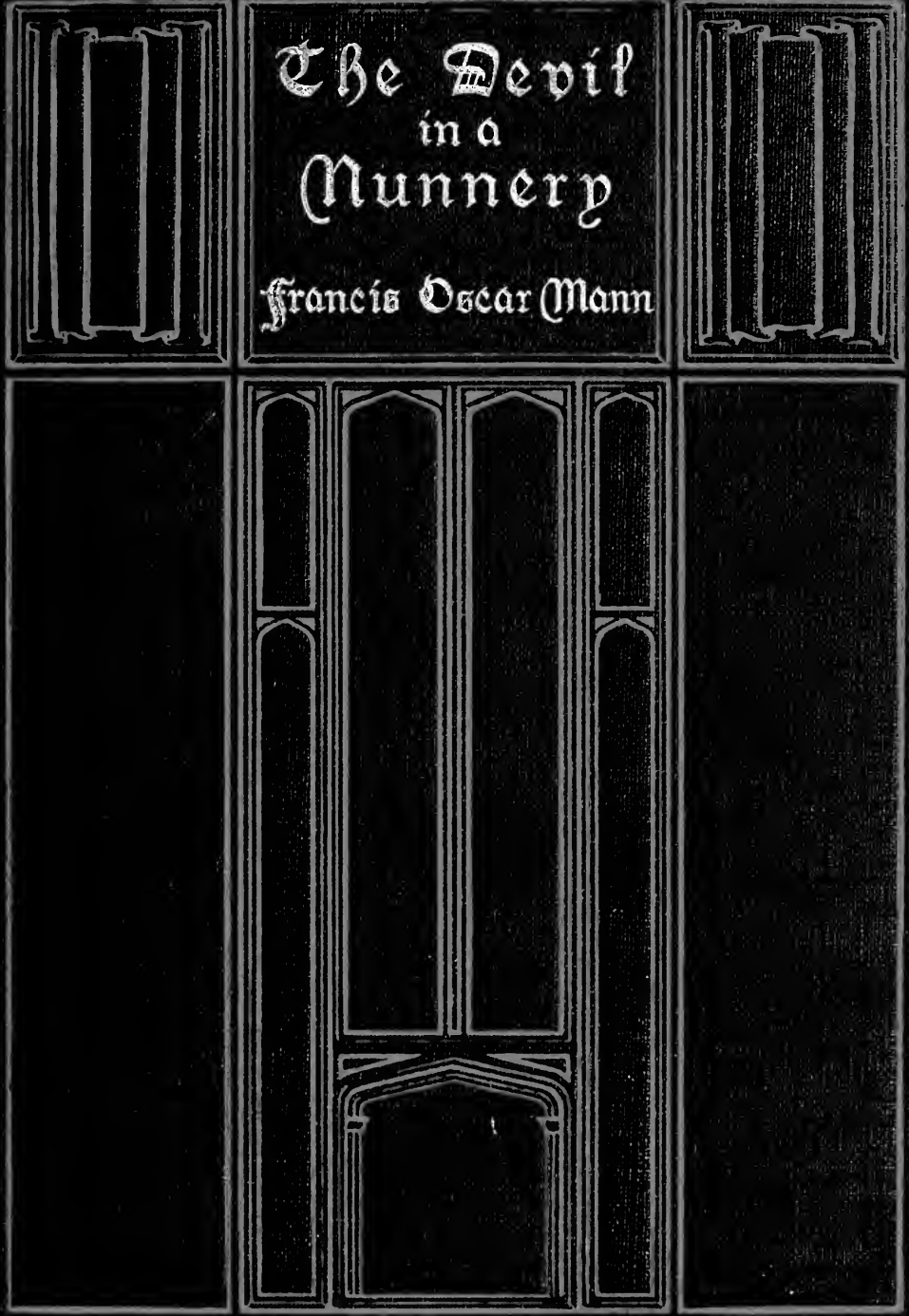
The Devil in a Nunnery

Francis Oscar Mann



THE DEVIL IN A NUNNERY

THE DEVIL IN A NUNNERY

AND OTHER MEDIAEVAL TALES

BY

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BUCKINGHAM is as pleasant a shire as a man shall see on a seven days' journey. Neither was it any less pleasant in the days of our Lord King Edward, the third of that name, he who fought and put the French to shameful discomfiture at Crecy and Poitiers and at many another hard-fought field. May God rest his soul, for he now sleeps in the great Church at Westminster.

Buckinghamshire is full of smooth round hills and woodlands of hawthorn and beech, and it is a famous country for its brooks and shaded waterways running through the low hay meadows. Upon its hills feed a thousand sheep, scattered like the remnants of the spring snow, and it was from these that the merchants made themselves fat purses, sending the wool into Flanders in exchange for silver crowns. There were many strong castles there too, and rich abbeys, and the King's Highway ran through it from North to South, upon which the pilgrims went in crowds to worship at the Shrine of the Blessed Saint Alban. Thereon also rode noble knights and stout men-at-arms,

and these you could follow with the eye by their glistening armour, as they wound over hill and dale, mile after mile, with shining spears and shields and fluttering pennons, and anon a trumpet or two sounding the same keen note as that which rang out dreadfully on those bloody fields of France. The girls used to come to the cottage doors or run to hide themselves in the wayside woods to see them go trampling by; for Buckinghamshire girls love a soldier above all men. Nor, I warrant you, were jolly friars lacking in the highways and the by-ways and under the hedges, good men of religion, comfortable of penance and easy of life, who could tip a wink to a housewife, and drink and crack a joke with the good man, going on their several ways with tight paunches, skins full of ale and a merry salutation for every one. A fat pleasant land was this Buckinghamshire; always plenty to eat and drink therein, and pretty girls and lusty fellows; and God knows what more a man can expect in a world where all is vanity, as the Preacher truly says.

There was a nunnery at Maids Moreton, two miles out from Buckingham Borough, on the road to Stony Stratford, and the place was called Maids Moreton because of the nunnery. Very devout creatures were the nuns, being holy ladies out of families of gentle blood. They punctually

fulfilled to the letter all the commands of the pious founder, just as they were blazoned on the great parchment Regula, which the Lady Mother kept on her reading-desk in her little cell. If ever any of the nuns, by any chance or subtle machination of the Evil One, was guilty of the smallest backsliding from the conduct that beseemed them, they made full and devout confession thereof to the Holy Father who visited them for this purpose. This good man loved swan's meat and galingale, and the charitable nuns never failed to provide of their best for him on his visiting days; and whatsoever penance he laid upon them they performed to the utmost, and with due contrition of heart.

From Matins to Compline they regularly and decently carried out the services of Holy Mother Church. After dinner, one read aloud to them from the Rule, and again after supper there was reading from the life of some notable Saint or Virgin, that thereby they might find ensample for themselves on their own earthly pilgrimage. For the rest, they tended their herb garden, reared their chickens, which were famous for miles around, and kept strict watch over their haywards and swineherds. If time was when they had nothing more important on hand, they set to and made the prettiest blood bandages imaginable for the Bishop, the Bishop's Chaplain,

the Archdeacon, the neighbouring Abbot and other godly men of religion round about, who were forced often to bleed themselves for their health's sake and their eternal salvation, so that these venerable men in process of time came to have by them great chests full of these useful articles. If little tongues wagged now and then as the sisters sat at their sewing in the great hall, who shall blame them, *Eva peccatrice*? Not I; besides, some of them were something stricken in years, and old women are garrulous and hard to be constrained from chattering and gossiping. But being devout women they could have spoken no evil.

One evening after Vespers all these good nuns sat at supper, the Abbess on her high dais and the nuns ranged up and down the hall at the long trestled tables. The Abbess had just said '*Gratias*' and the sisters had sung '*Qui vivit et regnat per omnia secula seculorum, Amen,*' when in came the Manciple mysteriously, and, with many deprecating bows and outstretchings of the hands, sidled himself up upon the dais, and, permission having been given him, spoke to the Lady Mother thus:

'Madam, there is a certain pilgrim at the gate who asks refreshment and a night's lodging.' It is true he spoke softly, but little pink ears are sharp of hearing, and nuns, from their secluded

way of life, love to hear news of the great world.

'Send him away,' said the Abbess. 'It is not fit that a man should lie within this house.'

'Madam, he asks food and a bed of straw lest he should starve of hunger and exhaustion on his way to do penance and worship at the Holy Shrine of the Blessed Saint Alban.'

'What kind of pilgrim is he?'

'Madam, to speak truly, I know not; but he appears of a reverend and gracious aspect, a young man well spoken and well disposed. Madam knows it waxeth late, and the ways are dark and foul.'

'I would not have a young man, who is given to pilgrimages and good works, to faint and starve by the wayside. Let him sleep with the haywards.'

'But, Madam, he is a young man of goodly appearance and conversation; saving your reverence, I would not wish to ask him to eat and sleep with churls.'

'He must sleep without. Let him, however, enter and eat of our poor table.'

'Madam, I will strictly enjoin him what you command. He hath with him, however, an instrument of music and would fain cheer you with spiritual songs.'

A little shiver of anticipation ran down the

benches of the great hall, and the nuns fell to whispering.

'Take care, Sir Manciple, that he be not some light juggler, a singer of vain songs, a mocker. I would not have these quiet halls disturbed by wanton music and unholy words. God forbid.' And she crossed herself.

'Madam, I will answer for it.'

The Manciple bowed himself from the dais and went down the middle of the hall, his keys rattling at his belt. A little buzz of conversation rose from the sisters and went up to the oak roof-trees, like the singing of bees. The Abbess told her beads.

The hall door opened and in came the pilgrim. God knows what manner of man he was; I cannot tell you. He certainly was lean and lithe like a cat, his eyes danced in his head like the very devil, but his cheeks and jaws were as bare of flesh as any hermit's that lives on roots and ditchwater. His yellow-hosed legs went like the tune of a May game, and he screwed and twisted his scarlet-jerkined body in time with them. In his left hand he held a cithern, on which he twanged with his right, making a cunning noise that titillated the backbones of those who heard it, and teased every delicate nerve in the body. Such a tune would have tickled the ribs of Death himself. A queer fellow to go pilgrimaging certainly, but

why, when they saw him, all the young nuns tittered and the old nuns grinned, until they showed their red gums, it is hard to tell. Even the Lady Mother on the dais smiled, though she tried to frown a moment later.

The pilgrim stepped lightly up to the dais, the infernal devil in his legs making the nuns think of the games the village folk play all night in the churchyard on Saint John's Eve.

'Gracious Mother,' he cried, bowing deeply and in comely wise, 'allow a poor pilgrim on his way to confess and do penance at the shrine of Saint Alban to take food in your hall, and to rest with the haywards this night, and let me thereof make some small recompense with a few sacred numbers, such as your pious founder would not have disdained to hear.'

'Young man,' returned the Abbess, 'right glad am I to hear that God has moved thy heart to godly works and to go on pilgrimages, and verily I wish it may be to thy soul's health and to the respite of thy pains hereafter. I am right willing that thou shouldst refresh thyself with meat and rest at this holy place.'

'Madam, I thank thee from my heart, but as some slight token of gratitude for so large a favour, let me, I pray thee, sing one or two of my divine songs, to the uplifting of these holy Sisters' hearts.'

Another burst of chatter, louder than before, from the benches in the hall. One or two of the younger Sisters clapped their plump white hands and cried, 'Oh!' The Lady Abbess held up her hand for silence.

'Verily, I should be glad to hear some sweet songs of religion, and I think it would be to the uplifting of these Sisters' hearts. But, young man, take warning against singing any wanton lines of vain imagination, such as the ribalds use on the highways, and the idlers and haunters of taverns. I have heard them in my youth, although my ears tingle to think of them now, and I should think it shame that any such light words should echo among these sacred rafters or disturb the slumber of our pious founder, who now sleeps in Christ. Let me remind you of what saith Saint Jeremie, *Onager solitarius, in desiderio animae suae, attraxit ventum amoris*; the wild ass of the wilderness, in the desire of his heart, snuffeth up the wind of love; whereby that holy man signifies that vain earthly love, which is but wind and air, and shall avail nothing at all, when this weak, impure flesh is sloughed away.'

'Madam, such songs as I shall sing, I learnt at the mouth of our holy parish priest, Sir Thomas, a man of all good learning and purity of heart.'

'In that case,' said the Abbess, 'sing in God's name, but stand at the end of the hall, for it suits

not the dignity of my office a man should stand so near this dais.'

Whereon the pilgrim, making obeisance, went to the end of the hall, and the eyes of all the nuns danced after his dancing legs, and their ears hung on the clear, sweet notes he struck out of his cithern as he walked. He took his place with his back against the great hall door, in such attitude as men use when they play the cithern. A little trembling ran through the nuns, and some rose from their seats and knelt on the benches, leaning over the table, the better to see and hear him. Their eyes sparkled like dew on meadow-sweet on a fair morning.

Certainly his fingers were bewitched or else the devil was in his cithern, for such sweet sounds had never been heard in the hall since the day when it was built and consecrated to the service of the servants of God. The shrill notes fell like a tinkling rain from the high roof in mad, fantastic trills and dying falls that brought all one's soul to one's lips to suck them in. What he sang about, God only knows; not one of the nuns or even the holy Abbess herself could have told you, although you had offered her a piece of the True Cross or a hair of the Blessed Virgin for a single word. But a divine yearning filled all their hearts; they seemed to hear ten thousand thousand angels singing in choruses, Alleluia,

Alleluia ; Alleluia ; they floated up on inpalpable clouds of azure and silver, up through the blissful paradises of the uppermost heaven ; their nostrils were filled with the odours of exquisite spices and herbs and smoke of incense ; their eyes dazzled at splendours and lights and glories ; their ears were full of gorgeous harmonies and all created concords of sweet sounds ; the very fibres of being were loosened within them, as though their souls would leap forth from their bodies in exquisite dissolution. The eyes of the younger nuns grew round and large and tender, and their breath almost died upon their velvet lips. As for the old nuns, the great, salt tears coursed down their withered cheeks and fell like rain on their gnarled hands. The Abbess sat on her dais with her lips apart, looking into space, ten thousand thousand miles away. But no one saw her and she saw no one ; every one had forgotten every one else in that delicious intoxication.

Then with a shrill cry, full of human yearnings and desire, the minstrel came to a sudden stop—

> 'Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
> And the small rain will down rain ?
> Christ, if my love were in my arms,
> And I in my bed again.'

Silence !—not one of the holy Sisters spoke, but some sighed ; some put their hands over their

hearts, and one put her hand in her hood, but when she felt her hair shorn close to her scalp, drew it out again sharply, as though she had touched red-hot iron, and cried, ' O Jesu.'

Sister Peronelle, a toothless old woman, began to speak in a cracked, high voice, quickly and monotonously, as though she spoke in a dream. Her eyes were wet and red, and her thin lips trembled. ' God knows,' she said, ' I loved him ; God knows it. But I bid all those who be maids here, to be mindful of the woods. For they are green, but they are deep and dark, and it is merry in the springtime with the thick turf below and the good boughs above, all alone with your heart's darling—all alone in the green wood. But God help me, he would not stay any more than snow at Easter. I thought just now that I was back with him in the woods. God keep all those that be maids from the green woods.'

The pretty Sister Ursula, who had only just finished her novitiate, was as white as a sheet. Her breath came thickly and quick as though she bore a great burden up hill. A great sigh made her comely shoulders rise and fall. ' Blessed Virgin,' she cried. ' Ah, ye ask too much ; I did not know ; God help me, I did not know,' and her grey eyes filled with sudden tears, and she dropped her head on her arms on the table, and sobbed aloud.

Then cried out Sister Katherine, who looked as old and dead as a twig dropped from a tree of last autumn, and at whom the younger Sisters privily mocked, 'It is the wars, the wars, the cursed wars. I have held his head in this lap, I tell you; I have kissed his soul into mine. But now he lies dead, and his pretty limbs all dropped away into earth. Holy Mother, have pity on me. I shall never kiss his sweet lips again or look into his jolly eyes. My heart is broken long since. Holy Mother! Holy Mother!'

'He must come oftener,' said a plump Sister of thirty, with a little nose turned up at the end, eyes black as sloes and lips round as a plum. 'I go to the orchard day after day, and gather my lap full of apples. He is my darling. Why does he not come? I look for him every time that I gather the ripe apples. He used to come; but that was in the spring, and Our Lady knows that is long ago. Will it not be spring again soon? I have gathered many ripe apples.'

Sister Margarita rocked herself to and fro in her seat and crossed her arms on her breast. She was singing quietly to herself.

> 'Lulla, lullay, thou tiny little child,
> Lulla, lullay, lullay;
> Suck at my breast that am thereat beguiled,
> Lulla, lullay, lullay.'

She moaned to herself, 'I have seen the village

women go to the well, carrying their babies with them, and they laugh as they go by on the way. Their babies hold them tight round the neck, and their mothers comfort them, saying, "Hey, hey, my little son; hey, hey, my sweeting." Christ and the blessed Saints know that I have never felt a baby's little hand in my bosom—and now I shall die without it, for I am old and past the age of bearing children.

'Lulla, lullay, thou tiny little boy,
Lulla, lullay, lullay;
To feel thee suck doth soothe my great annoy,
Lulla, lullay, lullay.'

'I have heard them on a May morning, with their pipes and tabors and jolly, jolly music,' cried Sister Helen; 'I have seen them too, and my heart has gone with them to bring back the white hawthorn from the woods. "A man and a maid to a hawthorn bough," as it says in the song. They sing outside my window all Saint John's Eve so that I cannot say my prayers for the wild thoughts they put into my brain, as they go dancing up and down in the churchyard; I cannot forget the pretty words they say to each other, "Sweet love, a kiss"; "Kiss me, my love, nor let me go"; "As I went through the garden gate"; "A bonny black knight, a bonny black knight, and what will you give to me? A kiss, and a kiss, and no more

than a kiss, under the wild rose tree." Oh, Mary Mother, have pity on a poor girl's heart, I shall die, if no one love me, I shall die.'

'In faith, I am truly sorry, William,' said Sister Agnes, who was gaunt and hollow-eyed with long vigils and overfasting, for which the good father had rebuked her time after time, saying that she overtasked the poor weak flesh. 'I am truly sorry that I could not wait. But the neighbours made such a clamour, and my father and mother buffeted me too sorely. It is under the oak tree, no more than a foot deep, and covered with the red and brown leaves. It was a pretty sight to see the red blood on its neck, as white as whalebone, and it neither cried nor wept, so I put it down among the leaves, the pretty poppet; and it was like thee, William, it was like thee. I am sorry I did not wait, and now I 'm worn and wan for thy sake, this many a long year, and all in vain, for thou never comst. I am an old woman now, and I shall soon be quiet and not complain any more.'

Some of the Sisters were sobbing as if their hearts would break; some sat quiet and still, and let the tears fall from their eyes unchecked; some smiled and cried together; some sighed a little and trembled like aspen leaves in a southern wind. The great candles in the hall were burning down to their sockets. One by one they spluttered out.

A ghostly, flickering light fell upon the legend over the broad dais, '*Connubium mundum sed virginitas paradisum complet*' — 'Marriage replenisheth the World, but virginity Paradise.'

'Dong, dong, dong.' Suddenly the great bell of the Nunnery began to toll. With a cry the Abbess sprang to her feet; there were tear stains on her white cheeks, and her hand shook as she pointed fiercely to the door.

'Away, false pilgrim,' she cried. 'Silence, foul blasphemy! *Retro me, Sathanas.*' She crossed herself again and again, saying *Pater Noster.*

The nuns screamed and trembled with terror. A little cloud of blue smoke arose from where the minstrel had stood. There was a little tongue of flame, and he had disappeared. It was almost dark in the hall. A few sobs broke the silence. The dying light of a single candle fell on the form of the Lady Mother.

