

YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

GRISLY GRISELL; OR, THE
LAIDLY LADY OF
WHITBURN: A TALE OF
THE WARS OF THE ROSES

Charlotte Yonge

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Lady of Whitburn: A Tale
of the Wars of the Roses**

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*Men speak of Job, and for his humblesse,
And clerkes when hem list can well endite,
Namely of men, but as in stedfastnese
Though clerkes preisyn women but a lite,
There can no man in humblesse him acquite
As women can, nor can be half so trewe
As women ben.*

Chaucer, The Clerke's Tale.

CHAPTER I

AN EXPLOSION

*It was a great pity, so it was, this villanous saltpetre should be digg'd out
of the bowels of the harmless earth.*
Shakespeare, King Henry IV., Part I.

A terrible shriek rang through the great Manor-house of Amesbury. It was preceded by a loud explosion, and there was agony as well as terror in the cry. Then followed more shrieks and screams, some of pain, some of fright, others of anger and recrimination. Every one in the house ran together to the spot whence the cries proceeded, namely, the lower court, where the armourer and blacksmith had their workshops.

There was a group of children, the young people who were confided to the great Earl Richard and Countess Alice of Salisbury for education and training. Boys and girls were alike there, some of the latter crying and sobbing, others mingling with the lads in the hot dispute as to “who did it.”

By the time the gentle but stately Countess had reached the place, all the grown-up persons of the establishment—knights, squires, grooms, scullions, and females of every degree—had thronged round them, but parted at her approach, though one of the knights said, “Nay, Lady Countess, ’tis no sight for you. The poor little maid is dead, or nigh upon it.”

“But who is it? What is it?” asked the Countess, still advancing.

A confused medley of voices replied, “The Lord of Whitburn’s little wench—Leonard Copeland—gunpowder.”

“And no marvel,” said a sturdy, begrimed figure, “if the malapert young gentles be let to run all over the courts, and handle that with which they have no concern, lads and wenches alike.”

“Nay, how can I stop it when my lady will not have the maidens kept ever at their distaffs and needles in seemly fashion,” cried a small but stout and self-assertive dame, known as “Mother of the Maidens,” then starting, “Oh! my lady, I crave your pardon, I knew not you were in this coil!

And if the men-at-arms be let to have their perilous goods strewn all over the place, no wonder at any mishap.”

“Do not wrangle about the cause,” said the Countess. “Who is hurt? How much?”

The crowd parted enough for her to make way to where a girl of about ten was lying prostrate and bleeding with her head on a woman’s lap.

“Poor maid,” was the cry, “poor maid! ’Tis all over with her. It will go ill with young Leonard Copeland.”

“Worse with Hodge Smith for letting him touch his irons.”

“Nay, what call had Dick Jenner to lay his foul, burning gunpowder—a device of Satan—in this yard? A mercy we are not all blown to the winds.”

The Countess, again ordering peace, reached the girl, whose moans showed that she was still alive, and between the barber-surgeon and the porter’s wife she was lifted up, and carried to a bed, the Countess Alice keeping close to her, though the “Mother of the Maidens,” who was a somewhat helpless personage, hung back, declaring that the sight of the wounds made her swoon. There were terrible wounds upon the face and neck, which seemed to be almost bared of skin. The lady, who had been bred to some knowledge of surgical skill, together with the barber-surgeon, did their best to allay the agony with applications of sweet oil. Perhaps if they had had more of what was then considered skill, it might have been worse for her.

The Countess remained anxiously trying all that could allay the suffering of the poor little semi-conscious patient, who kept moaning for “nurse.” She was Grisell Dacre, the daughter of the Baron of Whitburn, and had been placed, young as she was, in the household of the Countess of Salisbury

on her mother being made one of the ladies attending on the young Queen Margaret of Anjou, lately married to King Henry VI.

Attendance on the patient had prevented the Countess from hearing the history of the accident, but presently the clatter of horses' feet showed that her lord was returning, and, committing the girl to her old nurse, she went down to the hall to receive him.

The grave, grizzled warrior had taken his seat on his cross-legged, round-backed chair, and a boy of some twelve years old stood before him, in a sullen attitude, one foot over the other, and his shoulder held fast by a squire, while the motley crowd of retainers stood behind.

There was a move at the entrance of the lady, and her husband rose, came forward, and as he gave her the courteous kiss of greeting, demanded, "What is all this coil? Is the little wench dead?"

"Nay, but I fear me she cannot live," was the answer.

"Will Dacre of Whitburn's maid? That's ill, poor child! How fell it out?"

"That I know as little as you," was the answer. "I have been seeing to the poor little maid's hurts."

Lord Salisbury placed her in the chair like his own. In point of fact, she was Countess in her own right; he, Richard Nevil, had been created Earl of Salisbury in her right on the death of her father, the staunch warrior of Henry V. in the siege of Orleans.

"Speak out, Leonard Copeland," said the Earl. "What hast thou done?"

The boy only growled, "I never meant to hurt the maid."

"Speak to the point, sir," said Lord Salisbury sternly; "give yourself at least the grace of truth."

Leonard grew more silent under the show of displeasure, and only hung his head at the repeated calls to him to speak. The Earl turned to those who were only too eager to accuse him.

"He took a bar of iron from the forge, so please you, my lord, and put it to the barrel of powder."

"Is this true, Leonard?" demanded the Earl again, amazed at the frantic proceeding, and Leonard muttered "Aye," vouchsafing no more, and looking black as thunder at a fair, handsome boy who pressed to his side and said, "Uncle," doffing his cap, "so please you, my lord, the barrels had just been brought in upon Hob Carter's wain, and Leonard said they ought to have the Lord Earl's arms on them. So he took a bar of hot iron from the forge to mark the saltire on them, and thereupon there was this burst of smoke and flame, and the maid, who was leaning over, prying into his doings, had the brunt thereof."

"Thanks to the saints that no further harm was done," ejaculated the lady shuddering, while her lord proceeded—"It was not malice, but malapert meddling, then. Master Leonard Copeland, thou must be scourged to make thee keep thine hands off where they be not needed. For the rest, thou must await what my Lord of Whitburn may require. Take him away, John Ellerby, chastise him, and keep him in ward till we see the issue."

Leonard, with his head on high, marched out of the hall, not uttering a word, but shaking his shoulder as if to get rid of the squire's grasp, but only thereby causing himself to be gripped the faster.

Next, Lord Salisbury's severity fell upon Hob the carter and Hodge the smith, for leaving such perilous wares unwatched in the court-yard. Servants were not dismissed for carelessness in those days, but soundly flogged, a punishment considered suitable to the "blackguard" at any age, even under the mildest rule. The gunner, being somewhat higher in position, and not in charge at the moment, was not called to account, but the next question was, how the "Mother of the Maids"—the *gouvernante* in charge of the numerous damsels who formed the train of the Lady of Salisbury, and were under education and training—could have permitted her maidens to stray into the regions appropriated to the yeomen and archers, and others of the *meiné*, where they certainly had no business.

It appeared that the good and portly lady had last seen the girls in the gardens "a playing at the ball" with some of the pages, and that there, on a sunny garden seat, slumber had prevented her from discovering the absence of the younger part of the bevy. The demure elder damsels deposed that, at the sound of wains coming into the court, the boys had rushed off, and the younger girls had followed

them, whether with or without warning was not made clear. Poor little Grisell's condition might have been considered a sufficient warning, nevertheless the two companions in her misdemeanour were condemned to a whipping, to enforce on them a lesson of maidenliness; and though the Mother of the Maids could not partake of the flagellation, she remained under her lord's and lady's grave displeasure, and probably would have to submit to a severe penance from the priest for her carelessness. Yet, as she observed, Mistress Grisell was a North Country maid, never couthly or conformable, but like a boy, who would moreover always be after Leonard Copeland, whether he would or no.

It was the more unfortunate, as Lord Salisbury lamented to his wife, because the Copelands were devoted to the Somerset faction; and the King had been labouring to reconcile them to the Dacres, and to bring about a contract of marriage between these two unfortunate children, but he feared that whatever he could do, there would only be additional feud and bitterness, though it was clear that the mishap was accidental. The Lord of Whitburn himself was in Ireland with the Duke of York, while his lady was in attendance on the young Queen, and it was judged right and seemly to despatch to her a courier with the tidings of her daughter's disaster, although in point of fact, where a house could number sons, damsels were not thought of great value, except as the means of being allied with other houses. A message was also sent to Sir William Copeland that his son had been the death of the daughter of Whitburn; for poor little Grisell lay moaning in a state of much fever and great suffering, so that the Lady Salisbury could not look at her, nor hear her sighs and sobs without tears, and the barber-surgeon, unaccustomed to the effects of gunpowder, had little or no hope of her life.

