness, hope had revived.

The strange isolation in which they then found themselves—between locked doors a mile apart, earth above, earth beneath, earth all around them, they two alone, entombed yet vividly conscious of glowing life—had brought her nearer to him; and when at last the moment of parting arrived and again he faced it as final, there had come—all unheralded—the sudden wonder of her surrender.

True, she had afterwards withdrawn herself; true, she had sent him from her; true, he had gone, without a word. But that was because no promise could have been so binding, as that silent embrace.

He had gone from her on the impulse of the sweetness of obeying instantly her slightest wish; buoyed up by the certainty that no Convent walls could long divide lips which had met and clung with such a passion of mutual need.

That evening when, after much adventure, he at length gained the streets of the city, he had trodden them with the mien of a victor.

That night he had slept as he had not slept since the hour when his whole life had been embittered by a lying letter and a traitorous tongue.

But morning, alas, had brought its doubts; noon, its dark uncertainties; and as the hour of Vespers drew near, he had realised, with the helpless misery of despair, that it was madness to expect the Prioress of the White Ladies to break her vows, leave her Nunnery, and fly with him to Warwick.

Yet he carried out his plan, and kept to his undertaking, though here, in the calm atmosphere of the crypt, holy chanting descending from above, the remembrance still with him of the aloofness

of those stately white figures gliding between the pillars in the distance, he faced the madness of his hopes, and the mournful prospect of a life of loneliness.

Presently he arose, crossed the crypt, and took up his position behind a pillar to the right of the exit from the winding stair.

The chanting ceased. Vespers were over.

He heard the sound of soft footsteps drawing nearer.

The White Ladies were coming.

They came.

The Knight was not kept long in suspense. The Prioress walked first. Her face was hidden, but her height and carriage revealed her to her lover. She looked neither to right nor left but, turning away from the pillar behind which the Knight stood concealed, crossed to the steps leading down to the subterranean way, and so passed swiftly out of sight.

The Knight stood motionless until all had appeared, and had vanished once more from view.

One, tall but ungainly, crooked of body, and doubtless short of vision, missed her way among the columns and passed perilously near to the Knight. With his long arm, he could have clasped her. How old Antony would have chuckled, could she but have known! "Sister Mary Rebecca embraced by the Knight of the Bloody Vest? Nay then; the Saints forbid!"

The stretcher, borne by four men-at-arms, passed out from the Cathedral.

The Knight walked beside it, with bent head, and eyes upon the ground.

As it passed through the Precincts, the Lord Bishop himself rode out on his white palfrey, on his way to the Nunnery at Whytstone.

The Knight, being downhearted, did not lift his eyes.

The Bishop looked, kindly, upon the stretcher and upon the Knight's dark face.

The Bishop had known Hugh d'Argent as a boy.

He grieved to see him thus in sorrow.

Yet the Bishop smiled as he rode on.

Perhaps he did not put much faith in the efficacy of relics, for so heavily bandaged a broken head as that upon the stretcher.

For there was a whimsical tenderness about the Bishop's smile.

## **CHAPTER XIX**

### **THE BISHOP PUTS ON HIS BIRETTA**

Symon, Lord Bishop of Worcester, having received a letter from the Prioress of the White Ladies, praying him for an interview at his leisure, sent back at once a most courtly and gracious answer, that he would that same day give himself the pleasure of visiting the Reverend Mother, at the Nunnery, an hour after Vespers.

The great gates were thrown open, and the Bishop rode his palfrey into the courtyard.

The Prioress herself met him at the door and, kneeling, kissed his ring; then led him through the lower hall, where the nuns knelt to receive his blessing, and up the wide staircase, to the privacy of her own cell.

There she presently unfolded to him the history of her difficulties with that wayward little nun, Sister Mary Seraphine.

"But the point which I chiefly desire to lay before you, Reverend Father," concluded the Prioress, "is this: If the neighing of a palfrey calls more loudly to her than the voice of God; if her mind is still set upon the things of the world; if she professed without a true vocation, merely because she wished to be the central figure of a great ceremony, yet was all the while expecting a man to intervene and carry her off; if all this bespeaks her true state of heart, then to my mind there comes the question: Is she doing good, either to herself or to others, by belonging to our Order? Would she not be better away?"

"My lord, I fear I greatly shock you by naming such a possibility. But truly I am pursued by the remembrance of that young thing, beating the floor with her hands, and singing a mournful dirge about the crimson trappings of her palfrey. And, alas! when I reasoned with her and exhorted, she broke out, as I have told you, Reverend Father, into grievous blasphemy—for which she was severely dealt with by Mother Sub-Prioress, and has since been outwardly amenable to rules and discipline.

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