'To-morrow,' she said, 'we shall fast and sing *Placebo* and *Dirige* and the *Seven Penitential Psalms.* May the Holy God have mercy upon us for all we have done and said and thought amiss this night. Amen.'

Love and the Leper Woman

THE priest read the Office of the Mass to the village folk in the village church.

Sir Gilbert knelt in his great pew, staring all about him, cracking walnuts between his strong white teeth and spitting the shells out on to the pavement. Now and then he stroked other fragments from his grey beard with his thick and dirty hand and coughed huskily to clear his throat.

At the bench behind the pew knelt his squire, Philip of Gisburn. Philip was handsomely arrayed for the Holy Day in a rich green cloak embroidered with white and yellow daisies, in a doublet of purple velvet, scarlet hose and pyked shoes. His golden hair hung about his shoulders in thick locks, his complexion was white and red like a girl's, his features delicately moulded, his eyes grey as glass, his eyebrows curved like a bow, his nose straight and small, his mouth firm and red. When he was asleep he might have been mistaken for a maid or an angel (God and wise

men alone can tell the difference between these twain).

Four old men were dozing on their knees behind him. Upon his left a dozen old women ceaselessly cackled scandal, occasionally interrupting with their smothered, raucous laughter the voice of the priest. Philip glanced towards the little group of impious females. A moist black eye peered laughingly at him from beneath a bright yellow head-dress. Alice, the Franklin's daughter, was sitting at the end of her bench, across the aisle, upon the fringe of the group of withered gossips. She was without doubt a bonny creature, with eyes like sloes, lips like cherries, cheeks like peach blossom, and all else as one might wish. Philip returned her gaze with a roguish stare and then winked his left eye. The girl repressed laughter upon her lips and instantly dropped her eyes in devotion. After a while she raised her head again ; her eyes shone and a blush overspread her face ; she winked her right eye like lightning and dropped her head again.

For five minutes Philip steadily regarded her through his fingers. She slowly looked up again and glanced half timidly and half impudently toward him. He met her eyes with a full gaze of meaning, pursed his lips together, and softly kissed the air towards her. She blushed crimson,

but returned his salutation in a manner precisely similar. '*Deo Gratias*' cried the priest. The Ordinary of the Holy Sacrament was at an end.

. . . . . .

As Sir Gilbert and Philip rode homeward up the hill together they fell to talking.

'Who was that bonny wench with the big black eyes?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'Marry, sir, I counted a good half-dozen black-eyed wenches in church.'

'I don't doubt it, my good Philip; thy devotion was early on women rather than on Holy Church. But I mean the wench with black eyes and raven hair, and dressed in a right comely, yellow kirtle.'

'Marry, sir, I was that occupied with the matter of my devotions that I did not mark her.'

'My good Philip, thou art lying. The girl, who sat opposite thee, across the aisle?'

'Ah, now I know whom thou meanest. The girl is Alice, the Franklin's daughter.'

'What, the daughter of the rich Franklin? By the Virgin, but a fair wench, as pretty a piece of woman's flesh as I have seen in France or yet in Italy.'

Sir Gilbert thoughtfully stroked his beard. 'After all,' he said, 'England breeds the best horses and the bonniest women.'

II

Alice sat in the orchard. The boughs of the old apple-tree overshadowed her with a roof of emerald green and radiant snow. A warm air blew out of the south and toyed with the jet black curls hanging loose round her shoulders. The sunlight, piercing through the leafage, fell in vivid splotches upon her face and bare arms, as she bent busily over her embroidery.

Suddenly a long low whistle came from the hedge, repeated three times. At the first whistle Alice raised her head attentively, at the second she smiled and a swift look of joy shot into her dark eyes, at the third she threw down her work and ran to the hedge.

It was as she had thought. Philip had climbed the hedge. The next moment he held her in his arms.

'My darling,' he said, 'I am right glad to find thee here. I guessed I should.'

'Oh Philip,' she answered, 'this is a sight for my poor eyes. But I didn't hope that thou wouldst dare come. Oh, and if my father finds us together, he will be mad with rage.'

'I dare anything for thy sake, pretty Alice,' he answered, kissing her. 'But cheerly, my dearest, there 's no chance of your father happening upon

us, for I watched him into town a half an hour ago.'

'Praise Mary,' said Alice. 'If he caught us he would buffet me sorely, and he would tell Sir Gilbert, and then woe to thee, poor Philip.'

The young squire groaned and bit his underlip fiercely.

'I would to God the old knight were lying in his grave,' he said.

'Sh–sh,' said Alice, putting her little fingers over his tense mouth.

'Tell me now,' quoth he, 'canst thou not persuade thy father against this iniquitous marriage, or at least thy mother? It is a shameful and wicked thing to wed a young maid like thee against her will, and especially to a greybeard like old Sir Gilbert, a notorious villain and ribald to boot.'

Alice sighed deeply. 'I would by Our Lady I might. But father says that Sir Gilbert has bonny lands and castles and gold and silver in great plenty, nay, he is the lord of all these parts. Mother says the match is God's own fortune, and I shall have many pretty gowns to wear and go in a great chariot and folk shall call me "My Lady."'

'Holy Cross, that *thou* shouldst speak thus. It shall not be, I swear it by the Blessed Saints, it shall not be. When do they speak of making the contract?'

The girl hesitated.

'To—to-morrow,' stammered she at last. 'Father has bespoke Master Richard the Parson and Robert the Bailiff to the wine-drinking, and to stand as witnesses afterwards.'

'To-morrow? To-morrow?'

'Yea.'

'And thou didst not tell me. Thank the Lord I came hither this afternoon. Oh Alice, sweet Alice, thou dost love me, dost thou not? Thou dost love me, sweet Alice?'

She gazed at him reproachfully, then put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

'Thou knowest I do, dear Philip.'

'Thou dost? Then all is well. We shall wed in spite of all; we shall, I say. By Mary, I would go through Hell to win thee, my darling Alice. Now, sweeting, be brave and adventure a little for our dear love's sake, and I will save thee from that cursed old villain and thy father's covetousness. Listen: to-morrow the contract is to be signed; there is but one way; thou must escape this night.'

'Escape? This night?'

'Yea, this night. 'Tis the only way out. Listen. Thou sleepest alone except for old Annie? I will bribe old Annie to carry a rope-ladder into thy chamber. At midnight I will whistle outside the window; do thou descend

by the ladder, and ere sunrise we will put a dozen miles between us and Sir Gilbert.'

'Ah—but Annie?'

'Never fear; I know the hag. I have dealt with her before this. She would sell her soul to Hell for a gold angel. She will help thee. Thou wilt come with me? Say thou wilt come.'

'Oh Mary, never was a poor girl so perplexed,' cried Alice, and the round childish tears tumbled down her cheeks.

Philip kissed them away passionately.

'My darling; my heart's darling,' he cried, 'dost not love me better than all?'

'Yea, yea, thou knowest I do,' she answered piteously.

'Then wilt thou stay to be the wife of that hoary sinner, who had damned himself into Hell long before thou wert born? One brave step and thou art mine for ever. Once married before the priest, and not even the Lord King upon his throne can part us, praise Holy Mother Church. Escape with me to-night; promise me, promise, promise.'

'Jesu, Jesu,' sobbed the poor girl.

'Ah, thou dost not love me after all,' groaned Philip, 'thou dost not love me.' He unlaced her arms from his neck, and pushed her away from him, covering his face with his hands.

'But I do, I do,' she cried, clinging to him passionately.

'Then promise to come with me to-night; promise!'

'Ah, I promise, I promise.'

He kissed her fervently again and again.

'I must not stay,' quoth he. 'I must get everything to hand. I shall get horses ready. I must think of the road and the priest, and I must see old Annie. Remember thou hast promised. To-night, to-night.'

He kissed her again, and with one last passionate embrace they parted.

III

It was midnight. The squire's horse, tethered in the wood across the lane, champed upon its bit. Outside the Franklin's dwelling the squire crouched behind a briar bush, gazing at Alice's window thirty feet up. Not a star shone; the moon was overcast with dark clouds. A single bat flew erratically by; the frogs croaked harshly from the pool in the old moat. The darkness was laden with heavy mist that condensed in drops upon Philip's cloak. As he gazed at the window a sudden chill seized him; he shivered slightly. He looked for some faint light; there was none. He listened; there was no sound. All was silent as a grave. At length he gave three long low whistles. An owl hooted from the orchard, but

there came no other reply. He thought he heard a sound from Alice's window, but no, he was mistaken. Silence—still silence.

An hour passed away. There was no sign of any kind from the window. Another hour passed away, and another. The moon sickened behind the clouds, the eastern sky lightened, an opal light burned on the horizon, the air grew grey and the cocks began to answer each other from the roosts.

Philip's face was set hard and white. He rose to his feet, shaking the water from his cloak. He gazed up at the window and in a sudden paroxysm of rage shook his fist at its dark vacuity. With a bitter curse on his lips he flung away into the semi-darkness of the breaking morning.

IV

There was much ado in the Franklin's house. The Franklin had been to London and brought thither rich gowns, bright ribbons, gorgeous sashes, brocades, velvets and damasks, and much rich work of the goldsmiths. Spices and delicious meats filled his larders, the good wife was busied all day at her preserves, and a notable cook had been engaged to prepare the viands for the nuptial banquet.

In the oak parlour Robert the German undid

his pack and displayed the choice laces of Bruges and Mechlin. The Franklin, his wife and daughter, fingered them over with exclamations of admiration, the merchant naming the price of each article.

'Eh, but this is bonny,' cried Alice, holding up a lace kerchief to the light of the little window. As she did so the sunlight streamed upon her face and plainly revealed a small livid spot, about the size of a groat, upon her right cheek.

'Lo,' cried her mother, catching sight of it. 'The wench is spotted; 'twill never do for her to go to church speckled like a trout.'

'Nay, it is nothing,' said Alice.

'By the Virgin,' cried her father, 'thou shalt be bonny the bridal, be thou ugly for ever after,' and calling to a servant, he sent to bid the Leech come.

The Leech was a cunning man in diseases and in all manner of simples.

'Give her a draught for a good complexion, Master Doctor,' cried the Franklin.

'Let her be clear-skinned against the wedding,' said her mother.

But the Leech grew solemn as he examined the girl's face.

'Is it aught but a skin scratch, Master Doctor?' asked her father.

The Leech lifted his hands and closed his eyes in token of gravity.

'It is the leprosy,' he said.

'The leprosy,' shrieked her mother, and she crossed herself again and again.

'The leprosy,' muttered her father. He turned as white as a shroud and reeled against the wall.

Alice fell back in a swoon.

About noon the Bailiff told the news to Sir Gilbert. The old knight grunted.

'Before God,' he said, 'I have no use for a leper wench; thou canst tear up the parchments and send the girl to the lazar-house.'

Then as the Bailiff left the chamber he called after him, 'And send up thy daughter Kate to me this evening.'

Sir Gilbert was a grim and mighty man. The parchments were put by and Alice was admitted to the lazar-house over against the forest, and there she abode with those other folk, whom the Lord had afflicted in like manner.

Philip of Gisburn had gotten him leave a month since, and had betaken himself to the French wars to fight for the King.

V

It was the eve of our Lord's Nativity. The dusk was falling like a grey powder on the wide waste stretches of snow; the distant forests and barren hills were already hidden in an ashen

darkness. A single light shone warm and red from the village in the valley. No wind blew; it was very still and bitterly cold. The leper women stood in the highroad, a score of hideous, withered creatures, like phantoms embodied from foulness and decay. They gathered their filthy and scanty rags about them to defend them as they might from the nipping air. Some blew upon their meagre fingers, some feebly struck their bony palms together, some shuffled their swathed feet upon the snow. Their breath froze upon their blue lips.

'There will be no more travellers this way to-night,' said one, 'it grows dark apace.'

'God's malison upon them,' cried another. 'It 's precious little, when they do come, that they give us. A cursed day may the Holy Day be to them all; may all whole folk rot piecemeal, as we do,' and she shook her corroded arms fiercely in the air.

'Ah,' quoth Alice, looking toward the village. 'There were good and kindly folk once. I doubt but they are all gone now.'

One of the women laughed, screaming shrilly. 'What, thou fool? Didst ever hear of a leper's friends? Why, the Lord Almighty Himself deserts us and lives with rich men in the warm houses.'

'Hush, thou blasphemest,' cried another.

'Look, Christ is good, here come other wayfarers.'

Sturdily over the snow rode a young knight in armour that shone like gold. His horse was black as coal, with crimson trappings. Behind him a squire bore his broad pennon and there followed ten well-mounted men-at-arms, with bright spears and shields. At the noble's side rode a lady on a white palfrey. She was richly dressed in ermine and vair and cloth of brocade and gold. Her face was as fair as spring-time and glowed like a rose with the sharp exercise of riding. The hoofs of the horses sounded dully on the hard-frozen snow, and the laughter of the woman pierced through the air like the clear note of a bell.

Sir Philip of Gisburn returned from France, and with him travelled the fair lady Margot, the queen of love and delight.

'Money, money, for the love of Heaven, money,' whined the lepers.

'Beautiful lady, money for the poor lepers.'

'Largesse, noble knight and gentles all.'

'For Christ's sake a trifle, a miserable coin, good gentlemen.'

'May the Holy Virgin bless you a thousand times for each of your alms.'

'We will pray for you night and day for a penny, a single penny.'

They clacked their clacks and held out their wooden dishes.

'Holy Mother, what foul creatures are these?' cried Margot, shrinking upon her saddle. 'But, poor souls, I pity them from my heart.'

'Keep back, keep back, ye hags!' cried Sir Philip, making his stout charger rear and plunge from left to right among them. 'Out of my way, woman,' he cried to Alice, who stood in the way with extended dish.

At the sound of his voice she looked up into his face, gave a little cry, and shuffled quickly back before the French woman's palfrey.

'Poor soul!' quoth Margot, and unfastening her silken purse she threw a silver penny toward her. 'Pray for me,' she said.

The cavalcade moved quickly on over the snow. Their merry laughter and talk rang clear upon the air, growing fainter and fainter as they descended the hill path toward the village.

'Umph,' said Sir Philip to the fair Margot, 'I seem to have seen that wench's face before, somewhere. Lo, the church steeple; we have made a good journey.'

The leper women mumbled among themselves in groups. 'Let 's home,' said one to Alice. 'There 'll be no more to come by to-night; it grows dark apace. Here 's enough to stay our bellies on to-morrow.'

Alice's laugh echoed wild and shrill over the snow.

'Ay, home, home,' she cried. 'The French harlot hath given me a penny; the French harlot hath given me a penny.'

How the Devil stole the Pyx from Saint Osbert's Church

AT Easter this year Sir Geoffrey gave unto the parish church to have and to keep for ever a fair silver pyx, wherein to preserve the Blessed Body of Christ, which said vessel was beset about with many precious gems and wrought with the utmost cunning of art, so that the fame thereof spread into the country round, and many folk came many miles solely to gaze upon it.

The Martinmas following came one Master Montalto to the village, giving himself out to be a great master of physic and surgery from Paris and Naples and other Universities across the seas. He gained much credence with the people, inasmuch as he spoke with a wonderful gift of words, and was by his own confession far seen in the medicinal learning of the Moors and other heathen peoples. He lodged at the hostelry with Meg Dogtooth, and on holidays was wont to stand in the market-place and to speak to such as gathered round in the Greekish, Moorish, and Arabic tongues, and that with such astounding

fluency that he never was at a loss for a single word. Also he sold there a most potent and magical elixir, which could restore nature to those sick of disease or wasted by process of age.

There accompanied him one Martin, his servant, whose tongue never tired of magnifying and extolling the Doctor's skill and learning. This fellow, amongst other things, said that his master had cured Prester John's daughter of an imposthume in the neck, which she had had seven years, and which the Royal College of Physicians had despaired of; that he had restored sight to a certain blind pilgrim who had vainly spent his substance and fifteen years in seeking aid at the blessed shrines of Walsingham, Compostella, and elsewhere; and that he had also made whole of the leprosy a noble lady of Maguntium in High Germany.

This almost incredible skill of the Doctor gave many in the village to suppose that he dealt in magic and kindred unlawful arts, and this seemed the more probable inasmuch as the two weeks he remained in the village he went not once to church, whereby neglecting an observance which is strictly enjoined on all Christian men. Of this took especial note Master Bailiff, who was Churchwarden that year.

Now one evening the Bailiff sat by the hostel fire talking with Meg Dogtooth, when who should

come in but man Martin, and would not be gainsaid but the Bailiff must drink with him? When they had somewhat drunk together the Bailiff laid gentle complaint to Martin that his master, the Doctor, was over lax in his duty to Holy Mother Church.

'And for that I am right sorry, Master Bailiff,' said Martin, 'but, alas, he hath grown wondrous moody and passionate of late. Of a night he doth not sleep, but walketh aye up and down our chamber, wringing his hands, striking his breast and head, moaning and crying out on Our Blessed Lady and the Saints. I cannot persuade him to peace and quietness; he is sore troubled, and for my part I know not what to think. He groweth as thin as a Lenten herring and as pale as a wax candle, and he the greatest master of physic in the whole world. 'Tis a sad sight for these eyes of mine, I warrant thee.'

'Belike he hath some naughty matter on his conscience,' quoth the Bailiff cunningly. 'Maudlin of the Crossways was sorely troubled in like manner when she could not make full confession for shame.'

'Lo, Master Bailiff, I see indeed my master was right yesterday, when he said thou wert "vir doctissimus," which in the vulgar tongue betokeneth a man most wise and sagacious. By Our Lady, thou persuadest me to thine opinion.

My master hath power over the body but none over the soul, and therein lieth his sore. Would God there were some good man of religion in the town to whom he might disclose himself.'

'Why, good Martin, there is Sir John, our priest. I never knew an honester man of his cloth.'

'Sayest thou so, good sir? Then am I much beholden to thee for thy good counsel, and right glad would I be to perform thy counsel every whit. But alas, how might we come at Sir John? My master is proud as the Devil himself, and, God forgive him, Master Bailiff, loveth not priests.'

'I'faith, that shall be easily managed. Knowest thou not I am Churchwarden?'

'Marry, I knew thou wert much esteemed of the townsfolk.'

'Ay, ay, let it pass if I am. I will deal with Sir John; do thou deal with thy master and I warrant we shall bring them together. The Parson and I would patch up thy Master's soul, were it rotten as Northern cloth.'

'The Saints bless thee, Master Bailiff. Would I might persuade the good Doctor to thy counsel, but, alack, I have not thy silver tongue and subtle reasonings; the Blessed Virgin knows I am a poor creature.'

'Why, good Martin, thou hast only to open thy mouth.'

'Ay, ay, thou talkest an I were a man of thy own coinage, when I am but base metal. But, good Master Bailiff, wouldst thou but step to his chamber, where he sits even now moodily brooding all alone, I have no manner of doubt but thou wouldst prevail with him, especially if thou wouldst but consent to go with him to Sir John and join thy advice to that of the Parson.'

The Bailiff hemmed twice or thrice, stroked his beard, and emptied his tankard.

'Well, well, young man,' he said, 'e'en lead me to thy master.'

II

Good Sir John sat by his hearth fire. Over against him sat the Bailiff exceeding drowsy, anon nodding to sleep, anon waking with a start when his head fell overmuch forward on his breast. By the light of the flickering fire and a small oil-lamp Sir John read aloud with a running commentary from a great book he held upon his knees. The zeal of his study consumed him; his eyes shone with the excitement of his argument, the continuity and vehemence of his exposition had made his face red as a furnace.