Leonard Copeland's mood was sullen, not to say surly. He submitted to the chastisement without a word or cry, for blows were the lot of boys of all ranks, and were dealt out without much respect to justice; and he also had to endure a sort of captivity, in a dismal little circular room in a turret of the manorial house, with merely a narrow loophole to look out from, and this was only accessible by climbing up a steep broken slope of brick-work in the thickness of the wall.

Here, however, he was visited by his chief friend and comrade, Edmund Plantagenet of York, who found him lying on the floor, building up fragments of stone and mortar into the plan of a castle.

"How dost thou, Leonard?" he asked. "Did old Hal strike very hard?"

"I reckon not," growled Leonard.

"How long will my uncle keep thee here?" asked Edmund sympathisingly.

"Till my father comes, unless the foolish wench should go and die. She brought it on me, the peevish girl. She is always after me when I want her least."

"Yea, is not she contracted to thee?"

"So they say; but at least this puts a stop to my being plagued with her—do what they may to me. There's an end to it, if I hang for it."

"They would never hang thee."

"None knows what you traitor folk of Nevil would do to a loyal house," growled Leonard.

"Traitor, saidst thou," cried Edmund, clenching his fists. "'Tis thy base Somerset crew that be the traitors."

"I'll brook no such word from thee," burst forth Leonard, flying at him.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Edmund even as they grappled. "Who is the traitor forsooth? Why, 'tis my father who should be King. 'Tis white-faced Harry and his Beauforts—"

The words were cut short by a blow from Leonard, and the warder presently found the two boys rolling on the floor together in hot contest.

And meanwhile poor Grisell was trying to frame with her torn and flayed cheeks and lips, "O lady, lady, visit it not on him! Let not Leonard be punished. It was my fault for getting into his way when I should have been in the garden. Dear Madge, canst thou speak for him?"

Madge was Edmund's sister, Margaret of York, who stood trembling and crying by Grisell's bed.

CHAPTER II

THE BROKEN MATCH

The Earl of Salisbury, called Prudence.

Contemporary Poem.

Little Grisell Dacre did not die, though day after day she lay in a suffering condition, tenderly watched over by the Countess Alice. Her mother had been summoned from attendance on the Queen, but at first there only was returned a message that if the maid was dead she should be embalmed and sent north to be buried in the family vault, when her father would be at all charges. Moreover, that the boy should be called to account for his crime, his father being, as the Lady of Whitburn caused to be written, an evil-minded minion and fosterer of the house of Somerset, the very bane of the King and the enemies of the noble Duke of York and Earl of Warwick.

The story will be clearer if it is understood that the Earl of Salisbury was Richard Nevil, one of the large family of Nevil of Raby Castle in Westmoreland, and had obtained his title by marriage with Alice Montagu, heiress of that earldom. His youngest sister had married Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, who being descended from Lionel, Duke of Clarence, was considered to have a better right to the throne than the house of Lancaster, though this had never been put forward since the earlier years of Henry V.

Salisbury had several sons. The eldest had married Anne Beauchamp, and was in her right Earl of Warwick, and had estates larger even than those of his father. He had not, however, as yet come forward, and the disputes at Court were running high between the friends of the Duke of Somerset and those of the Duke of York.

The King and Queen both were known to prefer the house of Somerset, who were the more nearly related to Henry, and the more inclined to uphold royalty, while York was considered as the champion of the people. The gentle King and the Beauforts wished for peace with France; the nation, and with them York, thought this was giving up honour, land, and plunder, and suspected the Queen, as a Frenchwoman, of truckling to the enemy. Jack Cade's rising and the murder of the Duke of Suffolk had been the outcome of this feeling. Indeed, Lord Salisbury's messenger reported the Country about London to be in so disturbed a state that it was no wonder that the Lady of Whitburn did not make the journey. She was not, as the Countess suspected, a very tender mother. Grisell's moans were far more frequently for her nurse than for her, but after some space they ceased. The child became capable of opening first one eye, then the other, and both barber and lady perceived that she was really unscathed in any vital part, and was on the way to recovery, though apparently with hopelessly injured features.

Leonard Copeland had already been released from restraint, and allowed to resume his usual place among the Earl's pages; when the warder announced that he saw two parties approaching from opposite sides of the down, one as if from Salisbury, the other from the north; and presently he reported that the former wore the family badge, a white rosette, the latter none at all, whence it was perceived that the latter were adherents of the Beauforts of Somerset, for though the "Rose of Snow" had been already adopted by York, Somerset had in point of fact not plucked the Red Rose in the Temple gardens, nor was it as yet the badge of Lancaster.

Presently it was further reported that the Lady of Whitburn was in the fore front of the party, and the Lord of Salisbury hastened to receive her at the gates, his suite being rapidly put into some order.

She was a tall, rugged-faced North Country dame, not very smooth of speech, and she returned his salute with somewhat rough courtesy, demanding as she sprang off her horse with little aid, "Lives my wench still?"

"Yes, madam, she lives, and the leech trusts that she will yet be healed."

"Ah! Methought you would have sent to me if aught further had befallen her. Be that as it may, no doubt you have given the malapert boy his deserts."

"I hope I have, madam," began the Earl. "I kept him in close ward while she was in peril of death, but—" A fresh bugle blast interrupted him, as there clattered through the resounding gate the other troop, at sight of whom the Lady of Whitburn drew herself up, redoubling her grim dignity, and turning it into indignation as a young page rushed forward to meet the newcomers, with a cry of "Father! Lord Father, come at last;" then composing himself, doffed his cap and held the stirrup, then bent a knee for his father's blessing.

"You told me, Lord Earl, the mischievous, murderous fellow was in safe hold," said the lady, bending her dark brows.

"While the maid was in peril," hastily answered Salisbury. "Pardon me, madam, my Countess will attend you."

The Countess's high rank and great power were impressive to the Baroness of Whitburn, who bent in salutation, but almost her first words were, "Madam, you at least will not let the murderous traitors of Somerset and the Queen prevail over the loyal friends of York and the nation."

"There is happily no murder in the case. Praise be to the saints," said Countess Alice, "your little maid—"

"Aye, that's what they said as to the poor good Duke Humfrey," returned the irate lady; "but that you, madam, the good-sister of the noble York, should stand up for the enemies of him, and the friends of France, is more than a plain North Country woman like me can understand. And there—there, turning round upon the steep steps, there is my Lord Earl hand and glove with that minion fellow of Somerset, who was no doubt at the bottom of the plot! None would believe it at Raby."

"None at Raby would believe that my lord could be lacking in courtesy to a guest," returned Lady Salisbury with dignity, "nor that a North Country dame could expect it of him. Those who are under his roof must respect it by fitting demeanour towards one another."

The Lady of Whitburn was quenched for the time, and the Countess asked whether she did not wish to see her daughter, leading the way to a chamber hung with tapestry, and with a great curtained bed nearly filling it up, for the patient had been installed in one of the best guest-chambers of the Castle. Lady Whitburn was surprised, but was too proud to show herself gratified by what she thought was the due of the dignity of the Dacres. An old woman in a hood sat by the bed, where there was a heap of clothes, and a dark-haired little girl stood by the window, whence she had been describing the arrivals in the Castle court.

"Here is your mother, my poor child," began the Lady of Salisbury, but there was no token of joy. Grisell gave a little gasp, and tried to say "Lady Mother, pardon—" but the Lady of Whitburn, at sight of the reddened half of the face which alone was as yet visible, gave a cry, "She will be a fright!

You evil little baggage, thus to get yourself scarred and made hideous! Running where you ought not, I warrant!" and she put out her hand as if to shake the patient, but the Countess interposed, and her niece Margaret gave a little cry. "Grisell is still very weak and feeble! She cannot bear much; we have only just by Heaven's grace brought her round."

"As well she were dead as like this," cried this untender parent. "Who is to find her a husband now? and as to a nunnery, where is one to take her without a dower such as is hard to find, with two sons to be fitly provided? I looked that in a household like this, better rule should be kept."

"None can mourn it more than myself and the Earl," said the gentle Countess; "but young folks can scarce be watched hour by hour."

“The rod is all that is good for them, and I trusted to you to give it them, madam,” said Lady Whitburn. “Now, the least that can be done is to force yonder malapert lad and his father into keeping his contract to her, since he has spoilt the market for any other.”

“Is he contracted to her?” asked the Countess.

“Not fully; but as you know yourself, lady, your lord, and the King, and all the rest, thought to heal the breach between the houses by planning a contract between their son and my daughter. He shall keep it now, at his peril.”