'*Multa enim mala non egisset Daemon, nisi provocatus a sagis*' saith mine author, Master Bailiff, which is as much as to say that the Devil

availeth precious little, unless he be titillated or spurred on by warlocks, wizards, or witches, and much it is to be feared that this wise Doctor, urged on or driven by an immoderate and hydropathic love (or rather let me call it lust) of learning, hath fallen into a cursed intercourse with the angels of darkness, who, as the blessed Saint Austin saith in his book entitled in English *The City of God*, having been deceived himself, goeth about to deceive others.

'*Daemones enim advocati praesto sunt, seque exorcismis et conjurationibus quasi cogi patiuntur, ut miserum majorum genus in impietate detineant.*' Lo, Master Bailiff, have we not witnessed proof thereof ourselves? Did not old Mother Nightbird conjure a devil out of a parsley bed, who incontinently deserted her in the end, as she herself confessed, that she might perish in her mortal sin? Alas, wretched men compel the Devil with spells, but the Devil afterwards compelleth them with whips of scorpions. Satan feedeth them at first with tit-bits from his own mouth as they were his own dear darlings, but afterwards he turneth and rendeth them like a fierce hound, gulping them down his foul black throat like so many morsels.'

'*Vitam turbant, somnos inquietant, irrepentes etiam in corpora mentes terrent, ut ad cultum sui cogant; cum sint ipsi poenales, querunt—et cetera.*

The Devil, Master Bailiff, the Devil disquieteth human life, sendeth horrid dreams, terrifieth the mind, that he may compel men to worship him, whereby committing deadly sin. Of this, which I have thus obscurely and indeed somewhat brokenly thrown out, make no doubt but that I shall treat at becoming length and with much matter of illustration in my next Holy Day discourse. But as another author saith, speaking the very words of truth, "*Vita brevior*——" Holy Saints defend us, what was that ?'

'Eh ?' said the Bailiff, starting up, 'eh ?'

'Some one knocketh,' said the Parson.

''Tis the Doctor,' said the Bailiff, settling himself resolutely in his chair.

Sir John closed his volume and laid it with a somewhat tremulous hand upon the table. Taking the lamp in his hand he advanced to the door.

'*In tuas manus, Domine*,' he murmured as he unbarred and threw it open.

A deep groan came from without, and an agonised voice exclaimed, 'Hence Hell-hounds, hence ; as yet I am not yours.'

The next moment Doctor Montalto leapt flying over the threshold, sending the good priest head over heels into the corner. Swiftly slamming and barring the door behind him, he gave utterance to a long hollow noise, half a sigh of relief and half a moan of despair. Then he threw off

his crimson gown and hood and wiped beads of sweat from his brow, groaning horribly the while. He was tall and thin beyond ordinary. His sparse black locks fell in wisps to his shoulders, his face was mere bone upon which the skin was stretched tight and transparent, his whitey blue eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, his nose was hooked like a bird's beak, his mouth was a slit almost from ear to ear. His yellow hose and scarlet doublet were embroidered with cabalistic signs in green silk. In his belt were stuck a naked dagger and a couple of tooth-drawers. Round his neck he wore two rows of human teeth, the trophies of his art.

The Bailiff had pushed back his chair a little farther into the corner. Sir John picked himself up and advanced hesitatingly towards his penitent.

'The Saints bless thee,' he said. 'Thou art out of breath. Sit thee and drink.'

The Doctor's face expanded laterally about the jaws, and he seemed softly to smack his lips. Sir John filled a tankard with warm ale. The Doctor took it in both hands and gulped it down at a draught. He refilled it from the stoup on the hearth.

'Holy Father,' he said, and the tears fell from his eyes, 'I am a lost soul.' He groaned and gulped his ale, and groaned again.

'Despair not, my son,' quoth the Paron.

'The brand may be plucked from the burning even at the eleventh hour. The good Bailiff here hath discoursed of thee to me. Lo, I have diligently consulted my books, I have considered thy case, I discern the sickness in thy soul, I will prescribe for thee, I will prognosticate concerning thee. This is how the matter stands, is it not so? Thou art exceeding melancholy, thou hauntest solitary places; sleeping, thy slumbers are broken with horrible dreams; waking, thou seest visions in the sky, thou hearest voices in the air, thy food turneth to dust in thy mouth, thy drink scarifieth thy throat; is it not so?'

'Ay, ay,' moaned the Doctor, applying himself to his tankard.

'The Devil tempteth thee day and night, he allureth thee, he fondleth thee. Perchance thou yieldest to him?'

'Worse, worse,' moaned the Doctor.

'Ha, ha,' cried Sir John, rubbing his hands, 'Methought I should ferret thee out. Lo, Master Bailiff, you see what cometh of this book-learning of mine?'

'Worse, worse,' cried the Doctor in a loud voice. 'I have sold my immortal soul to the Devil for ever and aye.'

'Holy Mary,' cried the Bailiff, signing himself again and again.

Sir John dropped on his knees and rattled off prayers faster than a woman could shell peas.

The Doctor emptied his tankard and turned it upside down on the table with a bang.

'Listen,' he cried, stretching out his hand above his head in the direction of the Parson,—'Listen, and learn how I fell into damnation. What a learned man should do with a wife I cannot tell, but fool that I was, I married, and that was the beginning of sin.'

'Pardon,' cried the Priest, 'but marriage is a Sacrament and should be well esteemed of all men.'

'By thy leave,' continued the Doctor, 'I married one Mistress Beatbush. She had some small jointure; I was her third husband, but at first she did not seem to be so vile. However, when her portion was spent, my gorge rose at her, for know, good gentlemen, her face was withered and puckered like a Christmas apple, her voice like the barking of dogs or croaking of frogs, and her foul tongue dropped adders and vipers. Then did I call to mind the admonitions of the Holy Apostle Paul, and beat her often, yea, I even threw her once into the fire, and twice into our pond.'

'Certes,' cried the Parson, 'if thou didst this in measure and for faults duly committed, there thou didst but rightly, as I could prove to thee

out of Gratian, did but time and circumstance serve.'

'I beat her strictly according to the canon,' said the Doctor. 'She was one huge fault, an offence both to God and man, and in those days I was a right dutiful son of the Church.'

'And shall be yet, an I can help it,' interrupted Sir John.

'Prithee, do not interrupt, good Sir John,' quoth the Bailiff, 'I am right anxious to hear this story.'

'I will cut it short,' said the Doctor. 'One morning as I meditated in my study according to my wont, I heard this wife of mine yelping and barking in a quarrel with a neighbour, whereupon, consumed with sudden wrath, I cried out, "The Devil fly away with thee, thou ill-conditioned bitch," and, running to my books, straightway cast a spell into the air, so that the Devil immediately leapt into my room through the window.'

'Wrath, wrath, the beginning of sin,' exclaimed Sir John.

'He hath horns and hoofs and a great tail, hath he not?' asked the Bailiff.

'Nay,' replied the Doctor. 'He was like an ugly black dog with a white patch on his forehead.'

'Ay, ay, thou 'rt right,' cried the Parson. 'I have seen him many a time, lurking about our

God's acre, but he slinketh away fast enough when he catcheth sight of me, I warrant you.'

'Lo,' resumed the Doctor. 'This Devil bargained to fly away with my wife, as I had desired, and also to serve me faithfully for twenty years, would I but surrender my soul to him. Unhappy wretch that I am, I took the offer.'

'Oh, miserable man,' cried Sir John. 'That man, born of woman, should be such a fool to wager his immortal soul against twenty short years of pleasure and the evanishment of his wife.'

'Thou didst not know my wife,' said the Doctor indignantly.

'Methinks the terms were not unduly unreasonable,' quoth the Bailiff. 'But, please God, Master Doctor, thou didst sign no paper?'

'Ay, but I did,' groaned the Doctor. 'I signed a monstrous long roll of parchment, and the Devil took it away in his pocket, when he left.'

'Saving thy reverence, Master Doctor, 'tis there thou played foolishly,' said the Bailiff. 'I or any man would do business with the Devil on the large terms thou mentionest, for I hold it no sin to spoil the Egyptians, but to sign a paper, to bind thyself to the Devil with a contract, that is horrid impiety indeed, that is rank heresy and witchcraft. But hold. belike the Devil hath not

kept his part of the agreement. Hath he indeed served thy pleasure these twenty years as 'twas set down in the deed; otherwise, the one party not fulfilling his obligation, the other party cannot in equity be held liable, and *ipso facto* the aforesaid deed becometh null and void and of no account?'

'I cannot grumble; the Devil hath given me twenty good years of pleasure,' said the Doctor. 'I am lost, lost, lost.'

Sir John lifted his eyes to Heaven and moaned piteously.

The Bailiff coughed under his hand. 'I have heard,' he said, 'that the Devil is kind to his own. What manner of pleasure was it he solaced thee with? We know full well what Christ can do for us, it behoveth us to know what the Devil can.'

'Speak, good Doctor,' said Sir John, 'and let us hear what the Bailiff desireth, and I will enshrine thy narrative in the little treatise I purpose to endite *de Daemoniis*, for the enlightenment and warning of all Christian men.'

'Did he give thee gold?' asked the Bailiff.

'He did,' said the Doctor.

'What didst thou do with it?'

'I spent it.'

'Eh, I suppose thou wouldst.'

'Did he give thee power and glory over all the kingdoms of the earth?' asked the Parson.

'He did.'

'How didst thou use it?'

'I tweaked the Pope's nose when he sat in Council with his Cardinals and tripped the Emperor up on his belly, when he would have kissed His Holiness' toe.'

'There thou didst rightly,' said the Parson. 'For I am a true son of Holy Church and Peter is Peter, but this Pope is a fool and a rascal, and I care not who hears me say it.'

'Did the Devil give thee wenches?' asked the Bailiff.

'Many and many a one,' said the Doctor with a sigh. 'I am fain, yet right sad to think of them again; they were good wenches all, and I heartily loved them, but nothing lasts long in this world. He carried me on a rich Turkey carpet to the peerless palace of Ghengis Khan, which is built all of precious stones and embowered in fair gardens and orchards. Ah, many hundred happy days and nights have I spent there, and the Khan's lovely wife and her beautiful maidens conceived a great affection for me. Even now one of my sons is a mighty emperor in the East.'

'This Devil seemeth a very honest gentleman,' said the Bailiff.

'Then,' continued the Doctor, 'seeing, as Solomon saith, there is no satisfaction under the sun, I grew a little aweary even of this Paradise,

so I bade the Devil purvey me more pleasure elsewhere. So he took me up on his back and carried me to Prester John's land, where he made me to alight in the Empress's bosom in the form of a rose-petal. I have three daughters who wear their golden crowns yet in that court.'

'Meseemeth you have many children,' said the Bailiff.

'A few, a few.'

'Belike you had something to do with Mistress Catesby's wench?' asked the Parson.

'Ay, ay.'

'And with Kate Carrywell?' said the Bailiff.

'Ay, ay.'

'And with Gilly Hedgerow?' said the Parson.

'Ay, ay.'

'And with Tib Rushring?' asked the Bailiff.

'Ay, ay.'

'And with Sim's wife of the Wry Mouth?' asked the Parson.

'Ay, ay.'

'As for my wife,' said the Bailiff in a rage, 'I defy you or any man to speak ill of her.'

'Ay, ay,' said the Doctor, 'thy wife is as virtuous as any woman in Christendom, I 'll be bound.'

''Tis well thou sayest so,' said the Bailiff.

'Come, Master Bailiff,' said the Doctor, 'bear no malice against a man for a little worldly

pleasure, which departeth more swiftly than snow at Easter or the shaft from the bow. We are all sinners, all of us. My bolt is shot, my shaft is sped, and this time to-morrow night must I deliver up my soul to the Fiend and his everlasting torments.'

'What?' cried the Parson. 'Is thy term up? Must the Devil have his own so soon?'

'He must, by the Blessed Virgin,' groaned the Doctor, smiting his forehead and wiping the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. 'To-morrow at midnight, I am the foul Fiend's, unless, thou good man of religion, thou canst save me.'

'Thou shouldst not have been so ready with other folk's wenches,' said the Bailiff resentfully.

The Doctor fell on his knees before Sir John and raised his hands in supplication.

'Holy Father,' he cried, 'save me, save me, save me! Reverend priest, blessed clerk, devise some sacred sleight to save a miserable, wretched, damned soul.'

Round tears fell from Sir John's eyes and tumbled over his cassock.

'My poor son,' he quavered in a voice broken by sobs, 'thou shalt have a good two quart or more of holy water.'

'An ocean of holy water would not save me,' groaned the Doctor. 'The Fiend would dry it all up with one blast from his foul, hot mouth.'

'My son, my son; what shall I say? I will give thee the Blessed Host to hold between thy teeth all night.'

'Holy Father, this is a full terrible and mighty Fiend. He would bear me away in spite of the Host and but beat me the more fiercely therefore in Hell-flames.'

'I have heard,' said the Parson, 'that the Devil may not come into a holy and sanctified place.'

The Doctor leapt to his feet, clasped the Parson around the neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

'Oh wise and sagacious Father,' he cried. 'Thou hast saved me, thou hast saved me.'

'That I have,' said the Parson, 'but, but——'

'Thou hast said it,' cried the Doctor, 'thou hast said it. Good Sir John, of thy charity and for our dear Lord's sake, Who died on tree, suffer me to bestow myself the morrow night in the church of the blessed Saint Osbert.'

The Parson rose to his feet and put his hands on his plump hips.

''Tis done,' he said. ''Tis done. In that sanctified and holy place will I bestow thee safe from the filthy claws of Satan, until the time of peril be passed, and I have exorcised the fiend from thy precious soul.'

The Doctor prostrated himself at the Parson's feet and wept his gratitude.

'A thousand, thousand thanks, holy Father.

And the better to make certain, do thou also give unto me the key of the Church, that I may lock fast the great door against the Devil and his angels.'

'Thou shalt have it, my son, and in the morning shall Master Bailiff and I come to greet thee and sing *Jubilate* with thee.'

''Tis a goodly device and a holy,' said the Bailiff, 'but I would that there were some substitution in the contract, that thou hadst been able to sub-enfief, to sub-let thy part in the deed to some persona or body corporate, which hath neither a body to be smitten nor a soul to be damned. Would that there were some substitution of the liability set forth in the deed!'

The Doctor sat on the hearth, nursed his knees, and pondered.

'Thou art also, good Master Bailiff,' he said at last, 'a vir doctissimus, a man truly sagacious and learned in all points of the law. Verily thou art right, and I do begin to see clearly how we shall outwit this cunning and cruel fiend.'

'Yes, verily, I am right,' said the Bailiff eagerly.

'Lo, then,' said the Doctor, 'I will substitute an image, a simulacrum for the corporal body mentioned in the deed. To-morrow my man Martin and I shall cunningly fashion a man of straw, and dress him in seemly wise in my clothes, and when it is dark Martin shall carry him hither

and lay him in yonder corner with his face to the wall.'

'Excellent, excellent,' cried Sir John. 'But why bring him here?'

'The more to puzzle the fiend,' said the Doctor. 'And the further to perplex him I will leave word with mine hostess that I am gone to see Sir John.'

'Yea, and the Devil shall carry away the man of straw in thy stead?' said the Bailiff. 'An he do, methinks he is a great fool after all.'

'Nay, he is cunning enough,' said the Doctor, 'but hasty, terribly hasty, and I warrant he shall never find his mistake till he be inside Hell-gates with his load of straw.'

"'Tis a good jest and will work,' cried the Parson, 'or call me no scholar.'

'When the Devil shall hear I am gone to Sir John's,' continued the Doctor, 'he will fly hither at great pace, and for the protection of my soul, and of the Holy Church and of thy dwelling-house, I do most heartily beseech you, worthy gentlemen, that ye will therefore watch here to-morrow night by my man of straw, and assist me with thy continual prayers, stirring no jot nor ceasing from your holy occupation, no matter what strange and belike unearthly noises ye do hear from the Church.'

The Bailiff's jaw dropped, and the Parson stirred uneasily.

'Methinks,' said Sir John, 'the Devil is but a simple soul after all, and would be deceived without our prayers.'

'Worthy, worthy gentlemen,' said the Doctor, 'as ye love God, grant me my boon. If your prayers be lacking, there is no telling what the Devil may do in this, thine house, Master Parson.'

'I should not like the house destroyed,' said Sir John.

'If ye only pray,' said the Doctor, 'it can suffer no harm, nor ye yourselves in your bodies or souls, for I have heard the Devil himself say, times out of mind, that there is nothing he feareth more than a good man's prayers.'

The Bailiff shook his head. The Parson took a deep draught of warm ale, heaved a deep sigh, and gazed into the fire.

'Master Doctor,' he said at length, 'I have always tried to do my duty as it behoveth a Christian man and a priest, nor am I conscious of any mortal sin upon my conscience. It shall never be said that I, Sir John, Master of Arts in the University of Oxford and priest of this parish, was ever afeard of a devil. I will pray by thy man of straw, and mine honest Churchwarden shall pray with me.'

The Bailiff started and drew back suddenly, 'Nay, nay,' he cried.

'May the Holy Virgin bless thee,' cried the Doctor. 'I warrant thee the Devil cannot harm such men as be of clean life.'

'Art afeard, Master Bailiff?' asked Sir John.

'Nay, nay, not afeard,' said the Bailiff, 'but I would to God I were a man of better life.'

'Nay, thou art a godly layman,' said Sir John. 'Wilt thou leave the Shepherd to fight the Devil alone?'

'I have been Churchwarden these ten years,' said the Bailiff. 'Thou knowest, Sir John, I have done what I might for Holy Church. But to meet the Devil face to face——'

'Thou shalt not be weary in well-doing,' cried the Parson. 'Do thou but pray with me to-morrow night and I warrant thee it shall win thee many indulgences.'

'Many, didst thou say, Sir John, many? Thou persuadest me overmuch, but of my conscience, I——'

'Marry then, it is agreed,' cried the Parson. 'Do thou, Master Doctor, lock thyself in the Church and give thyself up to continual prayer before the sanctuary, and the good Bailiff and I shall cease not importuning the Saints for thee, here by thy man of straw.'

'I wish thou hadst taken thy Devil to another town,' quoth the Bailiff to the Doctor, 'or thou hadst considered all this before gadding

about to wenches on Turkey carpets. Well, well, I would, by Our Lady, I were a man of better life.'

III

It was very dark in the priest's little room. Right patiently had the Bailiff done his best to keep the fire in a blaze, blowing till his cheeks had well-nigh burst and his beard had singed itself on the hot coals, but, despite his efforts, it had sunk down into a mass of glowing, weakly flickering embers. The oil-lamp gave out an uncertain light, no moon or solitary star shone through the narrow window. The silence was complete, save for the occasional stirring of a mouse, the crackling of the embers, and the soughing of the wind round the house. In one corner, with the faint light of the lamp cast carefully upon it, lay the man of straw, habited in the scarlet cloak and hood of the Doctor.

Sir John and the Bailiff were on their knees with their backs to the wall and their hands upraised to Heaven. The Bailiff ever and anon, as often as he heard a little noise, glanced fearfully round about. Sir John prayed on in a low and tremulous tone.

'Prithee, cease not,' whispered the Bailiff

anxiously, as the Parson cleared his throat, 'cease not.'

'For the love of Heaven, sprinkle the holy water,' returned the priest. 'More, more, all round, all round.'

'Curse them again, good Father, curse them again,' muttered the Bailiff, sprinkling holy water with a subdued vigour from a large bucket, which stood by his side.

'By the authority of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,' recommenced the priest, 'and of Our Lady, Saint Mary, God's Mother of Heaven, and all other Virgins, and of Saint Michael and all other Angels, and of Saint Peter and all other Apostles, of Saint Nicholas and all other Confessors, and of all other Saints of Heaven—— Blessed Mary, didst thou not hear that?'

'Yea, ah, nay; 'twas but the wind. Curse them again; to it heartily, Sir John,' replied the Bailiff, 'Mother of God, how thick and fast do I remember my old sins, this night.'

The priest continued his exorcism.

'We accurse and ban and depart from this holy place, and damn into the everlasting pains of hell all devils, fiends, warlocks, witches, fairies, and goblins, whatsoever and of what degree, whether of the air above or of the earth beneath or of the waters under the earth. We accurse— Oh Mary, 'tis he——'

'Help, help! O Mary, aid us,' cried the Bailiff.

The wind dropped suddenly and there was silence again. Sir John supported his trembling body on the quaking body of the Bailiff, and quavered forth once more:

'We accurse thee within and without, going or staying, in wood, in water, or in field. Accurse them, Father and Son and Holy Ghost; accurse them Angels and Archangels and all the Nine Orders of Heaven; accurse them, Patriarchs, Prophets and Apostles and all God's disciples and all Holy Innocents, Martyrs, Confessors and Virgins, Monks, Canons, Hermits, Priests and Clerks.'

By this time Priest and Bailiff clung together in mortal terror. Their teeth chattered, their knees turned to water under them, their bones were loosened, a clammy sweat bathed them both, their hair stood on end.

'Curse, Sir John, curse, for God's sake, or we are lost,' gasped the Bailiff.

'*Fiat, fiat, Domine*,' groaned the Parson.

The next moment the door was flung suddenly open, a thunderbolt from the darkness hurtled across the room and upset the oil-lamp, a nauseous smell of burning filled the air, smoke and flames leapt up to the ceiling from the straw figure in the corner. Ten thousand devils seemed to belabour the Priest and the Bailiff, countless stout blows were showered on their bodies, countless

buffets were bestowed on pate and back and midriff until they roared and shrieked again. Then suddenly the blows ceased and they were left in darkness and silence once more.

'Ugh,' groaned the Bailiff as he came to himself, 'I am a mass of bruises. Never will I speak evil of the Devil again; he hath broken my back, I think.'

'Oh Mary,' moaned the Priest, 'I ache all over; 'twas a heavy-handed Devil, or a legion of them at least.'

'I wish, by Our Lady,' quoth the Bailiff savagely, 'the Devil would exercise a little discretion and know his own from others. *We* haven't sold our souls to him, *we* haven't spent his gold and had his pretty wenches. Methinks thou chosest a mighty inapt prayer, Sir John, that we caught such a shrewd beating.'

'It might have been worse but for our prayers,' replied the Parson.

'It could not have been much worse,' said the Bailiff. 'This meaneth a leech and bed for a week for me; Devil-watching is no fit pastime for a man of my years. Who next selleth himself to the Devil will get no help of me, I promise thee.'

'Canst creep to the fire and light the lamp?' moaned Sir John. 'The cursed Devils have beaten me so I cannot move a limb.'

The Bailiff crawled to the fire and re-lit the smouldering lamp and piled light wood on the fire.

Satan had not been deceived, and had not carried off the man of straw. Nevertheless he had grievously and spitefully used him by fire.

'Lo, the power of the Fiend,' said Sir John, displaying the effigy's entrails all blackened and charred. 'Yet doubt not the Doctor hath safely defied him in the inviolable sanctity of the blessed Saint Osbert.'

The Bailiff grunted and tenderly handled his posterior. 'Then would God I had been in his place and he in mine,' he said.

'If thou wilt reach to yonder shelf,' said the Parson, 'thou wilt find a pot of ointment. Let us anoint each other's bruises and rest, as we may till morning, when we will go greet the Doctor, whose soul we have this night most indubitably saved.'

IV

How vainly they, who fall into the Devil's snare, may hope to give him the slip at last, was made plain and evident to all men's sight the next morning, when the Parson and the Bailiff crept through the priest's garden to the Church to see how it had fared with the Doctor.

They found the great door locked, whereat Sir John was at first mightily pleased, saying that the Gates of Hell should not prevail against the Sanctuary of the Most High. Then he called repeatedly, through the key-hole, telling the Doctor that all was well and that he should open to them. But the Doctor opened not, whether absorbed in prayer or overcome by fasting they knew not, so they were fain to send for the smith, and he, after two hours' labour forced open the door with much difficulty and effort.

Then they searched the Church and, finding no trace of the Doctor, they were forced to conclude that the Devil had carried him off after all, even from the altar itself, whereat Sir John's jaw drooped lamentably. Moreover, they discovered that the foul Fiend had spirited away with him also the fair silver pyx, which Sir Geoffrey had given to the Church for ever, and which indeed no man hath seen since, nor the eight pennies which were in the parish chest, nor the rich vestments used by Sir John on Holy Days, nor the three pounds of best wax candles, which the Churchwardens had purchased against Candlemas.

Lo, how wondrous is God's providence, for at that very time when the Devil carried off Doctor Montalto, he carried off also his man Martin, so that these two and their goods vanished altogether into thin air and could never be heard

of afterwards. Whereat Mistress Dogtooth was much vexed, inasmuch as they had not paid her reckoning. But the village folk laughed when she complained thereof, and said the Doctor would pay her reckoning hereafter.

The Crusader

TWO miles out of town, reckoning from our Lord's mill on the greater stream, lies Garstang Hill, and sharply over against it is Hart Hill. Both these lie to the north-west, and they are very steep and very difficult to climb. Moreover, they are covered with dense wood, much bogland lying in the low-lying places, and it is said that many wolves lurk there, whence in winter-time they have been known to come down to the sheep-cotes in the village. Therefore, folk go there but little, unless it be to gather wood (for the land is waste and common), and even for this they go seldom, unless good fuel cannot be got nearer town. But on the low-lying slopes the swineherds sometimes drive their herds in autumn, when the acorns lie thick under the oaks. Between Hart Hill and Garstang lies a long narrow valley, and the ground of that valley is very fertile. Here Thomas the Freeman dwelt once, although none dwell there now. Thomas's father, and his father, and his father's father, had lived there as long as man could tell, and they held first from

King Alfred, the wise king, whose words are, even now, common in men's mouths. They paid to Earl Ranulf yearly at the Manor House the value of twenty sheep besides a trained hawk, and they took Ranulf to be their Lord.

It is barely twenty years since Thomas the Freeman held there a good hide of good land, on which he drove a great plough, beside having fair meadow-land down by the brook. And in harvest-time he has paid ten men a penny a day to gather in corn, and given them meat and drink as well. But now the place lies all waste and desolate, and the whinberry and blackberry grow thereon, and trees have taken root there, so that the waste has almost won it back to itself.

There was no one who knew Thomas very well, for he came seldom to the village except on Court days or Market, and he was by nature a silent man. He was tall above usual and stoutly made, with heavy shoulders, hands large as hoofs, and legged like a stork. He walked and moved like an ox, slowly and clumsily. But he was powerful of his body, and I have seen him lift a horse as lightly as an infant at the breast. (That was on the day when Sir John's wain and horses were in the Great Bog.) Yet for all that, he was a mild mannered man, slow of reproach, sparing of oaths, honest in his dealings, punctual in paying his dues and in his charity to the poor, no haunter

of taverns, nor gamester or ribald. Yet he seemed to hold himself aloof from folks, and in the days of which I speak, reckoned little of religion or his immortal soul, though, as to that, you shall hear later how the Lord in His infinite mercy afterwards touched his eyes, so that he should see, and seeing, walk into the way of peace. He lived in his house in the valley to himself and his wife and his children. He rose early and worked long and laboriously in the good light, and when his day's labour was done he would return from his fields to sit by the great fire and dandle his babies. I have heard that even in the long winter evenings, when he sat at home with his family around him, he had little to say. He would sit with his little girl on his knee, singing old women's songs of the countryside—'Hey, northern wind, how dost thou blow?' or 'Janikin came to dress our well'—as though he had been a tender, nursing-mother himself instead of a mighty figure of a man, the measure of two bowshafts long. Then he would say to Katherine, his wife, 'Lo, Kat, how the young one grows; he can nearly walk,' and she would answer, 'Yea, he groweth out of knowledge. But all our family made fine babies.'

Then there would be a long silence of about an hour or thereabouts between them, while the children would play and laugh at their feet and

the goodwife would get on with her spinning. Perhaps Thomas would show Thomas and Robert how to build a great castle, like that of Earl Ranulf, out of the wooden fire-blocks, or would amuse them smilingly at the game which is called 'Cat's Cradle.' Then, as they grew sleepy one by one, he would take and lay them gently on the soft straw in the warm corner.

'Kat,' he would say, or some such matter, 'methinks I will take little Thomas with me to the Longacre in the morning and let him aim at the crows with his sling.'

'Do, good husband,' she would answer, 'the boy dearly loves the sport.'

Then they would to bed themselves.

So Thomas lived innocently enough, but overmuch immersed in secular employment, and seldom troubling himself to come to Mass, even on Holy Days, except it were Easter or Christmas, or when he brought a child to the christening. Whereby Sir John, our priest, was somewhat troubled, and at times exhorted Thomas that he should come to Church more regularly, as befitted a Christian. To which Thomas would answer that the way was something long to the Church from his house, and he trusted he served God all the same, and so, smiling gently, he would home to his wife and babes and little amendment made.

But in the spring of the year of our Lord eleven hundred and eighty-nine, there came a wandering man of religion to the town, who was destined to be the means whereby, under God, a great miracle should be wrought in this man. For it was in that year that our sovereign Lord and King, Richard, being moved by the wrongs which Christ suffered at the hands of the heathen and accursed Saracens, in Jerusalem, the town of His Passion, made a strong vow, assumed the cross and proclaimed that he would set out with a great company of Christian knights and men-at-arms to wrest the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the unbelievers. Many holy men therefore, moved thereto by the Pope and the Bishops, went about all Christendom, exhorting the people to take up the Cross and follow the pious King overseas. Of these devoted preachers, came one Master Benedict to our village, and, having obtained permission, as was seemly, of Sir John, he preached daily to the people.

Master Benedict was truly a man filled with the Holy Ghost, and his sermons and speeches cast a spell over the town. 'O ye people, sons of God,' he would cry, 'why will ye make it your only care that your swine and cattle increase, that your corn shall ripen, that your grass wax strong and long in the water meadows, when your Lord is day by day crucified afresh in His Holy City at the hands

of idolaters and blasphemers ? ' He told of the bitter wrongs which Christian pilgrims suffered when they visited our Lord's Sepulchre ; then men shook and wept with grief. He told how our King had entered on that glorious enterprise first of all Christian Princes, and asked if they desired him to set out to that sacred slaughter single-handed and with no following of his liege people ; then men's eyes flashed with holy devotion and loyalty, and they cried out vehemently, ' Nay, nay.' He told how the Holy Father had offered a plenary indulgence to all who took the Cross, and how the souls of all Christians who suffered death on the Crusade would be borne instantly to Paradise ; then the people fell down on their knees and cried out with fierce sobs, ' Holy Cross, Holy Cross ; we will follow the Cross.'

So in one week twenty-three men had vowed themselves to the Holy Land, and I myself was so moved by the Monk's words, that I would have vowed, had it not been for a matter of importance I had on hand with William of Mousehill about a field which was used for pasture at Houghton. As it was, however, I bought from Master Benedict for twenty-two Easterling shillings, a phial containing a feather from the wing of the Archangel Michael, which he had gotten from Jerusalem, and I am assured that as often as I say a *Pater*

Noster and kiss this precious relic, so often do I partake the more amply of Our Saviour's merits. Moreover, when Master Benedict went forth from our village, he took with him certain gold and silver ornaments and cloths of brocade, fine silk and cambric, which the people, coming together, offered of their own free will towards the expenses of the Blessed Expedition.

However, of the twenty and three men who had taken the Cross, it is shameful to relate that more than half of them were absolved of their vow by the Archdeacon, some paying fines for that purpose up to twelve shillings. In the end something under half a score went from the village, and those not such men as we could have wished, being for the most part wastrels and ne'er-do-wells instead of such as truly feared and wished to serve God. One man, Nick the Carpenter, went, as folk shrewdly thought, because he was suspected of a certain man-slaying at Houghton, and two other men, Hick of the Hill and Eddie of the Townsend, had vowed when they were overfull of strong drink and had not afterwards the wherewithal to absolve themselves with the Archdeacon.

It happened by chance that Thomas the Freeman was in town to market the first morning when Master Benedict spoke, and having sold a couple of swine, he stood afterwards listening at the edge of the crowd round the Market Cross. At first he

looked on unconcernedly, leaning heavily on his staff, as was his wont, and once or twice turning, as though to go home again. But Master Benedict began to warm to his preaching, crying out 'Ah, Little Child, that criest from Thy Mother's arms, shall we not hear Thee? Ah, little Babe, that bore such pangs for us in Thy tender flesh, shall we not suffer a little for Thee? Ah, little Holy Boy, Who gavest Thyself for us, shall we not give ourselves for Thee?' and then Thomas, too, could not withdraw his eyes from the Monk's passionate face, and as he gazed his breath came thick and fast through his lips, and the great tears began to roll down his cheeks, although he made no manner of outcry as most of the people did, sobbing and striking themselves in their grief, and even falling prostrate on the ground and heaping dirt and stones on their heads. As the Monk finished, several made oath and took the Cross, but Thomas only sighed and turned heavily homeward, without a word to any man. The next day, however, he came again to the preaching, and the next day also, and so every day until the end of the week, when Master Benedict departed to preach his mission in other villages.

Then the Lord began to work mightily upon Thomas the Freeman. Now he entirely forsook his former and too secular habits and began to come most often to Church. Many a time I

have seen him kneeling before the painted Christ with his head in his hands, bowing himself and quivering from head to foot, as though in agony of spirit; and the villeins, driving their teams afield in the first light of morning, have seen him hurrying on his way to early morrow mass, anon crying out and anon muttering to himself, like a man possessed. Now he worked little about the homestead and in the fields as he was wont to do, but wandered all alone in the forest on Hart Hill, and often forgetting to return even at meal-times. Now he spoke less than ever to Katherine his wife, and you might see in his face the terrible conflict betwixt duty and created pleasure which raged within him. Of a night, he played no more with the children nor dandled them on his knee, but sat with a perplexed brow, ever and anon calling upon God, Our Lady, and the Blessed Saints. When his wife asked what ailed him that he was not as he was wont to be, he answered, 'The words of the man of God are eating out my heart.'

When his wife understood that, she burst into a loud cry, saying, 'I would to God that Monk had never come to the village, for, but for him, I had been the happiest woman alive.'

Thomas groaned as if his heart would break. Then he said, 'Let us pray that God will guide us even as it seemeth best to Himself.'

So they prayed together with many tears, and after that Katherine felt easier in her mind.

For many days Thomas struggled with the fierce prompting which the Monk had put into his heart and strove to put it by him, saying to himself, 'I would gladly take sword and buckler and do service for Jesus Christ, but verily I am a married man and I must needs look to my wife and my four young children.'

But ever he would be answered from within himself, 'If thou settest thy hand to the Lord's work, shall the Lord forsake thee and thine?'

One day, as Katherine was plucking a fowl, he came in from the village, whence he had been to Church. His face was calm and set, and a solemn smile played about his countenance. Katherine had not seen him so pleasant for many a long day, and she was glad in her heart. But she fell also into some little awe of him, for he was, as it were, lifted far off from her.

'Ay, Thomas, but thou lookest kindly,' she said.

'Katherine, do not blame me overmuch; forgive me that I cannot but put sore trouble upon thee. The Lord hath strictly told me that I must go and serve Him in the Holy Land, and I have this morning made oath to Sir John, our priest.'

'Holy Mother, have pity, have pity,' cried

Katherine. 'Oh husband, thou must not leave me, not after all these years. Say thou wilt not go.'

'Dear Katherine,' he said sweetly, 'I must go. I have not been able to escape God these many days, and I must not disobey Him. It is He that hath commanded me.'

'Ah, dear God. And is this all thy love for me and thy little ones, to leave me now for these cursed wars? I shall not see thee again, I know I shall not, and I and my little ones shall all perish. Thou never lovedst me or thou wouldst not desert me now.'

'Dear Katherine, I love thee now more than ever I did, but I cannot refuse my God; I must go.'

'But the children that you have made so much of? Oh husband, bethink thyself; thou mayst wipe out thy oath by a fine to the Archdeacon.'

'That I may not do, dear Katherine, for I have made my oath to God. As for the children, He knows how heavy my heart is to leave them, but Sir John has given me a word of comfort from Holy Writ, that the Lord is mindful of His own.'

The tears burst from Katherine's eyes, and she flung herself at his feet, convulsed with great sobs and clinging to his knees.

'Don't go, don't go!' she cried, but her

husband sadly raised her, kissing her again, and said, ' I must ; I must.'

Then Thomas gently disengaged her arms from his body and laid her on the settle, and went forth to prepare for his journey. Going to town, he sold a herd of swine for coined silver, and exchanged thirty parcels of wool with a Flanders merchant, who happened to be in the village, against a gold Byzant. Having thus furnished himself with ready money to pay his way across the sea, he returned home and fetched down his leather and iron jerkin from the wall, and furbished his great sword and shield.

Two days later, he set out alone to join King Richard, going first to Southampton, thence to take ship for France. At his house door Katherine wept on his bosom, and held him to her as strongly as she might, that at last he had to burst from her by main force. Then she clung gasping and nigh fainting to the door-post, and had no strength to wave him farewell. The children ran after him, crying, ' Father, father,' in shrill misery. Three times he turned back and took them up in his arms and blessed and kissed them, before he could drag himself away. He did not dare to look back down the forest pathway to his wife upon the threshold of the house, but he said to himself crazily, ' For the Lord is mindful of His own; He remembereth His servants.'

Katherine fell in a swoon across the doorway. The children thought she was dead, and knelt round the senseless body, screaming in their desolation.

. . . . . .

Evil things happened in the year that followed, for there befell a great feud between Earl Ranulf and William of Beeston. One winter's night William of Beeston's men came down by Hart Hill, and they ravished as far as they dared up to Earl Ranulf's castle, and they burnt Thomas the Freeman's house, and slew his wife and children, therein showing themselves more like beasts than Christian men.

II

I remember that we had that day finished cutting the corn in the Long Field. It was evening, and a large moon had just come up. I had been to see John the Smith about four horse-shoes, which he had promised me, and I was returning by the bridge, having them hitched in my belt. As I came by the great oak, which grows by the bridge, I became aware of a man lurking there in the shadow, and looking narrowly I knew him for a stranger. I was at first minded to give the hue and cry, and to bring the whole village about his ears, but yet there was something familiar to me in the man's figure, so putting my

hand to my knife, I came a little out of my way to pass nearer to him. Blessed God, how cold my heart turned when of a sudden I recognised him. It was Thomas the Freeman, home from the Holy Land. I thought of his dead wife and babes up at Hart Hill, and I was fain to pass him as if I knew him not, but my knees failed under me, and I stood shaking like a leaf as he came towards me.

'What, Nicholas man,' he said, 'dost not know me, Thomas the Freeman?'

'Holy Virgin,' I said, and took his outstretched hands.

'How go things with Katherine and the children? How are they?' he asked.

I was silent, being troubled as to how I should answer him, for my heart bled at the thought of the news he must have. I turned my face to the ground.

'What; are they not well? What 's to do? For the love of God, answer me.'

At that I turned to him full heavily and said sadly, 'If to be at peace is to be well, they are well, for they rest with the Blessed Saints in Christ.'

He swayed to and fro like a drunken man.

'They are dead?' he asked, in a hoarse gasping voice.

I nodded, and he gave a low cry and sank to the

earth as one dead. I halloaed loudly, and John the Smith and his big son came running from their house with bills in their hands. But I told them what had befallen, and John's son fetching water from the brook, we bathed Thomas's face therewith; so after a time he came to himself, though moaning a little as though he were sore hurt. We half led and half carried him to the Smith's house, where they sat him on a great chair by the fire. It was a long time before he spoke, and we stood apart from him, the women-folk and the children gazing curiously and pityingly at him from the corner. Then he said, 'How did they die?' and we told him shortly that the men of William of Beeston had slain them.