Grisell was cowering among her pillows, and no one knew how much she heard or understood.

The Countess was glad to get Lady Whitburn out of the room, but both she and her Earl had a very trying evening, in trying to keep the peace between the two parents. Sir William Copeland was devoted to the Somerset family, of whom he held his manor; and had had a furious quarrel with the Baron of Whitburn, when both were serving in France.

The gentle King had tried to bring about a reconciliation, and had induced the two fathers to consent to a contract for the future marriage of Leonard, Copeland’s second son, to Grisell Dacre, then the only child of the Lord of Whitburn. He had also obtained that the two children should be bred up in the household of the Earl of Salisbury, by way of letting them grow up together. On the same principle the Lady of Whitburn had been made one of the attendants of Queen Margaret—but neither arrangement had been more successful than most of those of poor King Henry.

Grisell indeed considered Leonard as a sort of property of hers, but she beset him in the manner that boys are apt to resent from younger girls, and when he was thirteen, and she ten years old, there was very little affection on his side. Moreover, the birth of two brothers had rendered Grisell’s hand a far less desirable prize in the eyes of the Copelands.

To attend on the Court was penance to the North Country dame, used to a hardy rough life in her sea-side tower, with absolute rule, and no hand over her save her husband’s; while the young and outspoken Queen, bred up in the graceful, poetical Court of Aix or Nancy, looked on her as no better than a barbarian, and if she did not show this openly, reporters were not wanting to tell her that the Queen called her the great northern hag, or that her rugged unwilling curtsy was said to look as if she were stooping to draw water at a well. Her husband had kept her in some restraint, but when he had gone to Ireland with the Duke of York, offences seemed to multiply upon her. The last had been that when she had tripped on her train, dropped the salver wherewith she was serving the Queen, and broken out with a loud “Lawk a daisy!” all the ladies, and Margaret herself, had gone into fits of uncontrollable laughter, and the Queen had begged her to render her exclamation into good French for her benefit.

“Madam,” she had exclaimed, “if a plain woman’s plain English be not good enough for you, she can have no call here!” And without further ceremony she had flown out of the royal presence.

Margaret of Anjou, naturally offended, and never politic, had sent her a message, that her attendance was no longer required. So here she was going out of her way to make a casual inquiry, from the Court at Winchester, whether that very unimportant article, her only daughter, were dead or alive.

The Earl absolutely prohibited all conversation on affairs in debate during the supper which was spread in the hall, with quite as much state as, and even greater profusion and splendour, than was to be found at Windsor, Winchester, or Westminster. All the high born sat on the dais, raised on two steps with gorgeous tapestry behind, and a canopy overhead; the Earl and Countess on chairs in the centre of the long narrow table. Lady Whitburn sat beside the Earl, Sir William Copeland by the Countess, watching with pleasure how deftly his son ran about among the pages, carrying the trenchers of food, and the cups. He entered on a conversation with the Countess, telling her of the King’s interest and delight in his beautiful freshly-founded Colleges at Eton and Cambridge, how the King rode down whenever he could to see the boys, listen to them at their tasks in the cloisters,

watch them at their sports in the playing fields, and join in their devotions in the Chapel—a most holy example for them.

“Ay, for such as seek to be monks and shavelings,” broke in the North Country voice sarcastically.

“There are others—sons of gentlemen and esquires—lodged in houses around,” said Sir William, “who are not meant for cowl or for mass-priests.”

“Yea, forsooth,” called Lady Whitburn across the Earl and the Countess, “what for but to make them as feckless as the priests, unfit to handle lance or sword!”

“So, lady, you think that the same hand cannot wield pen and lance,” said the Earl.

“I should like to see one of your clerks on a Border foray,” laughed the Dame of Dacre. “’Tis all a device of the Frenchwoman!”

“Verily?” said the Earl, in an interrogative tone.

“Ay, to take away the strength and might of Englishmen with this clerkly lore, so that her folk may have the better of them in France; and the poor, witless King gives in to her. And so while the Beauforts rule the roast—”

Salisbury caught her up. “Ay, the roast. Will you partake of these roast partridges, madam?”

They were brought round skewered on a long spit, held by a page for the guest to help herself.

Whether by her awkwardness or that of the boy, it so chanced that the bird made a sudden leap from the impalement, and deposited itself in the lap of Lady Whitburn’s scarlet kirtle! The fact was proclaimed by her loud rude cry, “A murrain on thee, thou ne’er-do-weel lad,” together with a sounding box on the ear.

“’Tis thine own greed, who dost not—”

“Leonard, be still—know thy manners,” cried both at once the Earl and Sir William, for, unfortunately, the offender was no other than Leonard Copeland, and, contrary to all the laws of pagedom, he was too angry not to argue the point. “’Twas no doing of mine! She knew not how to cut the bird.”

Answering again was a far greater fault than the first, and his father only treated it as his just desert when he was ordered off under the squire in charge to be soundly scourged, all the more sharply for his continuing to mutter, “It was her fault.”

And sore and furrowed as was his back, he continued to exclaim, when his friend Edmund of York came to condole with him as usual in all his scrapes, “’Tis she that should have been scourged for clumsiness! A foul, uncouth Border dame! Well, one blessing at least is that now I shall never be wedded to her daughter—let the wench live or die as she lists!”

That was not by any means the opinion of the Lady of Whitburn, and no sooner was the meal ended than, in the midst of the hall, the debate began, the Lady declaring that in all honour Sir William Copeland was bound to affiance his son instantly to her poor daughter, all the more since the injuries he had inflicted to her face could never be done away with. On the other hand, Sir William Copeland was naturally far less likely to accept such a daughter-in-law, since her chances of being an heiress had ceased, and he contended that he had never absolutely accepted the contract, and that there had been no betrothal of the children.

The Earl of Salisbury could not but think that a strictly honourable man would have felt poor Grisell’s disaster inflicted by his son’s hands all the more reason for holding to the former understanding; but the loud clamours and rude language of Lady Whitburn were enough to set any one in opposition to her, and moreover, the words he said in favour of her side of the question appeared to Copeland merely spoken out of the general enmity of the Nevils to the Beauforts and all their following.

Thus, all the evening Lady Whitburn raged, and appealed to the Earl, whose support she thought cool and unfriendly, while Copeland stood sullen and silent, but determined.

“My lord,” she said, “were you a true friend to York and Raby, you would deal with this scowling fellow as we should on the Border.”

“We are not on the Border, madam,” quietly said Salisbury.

“But you are in your own Castle, and can force him to keep faith. No contract, forsooth! I hate your mincing South Country forms of law.” Then perhaps irritated by a little ironical smile which Salisbury could not suppress. “Is this your castle, or is it not? Then bring him and his lad to my poor wench’s side, and see their troth plighted, or lay him by the heels in the lowest cell in your dungeon. Then will you do good service to the King and the Duke of York, whom you talk of loving in your shilly-shally fashion.”

“Madam,” said the Earl, his grave tones coming in contrast to the shrill notes of the angry woman, “I counsel you, in the south at least, to have some respect to these same forms of law. I bid you a fair good-night. The chamberlain will marshal you.”

CHAPTER III

THE MIRROR

*"Of all the maids, the foulest maid
From Teviot unto Dee.
Ah!" sighing said that lady then,
"Can ne'er young Harden's be."*

Scott, The Reiver's Wedding.

"They are gone," said Margaret of York, standing half dressed at the deep-set window of the chamber where Grisell lay in state in her big bed.

"Who are gone?" asked Grisell, turning as well as she could under the great heraldically-embroidered covering.

"Leonard Copeland and his father. Did'st not hear the horses' tramp in the court?"

"I thought it was only my lord's horses going to the water."

"It was the Copelands going off without breaking their fast or taking a stirrup cup, like discourteous rogues as they be," said Margaret, in no measured language.

"And are they gone? And wherefore?" asked Grisell.

"Wherefore? but for fear my noble uncle of Salisbury should hold them to their contract. Sir William sat as surly as a bear just about to be baited, while thy mother rated and raved at him like a very sleuth-hound on the chase. And Leonard—what think'st thou he saith? "That he would as soon wed the loathly lady as thee," the cruel Somerset villain as he is; and yet my brother Edmund is fain to love him. So off they are gone, like recreant curs as they are, lest my uncle should make them hear reason."

"But Lady Madge, dear Lady Madge, am I so very loathly?" asked poor Grisell.

"Mine aunt of Salisbury bade that none should tell thee," responded Margaret, in some confusion.

"Ah me! I must know sooner or later! My mother, she shrieked at sight of me!"