'Kat and all my little ones; they did not leave a single one,' he said, and his head dropped slowly upon his breast and a single tear welled from each of his eyes.

After that he was quiet again, and we knew not what to say to comfort him, so after a little time I went my way home, and he stayed with John the Smith that night.

The next morning I went to see how he fared. He was still sitting on the great chair by the fireside where I had left him overnight, and indeed they told me he had never moved or spoken a single word since. He sat with his head on his

bosom and his eyes half closed, fidgeting with his fingers like a little boy who has been shamed for tardiness at school. John greeted him as I entered, and asked him to break his fast on bacon and beer, but he denied him and asked for a cup of water, which they brought him. When he saw me he rose unsteadily.

'I will go to my house,' he said, and went towards the door.

'Go not to-day,' cried the Smith's wife. 'Sit and rest thee a while.'

'Nay, good wife, but I will go,' he said.

'Ay, but the man is as weak as a sick dog,' she cried. 'Prithee, good husband, if he will go, go thou with him.'

The Smith took his staff, and we both of us went together after Thomas. It is a stiff uphill road to Hart Hill, and Thomas was forespent so that we had to help him over the rough and steep places, going always side by side in perfect silence. So we came to the little forest path, and it was now half grown over and obstructed by the branches of the trees, and so on to the stone wall that ran round the steading, and there we stopped, for thence could all be seen of what was Thomas's house. In the midst of a wide open space, overgrown with rough hill grass and ragwort and young gorse and blackberry, were a few charred rafters and some baked and crumbling

plaster. The September morning was mellowing into perfect brightness, the dew had fallen heavily the night before and glistened mistily on every blade and leaf. A great stillness hung over the place; only a single crow flapped its black wings in the blue sky, cawing its way to the woods. In three years the busy homestead had become a wilderness and the spear-grass waved where Thomas had dandled his babies. Thomas sighed heavily as he gazed, then crossing himself he turned away.

'This is a hard home-coming for a man like me,' he said, 'God knows I had not looked for this at His hands.'

'We are all in His hands, Thomas,' I said, 'and your wife and children no less than we.'

So we came back in silence to town, and as we came to the Market we had to catch Thomas between us or he would have fallen with his weakness. When he had revived somewhat he said, 'Now I must go to the Abbey at Roodborough, for so I swore to myself when we were up yonder at Hart Hill.'

'Roodborough,' I cried. 'Why, Thomas, it is seven miles, and thou couldst hardly walk the length of the Market Place. But he answered, 'I must go,' and actually tried to set forward. Then seeing he would not be stayed, and wondering why he should wish to go thither, I bethought

myself of a certain business of my Lord's, which I had with the Cellarer of the Abbey, and I offered right willingly to bring him there. I took him and led him to my house, where he ate a little fresh fish and bread, and then we took cart and came two hours after noon to Roodborough.

There I had much talk with Simon the Cellarer. Meanwhile, as I heard, Thomas accosted certain of the monks as they stood in the Guest House administering to the wants of the poor, and prayed them with vehemence and insistence to lead him to the Abbot. So earnest was his countenance and so strange and convincing his manner, that they knew not how to deny him, especially as Abbot Gregory had notable bowels of compassion, and never denied himself to the poor and afflicted, and they weened he might be wroth if they sent the man away. So they brought him to the Abbot, and he told the Abbot all those things which had happened to him since his going forth overseas, and humbly asked to be admitted to their Order. Then the Abbot sent for me, and partly from the confirmation of my lips, and partly from common rumour, knowing Thomas to have spoken truly, he commanded that he should be taken into the Abbey. So I returned home by myself, and a week or two later Thomas was admitted to the Order as he had asked.

But he was very feeble and ill from the time that he came within the Abbey walls. They put him in a bed in their Infirmary, attending him night and day. All through his illness he was very devout in the exercises of religion, as far as the weakness of his body and the strict commands of the Abbot would allow, continually recommending himself to his Maker through the merits of Christ Jesus, Our Lord, and ceaselessly imploring the intercession of Our Lady and All Saints for the remission of his sins. The good Abbot, being filled with pity for the man on account of the grievous trials, with which it had seemed meet to the Lord to try him, had him oftentimes carried from his cell in the Infirmary of the Choir to assist at the Holy Sacrament of the Mass. On the warm days of the late autumn, they would open the little window of his cell and place his bed so that he could gaze towards Hart Hill and Garstang, which he loved above all things. For there in the mellow distance he could watch the white mists swirl round the familiar peaks and woods and fill the remembered valleys as though with fine wool. He watched the wind bend the trees upon the slopes and drive the clouds like a flight of wild geese across the grey sky. Nearer at hand in the Abbey orchard the last red leaves came fluttering down, and he knew that the winter was hard by. Then his stricken face grew bright with

some faint foreshining of the joy to come, and his lips moved in prayer.

'What prayer dost thou pray?' the Brother who had charge of the Infirmary asked him one day.

'Good brother, I am thanking God,' he replied.

He grew feebler day by day, his life quietly flowing hence, like a still river that flows through secret valleys to the sea, until as days grew sharp and chill, at the beginning of Advent, the Brethren doubted whether God would not call him to Himself before Christmas Day came. But hearing two of the Brethren whispering somewhat to this effect, when they thought that he slept, he called to them, and said, 'Dear Brethren, have no fear for me; I shall live till Christmas Day.'

When the bell rang for Midnight Mass on Christmas Day, and he still lay on his bed a living man, the Brethren knew that God must have made him a promise. But even while Mass was singing in the Church, he grew on a sudden weaker; he twice failed to catch his breath, and be became very cold, so that they could not warm him by rubbing his limbs. So they sent to warn the Abbot, as he had straitly charged them, and he hastening brought the Blood and Body of Christ, and having shriven him without delay, administered it to him, who received it with

trembling humility, but with tears of joy in his eyes.

Then he asked that he might die in the manner which is customary with the Order, if he were so far thought worthy. So having spread a cross of ashes on the floor, they laid him thereon. Then, whispering to the Abbot, who knelt beside him, he asked that the window might be opened, that he might see the sun rise upon Christmas Day.

It was still very dark and very quiet; only the wind rustled among the grass and bare branches, and ever and anon the passing bell tolled from the great tower. The kneeling Brethren prayed, and the dying man fixed his eyes on that spot in the darkness where, in morning light, the valley between Hart Hill and Garstang was wont plainly to be seen. The bitter cold air entered the cell.

They watched an hour and then another. Blue vivid bands streaked the east, a luminous haze spread from the hilltops down into the valleys; the cloak of thick darkness slowly lifted and a grey light filled the earth. Over Hart Hill and Garstang grew and blossomed an intense radiance, a burning white rose; slant beams of splendour fell athwart the smoking hillsides; the mists rose in purple and scarlet and gold before the rising sun. From the red-roofed town below

came the joyful ringing of many bells. It was Christmas morning.

Thomas the Freeman stretched out his arms towards the East; a great splendour, as of the smoke of incense, and a wondrous music as of a vast symphony filled the earth and sky.

'Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus,' he said, and fell back upon his cross.

Gloss

[Added in a different and later hand.]

The meaning of this true relation is most clear. The man Thomas did not come to church as he should, and thus despised God's holy ordinances and commands. Therefore God avenged Himself of him and struck him even where he had most offended—in his wife and children. How marvellously just and true are all His ways. Blessed be His Name for ever. Amen.

How William the Mason avenged Himself on the Twelve Apostles

WILLIAM THE MASON was the best man of his craft in Roodborough. His father before him had been a clever craftsman, but those who best could judge were wont to say that he had never done a better piece of work than the begetting of his son. For William was exceeding skilful not only in the sculpture of stone but also in the carving of wood and the working of precious metals, and occupied himself in all branches of his mystery, in ornament and design and in figures from the life, such as those of men and birds and beasts and flowers. He it was who wove delicate traceries of leaves and tendrils out of the stubborn stone of the capitals in Blewberry Church, which were so esteemed for their excellent beauty that craftsmen came from as far as London merely to examine them. He also carved the rood-screen at Houghton, wherein, upon the one side he cut lively figures of Father Adam and Mother Eve biting upon the apple, with the devilish serpent beholding them maliciously from the boughs of the

Tree of Knowledge, and upon the other a vigorous representation of the Blessed Archangel Michael casting Satan into the bottomless pit. This last was such a notable piece of work for vividness and reality, that some of the common folk took occasion thereby to excuse themselves from attending the Divine services with due Christian punctuality, saying that the Devil William had carved so feared and scared them with its hideous aspect, that they could not sleep of nights after having seen it in church. Also he wrought the great oaken rood at Charnwood, carving Christ's figure thereon from the actual human body, to wit, taking John Dymock for a model and chiselling the wooden block into his likeness limb by limb and muscle by muscle, only altering the countenance a little. Than this nothing more skilful was ever seen, but thereby unhappily enough the aforesaid John Dymock got a great chill upon his lungs and liver, which made him cough and wheeze pitifully the whole winter through until Lammastide. William also worked the fair pyx of silver for the Church of Saint Osbert, which, as it was said, was of such surpassing beauty that the Evil One himself coveted it and, coming in the night, stole it away. When Abbot Absalom enlarged and beautified the Abbey Church, he employed William much in the work, and rewarded him with many precious gifts. But of this you will hear more anon.

William's father, besides being a skilful workman, had been no unthrifty husbandman, so that when he departed this life (God rest his soul) he left unto his son, not only the good dry house at the Bridgend with its adjoining workshop, but much choice stone and timber ready prepared for working upon, a set of carving tools of such sort as were not known in these parts (some having been fetched from as far as Flanders), and a great chest in the bed-chamber nigh half full of golden coin. But although William was a better workman than his father, he was a less thrifty husbandman, for he would not give himself to the careful managing and sparing and putting by, which had made his father a burgher of substance.

'Money!' Will was wont to say to his boon fellows at the alehouse,—'Money! Why, 'tis for spending! I'd as lief be an earthworm and dwell in a midden as sweat and stint and spare to hoard up bits of metal in an old chest. Wife, a good cup of ale for these gentlemen all, and draw of your best. What saith Holy Writ: "Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth, where the moth and the rust corrupt and thieves break through and steal"?'

Then he would run on in his old jesting vein: 'I will give my best cloak to the man among you who can empty yon stoup without drawing breath, and a French crown to him who hath the reddest

nose. I love a red nose above all things, especially when 'tis past strawberry time. What, Nicholas, thou merry devil, strike a tune!'

Whereupon merrily in the alehouse went tabor, tongues, and toes until bedtime, when Will, who called the tune, usually paid the piper in more ways than one. God knows he was a happy, devil-may-care fellow enough, like the pretty painted butterflies you can see in the fields in summertime, ready to spend right royally and to quip and to laugh with the best and worst of folk. When he gave gifts at Saint Valentine's there were none so rare and fair as his in the town; when he gave alms he scattered his silver right and left like the Lord King when he goes up to Westminster to be crowned, and as though good coin was of no more account than hazel-nuts in September. Twice he journeyed to London to see some marvellous sculpture in a new church there of which he had heard Abbot Absalom speak, and Our Lady alone knows of how much the cozengers and lying knaves of Eastcheap cheated him. Certainly, however, he went each time with a good fat purse at his girdle and returned each time with it emaciated and chapfallen as one of Pharaoh's lean kine. But he also brought back with him two or three great bales of rich cloths and embroideries, which he had purchased there, partly for his own back and

partly for gifts to certain wenches with whom he kept company.

Idle though this good fellow was on occasion, yet when the fit came upon him no Israelite in the House of Bondage would work harder than he. 'Ay, this is one of my working days,' he would say to a neighbour, who had poked his nose in at the door to ask what ailed him that he worked so early and sang so loudly in his workshop nowadays. Then away he would go again with his chisel and mallet, hammering, chipping, and shaping as though 'twas all the good Lord had sent him in the world for, and singing like the birds in spring.

'Wert thou but in this mind always,' his neighbour would answer, 'there were no more laborious Christian in England than thou.'

Whereat Will would laugh and say, 'Thou must not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn; I cannot draw in plough seven days a week.'

At such times he would go with more joy to his labour than other men to the wassail, and such was the delight he took in shaping his figures and forms and fruit and flowers out of the stubborn and recalcitrant stone, that you would have said that the Almighty Himself had had no diviner ecstasy when He hewed the world out of chaos in the first great act of creation. But ardent and

zealous as he was to make his thoughts live in the stone and wood, he had no skill or energy in the collection of his just dues and debts, and since folk do not generally pay what they owe unless they are asked twice or thrice, yea, many times, it came about that many a pretty piece of work that he had wrought came gratis to the hands of unscrupulous men, who did not consider that the labourer is worthy of his hire, and that a debt is a debt although it be not importunely demanded. So it came about, that by dint of free spending and poor managing, in less than three years from his father's death, William found that the oaken chest in the upper chamber had been quite emptied of its coin, and began to be hard put to it for money in his pocket, especially as at this time there was for a short spell little employment of his kind to be gotten. William was not a man to go about with an empty purse if by hook or by crook it might be avoided, so having pondered the matter a little, he straightway bethought himself of the Twelve Apostles, and without more ado betook himself to the dwelling of one Master Matthew, the wealthiest and most notorious of them all.

The Twelve Apostles were not the holy and pitiful men that their name might seem to betoken, nay, they had been so nicknamed by some satirical fellow out of ridicule and contempt, and were indeed little better than Jews, being usurers.

Yet the name befitted them in some respects (although not in respects the most honourable), for there were twelve of these ill-conditioned fellows, and they were mostly named after the Blessed Disciples of our Lord, one being Peter, another Matthew, another Luke, another Philip, and so on; and they lived as close to each other as possible, cheek by jowl in a corner of the Market Place, as though there were great affection between them, a thing impossible to conceive of such villains. Howbeit their nickname was commonly in men's mouths, so that it was a common jest in the town when any one had gone a-borrowing, that 'he had gone to church to the Twelve Apostles,' and when any one paid them back that 'Peter had had his pence,' or that such a one 'had given an offering to Saint Luke' or 'to Saint Philip,' as the case might be.

God knows, it was an accursed trade these extortioners drove, laying out their money at interest, and taking bonds upon raiment, jewels, and land, and even upon consecrated churches, reaping where they had not sown, and taking up where they had not planted. Lo, what saith Master Aristotle, that learned Greek? So to do, saith he, is to sin against nature by making money to breed unnaturally and foully upon money, and 'tis widely known that Holy Mother Church strictly forbids such abominable traffic to all

Christians. But why should I repeat all this? These evil men knew the law of God as well as I, but it availed nought against their accursed lust of gold, which perhaps were the more pardonable had they been Jews and heathen, but, nay, they loudly confessed and proclaimed themselves Christians, and were as punctual in all the observances of the Church as any man in town. They thought belike, that having cheated God on Week Days they might also cheat him on Holy Days; God yield them in good measure therefor, when Satan shall pour down their greedy maws in Hell the molten metal which they loved so well on earth. Yea, and as much blame and punishment is due to the Lords and powerful men, who countenanced and supported them in their usury, whereby drawing profit to themselves from the sin of others.

Now Master Matthew, to whom William had betaken himself, was a shrivelled-up old man, bow-legged and palsy-stricken, with a bald head like a bladder, a long grey beard wherein the birds might have nested, skinny loose cheeks, cunning goggling eyes, and a long sharp nose like a quill with a big black wart growing on the side of it.

'Good morrow, Master Matthew,' quoth Will, bursting into the chamber where the old usurer sat at work, casting up his debts with tallies on a chequered board.

'Good morrow,' wheezed Master Matthew as though he had a peck of March dust in his throat. He blinked cunningly at Will for one moment with his red eyelids and then resumed his calculations.

'Nay,' cried Will, slapping him bravely on the shoulder till he coughed again and his eyes seemed ready to start from their red sockets; 'nay, thou greedy old cock, cease scratching thy dunghill a moment and lend me thirty crowns instanter.'

'Lend thee "thirty crowns,"' screamed Master Matthew. '"Thirty crowns?" Holy Paul, dost thou think I am a rich man? Where am I to get thirty crowns, or half that?'

'Thou abominable old liar,' cried Will merrily, slapping his back again. 'For shame, for shame, aged Master Matthew. Wilt thou also add to the sin of usury the sin of lying? Consider thy bald head and grey beard, consider thy weak joints and short breath, and at thine age heap not up damnation on a soul already as damned as any in Roodborough.'

'Blessed Saints, let my back alone; I tell thee I have it not to lend; I have no such sum by me, at least not at present. Besides, what security shall I have? What security is there, tell me that?'

'Ah, ah, my amiable Jew, thou wilt find the thirty crowns if I find the security? Is it not so? Well, take my house, my workshop, my furnishings, my tools, my utensils, my cloak, my

shirt upon my back. Is not that enough, my Barrabbas ? '

' Holy Saints, I do not know, I cannot tell, I must think about it. Perhaps 'twould do an I had the money,' said Master Matthew eagerly, biting his scrubby, cracked nails, and throwing quick, cunning glances at William.

' Perchance you might find the money an you looked carefully,' said Will. ' Hast looked in the chimney, hast looked in thy sock or in thy long beard ? '

' Nay, nay, I tell thee I have it not; but perhaps my good friend, Master Luke, may help, or, now I think of it, perhaps to oblige thee, Master Luke, Master Mark, and I might make up the sum between us. Verily, I believe it might be done. Marry, good Master William Mason, if that will serve thy turn, we should be glad to help out an honest man at need. I will see, I will see ; but do thou return hither this afternoon, against when I may have the bond ready for thee to sign.'

Thus William got his thirty crowns upon his bond, but upon such hard conditions were they lent that within six months (since employment still remained scarce) he began woefully to perceive that presently the Twelve Apostles would enter upon his house and shop, and confiscate the very tools wherewith he earned his bread and meat, so that in the future he might look not only for an

empty purse but also for an empty belly. Without doubt this would have come to pass, had not old Abbot Absalom at this time taken it into his head to glorify the Blessed Mother of God by enlarging and beautifying the Abbey Church. This enterprise he conceived in no mean spirit, extending the nave forty feet or more, and the aisles in proportion, and ornamenting the whole church, both old and new, with many choice sculptures, wherein he made much use of William, both for his excellent advice and his skill with his hands. For which work William received many rich and generous gifts from the Abbot, and with these he was able at length to redeem his bond from the usurers, although only at three times the price he had received for it. Whereat he cursed Master Matthew and his friends right shrewdly, so that it made people rejoice to hear him, and he swore that he would yet be avenged upon the whole pack of them. Yea, he said he would fain be a Devil in Hell, if only for the pleasure of tormenting Master Matthew in the Lake of Fire.

II

When Abbot Absalom was on his way from Rome, from seeing our Father the Pope, he had been shown in a certain place in France a church porch of such exquisite proportions and workman-

ship as filled him with admiration. When, therefore, he enlarged the Abbey Church, he determined to build the great West door in a similar fashion, and while the work was yet in hand he sent for William and asked him to carve some religious figures for ornament upon the upper projection of the porch. William gladly agreed to do all that he wished, and hied him joyfully home and set straightway to work. He laboured diligently and without remission for very many weeks, and with such secrecy, covering up and removing each piece of sculpture as he finished it, as folk had never seen in him before, so that no one knew what subjects he had chosen to illustrate in his work. A few days before Easter Sunday, together with his men Abel and Geoffrey, he took the great stones he had carved, all swathed in old cloths so that none should see them, and fitted them in their places upon the porch, giving out to all that his work should be seen for the first time fully unveiled on Easter Sunday.