"I would not have your mother," said the outspoken daughter of "proud Cis." "My Lady Duchess mother is stern enough if we do not bridle our heads, and if we make ourselves too friendly with the meiné, but she never frets nor rates us, and does not heed so long as we do not demean ourselves unlike our royal blood. She is no termagant like yours."

It was not polite, but Grisell had not seen enough of her mother to be very sensitive on her account. In fact, she was chiefly occupied with what she had heard about her own appearance—a matter which had not occurred to her before in all her suffering. She returned again to entreat Margaret to tell her whether she was so foully ill-favoured that no one could look at her, and the damsel of York, adhering to the letter rather young than the spirit of the cautions which she had received, pursed up her lips and reiterated that she had been commanded not to mention the subject.

"Then," entreated Grisell, "do—do, dear Madge—only bring me the little hand mirror out of my Lady Countess's chamber."

"I know not that I can or may."

"Only for the space of one Ave," reiterated Grisell.

"My lady aunt would never—"

"There—hark—there's the bell for mass. Thou canst run into her chamber when she and the tirewomen are gone down."

"But I must be there."

“Thou canst catch them up after. They will only think thee a slug-a-bed. Madge, dear Madge, prithee, I cannot rest without. Weeping will be worse for me.”

She was crying, and caressing Margaret so vehemently that she gained her point. Indeed the other girl was afraid of her sobs being heard, and inquired into, and therefore promised to make the attempt, keeping a watch out of sight till she had seen the Lady of Salisbury in her padded head-gear of gold net, and long purple train, sweep down the stair, followed by her tirewomen and maidens of every degree. Then darting into the chamber, she bore away from a stage where lay the articles of the toilette, a little silver-backed and handled Venetian mirror, with beautiful tracery in silvered glass diminishing the very small oval left for personal reflection and inspection. That, however, was quite enough and too much for poor Grisell when Lady Margaret had thrown it to her on her bed, and rushed down the stair so as to come in the rear of the household just in time.

A glance at the mirror disclosed, not the fair rosy face, set in light yellow curls, that Grisell had now and then peeped at in a bucket of water or a polished breast-plate, but a piteous sight. One half, as she expected, was hidden by bandages, but the other was fiery red, except that from the corner of the eye to the ear there was a purple scar; the upper lip was distorted, the hair, eyebrows, and lashes were all gone! The poor child was found in an agony of sobbing when, after the service, the old woman who acted as her nurse came stumping up in her wooden clogs to set the chamber and bed in order for Lady Whitburn’s visit.

The dame was in hot haste to get home. Rumours were rife as to Scottish invasions, and her tower was not too far south not to need to be on its guard. Her plan was to pack Grisell on a small litter slung to a sumpter mule, and she snorted a kind of defiant contempt when the Countess, backed by the household barber-surgeon, declared the proceeding barbarous and impossible. Indeed she had probably forgotten that Grisell was far too tall to be made up into the bundle she intended; but she then declared that the wench might ride pillion behind old Diccon, and she would not be convinced till she was taken up to the sick chamber. There the first sound that greeted them was a choking agony of sobs and moans, while the tirewoman stood over the bed, exclaiming, “Aye, no wonder; it serves thee right, thou evil wench, filching my Lady Countess’s mirror from her very chamber, when it might have been broken for all thanks to thee. The Venice glass that the merchant gave her! Thou art not so fair a sight, I trow, as to be in haste to see thyself. At the bottom of all the scathe in the Castle! We shall be well rid of thee.”

So loud was the oburgation of the tirewoman that she did not hear the approach of her mistress, nor indeed the first words of the Countess, “Hush, Maudlin, the poor child is not to be thus rated! Silence!”

“See, my lady, what she has done to your ladyship’s Venice glass, which she never should have touched. She must have run to your chamber while you were at mass. All false her feigning to be so sick and feeble.”

“Ay,” replied Lady Whitburn, “she must up—don her clothes, and away with me.”

“Hush, I pray you, madam. How, how, Grisell, my poor child. Call Master Miles, Maudlin! Give me that water.” The Countess was raising the poor child in her arms, and against her bosom, for the shock of that glance in the mirror, followed by the maid’s harsh reproaches, and fright at the arrival of the two ladies, had brought on a choking, hysterical sort of convulsive fit, and the poor girl writhed and gasped on Lady Salisbury’s breast, while her mother exclaimed, “Heed her not, Lady; it is all put on to hinder me from taking her home. If she could go stealing to your room—”

“No, no,” broke out a weeping, frightened voice. “It was I, Lady Aunt. You bade me never tell her how her poor face looked, and when she begged and prayed me, I did not say, but I fetched the mirror. Oh! oh! It has not been the death of her.”

“Nay, nay, by God’s blessing! Take away the glass, Margaret. Go and tell thy beads, child; thou hast done much scathe unwittingly! Ah, Master Miles, come to the poor maid’s aid. Canst do aught for her?”

“These humours must be drawn off, my lady,” said the barber-surgeon, who advanced to the bed, and felt the pulse of the poor little patient. “I must let her blood.”

Maudlin, whose charge she was, came to his help, and Countess Alice still held her up, while, after the practice of those days, he bled the already almost unconscious child, till she fainted and was laid down again on her pillows, under the keeping of Maudlin, while the clanging of the great bell called the family down to the meal which broke fast, whether to be called breakfast or dinner.

It was plain that Grisell was in no state to be taken on a journey, and her mother went grumbling down the stair at the unchancy bairn always doing scathe.

Lord Salisbury, beside whom she sat, courteously, though perhaps hardly willingly, invited her to remain till her daughter was ready to move.

“Nay, my Lord, I am beholden to you, but I may scarce do that. I be sorely needed at Whitburn Tower. The knaves go all agee when both my lord and myself have our backs turned, and my lad bairns—worth a dozen of yon whining maid—should no longer be left to old Cuthbert Ridley and Nurse. Now the Queen and Somerset have their way ’tis all misrule, and who knows what the Scots may do?”

“There are Nevils and Dacres enough between Whitburn and the Border,” observed the Earl gravely. However, the visitor was not such an agreeable one as to make him anxious to press her stay beyond what hospitality demanded, and his wife could not bear to think of giving over her poor little patient to such usage as she would have met with on the journey.

Lady Whitburn was overheard saying that those who had mauled the maid might mend her, if they could; and accordingly she acquiesced, not too graciously, when the Countess promised to tend the child like her own, and send her by and by to Whitburn under a safe escort; and as Middleham Castle lay on the way to Whitburn, it was likely that means would be found of bringing or sending her.

This settled, Lady Whitburn was restless to depart, so as to reach a hostel before night.

She donned her camlet cloak and hood, and looked once more in upon Grisell, who after her loss of blood, had, on reviving, been made to swallow a draught of which an infusion of poppy heads formed a great part, so that she lay, breathing heavily, in a deep sleep, moaning now and then. Her mother did not scruple to try to rouse her with calls of “Grizzy! Look up, wench!” but could elicit nothing but a half turn on the pillow, and a little louder moan, and Master Miles, who was still watching, absolutely refused to let his patient be touched or shaken.

“Well a day!” said Lady Whitburn, softened for a moment, “what the Saints will must be, I trow; but it is hard, and I shall let St. Cuthbert of Durham know it, that after all the candles I have given him, he should have let my poor maid be so mauled and marred, and then forsaken by the rascal who did it, so that she will never be aught but a dead weight on my two fair sons! The least he can do for me now is to give me my revenge upon that lurdane runaway knight and his son. But he hath no care for lassies. Mayhap St. Hilda may serve me better.”

Wherewith the Lady of Whitburn tramped down stairs. It may be feared that in the ignorance in which northern valleys were left she was very little more enlightened in her ideas of what would please the Saints, or what they could do for her, than were the old heathen of some unknown antiquity who used to worship in the mysterious circles of stones which lay on the downs of Amesbury.

CHAPTER IV

PARTING

*There in the holy house at Almesbury
Weeping, none with her save a little maid.*

Tennyson, Idylls of the King.

The agitations of that day had made Grisell so much worse that her mind hardly awoke again to anything but present suffering from fever, and in consequence the aggravation of the wounds on her neck and cheek. She used to moan now and then “Don’t take me away!” or cower in terror, “She is coming!” being her cry, or sometimes “So foul and loathly.” She hung again between life and death, and most of those around thought death would be far better for the poor child, but the Countess and the Chaplain still held to the faith that she must be reserved for some great purpose if she survived so much.

Great families with all their train used to move from one castle or manor to another so soon as they had eaten up all the produce of one place, and the time had come when the Nevils must perforce quit Amesbury. Grisell was in no state for a long journey; she was exceedingly weak, and as fast as one wound in her face and neck healed another began to break out, so that often she could hardly eat, and whether she would ever have the use of her left eye was doubtful.