On Easter Sunday, as is the custom, nigh all the townsfolk in their best raiment flocked to the Morrow Mass in the Abbey Church, but first and earliest of all went William himself with many of his gossips, as Nicholas the Piper, Tom the Fletcher, Ned Arrowsmith and Sim the Hayward, and his two men Abel and Geoffrey. With them also went Master Brereton and his good wife,

and fat Mistress Slopstone, Kate of the Cross Roads, bonny Gilly Hedgerow, and a score more of good wenches. They walked in great glee, and by the way there was talk of William's piece of work to be seen that day.

'Marry,' said Nick, 'now we shall see this handiwork of thine, which thou hast kept as secret as a priest his bastard.'

'By Our Lady,' quoth Mistress Slopstone, 'it should be a bonny loaf that has been so long in the baking.'

'Nay, nay,' answered Will, ''tis a poor thing enough, I warrant you, a few holy figures to call folk to a better mind, nothing more.'

So they came to the church, and when they cast their eyes up at Will's carvings, now plain to be seen, and perceived what manner of thing it was he had done, they burst into sudden laughter that they could not contain, until the tears ran down their cheeks, their sides heaved as though they would crack, and their knees began to give way under them. Even good Master Brereton, usually solemn as an owl, laughed until he was fain to bend double and grip his knees with his hands. As for Nick, he tumbled on the grass upon his back and laughed until he was weak as water or a six months' child.

'Thou witty devil, ha, ha,' laughed Tom Fletcher.

'Ah, ah, thou whoreson clever knave,' gasped fat Mistress Slopstone, her fat old sides quivering and shaking until her stomacher burst.

'Thou naughty—he, he, he' laughed Mistress Kate, covering her great open mouth with her huge bony hand, while her bones rattled up and down in their skinny case.

'Verily, William,' said Mistress Brereton smiling heartily, 'thou art the cunningest rogue and the best mason in England. I see a man is a right fool to fall out with thee.'

'A few figures of religion, figures of religion,' quoth William, taking off his bonnet and bowing right low and gallantly.

By this time other folk had come up, and shortly there was a great crowd staring and laughing at Will's handiwork, and so loath were they to leave looking thereon, that there were few but the gravel-blind that were punctual to Mass that morning.

Will had taken a shrewd revenge on the Twelve Apostles. Above the porch he had carved with wonderful mastery, as though from the very act of life itself, a representation of Devils carrying usurers to Hell, to each of twelve usurers a couple of hideous Devils, and each usurer an exact and speaking likeness of one of these cursed Twelve Apostles. In the middle of the piece, especially plain to be seen, was Master Matthew despairingly

resisting two shaggy Devils who were lugging him from his money-bags. One grisly Devil, all be-hoofed and be-horned, had twined his foul legs around him and forced his bald pate downward with his bony claw, fastening his teeth in a great bite in his naked neck. The other had grasped Master Matthew's waist with one arm with such violence and force that his talons sank deeply into the belly and chest; with his other claw he tugged with right good will at Master Matthew's beard. Nor was there any mistaking Master Matthew; there might you see his bald head, his little eyes goggling out of his head, his loose hanging cheeks (down which round stony tears had now been made to course), his bandy legs; yea, all so done to the life that you might discern even the wart with which God had punished him upon the side of his long nose.

To the right and left of this group were the other Apostles, done with an equal energy and faithfulness, so that folk regarding them were fain to burst into laughter of recognition, although Will had distorted their faces with grotesque grimaces of agony and dismay.

'Holy Mary, there is Master Mark with the patch in his cloak he hath had this many a long year,' cried one of the crowd. 'Yea, but it is wonderful; and does the old miser intend to take that to Hell with him also?'

'Saints,' cried another, 'he hath gotten the hump on Master Philip's back to a wonderment. Eh, but I am woe to look upon that Master Philip's face, it is that adread and afeared.'

'Yea, neighbour,' answered another, 'but look upon Master John's withered hand; I could swear to it among a thousand.'

All unwitting came the Twelve Apostles amongst the crowd to see what this star-gazing should mean, mayhap thinking, avaricious hypocrites, that a Blessed Saint had come down from Heaven to borrow a hundred crowns. The people cheered and laughed when they saw them, and did not spare their quips and quirks, casting their eyes up at the carven figures and crying, that 'Hell must indeed be a fearsome place, where such naughty fellows went,' and that 'sin was written on their faces,' and much more to that effect. Whereat the Twelve gnashed their teeth and snarled at them like dogs, and crept off homeward as fast as they might.

Thereafter, when they met William in the Market or upon the way, they glared at him with spiteful eyes and cursed him under their breath. But he, being quit of them and having gotten his revenge, smiled sweetly upon them in return and wished them 'Good-day.' Honest folk, seeing them go to the Abbey Church as before and nothing amend their ways, said it was a wonder

that God did not make the carven images fall upon them and thus slay them in their hypocritical wickedness.

III

A few months afterwards, when the savour of the jest had become somewhat stale in the nostrils of the town, it happened that old Master Matthew, looking out of an upper chamber at the backside of the house early one morning, spied a certain maid washing out her smocks in a little green and private garden, and his mind was so perturbed at the view of her pretty cheeks, fair white arms and full bosom, that his evil old frame began to shake with desire from head to foot. He spied upon her secretly for some days, and then, unable to contain any longer, he went incontinently to her father (who was a poor man of the town) and obtained the girl in marriage, offering largely for her and buying her with money as though she had been a cow or a sheep instead of a Christian woman.

When the news got about the town that old Master Matthew was minded to marry a young wench, great was the talk thereof. Some asked what an old wretch, who had enough to do with cordials and powders to keep the flicker of life in his withered carcass, could want with a wife.

Others said that there was not heat enough in his heart to warm his own body in bed of a winter's night, and that he had better be thinking of burying instead of marrying; others that he had been better minded to patch up his old soul for the next world than to meddle with womankind, with much more that was true of the same sort. Even his infamous companions in sin, the Apostles (or the Apostates as they might have been more rightly called), came and reasoned with him against his intention, saying that a young wife would be wanton, fickle, and wasteful, spending and squandering on rich garments for her back and rare dainties for her belly, and wasting in a few months what he had hardly gotten in so many years, and that she would make his life a Hell or at least a Purgatory so as to bundle him as quickly as might be into his grave, that she might enjoy his goods and fortune with a lusty young husband of her own choosing after his decease. But old men are violent and headstrong in their fancies, and Master Matthew in his sudden heat seemed to love the wench even more than his gold and silver, so that all their persuasions were of no effect.

On the bridal day, therefore, away he crept to Church in a shabby green jerkin, which he had had from Nick the Piper in pawn, with a favour in his bosom and a stick in his hand. Holy

Virgin, but a pretty couple the jolly young Margot and he made, she fresh and fair as a mead in May when it is all be-starred with flowers, he like a figure of Old Time on a monument. He tottered along clinging to her arm like a brat to his mother's gown, stumbling and coughing and wheezing and spitting as though he would shatter his old frame to pieces. She looked straight before her, and the tears stood in her bonny blue eyes.

So they came to the threshold of the Church, and lo, just as the wretched old man put forth his quivering foot to touch consecrated ground, the Lord showed full mightily that He does not sleep or slumber, for He touched the stone whereon William had carved the carrying hence of Master Matthew by Devils with His finger and it fell suddenly from its place and smote the usurer on his bald and shining skull, crushing him to the ground. When they ran to him and raised him up, he was dead. Truly, when William carved that stone, God inspired him more than he thought, so that his chisel carved not only symbols but also prophecies.

When the news of this event became known in the town, folk said that it was a judgment of God upon Master Matthew, because he had practised the sin of usury, and they began to ask how long the remaining eleven Apostles would be suffered

to live in their wickedness. Many thought that each in his turn would be slain in precisely the same manner, each by his own carven stone as he went through the great West porch to offer hypocrisy at the altar of the Most High. When men met any of them walking abroad, they would stand and jeer at them with cunning words.

'Nay, I know not, Master Luke,' would Nick the Piper say, 'but if I were one of you fellows, who live in the corner of the Market, I would never go into the Church unless it were by the windows.'

'Is Master Mark alive yet?' would ask the Fletcher. 'I wot he had been killed by a shrewd blow on the pate days ago.'

'Hast thou heard?' quoth Sim. 'An angel sat watching all last Holy Day on the great porch. I marvel, Master Mark, that thou and thy fellows come not to Church. Surely thou hast been instructed and knowest what is fit for a Christian man?'

'Has Master Philip's stone fallen from the Church porch yet?' asked the Arrowsmith. 'Methinks it seemed perilously loosened last time I saw it.'

Robert the Carpenter, meeting three of the Apostles in the Market Place, stopped them and roundly declared in the hearing of all that he would build eleven good oak coffins for such as

might be in need of them as cheaply as might be, were they only bespoken at once and in that quantity.

By reason of so many quips and dry bobs the Apostles were in a few weeks brought to a misery and humiliation befitting their state of sin. They scarcely dared poke their noses from their lattices into the street but folk would begin to cry out upon them and to wonder loudly that they were still alive. None of them dared go to Church; Master Mark, taking his courage in both hands, set out one Holy Day, but when he came in sight of the church porch, and caught sight of the gap in the upper projection thereof, whence Master Matthew's stone had fallen, his heart failed him and he turned back, and that although many good men standing within the porch, encouraged him to enter, calling to him that it were better to be damned as a usurer than as a heretic. This saying, getting passed from mouth to mouth, gave new matter to the people, who now stood about in their idle moments under the Apostles' houses in the corner of the Market Place, and cried to each other that the Abbot had written a letter to the Archdeacon of the Diocese that there were eleven men in the town, who came to none of the Divine Services, and were esteemed either heretics or Jews, and that the Archdeacon had sent word in reply that he would shortly

come with his clerks and purge the town of heresy as though with a raging fire, and further inquiring whether there were any known and notorious practisers of usury in the Borough.

At which words the eleven Apostles, who stood each one listening beside his lattice, quaked with dread and crept away silently to the back of the house, being too afeared to listen to any more of such talk.

IV

One night, about an hour after sundown, William returned from dancing on the green. It had turned in chill with a heavy dew falling, so he sat awhile before the fire to warm himself before going to his bed. As he sat humming to himself a jolly tune he had gotten from Nick the Piper, there came a sort of scratching or rustling at the door.

'Beshrew me,' he said half aloud, 'but rats are as plentiful as blackberries in this house,' and he hurled a log at the place whence the sound came. But instead of the noise ceasing, it came again a little louder than before, and Will then understood that it was some one fumbling at the latch outside.

'In God's name,' he cried lustily, 'come in, thou old bat.'

With that the latch was hesitatingly lifted and Master Mark cautiously poked his red pate inside and peered suspiciously around.

'What,' cried Will, 'Master Mark? Mine ancient friend of the patched cloak, mine honest acquaintance the Prince of the Jews? Enter, my worthy usurer, out of the night dew and warm thy cold heart against the fire.'

'For the love of Mary, good Master Will, speak more quietly,' stuttered Master Mark, half dead with fear. 'If these town devils hear thee, they will slay me.'

'Oh, oh,' thought Will. '"Good Master Will," forsooth. Sits the wind in that quarter i' faith?'

Master Mark insinuated himself through the doorway and, shutting the door behind him with exceeding great quietness, shuffled into the room.

'Sit down, my Master,' quoth Will courteously, 'though why thou thus honourest my poor dwelling, I cannot tell, since I have no need or mind to go a-borrowing again.'

Master Mark subsided heavily upon a chair, blew a great sigh of relief from his gross carcass, and blinked ponderingly at the fire with his beady black eyes. Then he turned to William and, with his harsh voice for the nonce tuned to entreaty, said, 'Good Master William Mason, I know thou hast a mild and compassionate heart, albeit thou art fond of quips and laughter.'

'Yea, I am a mild man,' quoth William, 'as mild as curds and whey.'

'Yea, yea, and so say all men, so therefore when my friends and I took counsel together.'

'*Thy* friends. Prithee, and who are they?'

'Why, Master Luke and Master Philip and Master ——'

'Ay, now I take thee, the Apostles?'

'Ay, so men blasphemously miscall us, who are indeed good Christian men. When we had taken thought together, it seemed best to us all, seeing that thou wert a man with bowels of compassion, that one of us should come and tell thee that we cast ourselves utterly on thy misericord and mercy.'

'"Mercy?" "Misericord?" Master Mark, thou jestest. Are ye not rich? Have ye not gold? Have ye not houses? Have ye not lands? Who are ye, to cast yourselves on the mercy of a poor fellow that lives by the sweat of his brow?'

'Ah, sir, jest not with miserable and broken men, that are as worms under thy heel. Hast thou not wrought satirical sculptures of us over the Church porch, and filled the dead stones with a devilish cunning and malice, that they lie, as it were, in wait, to precipitate themselves upon us when we pass underneath, so that we are afeared for our lives to fulfil our pious desires and devoirs to Holy Church, which we duly owe as Christian men?'

Master Mark snuffled in his nose and rubbed his dirty sleeve across his gingery eyebrows.

'"Christian men"?' said Will. 'I had thought ye were Jews.'

'Nay, gentle Master Will, no Jews, but as good Christians as any in Roodborough. Yea, and have not thy sculptures brought upon us the hatred and contempt of the whole town, so that we daily go in fear of violence even to murder? Ay, and besides; whereas we dare not for thy spiteful carvings go to Church to Mass or Confession, do not the people say openly that we are heretics and Jews, and threaten to present us to the Archdeacon that we may be delivered to the torment and the fire?'

''Twas the finger of God that hurled the stone on the head of old Master Matthew, and none can stand before His wrath. Thou wert best, Master Mark, to get to thy prayers, for I doubt whether thou wilt live over long.'

'Good Master Will,' whined Master Mark, 'we do indeed pray hourly and daily to the Blessed Virgin and all Saints to intercede for us, miserable sinners. But thou art a good, kindly man, and perchance in this case more powerful than they, and we would ask thee, we would entreat thee, to take down—of course for a payment—for a good substantial sum—to take down these carven figures, that we may worship in the

Church again like good Christian men, as we did heretofore.'

'Holy Saints of God, and wouldst thou have the artist destroy his artistry, desecrate the Blessed Church and meddle with the wrath of God? Blessed Mary forbid.'

'Nay, nay, we would not have thee destroy thy work, which is indeed exceeding rare and cunning, but only to remove it from its present place, so that we might go to Mass in safety. Doubtless if thou take it down, thou couldst sell it again at great profit. Besides, good Master William, remember that it hath been defaced already with the fall of Master Matthew's stone, and with each one of us that crosses the threshold of the porch, it will deface itself more, until it be entirely destroyed, and that with lamentable shedding of blood.'

'Of a surety, Master Mark, each stone will have its man.'

'Ah, Master William, have mercy upon us broken men. We will pay thee, I warrant thee, if thou wilt but remove them, and that right liberally.'

William lit a taper at the fire, and going to his workshop door, flung it open. He peered within, holding the taper high above his head so that the light fell on the shattered image of Master Matthew struggling in the hands of the demons.

''Tis piteously shattered,' he thought, 'I doubt

beyond redemption. Lo, the old man is dead now and doubtless in Hell; I should be loath to set his figure up again thus. Yet without it my work is defaced, yea, and every Apostle that ventures into Church will deface it more.'

Then his eye fell on certain parchments, whereon he had but yesterday sketched out a fair design and had sighed to himself to think that there was no other porch like that at the Abbey Church to ornament. He had thought that, were it to be done again, he would do it thus, and better so. He turned to Master Mark, who watched him with cunning eyes like a pig's.

'And what wilt thou pay me for taking down the carvings?' he asked.

'Marry,' cried Mark joyfully, 'we are no skinflints, good sir; we are honest men and will pay. For each stone thou removest we will give thee ten crowns.'

'Ten crowns. Thou jestest, my gentle usurer. Hast thou bethought that the carvings have not only to be removed but also to be replaced by others as beautiful? Thou hast best home again.'

'Oh Mary, ten crowns. Wilt thou not take ten crowns? Oh, the hard hearts of men. Not ten crowns? Nay then, fifteen. Nay? Not fifteen? Then twenty, twenty crowns; say twenty crowns for each stone, Master William, eleven twenties, two hundred and twenty

crowns in all, or say two hundred, two hundred in all.'

'Hast thou considered, Master Mark, that maybe there is the Abbot to placate for taking liberties with his new Porch? Is not even a usurer's life worth thirty crowns? Say thirty crowns for each stone and I will close with thee, nay, for three hundred crowns in all I am thine. Dost agree? Otherwise, home again to thy prayers, mine ancient penitent.'

'Oh,' groaned Master Mark, 'oh Mary, that such a young man should have such a hard heart, and should be so covetous. Three hundred didst thou say?'

'Yea, no less.'

'Mary, Mary, 'tis too much.'

'Good even, then, Master Mark.'

'Nay, nay, if thou must, then thou shalt have it, three hundred crowns. But thou wilt take away every single stone?'

'Yea, and replace every single one.'

'Swear then.'

'Nay, my word is my bond.'

'Promise then.'

'Ay, I promise.'

'Agreed then, and I take thy promise. But when wilt thou do it?'

'As soon as I have carved the stones wherewith to replace thee and thy brethren. But do thou

bring the three hundred crowns here this time to-morrow evening.'

'Yea, I will bring two hundred and the other hundred after the work is finished.'

'If it please thee, good night.'

'Good night.'

Master Mark crept forth from the house like a rat from his hole.

For three months afterwards Will was seldom to be seen at the Market, at the Green, or at the Alehouse, but was ever in his shop singing like a thrush and working like a Trojan. When folk asked what kept him so busy these days he would answer that he was carving a wondrous fine memorial for Master Matthew's grave, whereat they laughed and called him a mad wag.

When he had finished the work, having called his two faithful men, Abel and Geoffrey, to him, he swore them to secrecy. Then he told them all that he was about and desired them to help him, to which they agreed right willingly. That night after Vespers they went privily forth by a back way to the Church, bearing with them a ladder and mallets and chisels. Climbing the porch, they worked there the best part of the night, breaking away the mortar and cement which held the carved stones in their places, so that in the end they rested loosely in their sockets and might be carried easily away. The next night

came in very misty and dark, so that for lack of light they could not go and finish their work, but the night following they stole forth again and this time brought down the Apostles from their places on the porch and replaced them by the stones which William had newly worked, in such sort that the upper part of the porch was all remade as he had designed it afresh.

Early next morning the people coming to Mass were filled with great astonishment to see that the Apostles had disappeared and in their place were carvings the most beautiful imaginable of the Adoration of Our Lord by the Three Magi. Many and loud were their expressions of wonder and admiration, and, ever as the news spread, the crowd of those gazing increased, until nigh half the town stood round the West Porch. All agreed that cunning as William's work had been, it was naught compared with this. 'Nay,' they said among themselves, 'William doth well enough, but this is beyond him; this is plainly the hand of God. Glory be to the Blessed Virgin, that we should live to see such a great miracle worked, and in this our town too.'

Then up spake a certain cordwainer, 'Now I call to mind somewhat I saw late last night, as I came from Mistress Woolcomb's churching-ale.'

'And what was that?' they asked him.

'Marry, 'twas full moon,' said he, 'and

wondrous bright, and casting my eyes on the Abbey Church as I came down the Abbey hill, 'twas as though I saw three great fellows hard at work on yon porch. I had drunk full heavy of Mistress Woolcomb's strong ale, and I weened I had been deceived, else had I spoken before, but now methinks they were wondrous large for mortal men and had each a glory round his head very sweet and comfortable to see.'

'Yea,' quoth another, 'and I saw them too as I came with the cordwainer, and I dared not speak either, for I had drunk full heavily and weened that they might not be there after all, and they had mighty wings all feathery on their shoulders and a great light was going forth out of them.'

'Doubtless,' said the people, 'these were three angels, and they it is who have wrought this beautiful work.'

Whereupon it straightway went through the town that the three Archangels had visited the Abbey Church in the night and had carved thereon the Adoration of the Magi in the stead of William's usurers. This tale cast the whole place into a turmoil and, spreading into the country districts, caused the upland folk to come into Roodborough in hundreds in order to see the angelic handiwork. For many days the town was like a fair with so many people coming and going, with such selling of meat and beer and

bread, such cryings for lodging and stabling, such companies of pilgrims, so many monks and friars and so many minstrels and tumblers. Never before had the alehouses and hostelries been so full, and never before had so much good coin flowed into them in so short time.

Meanwhile William, and Abel and Geoffrey, played mum-budget and held their tongues, privily laughing and girding one another, saluting each other by 'Blessed Archangel Michael,' or 'Good Sir Raphael,' or 'My Lord Gabriel.' William said that never before had folk so fully owned to his skilful craftsmanship, and he should without doubt be able to sell the Apostles elsewhere for a good round sum.

But at the end of a couple of weeks came old Abbot Absalom riding down from London, from the King's holding of Parliament. Being told of the great miracle which the Blessed Archangels had worked on his Church porch, he went in hot haste to behold it. He examined it carefully and critically.

'Marry,' quoth he at length in a dry decided voice, 'if this be the work of the Blessed Archangels, then have Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael been to school at that knave William's.'

Then he pointed with his staff to the figure of Our Blessed Lady, carved to the life, holding the Holy Infant on her lap for the Wise Men to adore.

'God's foot,' quoth he, 'I have seen that Virgin's face somewhere before.'

They all began to stare at the carven Virgin; then some began to titter and then to laugh, and at last one cried out, 'Beshrew me, if it is not bonny Gilly Hedgerow from the Crutched House.'

Now at the time William was amorous of this wench.

When the Abbot had dined he sent a messenger for William, and had him brought forthwith into his presence.

'Right noble and celestial sire,' said the Abbot, bowing satirically as low as his fat paunch would let him, 'I have spoken with many a great lord and noble, with our Lord the King and with His Holiness the Pope, but never have I had the honour of meeting an Archangel before.'

Whereupon William fell down upon his knees and told the Abbot all that had happened, how the Twelve Apostles had cheated him of a hundred crowns, and how he had made them repay him three times as much. In the end he asked forgiveness, humbly submitting that although he had indeed taken down the Apostles he had put a better piece of work in their place.

Then the Abbot laughed heartily at the story and, raising William to his feet, sent for a cup of wine wherein he pledged him merrily as the

wittiest cogging knave in England, and forced him also to pledge him in return.

'I freely forgive thee,' quoth he, 'for thou hast not only given me a good jest to tell to my Lord Abbot of Saint Alban's, but an excellent exchange against the Apostles, which, however, I will buy from thee again for the Chapter House.'

So saying he gave Will the cup with twenty crowns in it to boot, and afterwards told the story of Will's revenge upon the usurers with great applause at the King's Court at Westminster. When the townsfolk got to hear of it, they laughed as heartily thereat as the Abbot had done, and for a long time afterwards William and his two men were commonly known as the Archangels. Further, they said that Roodborough was indeed a town favoured by God, for whereas it had long possessed a famous goodly Abbey and the Twelve Apostles, now also it had the three Archangels into the bargain.

How Peter heard the Cock crow

I

IT was pitch dark in Deptford Creek, neither moon nor star. Uneasily walking by the waterside on the squelching mud flats, or on the landing-stage among tuns and chests and beams and piles of stone ballast, you might just make out the mast and round hull of the cog *Rose Mary*, as she swung slowly at her moorings. On the one side, the broad flood of the Thames shone dully like molten lead or thick oil; on the other, one or two lights glimmered faintly from Deptford town. There was a smell of tar and bilge-water and stale beer.

Beneath the light of the lantern, which burned dimly on the poop of the *Rose Mary*, lay Peter the Shipman comfortably on a coil of rope. By his side was a stoup of the strongest French wine he had been able to find in the cog's hold. He had reason to be merry that night, so he trolled jolly choruses to himself between his long

draughts. The *Rose Mary* had sailed from Bordeaux with the tide on the night of the last Wednesday, and here she was, gotten into Deptford Creek safe and sound by the Friday midnight. Never had he made such an easy and speedy passage. Besides, in his purse he bore certain pieces of silver, which he had gotten from the chapman of the Bordeaux ward at easy purchase, together with a rose noble, which he had picked from the purse of a young squire, who had taken passage with him to England. Peter chuckled. He thought to himself, 'To-morrow early shall I leave these knaves, Thomas and Ralph, to unlade, and will I forth to the Golden Cock in Deptford to my leman Kate, to be jolly and to play me with her all the day, and I shall have great plenty of silver to buy me as much good ale as I want (curse this feeble French wine!), and as many delicate cakes and puddings and pies and ripe Kentish cherries as I can get into my belly. And the day after that shall I to Newington with that knave Ralph, to his wench's by the Green, and stay there till all my money is spent, and then, heigho, for my pretty little Bette at Bordeaux. Beshrew my heart, how I love the girl, now I 've left her a day or two.'

Then he burst out into a sailor's catch.

'Who leadeth so merry, so merry his life,
As the Shipman of Sandwich, who wanteth a wife.'

At the sound of his voice a woman came out of the darkness and stood at the edge of the landing-stage in the faint light cast by the ship's lantern. She was clad in many-coloured and tawdry garments, and from his place on the poop Peter could discern the chalk and rouge plastered on her cheeks and the bright vermilion on her lips ; he knew her for a wench of the town. She peered into the cog.

'What, pretty Peter,' she cried to him, 'art home again, good fellow ? Thou 'rt welcome, by my troth. Come now and sup with me at the Pair of Oars. There is pretty company there, I warrant thee, Lilias Lightbody, Martha Kittlelegs, and Cicely Shakesheets and other jolly wenches and their fellows, as merry a crew as one's heart could desire. Convey me thither, my little pigsnye, for I did ever dote on thee.'

'Nay, good Belle, I am fast,' quoth Peter, 'the Devil be damned for it. I cannot stir till morning, with the cog to be berthed and the hold to be cleared.'

'The Devil damn thee for a liar,' cried the woman. 'Thou couldst if thou wouldst, I warrant. Hast thou worn thy rotten carcass out in France that thou art afeared to put foot ashore, thou whoreson fish-head, thou ? Thou art a radish and no man, a filthy remnant, a dead dog——'

'What, thou old beldame,' cursed Peter in good set terms, 'thou scarecrow, thou bundle of rags and bones and paint, thou whited sepulchre, thou old corruption, thou walking gravewoman. Hook thyself to some dead-drunken land lubber, for thou makest me retch to look on thee. Go to, thou art past thy trade, get thee to a hospital, thou.'

The woman replied to him with another volley of abuse, and then turning, retreated slowly into the darkness whence she came. Peter howled jeers and ribaldry after her as long as he judged her within earshot; then he settled himself once more upon his coil of rope and applied himself to his wine-stoup.

He laughed aloud. He had suddenly called to mind how he and other good fellows in the *Holy Trinity* had pillaged the Fleming barge off Gravelines, and how, after they had rummaged the vessel from stem to stern, they had hurled the mariners into the sea to swim their way home, if so they might. He remembered one fat Fleming in especial, who had made them almost burst with laughter, such comic antics did he cut when he understood what fate was to befall him. His face had turned pasty white and his eyes yellow with fear, he had pattered prayers like a priest in mortal terror of Hell Fire, and when they shoved him overboard into the sea, and he struck

the water plump like a lump of lead, he had screamed out 'Mother!' 'Twas truly comical to hear such a fat old devil cry out for his mother as though he had been a two-years' child. Peter fingered the dagger, which hung round his neck on a lanyard; it was a good dagger of fine Spanish steel, it had once hung from that same Fleming's neck.

A bell began to toll from the town solemnly and dolefully.

It was the passing bell, rung that Christian men might pray for a soul upon the threshold of the great darkness. Peter listened for the mournful strokes, mechanically he counted them up till ten, and then began from one again.

Suddenly the bell ceased.

Peter knew that the soul had gone out into the darkness, and he crossed himself and said *Pater Noster*, as he had been taught to do as a child.

Then the fat Fleming recurred to his mind, but somehow he did not make him laugh this time. 'Poor devil,' he thought, and said *Pater Noster* again. He pondered silently for a long time, and his mind began to be strangely disturbed.

'Pah!' quoth he, shaking himself, and took another draught of wine, but the liquor had no taste and he put the tankard down. He looked upward to the sky; there was still no moon or

stars to be seen, only blackness overhead and blackness all round, save for a little lightening in the East where the day would presently break. He thought of the woman who had just left him; then he thought of his mother, whom he had not seen these five years—five years which he had spent in roving, smuggling and pirating from the Hanse Ports to the Holy Land. God knows how many more sins he had piled on his conscience since the day he had last bid her farewell in the tiny apple-orchard behind the house. Then she had had a mad notion of going on a pilgrimage with him to Saint Thomas at Canterbury, and he had told her to keep her old bones safe by the fireside and to leave such junketings to young wenches. 'Ah,' she had answered, 'I should be easier in my mind had thou and I made vows together at the tomb of the Holy Thomas.' He had replied to her roughly to keep house and to say her prayers at home, and had trudged away without more ado in his ill-temper. He remembered her now standing under the trees and looking sadly after him. He thought there had been tears in her eyes, and at the time he had been fain to whistle to make his mind the easier.

Peter was an evil fellow, and he knew it. There were few knavish trades asea or ashore to which he had not turned his hand. Many were the gallows that ached for him, many were those who

had vowed to have their own by him again, and many were the souls who would accuse him before the Righteous Judge at the Dreadful Doomsday. Yet his mother had taught him *Ave*, *Pater Noster*, and *Credo* as soon as he might run and talk, and had nurtured him in all good religion. Truly she was a godly woman, this mother of his, and she had borne a graceless son. Surely she would sit with the Saints at last around Our dear Lord's feet, while he would have his portion in the Lake which burns with fire. If only with a word he could undo five years, why, then he might start again.

Through the darkness came the glimmer of moving lights and the sound of far-off voices singing in modulation and time. He propped himself on his elbow and strained his eyes and ears. The swinging lights approached, the singing came nearer ; he heard the sound of feet on the rough causeway. A band of pilgrims, having risen before it was yet light, went on their way to Saint Thomas of Canterbury with their lanterns and staves in their hands, and their mouths filled with divine songs. In Gregorian cadence they sang the penitential psalms, and Peter listened as a man in a dream to their solemn chanting growing fainter and fainter in the distance, and watched their glimmering lanterns extinguished one by one in the obscurity.

It was as though he had seen a vision of the Saints of God going up with their lamps burning to the altar of the Most High, singing 'Holy, holy, holy.' He gazed after them, long after they had disappeared, with wide eyes and parted lips.

'She was right,' he said at length, speaking slowly to himself. 'She is a godly woman. She shall go on pilgrimage with me, though it be to Rome itself.'

He thought of the blessed Saint Godric and how he had borne his mother Romewards on his back, and how an angel had come down from Heaven to help them on their way.

He waited for the morning to break.

II

Peter was footsore and weary. For three days he had walked from sunrise to sunset, and now, at the end of the third day, his shipman's legs were stiff and his feet blistered almost to bleeding. But he valiantly stepped forward, looking neither to left nor right, aiding himself much by his staff, and planting his feet firmly on the rough way.

He began to recognise the landmarks. There, blue-black against the red-shot sky of sunset, lay the Cow's Back, as he had seen it so often of old,

like a barrier for ever dividing darkness from intolerable splendours; there, winding down and clothing the valley as far as the eye could reach in a mantle of sombre foliage, lay the Ravens Wood, in which he had so often gone shooting with his little bow when a boy; there, wave after wave in multitudinous succession swept the grassy uplands over which he had seen the villeins drive the herds in the fresh light of so many mornings of yore; there, clad in bramble and gorse and heather, stretched the wild common where he had been wont to gather the ripe berries in autumn.

And now, as he came nearer home, there was the splintered oak which folk called 'the Fairies,' round which he had danced with two little village girls for good luck when a lad; there were the two huge and solitary stones, by which he had played with his dead brother through many a long summer's day; there was the standing pool upon which he had been wont to slide with the village boys in the hard winters; there was the desolate mere where he had found the bittern's nest.

Meanwhile the red fire had faded from the western sky, and the shadows deepened and stretched outwards from under the hills. The mist came up and hid the land like a layer of cotton wool and soaked him to the skin. He plodded on.

At the last village folk had told him, 'A good

eight mile and he were best to stay there that night, for it was a rough road and one easy to miss.' But he had replied that he was in haste and he knew the road. In the darkness he could distinguish little, but over the hill yonder should lie the church with the graveyard, in which rested his father's and his father's father's bones. In the hollow below the hill and on this side of it should lie his mother's house; at the top of the rise he should see it if there were only light enough. He hastened and climbed the rise. Down in the valley, a tiny yellow light glimmered feebly through the blackness. There was his home, and the candles burnt for his return. He hastened on again, breaking into a shambling run. As he drew near he fell into a walking pace, for he felt a sudden shamefacedness. Besides, he did not want to alarm his mother; honest wayfarers were few at that time of night, he thought.

He reached the door and put his hand upon the latch. Suddenly he stayed. An unearthly wailing came from within, the feeble and cracked voices of old women raised in a mournful melody. Peter's breath came thick and fast, he almost choked, and his heart thumped like a hammer against his ribs. With an effort he lifted the latch and flung open the door.

Upon a table in the middle of the room lay the dead body of his mother, laid out for burial

and swathed completely except for the face in white grave-clothes. Upon her bosom was set a small platter of salt, and at each corner of the table a rushlight burnt feebly. Four old women sat round the corpse and wailed the lyke-wake dirge.

'This ae night, this ae night,
Every night and all,
Fire and sleet and candle light,
And Christ receive thy soul.'

Their ancient withered bodies swayed in time with the mournful air they sang, and cast fantastic shadows on the bare and plastered walls. Peter comprehended the scene in an instant.

At his entrance the hags abruptly ceased their wailing and, gazing upon him, sent up exclamations of recognition and surprise.

'Eh, this is thy home-coming,' quoth one.

'Behold thy mother, thou evil son,' cried another.

'Art not ashamed?' screamed the third, pointing to the corpse.

'Thou serpent,' cried the fourth.

Peter did not answer them. He stood uncertainly upon his feet as though he had been drunk, and trembled like a leaf. Then he went shakily across the floor and gazed upon the face of the dead.

One of the old women stole up behind him.

'She hath gone to accuse thee before the Lord God,' she screamed into his ear.

Peter turned and looked mournfully upon her with a face like death. 'That she would never do,' quoth he sadly.

Whereupon they snarled at him like she-wolves, he not answering them but standing like one sore perplexed and distressed. Then one began the dirge again, and the others held the burden. Peter turned and gazed steadily at them.

'Go,' he said, and pointed to the door.

They ceased wailing and looked at him dumbly. One began to utter words of abuse, but he pointed to the door again. So they gathered their rags about them and went out, muttering foully and casting spiteful glances upon him. He shut the door behind them.

Then he went and stood by the head of the dead woman and regarded her face steadfastly. It was as white as the linen which shrouded it, and the features as clear-cut and firm as they had been cunningly worked in marble; the majesty of an unutterable peace was on her countenance. Peter thought of the stone image of a holy nun he had once seen on a tomb in a great church at Bruges.

'She was a very holy woman, although she was my mother and I am her son,' he thought simply. 'I am as foul as she was holy.'

How Peter heard the Cock crow

He watched the dead hour after hour all through the night, and the whole of his life passed before his eyes as the life of every man will pass before the eyes of the Incorruptible Judge at Doomsday. Anon bitter tears fell like rain down his cheeks, anon his eyes were hot and dry as glowing coals; he tried to pray, but he had forgotten most of what his mother had taught him, and he had no wit to pray in his own language. Anon he passionately hated himself as Righteousness hateth Sin, anon he pitied himself with a pity nigh as great as Our Lord's for the souls that are damned. The dead woman lying there shamed him all the while, but she could not rebuke him.

It neared the end of the last watch of the night, and the rush-lights guttered out one by one. Peter was moved with a mighty anguish and shaken like a reed from head to foot. He flung his arms round the dead woman and cried out with a loud and terrible voice, 'Mother, forgive me, I did not know.'

The eyes of the dead woman slowly unclosed, her mouth opened and she spoke:

'Son, keep me no longer here, nor cheat me of that everlasting rest that I have already found.'

Her eyes closed for ever, and Peter knew that of the dead there is no forgiveness.

The Fall of Castle Beaumont

RALPH of the Skeely-Eye was right wroth that night. He had drunk much of the alewife's strongest brew, he had lost eightpence at quoits to Watkin Ploughman, and Clarice of Cock's Lane had openly flouted him before the menfolk. Now he played at draughts with Thomas the Cordwainer, and Thomas had penned his pieces in a corner so that he could move no way without being taken. The flush on his red face deepened, he tugged at his black beard, and then with one heavy blow of his great fist sent board and draughtsmen with a crash to the floor.

'To Hell with the game!' he cried, rising to his feet.

Thomas the Cordwainer looked afeared; he would for a moment that he had not won that game. The sudden noise interrupted the little group round the hearth fire, where Pierce the Clerk, Watkin and Long Hugh were deep in talk with the barefooted friar. A stranger sat quietly listening by them.

'Steady,' cried Pierce. 'Thou hast that same Hell so often on thy lips that I doubt but it will be thine own place at the last.'

Ralph of the Skeely-Eye swung unsteadily on his feet, and turned his fierce, bloodshot eyes on Pierce.

'God blight thee, thou snivelling hound,' he cried. 'And what is it to thee if it is to Hell that I fare?'

He bared his thick hairy arm and pointed to its corded knots of muscle.

'Seest thou this arm? Here is bone and sinew and muscle enough to knock a way through the world for me, and God help the man who comes between me and my will. While I am man of flesh and blood I will do my pleasure and play my game; when I 'm dead, so-so, let the Devil have his due. 'Tis all fair enough; my day now, his day then, but let him keep his distance till the clock strikes.'

He paused, glaring fiercely round on the company. The barefoot friar caught his eye, regarding him steadily with blue and lambent orbs.

'Thou fool,' quoth he in deep, sad tones. 'Thou poor fool. Knowest thou not that the Lord hath given this world into the hand of the Adversary, that he may weigh unto men according to their deserts and reap unto them after their sowing? Even now, while thou standest

blaspheming, the Devil is behind thee and laugheth at thy folly till he is like to burst. When the measure of thine iniquity is heaped to the full, although thou be all unwitting of the date thereof, thou shalt straightway be borne in his fierce talons as the tares to the furnace, which burneth evermore.'

Ralph started at the mention of the Devil and cast a fearful glance behind him; then, reassured, he gave his leather girdle a hitch and answered sullenly.

'I 'll not speak with friars. When my spell 's up, let the Devil come; till then I am neither his nor thine nor any man's but mine own.'

The friar straightway rose from his seat and, swiftly crossing the floor, seized Ralph by the arm.

'Come, sit thee here,' he said, 'and I will tell thee that which, if it melt not thy soul in utter penitence, will at least show thee the power of the Prince of Darkness and the miserable end of sinners such as thou.'

He half led and half dragged Ralph to the chimney, and forced him to sit down upon a bench. Ralph made but a feeble resistance, for he was subdued and nigh scared by the friar's eye. Pierce, Thomas, Watkin and Long Hugh gathered eagerly round, for the deep voice of the friar charmed them like church music when it

breaks upon the ear at midnight. His eyes held them and they listened to him as to a man speaking in a vision. Even from Ralph's dull face the fumes of strong drink half dissipated. The stranger listened from his seat a little way off.