Master Miles was at his wits’ end, Maudlin was weary of waiting on her, and so in truth was every one except the good Countess, and she could not always be with the sufferer, nor could she carry such a patient to London, whither her lord was summoned to support his brother-in-law, the Duke of York, against the Duke of Somerset.

The only delay was caused by the having to receive the newly-appointed Bishop, Richard Beauchamp, who had been translated from his former see at Hereford on the murder of his predecessor, William Ayscough, by some of Jack Cade’s party.

In full splendour he came, with a train of chaplains and cross-bearers, and the clergy of Salisbury sent a deputation to meet him, and to arrange with him for his reception and installation.

It was then that the Countess heard that there was a nun at Wilton Abbey so skilled in the treatment of wounds and sores that she was thought to work miracles, being likewise a very holy woman.

The Earl and Countess would accompany the new bishop to be present at his enthronement and the ensuing banquet, and the lady made this an opportunity of riding to the convent on her way back, consulting the Abbess, whom she had long known, and likewise seeing Sister Avice, and requesting that her poor little guest might be received and treated there.

There was no chance of a refusal, for the great nobles were sovereigns in their own domains; the Countess owned half Wiltshire, and was much loved and honoured in all the religious houses for her devotion and beneficence.

The nuns were only too happy to undertake to receive the demoiselle Grisell Dacre of Whitburn, or any other whom my Lady Countess would entrust to them, and the Abbess had no doubt that Sister Avice could effect a cure.

Lady Salisbury dreaded that Grisell should lie awake all night crying, so she said nothing till her whirlicote, as the carriage of those days was called, was actually being prepared, and then she went to the chamber where the poor child had spent five months, and where she was now sitting dressed, but propped up on a sort of settle, and with half her face still bandaged.

“My little maid, this is well,” said the Countess. “Come with me. I am going to take thee to a kind and holy dame who will, I trust, with the blessing of Heaven, be able to heal thee better than we have done.”

“Oh, lady, lady, do not send me away!” cried Grisell; “not from you and Madge.”

“My child, I must do so; I am going away myself, with my lord, and Madge is to go back with her brother to her father the Duke. Thou couldst not brook the journey, and I will take thee myself to the good Sister Avice.”

“A nun, a nunnery,” sighed Grisell. “Oh! I shall be mewed up there and never come forth again! Do not, I pray, do not, good my lady, send me thither!”

Perhaps my lady thought that to remain for life in a convent might be the fate, and perhaps the happiest, of the poor blighted girl, but she only told her that there was no reason she should not leave Wilton, as she was not put there to take the vows, but only to be cured.

Long nursing had made Grisell unreasonable, and she cried as much as she dared over the order; but no child ventured to make much resistance to elders in those days, and especially not to the Countess, so Grisell, a very poor little wasted being, was carried down, and only delayed in the hall for an affectionate kiss from Margaret of York.

“And here is a keepsake, Grisell,” she said. “Mine own beauteous pouncet box, with the forget-me-nots in turquoises round each little hole.”

“I will keep it for ever,” said Grisell, and they parted, but not as girls part who hope to meet again, and can write letters constantly, but with tearful eyes and clinging hands, as little like to meet again, or even to hear more of one another.

The whirlicote was not much better than an ornamental waggon, and Lady Salisbury, with the Mother of the Maids, did their best to lessen the force of the jolts as by six stout horses it was dragged over the chalk road over the downs, passing the wonderful stones of Amesbury—a wider circle than even Stonehenge, though without the triliths, *i.e.* the stones laid one over the tops of the other two like a doorway. Grisell heard some thing murmured about Merlin and Arthur and Guinevere, but she did not heed, and she was quite worn out with fatigue by the time they reached the descent into the long smooth valley where Wilton Abbey stood, and the spire of the Cathedral could be seen rising tall and beautiful.

The convent lay low, among meadows all shut in with fine elm trees, and the cows belonging to the sisters were being driven home, their bells tinkling. There was an outer court, within an arched gate kept by a stout porter, and thus far came the whirlicote and the Countess’s attendants; but a lay portress, in a cap and veil and black dress, came out to receive her as the door of the carriage was opened, and held out her arms to receive the muffled figure of the little visitor. “Ah, poor maid,” she said, “but Sister Avice will soon heal her.”

At the deeply ornamented round archway of the inner gate to the cloistered court stood the Lady Abbess, at the head of all her sisters, drawn up in double line to receive the Countess, whom they took to their refectory and to their chapel.

Of this, however, Grisell saw nothing, for she had been taken into the arms of a tall nun in a black veil. At first she shuddered and would have screamed if she had been a little stronger and less tired, for illness and weakness had brought back the babyish horror of anything black; but she felt soothed by the sweet voice and tender words, “Poor little one! she is fore spent. She shall lie down on a soft bed, and have some sweet milk anon.”

Still a deadly feeling of faintness came upon her before she had been carried to the little bed which had been made ready for her. When she opened her eyes, while a spoon was held to her lips, the first thing she saw was the sweetest, calmest, most motherly of faces bent over her, one arm round her, the other giving her the spoon of some cordial. She looked up and even smiled, though it was a sad contorted smile, which brought a tear into the good sister’s eyes; but then she fell asleep, and only half awoke when the Countess came up to see her for the last time, and bade her farewell with a

kiss on her forehead, and a charge to Sister Avice to watch her well, and be tender with her. Indeed no one could look at Sister Avice's gentle face and think there was much need of the charge.

Sister Avice was one of the women who seem to be especially born for the gentlest tasks of womanhood. She might have been an excellent wife and mother, but from the very hour of her birth she had been vowed to be a nun in gratitude on her mother's part for her father's safety at Agincourt.

She had been placed at Wilton when almost a baby, and had never gone farther from it than on very rare occasions to the Cathedral at Salisbury; but she had grown up with a wonderful instinct for nursing and healing, and had a curious insight into the properties of herbs, as well as a soft deft hand and touch, so that for some years she had been sister infirmarer, and moreover the sick were often brought to the gates for her counsel, treatment, or, as some believed, even her healing touch.

When Grisell awoke she was alone in the long, large, low room, which was really built over the Norman cloister. The walls were of pale creamy stone, but at the end where she lay there were hangings of faded tapestry. At one end there was a window, through the thick glass of which could be dimly seen, as Grisell raised herself a little, beautiful trees, and the splendid spire of the Cathedral rising, as she dreamily thought, like a finger pointing upwards. Nearer were several more narrow windows along the side of the room, and that beside her bed had the lattice open, so that she saw a sloping green bank, with a river at the foot; and there was a trim garden between. Opposite to her there seemed to be another window with a curtain drawn across it, through which came what perhaps had wakened her, a low, clear murmuring tone, pausing and broken by the full, sweet, if rather shrill response in women's voices. Beneath that window was a little altar, with a crucifix and two candlesticks, a holy-water stoup by the side, and there was above the little deep window a carving of the Blessed Virgin with the Holy Child, on either side a niche, one with a figure of a nun holding a taper, the other of a bishop with a book.

Grisell might have begun crying again at finding herself alone, but the sweet chanting lulled her, and she lay back on her pillows, half dozing but quite content, except that the wound on her neck felt stiff and dry; and by and by when the chanting ceased, the kind nun, with a lay sister, came back again carrying water and other appliances, at sight of which Grisell shuddered, for Master Miles never touched her without putting her to pain.

"*Benedicite*, my little maid, thou art awake," said Sister Avice. "I thought thou wouldst sleep till the vespers were ended. Now let us dress these sad wounds of thine, and thou shalt sleep again."

Grisell submitted, as she knew she must, but to her surprise Sister Avice's touch was as soft and soothing as were her words, and the ointment she applied was fragrant and delicious and did not burn or hurt her.

She looked up gratefully, and murmured her thanks, and then the evening meal was brought in, and she sat up to partake of it on the seat of the window looking out on the Cathedral spire. It was a milk posset far more nicely flavoured than what she had been used to at Amesbury, where, in spite of the Countess's kindness, the master cook had grown tired of any special service for the Dacre wench; and unless Margaret of York secured fruit for her, she was apt to be regaled with only the scraps that Maudlin managed to cater for her after the meals were over.

After that, Sister Avice gently undressed her, took care that she said her prayers, and sat by her till she fell asleep, herself telling her that she should sleep beside her, and that she would hear the voices of the sisters singing in the chapel their matins and lauds. Grisell did hear them, as in a dream, but she had not slept so well since her disaster as she slept on that night.

CHAPTER V

SISTER AVICE

*Love, to her ear, was but a name
Combined with vanity and shame;
Her hopes, her fears, her joys, were all
Bounded within the cloister wall.*

Scott, Marmion.

Sister Avice sat in the infirmary, diligently picking the leaves off a large mass of wood-sorrel which had been brought to her by the children around, to make therewith a conserve.

Grisell lay on her couch. She had been dressed, and had knelt at the window, where the curtain was drawn back while mass was said by the Chaplain, the nuns kneeling in their order and making their responses. It was a low-browed chapel of Norman or even older days, with circular arches and heavy round piers, and so dark that the gleam of the candles was needed to light it.

Grisell watched, till tired with kneeling she went back to her couch, slept a little, and then wondered to see Sister Avice still compounding her simples.

She moved wearily, and sighed for Madge to come in and tell her all the news of Amesbury—who was riding at the ring, or who had shot the best bolt, or who had had her work picked out as not neat or well shaded enough.

Sister Avice came and shook up her pillow, and gave her a dried plum and a little milk, and began to talk to her.

“You will soon be better,” she said, “and then you will be able to play in the garden.”

“Is there any playfellow for me?” asked Grisell.

“There is a little maid from Bemerton, who comes daily to learn her hornbook and her sampler. Mayhap she will stay and play with you.”

“I had Madge at Amesbury; I shall love no one as well as Madge! See what she gave me.”

Grisell displayed her pouncet box, which was duly admired, and then she asked wearily whether she should always have to stay in the convent.

“Oh no, not of need,” said the sister. “Many a maiden who has been here for a time has gone out into the world, but some love this home the best, as I have done.”

“Did yonder nun on the wall?” asked Grisell.

“Yea, truly. She was bred here, and never left it, though she was a King’s daughter. Edith was her name, and two days after Holy Cross day we shall keep her feast. Shall I tell you her story?”

“Prithee, prithee!” exclaimed Grisell. “I love a tale dearly.”

Sister Avice told the legend, how St. Edith grew in love and tenderness at Wilton, and how she loved the gliding river and the flowers in the garden, and how all loved her, her young playmates especially. She promised one who went away to be wedded that she would be godmother to her first little daughter, but ere the daughter was born the saintly Edith had died. The babe was carried to be christened in the font at Winchester Cathedral, and by a great and holy man, no other than Alphegius, who was then Bishop of Winchester, but was made Archbishop of Canterbury, and died a holy martyr.

“Then,” said Sister Avice, “there was a great marvel, for among the sponsors around the square black font there stood another figure in the dress of our Mother Abbess, and as the Bishop spake and said, “Bear this taper, in token that thy lamp shall be alight when the Bridegroom cometh,” the form held the torch, shining bright, clear, and like no candle or light on earth ever shone, and the face was the face of the holy Edith. It is even said that she held the babe, but that I know not, being

a spirit without a body, but she spake the name, her own name Edith. And when the holy rite was over, she had vanished away.”

“And that is she, with the lamp in her hand? Oh, I should have been afraid!” cried Grisell.

“Not of the holy soul?” said the sister.

“Oh! I hope she will never come in here, by the little window into the church,” cried Grisell trembling.

Indeed, for some time, in spite of all Sister Avice could say, Grisell could not at night be free from the fear of a visit from St. Edith, who, as she was told, slept her long sleep in the church below.

It may be feared that one chief reliance was on the fact that she could not be holy enough for a vision of the Saint, but this was not so valuable to her as the touch of Sister Avice’s kind hand, or the very knowing her present.

That story was the prelude to many more. Grisell wanted to hear it over again, and then who was the Archbishop martyr, and who were the Virgins in memory of whom the lamps were carried.

Both these, and many another history, parable, or legend were told her by Sister Avice, training her soul, throughout the long recovery, which was still very slow, but was becoming more confirmed every day. Grisell could use her eye, turn her head, and the wounds closed healthily under the sister’s treatment without showing symptoms of breaking out afresh; and she grew in strength likewise, first taking a walk in the trim garden and orchard, and by and by being pronounced able to join the other girl scholars of the convent. Only here was the first demur. Her looks did not recover with her health. She remained with a much-seamed neck, and a terrible scar across each cheek, on one side purple, and her eyebrows were entirely gone.

She seemed to have forgotten the matter while she was entirely in the infirmary, with no companion but Sister Avice, and occasionally a lay sister, who came to help; but the first time she went down the turret stair into the cloister—a beautiful succession of arches round a green court—she met a novice and a girl about her own age; the elder gave a little scream at the sight and ran away.

The other hung back. “Mary, come hither,” said Sister Avice. “This is Grisell Dacre, who hath suffered so much. Wilt thou not come and kiss and welcome her?”

Mary came forward rather reluctantly, but Grisell drew up her head within, “Oh, if you had liefer not!” and turned her back on the girl.

Sister Avice followed as Grisell walked away as fast as her weakness allowed, and found her sitting breathless at the third step on the stairs.

“Oh, no—go away—don’t bring her. Every one will hate me,” sobbed the poor child.

Avice could only gather her into her arms, though embraces were against the strict rule of Benedictine nuns, and soothe and coax her to believe that by one at least she was not hated.

“I had forgotten,” said Grisell. “I saw myself once at Amesbury! but my face was not well then. Let me see again, sister! Where’s a mirror?”

“Ah! my child, we nuns are not allowed the use of worldly things like mirrors; I never saw one in my life.”

“But oh, for pity’s sake, tell me what like am I. Am I so loathly?”

“Nay, my dear maid, I love thee too well to think of aught save that thou art mine own little one, given back to us by the will of Heaven. Aye, and so will others think of thee, if thou art good and loving to them.”

“Nay, nay, none will ever love me! All will hate and flee from me, as from a basilisk or cockatrice, or the Loathly Worm of Spindlesheugh,” sobbed Grisell.

“Then, my maid, thou must win them back by thy sweet words and kind deeds. They are better than looks. And here too they shall soon think only of what thou art, not of what thou look’st.”

“But know you, sister, how—how I should have been married to Leonard Copeland, the very youth that did me this despite, and he is fair and beauteous as a very angel, and I did love him so,

and now he and his father rid away from Amesbury, and left me because I am so foul to see,” cried Grisell, between her sobs.

“If they could treat thee thus despiteously, he would surely not have made thee a good husband,” reasoned the sister.

“But I shall never have a husband now,” wailed Grisell.

“Belike not,” said Sister Avice; “but, my sweetheart, there is better peace and rest and cheer in such a home as this holy house, than in the toils and labours of the world. When my sisters at Dunbridge and Dinton come to see me they look old and careworn, and are full of tales of the turmoil and trouble of husbands, and sons, and dues, and tenants’ fees, and villeins, and I know not what, that I often think that even in this world’s sense I am the best off. And far above and beyond that,” she added, in a low voice, “the virgin hath a hope, a Spouse beyond all human thought.”

Grisell did not understand the thought, and still wept bitterly. “Must she be a nun all her life?” was all she thought of, and the shady cloister seemed to her like a sort of prison. Sister Avice had to soothe and comfort her, till her tears were all spent, as so often before, and she had cried herself so ill that she had to be taken back to her bed and lie down again. It was some days before she could be coaxed out again to encounter any companions.

However, as time went on, health, and with it spirits and life, came back to Grisell Dacre at Wilton, and she became accustomed to being with the other inmates of the fine old convent, as they grew too much used to her appearance to be startled or even to think about it. The absence of mirrors prevented it from ever being brought before her, and Sister Avice set herself to teach her how goodness, sweetness, and kindness could endear any countenance, and indeed Grisell saw for herself how much more loved was the old and very plain Mother Anne than the very beautiful young Sister Isabel, who had been forced into the convent by her tyrannical brother, and wore out her life in fretting and rudeness to all who came in her way. She declared that the sight of Grisell made her ill, and insisted that the veiled hood which all the girls wore should be pulled forward whenever they came near one another, and that Grisell’s place should be out of her sight in chapel or refectory.

Every one else, however, was very kind to the poor girl, Sister Avice especially so, and Grisell soon forgot her disfigurement when she ceased to suffer from it. She had begun to learn reading, writing, and a little Latin, besides spinning, stitchery, and a few housewifely arts, in the Countess of Salisbury’s household, for every lady was supposed to be educated in these arts, and great establishments were schools for the damsels there bred up. It was the same with convent life, and each nunnery had traditional works of its own, either in embroidery, cookery, or medicine. Some secrets there were not imparted beyond the professed nuns, and only to the more trustworthy of them, so that each sisterhood might have its own especial glory in confections, whether in portrait-worked vestments, in illuminations, in sweetmeats, or in salves and unguents; but the pensioners were instructed in all those common arts of bakery, needlework, notability, and surgery which made the lady of a castle or manor so important, and within the last century in the more fashionable abbeys Latin of a sort, French “of the school of Stratford le Bowe,” and the like, were added. Thus Grisell learnt as an apt scholar these arts, and took especial delight in helping Sister Avice to compound her simples, and acquired a tender hand with which to apply them.

Moreover, she learnt not only to say and sing her Breviary, but to know the signification in English. There were translations of the Lord’s Prayer and Creed in the hands of all careful and thoughtful people, even among the poor, if they had a good parish priest, or had come under the influence of the better sort of friars. In convents where discipline was kept up the meaning was carefully taught, and there were English primers in the hands of all the devout, so that the services could be intelligently followed even by those who did not learn Latin, as did Grisell. Selections from Scripture history, generally clothed in rhyme, and versified lives of the Saints, were read aloud at meal-times in the refectory, and Grisell became so good a reader that she was often chosen to chant out the sacred story, and her sweet northern voice was much valued in the singing in the church. She

was quite at home there, and though too young to be admitted as a novice, she wore a black dress and white hood like theirs, and the annual gifts to the nunnery from the Countess of Salisbury were held to entitle her to the residence there as a pensioner. She had fully accepted the idea of spending her life there, sheltered from the world, among the kind women whom she loved, and who had learnt to love her, and in devotion to God, and works of mercy to the sick.

CHAPTER VI THE PROCTOR

*But if a mannes soul were in his purse,
For in his purse he should yfurnished be.*

Chaucer, Canterbury Pilgrims.

Five years had passed since Grisell had been received at Wilton, when the Abbess died. She had been infirm and confined to her lodging for many months, and Grisell had hardly seen her, but her death was to change the whole tenor of the maiden's life.

The funeral ceremonies took place in full state. The Bishop himself came to attend them, and likewise all the neighbouring clergy, and the monks, friars, and nuns, overflowing the chapel, while peasants and beggars for whom there was no room in the courts encamped outside the walls, to receive the dole and pray for the soul of the right reverend Mother Abbess.

For nine days constant services were kept up, and the requiem mass was daily said, the dirges daily sung, and the alms bestowed on the crowd, who were by no means specially sorrowful or devout, but beguiled the time by watching *jongleurs* and mountebanks performing beyond the walls.

There was the "Month's Mind" still to come, and then the chapter of nuns intended to proceed to the election of their new Abbess, unanimously agreeing that she should be their present Prioress, who had held kindly rule over them through the slow to-decay of the late Abbess. Before, however, this could be done a messenger arrived on a mule bearing an inhibition to the sisters to proceed in the election.

His holiness Pope Calixtus had reserved to himself the next appointment to this as well as to certain other wealthy abbeys.

The nuns in much distress appealed to the Bishop, but he could do nothing for them. Such reservations had been constant in the subservient days that followed King John's homage, and though the great Edwards had struggled against them, and the yoke had been shaken off during the Great Schism, no sooner had this been healed than the former claims were revived, nay, redoubled, and the pious Henry VI. was not the man to resist them. The sisters therefore waited in suspense, daring only meekly to recommend their Prioress in a humble letter, written by the Chaplain, and backed by a recommendation from Bishop Beauchamp. Both alike were disregarded, as all had expected.

The new Abbess thus appointed was the Madre Matilda de Borgia, a relation of Pope Calixtus, very noble, and of Spanish birth, as the Commissioner assured the nuns; but they had never heard of her before, and were not at all gratified. They had always elected their Abbess before, and had quite made up their minds as to the choice of the present Mother Prioress as Abbess, and of Sister Avice as Prioress.

However, they had only to submit. To appeal to the King or to their Bishop would have been quite useless; they could only do as the Pope commanded, and elect the Mother Matilda, consoling themselves with the reflection that she was not likely to trouble herself about them, and their old Prioress would govern them. And so she did so far as regarded the discipline of the house, but what they had not so entirely understood was the Mother de Borgia's desire to squeeze all she could out of the revenues of the house.

Her Proctor arrived, a little pinched man in a black gown and square cap, and desired to see the Mother Prioress and her steward, and to overlook the income and expenditure of the convent; to know who had duly paid her dowry to the nunnery, what were the rents, and the like. The sisters had

already raised a considerable gift in silver merks to be sent through Lombard merchants to their new Abbess, and this requisition was a fresh blow.

Presently the Proctor marked out Grisell Dacre, and asked on what terms she was at the convent.

It was explained that she had been brought thither for her cure by the Lady of Salisbury, and had stayed on, without fee or payment from her own home in the north, but the ample donations of the Earl of Salisbury had been held as full compensation, and it had been contemplated to send to the maiden's family to obtain permission to enrol her as a sister after her novitiate—which might soon begin, as she was fifteen years old.

The Proctor, however, was much displeased. The nuns had no right to receive a pensioner without payment, far less to admit a novice as a sister without a dowry.

Mistress Grisell must be returned instantly upon the hands either of her own family or of the Countess of Salisbury, and certainly not readmitted unless her dowry were paid. He scarcely consented to give time for communication with the Countess, to consider how to dispose of the poor child.

The Prioress sent messengers to Amesbury and to Christ Church, but the Earl and Countess were not there, nor was it clear where they were likely to be. Whitburn was too far off to send to in the time allowed by the Proctor, and Grisell had heard nothing from her home all the time she had been at Wilton. The only thing that the Prioress could devise, was to request the Chaplain to seek her out at Salisbury a trustworthy escort, pilgrim, merchant or other, with whom Grisell might safely travel to London, and if the Earl and Countess were not there, some responsible person of theirs, or of their son's, was sure to be found, who would send the maiden on.

The Chaplain mounted his mule and rode over to Salisbury, whence he returned, bringing with him news of a merchant's wife who was about to go on pilgrimage to fulfil a vow at Walsingham, and would feel herself honoured by acting as the convoy of the Lady Grisell Dacre as far at least as London.

There was no further hope of delay or failure. Poor Grisell must be cast out on the world—the Proctor even spoke of calling the Countess, or her steward, to account for her maintenance during these five years.

There was weeping and wailing in the cloisters at the parting, and Grisell clung to Sister Avice, mourning for her peaceful, holy life.

“Nay, my child, none can take from thee a holy life.”

“If I make a vow of virginity none can hinder me.”

“That was not what I meant. No maid has a right to take such a vow on herself without consent of her father, nor is it binding otherwise. No! but no one can take away from a Christian maid the power of holiness. Bear that for ever in mind, sweetheart. Naught that can be done by man or by devil to the body can hurt the soul that is fixed on Christ and does not consent to evil.”

“The Saints forefend that ever—ever I should consent to evil.”

“It is the Blessed Spirit alone who can guard thy will, my child. Will and soul not consenting nor being led astray thou art safe. Nay, the lack of a fair-favoured face may be thy guard.”

“All will hate me. Alack! alack!”

“Not so. See, thou hast won love amongst us. Wherefore shouldst not thou in like manner win love among thine own people?”

“My mother hates me already, and my father heeds me not.”

“Love them, child! Do them good offices! None can hinder thee from that.”

“Can I love those who love not me?”

“Yea, little one. To serve and tend another brings the heart to love. Even as thou seest a poor dog love the master who beats him, so it is with us, only with the higher Christian love. Service and prayer open the heart to love, hoping for nothing again, and full oft that which was not hoped for is vouchsafed.”

That was the comfort with which Grisell had to start from her home of peace, conducted by the Chaplain, and even the Prioress, who would herself give her into the hands of the good Mistress Hall.

Very early they heard mass in the convent, and then rode along the bank of the river, with the downs sloping down on the other side, and the grand spire ever seeming as it were taller as they came nearer; while the sound of the bells grew upon them, for there was then a second tower beyond to hold the bells, whose reverberation would have been dangerous to the spire, and most sweet was their chime, the sound of which had indeed often reached Wilton in favourable winds; but it sounded like a sad farewell to Grisell.

The Prioress thought she ought to begin her journey by kneeling in the Cathedral, so they crossed the shaded close and entered by the west door with the long vista of clustered columns and pointed arches before them.

Low sounds of mass being said at different altars met their ears, for it was still early in the day. The Prioress passed the length of nave, and went beyond the choir to the lady chapel, with its slender supporting columns and exquisite arches, and there she, with Grisell by her side, joined in earnest supplications for the child.

The Chaplain touched her as she rose, and made her aware that the dame arrayed in a scarlet mantle and hood and dark riding-dress was Mistress Hall.

Silence was not observed in cathedrals or churches, especially in the naves, except when any sacred rite was going on, and no sooner was the mass finished and "*Ite missa est*" pronounced than the scarlet cloak rose, and hastened into the south transept, where she waited for the Chaplain, Prioress, and Grisell. No introduction seemed needed. "The Holy Mother Prioress," she began, bending her knee and kissing the lady's hand. "Much honoured am I by the charge of this noble little lady."

Grisell by the by was far taller than the plump little goodwoman Hall, but that was no matter, and the Prioress had barely space to get in a word of thanks before she went on: "I will keep her and tend her as the apple of mine eye. She shall pray with me at all the holy shrines for the good of her soul and mine. She shall be my bedfellow wherever we halt, and sit next me, and be cherished as though she were mine own daughter—ladybird as she is—till I can give her into the hands of the good Lady Countess. Oh yes—you may trust Joan Hall, dame reverend mother. She is no new traveller. I have been in my time to all our shrines—to St. Thomas of Canterbury, to St. Winifred's Well, aye, and, moreover, to St. James of Compostella, and St. Martha of Provence, not to speak of lesser chantries and Saints. Aye, and I crossed the sea to see the holy coat of Trèves, and St. Ursula's eleven thousand skulls—and a gruesome sight they were. Nay, if the Lady Countess be not in London it would cost me little to go on to the north with her. There's St. Andrew of Ely, Hugh, great St. Hugh and little St. Hugh, both of them at Lincoln, and there's St. Wilfred of York, and St. John of Beverly, not to speak of St. Cuthbert of Durham and of St. Hilda of Whitby, who might take it ill if I pray at none of their altars, when I have been to so many of their brethren. Oh, you may trust me, reverend mother; I'll never have the young lady, bless her sweet face, out of my sight till I have safe bestowed her with my Lady Countess, our good customer for all manner of hardware, or else with her own kin."

The good woman's stream of conversation lasted almost without drawing breath all the way down the nave. It was a most good-humoured hearty voice, and her plump figure and rosy face beamed with good nature, while her bright black eyes had a lively glance.

The Chaplain had inquired about her, and found that she was one of the good women to whom pilgrimage was an annual dissipation, consecrated and meritorious as they fondly believed, and gratifying their desire for change and variety. She was a kindly person of good reputation, trustworthy, and kind to the poor, and stout John Hall, her husband, could manage the business alone, and was thought not to regret a little reprieve from her continual tongue.

She wanted the Prioress to do her the honour of breaking her fast with her, but the good nun was in haste to return, after having once seen her charge in safe hands, and excused herself, while Grisell, blessed by the Chaplain, and hiding her tears under her veil, was led away to the substantial

smith's abode, where she was to take a first meal before starting on her journey on the strong forest pony which the Chaplain's care had provided for her.

CHAPTER VII

THE PILGRIM OF SALISBURY

*She hadde passed many a strange shrine,
At Rome she had been and at Boleine,
At Galice, at St. James, and at Coleine,
She could moche of wandering by the way.*

Chaucer, Canterbury Pilgrims.

Grisell found herself brought into a hall where a stout oak table occupied the centre, covered with home-spun napery, on which stood trenchers, wooden bowls, pewter and a few silver cups, and several large pitchers of ale, small beer, or milk. A pie and a large piece of bacon, also a loaf of barley bread and a smaller wheaten one, were there.

Shelves all round the walls shone with pewter and copper dishes, cups, kettles, and vessels and implements of all household varieties, and ranged round the floor lay ploughshares, axes, and mattocks, all polished up. The ring of hammers on the anvil was heard in the court in the rear. The front of the hall was open for the most part, without windows, but it could be closed at night.

Breakfast was never a regular meal, and the household had partaken of it, so that there was no one in the hall excepting Master Hall, a stout, brawny, grizzled man, with a good-humoured face, and his son, more slim, but growing into his likeness, also a young notable-looking daughter-in-law with a swaddled baby tucked under her arm.

They seated Grisell at the table, and implored her to eat. The wheaten bread and the fowl were, it seemed, provided in her honour, and she could not but take her little knife from the sheath in her girdle, turn back her nun-like veil, and prepare to try to drive back her sobs, and swallow the milk of almonds pressed on her.

“Eh!” cried the daughter-in-law in amaze. “She’s only scarred after all.”

“Well, what else should she be, bless her poor heart?” said Mrs. Hall the elder.

“Why, wasn’t it thou thyself, good mother, that brought home word that they had the pig-faced lady at Wilton there?”

“Bless thee, Agnes, thou should’st know better than to lend an ear to all the idle tales thy poor old mother may hear at market or fair.”

“Then should we have enough to do,” muttered her husband.

“And as thou seest, ’tis a sweet little face, only cruelly marred by the evil hap.”

Poor Grisell was crimson at finding all eyes on her, an ordeal she had never undergone in the convent, and she hastily pulled forward her veil.

“Nay now, my sweet young lady, take not the idle words in ill part,” pleaded the good hostess.

“We all know how to love thee, and what is a smooth skin to a true heart? Take a bit more of the pasty, ladybird; we’ll have far to ride ere we get to Wherwell, where the good sisters will give us a meal for young St. Edward’s sake and thy Prioress’s. Aye—I turn out of my way for that; I never yet paid my devotion to poor young King Edward, and he might take it in dudgeon, being a king, and his shrine so near at hand.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the smith; “trust my dame for being on the right side of the account with the Saints. Well for me and Jack that we have little Agnes here to mind the things on earth meanwhile.

Nay, nay, dame, I say nought to hinder thee; I know too well what it means when spring comes, and thou beginn’st to moan and tell up the tale of the shrines where thou hast not told thy beads.”

It was all in good humour, and Master Hall walked out to the city gate to speed his gad-about or pious wife, whichever he might call her, on her way, apparently quite content to let her go on her pilgrimages for the summer quarter.

She rode a stout mule, and was attended by two sturdy varlets—quite sufficient guards for pilgrims, who were not supposed to carry any valuables. Grisell sadly rode her pony, keeping her veil well over her face, yearning over the last view of the beloved spire, thinking of Sister Avice ministering to her poor, and with a very definite fear of her own reception in the world and dread of her welcome at home. Yet there was a joy in being on horseback once more, for her who had ridden moorland ponies as soon as she could walk.

Goodwife Hall talked on, with anecdotes of every hamlet that they passed, and these were not very many. At each church they dismounted and said their prayers, and if there were a hostel near, they let their animals feed the while, and obtained some refreshment themselves. England was not a very safe place for travellers just then, but the cockle-shells sewn to the pilgrim's hat of the dame, and to that of one of her attendants, and the tall staff and wallet each carried, were passports of security.

Nothing could be kinder than Mistress Hall was to her charge, of whom she was really proud, and when they halted for the night at the nunnery of Queen Elfrida at Wherwell, she took care to explain that this was no burgess's daughter but the Lady Grisell Dacre of Whitburn, trusted to *her* convoy, and thus obtained for her quarters in the guest-chamber of the refectory instead of in the general hospitium; but on the whole Grisell had rather not have been exposed to the shock of being shown to strangers, even kindly ones, for even if they did not exclaim, some one was sure to start and whisper.

After another halt for the night the travellers reached London, and learned at the city gate that the Earl and Countess of Salisbury were absent, but that their eldest son, the Earl of Warwick, was keeping court at Warwick House.

Thither therefore Mistress Hall resolved to conduct Grisell. The way lay through narrow streets with houses overhanging the roadway, but the house itself was like a separate castle, walled round, enclosing a huge space, and with a great arched porter's lodge, where various men-at-arms lounged, all adorned on the arm of their red jackets with the bear and ragged staff.

They were courteous, however, for the Earl Richard of Warwick insisted on civility to all comers, and they respected the scallop-shell on the dame's hat. They greeted her good-humouredly.

"Ha, good-day, good pilgrim wife. Art bound for St. Paul's? Here's supper to the fore for all comers!"

"Thanks, sir porter, but this maid is of other mould; she is the Lady Grisell Dacre, and is company for my lord and my lady."

"Nay, her hood and veil look like company for the Abbess. Come this way, dame, and we will find the steward to marshal her."

Grisell had rather have been left to the guardianship of her kind old friend, but she was obliged to follow. They dismounted in a fine court with cloister-like buildings round it, and full of people of all kinds, for no less than six hundred stout yeomen wore red coats and the bear and ragged staff.

Grisell would fain have clung to her guide, but she was not allowed to do so. She was marshalled up stone steps into a great hall, where tables were being laid, covered with white napery and glittering with silver and pewter.

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