'Listen,' cried the friar, 'to the tragical history of Castle Beaumont, and may Christ and the Blessed Virgin and All Hallows grant it be to the health and comfort of your souls.

'Five days' journey hence into the West country stood Castle Beaumont, and it was the fairest and strongest castle that any man had ever seen. It was built on the crest of a great hill so high that its towers, like those of the proud Babel, seemed to threaten the Heavens, and so stoutly of hard hewn stone, and so cunningly with barbicans, bastions and battlements and broad moats, that it might not be taken, nay, though even the Lord King himself came against it with tens of thousands of men and with mangonels, belfries, and rams. Above it was naught but the wide and naked heaven; below it, richly clothing the slopes of the great hill, lay a forest of oak and beech; below the forest lay a wide water, and a mile over the meadows, this side of the water, lay a poor village called Vill Beaumont.

'The Lord of Beaumont was rich and mighty above all the nobles in this realm, for east and west, and south and north, as far as one might ride

on a long summer's day, one's horse would not step on an ell of land that was not his. A score of stone castles and thirty walled towns owned him allegiance, and he milked the fatness from a hundred and fifty rich manors. When he rode forth to war there rode with him a hundred knights in full harness and five hundred men-at-arms in helmets and hauberks of twisted mail, so that there was no lord in the land who could stand against him.

'But lo, this Lord, of whom I speak, was a man of stark and violent heart, swollen with pride and vain imagination, a fearer of neither God nor man. For him Christ and His Church might not have been; he took no thought for his soul but lived as a beast of the field, subject to his own unlawful lusts and desires. Fierce moods came upon him like lightning at midsummer, but aye more harmful, and he was more stark and terrible in his rages than a roaring lion. If one vexed him, he would gnash upon him with his teeth and strike him with his fist even to the breaking of bones, or if so be that he might not come at him, he would hurl himself down upon the rushes and bite upon them with his teeth, smiting himself upon the face and dashing his head against the floor.

'This Lord one evening a little before sunset returned from his day's hunting, and he was merry because he had slain much. As he rode

slowly homeward (his attendants being occupied with the quarry) he spied in the great wood and not many paces from the Castle Drawbridge a strange lady. She rode upon a grey palfrey and was clad in a bright green cloak embroidered all with pearls. She was very comely. She seemed to that wicked Lord to be more fair than summer or the sweet sunlight, and he gazed on her like one smitten with sudden wonder. But he was no man to be abashed before womenfolk, so he presently saluted her and rode towards her. To him she made answer with so melodious and delicate voice (as the deceitful Sirens used towards Sir Ulysses), and with so jolly demeanour and sweet accord, that his heart was ravished within him, and he was filled with sudden desire of her. Therefore coming up close to her palfrey, without more ado he flung his arm round her waist and kissed her on the lips, she making but faint and seemingly wanton resistance. So toying with her, he led her into the castle and kept her with him that night and thereafter.

'The Lord's wife was a lady right devout and pious, much given to orisons and fasting and penance. Mightily had she striven to turn her husband from his evil way of life, and she had also gotten many religious men and women, far and near, to pray for his amendment, and in especial had had supplication made at the shrines

of the Saints most powerful in such cases throughout the land. But so entirely was her Lord given over to the Devil that all was in vain, and the more she talked to him of repentance and the torments of the damned, the more he hardened his heart and the more fierce and hot his anger boiled against her. "Go to thy prayers, thou jade," he would cry, "thou wert fit for a green-faced nun or a puling anchoress." Then he would revile her grievously, saying the sight of her chapfallen face set his teeth on edge like a sour apple and was like to turn the victual on his stomach, and would blasphemously offer golden candlesticks to all the parish churches in England, would she but hang herself from the battlements or cast herself headlong into the moat. Whereupon, weeping, she would betake herself to her bower and read solitarily (but none the less in the care of Holy Angels) from her Book of Hours.

'With the coming of the strange woman to the Castle, the Lord's rage against his Lady was grievously increased, so that he gave over all the governance of his household to his new mistress, and forbade his true wife to look upon his face any more, lest he did her some violent injury.

'Lo, good men all, how one sin leadeth to another, for pride, having begotten lust, now lust begot murder.

'One day his Lady-wife, conceiving that a

little religious book, which a godly man had sent her, entitled *A Little Sooth Sermon of the Seven Deadly Sins*, might aid to cleanse his filthy and impure heart, came to him as he sat on a bench in the base court singing a vain amorous song beneath the window of his wanton, and, calling him from his lightness, began forthwith to read to him from the book. She had not interrupted him long or read far, when the blood rushed madly to his impious brain, the veins knotted on his forehead, his complexion became sanguine and purple, and without more ado, drawing his dagger from his girdle, he rushed upon her and slew her with a hundred thrusts thereof, afterwards casting her martyred body into the moat.

'Now, look ye, good men, what befell after this evil and horrid deed. The wicked Lord, after he had gone so far in iniquity, considered that the Devil would be sure to have him at the last. Therefore, like Ralph here, he determined to have his fling, and to lead his life with as much solace and mirth and gladness as might be, thus blotting out from his soul the consciousness of the eternal miseries which awaited him. But mark ye what happened in the sequel.

'Vill Beaumont was utterly given over to all kinds of wretchedness and distress, for it lay close under the castle, and the men-at-arms were wont

often to come down thither and despoil the villagers, slaying the sheep and cattle in the fields, trampling the standing rye and corn, devouring the bread and meat which God sent for the bellies of His poor, and wantonly and in derision spilling the thin ale from their barrels. Yea, twice or thrice, when these insolent men of war were in their cups, they had fired the village and burnt down the better half of it, whereby some poor souls, being chiefly babes and old and infirm persons, were sent to their account, unshriven and unanointed, with their sins upon them, Christ have mercy. When the villeins came and made complaint to their Lord, he would cry out upon them fiercely, "What, ye swine, ye cattle, is there not ploughing? Is there no ditching? Away, ye beasts," and he would drive them headlong from his presence with curses and buffets, and then call to his Bailey to put more work upon them, that they should have no leisure to waste in grumbling and tale-bearing.

'Many villeins would not abide longer in the vill but fled into the greenwood to drive the hart and the doe instead of the plough and the cart, and to sustain the heat, the cold, the snow, the frost, the rain of God's heaven, rather than the inhumanity of Christian men. Corn, flesh, cheese, and butter were so scarce and dear that few had wherewith to keep them from starving,

for where there was so little hope of harvest, men would not trouble to sow or plant or plough. Some fled to foreign boroughs where they were not known, to live as freemen, and some, who erstwhile had been men of substance, left the village secretly to go on alms. Never elsewhere was more wretchedness seen.

'Hither to this village came one morning a wandering minstrel. Lo, good fellows all, he was the pitifullest figure a man might conceive, his hosen and jerkin all torn, his hair sticking out from the holes in his cap, his toes projecting from his bursten shoes, and white with dust from head to foot as though he had walked many miles between Matins and Prime. He seemed half pined for lack of food, there was no flesh on his bones, and I ween you might have counted his ribs. His face was like a pale flower, his faint blue eyes wandered when he spoke to any, so that folks easily judged him to be one of God's innocents. Around his neck upon a cord he bore a fiddle, and the bow thereof swung by a string from his shoulder. Of these he took great care, as though they had been treasures of worth.

'He came to the folk who sat idly by the water-mill, and looked vacantly upon them with his lustreless eyes.

'"Will ye have any mirth?" he asked, finger-

ing his fiddle and speaking in a thin, sad voice, like a sick child's.

'They were silent at first. Then they began to speak in bitter jest, as desperate men will do.

'"We are merry devils enough without thy mirth," said one.

'"Hast *thou* any mirth?" asked another. "I wot thou hadst been Death himself."

'"We have done nothing but sing and play here the last half-score of years," said another. "I am sick of mirth; hast thou no bread?"

'"I had rather use my teeth than my ears," said another.

'But one of the women, casting her eyes upon him, cried, "Nay, thou art but a child and half dead at that, poor knave. Sit thee down and rest awhile. Thou art a true foreigner, else thou wouldst know that the villeins of Beaumont have naught to put into their own bellies, much more to give away. But stay; God forbid that one of His innocents should perish by the wayside."

'So saying she went into her hovel and presently returned with a cup of sheep's milk and a thin cake of rye-bread. (Verily, as saith the Evangelist, few but the poor shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.) The minstrel smiled sadly at her and took the cup and the cake, saying "Merci." Folk watched him curiously while he ate, for he seemed fragile as a young girl

and unhappy as a bird that has lost her mate. When he had finished he took his fiddle and bow and began to play. Certainly he was a skilful musician, and he played many strange songs in which they had great delight, but after a while they bid him stay.

'"Thou art a right cunning minstrel," they said, "and right woe are we that we have naught wherewith to repay thee for thy sweet music; 'twould be shame to keep thee here playing for nothing, when thou mightest earn rich gifts for thyself up at the castle. The Lord has a feast toward, and though he is full stark and cruel to such poor labouring folk as we, he loves music and mirth, and belike would pay thee dearly for thy skill.

'"My good Lord loved to hear me play once," said the minstrel, "but he is dead, and sleepeth with the saints in Christ."

'"Come, little knave," said the woman. "Get thee to the great castle thou seest yonder. There at least thou shalt get broken victuals to fill thy poor, empty maw."

'They went with him, leading him to the end of the village and showing him the track thence up to the castle. They wished him Godspeed and a good journey.

'The minstrel slowly descended the hillside, crossed the broad meadows and came to the still

water and thence climbed upward through the great wood. Bright beams pierced the thick leafage overhead and shot the cool rich shadows with patches of brilliant emerald. The moss yielded like a carpet to his feet. On either side of the narrow track waved the lush bracken, high to his waist. The undergrowth in the odorous glades was besnowed with flowering bramble and starred with golden honeysuckle. Bright toadstools lit gorgeously the secret glooms. Now and then a squirrel rustled lightly among the branches, and ever and anon a coney started from beneath his feet, but in all that green wilderness sounded no voice of a bird.

'After a toilsome climb he came to the castle and stood doubtfully at the Drawbridge. The warden spied him from his place under the portcullis and, noting the fiddle he carried, called to him lustily to enter, for the Lord was at meat and dearly loved to hear minstrels. So the minstrel crossed the bridge, and the warden, gripping him by the arm, delivered him over with a leer and a wink to a sewer. The sewer grinning spitefully, linked arms with him and so brought him, willy-nilly, to the great hall.

'Never was there a hall half so magnificent and stately as that of Castle Beaumont. Words cannot describe it; 'tis past mortal cunning to speak of it justly. Its walls were twice as high as

the steeple of your parish church and its length was two good bowshots. It was hung round about with gorgeous tapestries, whereon were worked figures of men and horses and trees and palaces in fresh and lively colours ; the oak-ribbed vault was coloured as an azure heaven in which burnt an infinite multitude of golden stars. The floor was carpeted with cloth of indigo and silver.

'The tables, which ran down the hall from end to end, and the high table upon the Lord's dais, shone with precious vessels of silver and gold, wrought cunningly in fantastic shapes, delicately chiselled and chased, and set with flaming rubies and whitest pearls. Left and right against the walls were sideboards laden with the remains of rich and delicate dishes, with cygnet, peacock, and venison, with pies, custards and jellies, and flanked with great tuns of beer and wine.

'Never were men and women so richly arrayed as the guests that sat at board, each with the value of a fat manor to cover the dainty skin ; some in cloth of tars, some in sendal, some in pall and some in corduroys, many-hued like the rainbow. Round their proud necks they wore chains of the purest gold ; on their fingers sparkled precious stones worth a king's ransom. Never, nay, not in the King's hall royal, were gathered such pomp and prodigality, such wealth and such splendour.

Lo, this world passeth away to nothingness and maketh haste unto its end, yet men still vainly boast themselves in the clothes that hide and the meat that feeds corruption, making themselves laughingstocks to God and His holy angels.

'When the poor minstrel shambled into the hall, he was utterly abashed and so smitten with shame that his knees turned to water under him, and he was fain to bow his head to hide the tears which suddenly filled his eyes. A sea of many colours surged before him, with rows of flushed cruel faces of men, with here and there the sheen of a woman's white shoulder. A great blare of trumpets went suddenly soaring up to the roof. He looked round pitifully like a lost child, starting this way and that like a hare caught in a net. The guests burst into a roar of laughter at the sight of him.

'The Lord of Beaumont sat at the high table on the dais, with his wanton leman by his side. When he saw the minstrel he stared hard, then he laughed loudly with the rest. Then he brought his heavy fist down with a crash on the board to command silence. There was a sudden hush.

'"Bring the Ragman here," quoth he harshly.

'The lady by his side laughed lightly in clear cold tones.

'The sewer led the minstrel before the dais and left him trembling there before the Lord. The Lord

of Beaumont was as huge as an ox, and held his two fists clenched on the table before him as though he were an angered. His broad bearded face was like a fire, and his fierce bloodshot eyes rolled evilly round the hall. But as for his leman, not Helen nor Guinivere, long since dead, but ever famous for excellent beauty, could well compare with her, so wanton, so white, so debonair. I ween she was well fitted to draw the hearts of all men unto her. Folk who had gazed on her might say " I have seen the fairest of created flesh."

' " What, thou starveling," cried the Lord, " art thou come hither to make us merry ; methought thou wert a skeleton from the graveyard, walking at noonday."

' Then he called to his musicians, who sat with their trumpets, nakers, and cymbals in their hands, smiling disdainfully, " Look, ye knaves, here is a fellow come to teach you your trade. He can many a merry note and jolly stave, he can many a wanton song and sly ballad. God's foot, I see it in his cunning eye, though to look at his lean ribs a man might not think it."

' The guests in the hall laughed loudly at their Lord's mirth.

' " If he cannot make good mirth," quoth the lady in a hard cruel voice, " it were best he were whipped till the blood come, for his lantern chaps and staring eyes. Ugh, my gorge rises to look on

the fellow; he looks worse than a spitted lark and smells of death."

'One of the musicians rose from his place beside the dais and went and whispered in the Lord's ear. The Lord laughed hoarsely. "God's fist," he said, "'tis a good jest, let it be done."

'Whereupon the musician approached the minstrel.

'"Good Master Minstrel," quoth he with cunning pleasantry, "what rare instrument hast thou in thy hands? Blessed Virgin, 'tis no wonder thou claspest it so closely to thy bosom. And what an excellent piece of work is thy bow! Verily I believe they must have been Apollo's, the god of music's. Prithee let me and my poor fellows behold it more closely."

'The minstrel did not answer, but held his fiddle the more tightly to him, shrinking away.

'"Nay, for courtesy's sake," said the musician.

'"God's eyes, thou wert best, thou scarecrow," thundered the Lord from the dais.

'In great dread the minstrel released his hold upon the fiddle; his hands fell awkwardly by his sides; he gazed foolishly at the floor. The musician took the instrument and the bow and passed them round among his fellows. Many were the mocking commendations they made upon it, but at the last they returned it to him with satirical compliments and courtesy.

'"Play," cried the Lord,—"Play, for thy hide's sake, minstrel," and he thumped the board again.

'The minstrel held his fiddle and bow ready to play. He closed his eyes and swayed a little to and fro; the riot of colour and noise faded from his eyes and ears, it grew very silent. He felt himself alone on a far hillside; a small, still rain fell out of the clouds and murmured upon multitudinous leaves; a rainbow spanned the heavens and its misty radiance was reflected in watery meadows far away. Blue smoke went slowly up from the chimney of his mother's cottage. Then the songs of his own country came to his heart and filled his eyes with tears. His fingers lovingly sought the keyboard, one moment he paused, then drew the bow over the strings.

'A discordant shriek stridently echoed through the hushed hall: they had greased his bow.

'A roar of laughter went up from the benches. He opened his eyes in agonized bewilderment and gazed uncomprehendingly at his fiddle.

'"A right minstrel indeed," shouted the guests.

'"An ass to bray thus," cried some.

'"A beast to beard us thus," cried others; and yet again, "Pelt him, pelt him!"

'Some spat at him, some slung the wine from their goblets at him, others pelted him with broken

piecrust and gobbets of custard and jelly and cake, and with apples and pears and nuts. Half-dazed he stood stock-still awhile, until at length an apple struck him full on the forehead and nearly brought him to the ground. The men guffawed till they cried and the women screamed with delight.

'"Again, again," they shrieked. "Bring the little devil down," "Break his skull," "Knock his eye out," "A crown that I break his fiddle," "Under the ear this time." The lady at the dais drew a dagger from her girdle and, leaning over the table, aimed it with all her force at the minstrel. She snarled like a cat when she saw she had missed her aim. The noise of Hell went up from the hall.

'With a sudden cry, the minstrel, clasping his fiddle and bow to his side, turned like a hunted hare, and, before any of the drunken feasters could stagger to their feet to stay him, had rushed through the hall and out at the great door. Lo, the Lord held this innocent in the hollow of His hand, for as he sped across the courtyard and drawbridge there was none to let him. Down the forest path he went, and down and down and down, leaping the great roots of oak and beech, bursting through the tall bracken, diving through the tangled undergrowth, falling headlong down the dry watercourses and gullies, and down and

down and down until he came to the still water. Then up and up and up over the broad meadows, and up and up and up the hillside, with never a moment's stay for breath, never a moment's looking backward, up, up to Vill Beaumont cowering in the hollow of the ridge. At the top of the hill he ran full tilt into a group of villeins. They stood gazing toward the Castle, their countenances smitten with amazement and horror. They crossed themselves devoutly and uttered many a broken prayer.

'"Look, look," they cried, "Jesu! look," and they pointed upwards.

'The minstrel turned and gazed.

'"Christ be merciful to me, a sinner," cried a man hoarsely from the crowd.

'"Amen."

'"The Lord deliver us from evil."

'"Amen."

'Castle Beaumont had disappeared. The great hill on which it had stood was covered with ancient trees even to its summit; a clear, still sky lay over it, against which a dozen black rooks flapped lazily homewards to their nests. The wide water reflected sky and hill and ancient forest as though in a quiet and eternal mirror. The minstrel fell upon his knees and sobbed as though his heart would break.'

. . . . . .

'Ah-h-h,' said Watkin, drawing a long breath as the Friar concluded.

''Tis certain,' said Long Hugh solemnly, after a long pause, 'that the ways of the Lord are wonderful and not to be scanned.'

'Good fellows all,' said the Friar, 'and you in especial, Ralph of the Skeely-Eye, we see by this true and notable ensample——'

'Ah,' interrupted Ralph, recovering from a fit of stupid amazement,—'Ah, but be it true, Master Friar, be it true?'

'As true as Holy Writ,' said the Friar.

'Didst thou know the castle?' asked Ralph.

'Nay, but the man who told me the tale swore to its truth by the bones of the Holy Saint Thomas.'

''Tis Gospel truth,' quoth the stranger from the corner, where he sipped his warmed ale, and breaking in on the conversation for the first time. 'I knew the castle well, and have been therein often myself.'

Meg of Four Lane Ends

I

IT was very hot in the market-place. The sun blazed from a cloudless sky like a globe of molten brass. The houses on each side of the square threw a hard and narrow rim of shadow upon the pavement, above the scorched cobbles of which heat ceaselessly vibrated in waves. A couple of dogs lay panting under the market cross with glazed eyes, and dripping, projected tongues. The open market-place was well-nigh deserted, for folk could not cheapen and bargain with the fierce sunlight beating on the napes of their necks, and so had taken shelter from the sweltering heat in the neighbouring hostelries and canvas ale-booths. Only in the little patch of shade cast by the 'Three Arrows' stood a small group of hucksters selling petty wares. There was a fellow with bright-coloured ribbons and gloves, whose parched tongue had long since refused to perform its office; there was another with damsons and little green apples, whose thirst had driven him to devour almost as much as he had sold; there was an old woman fallen

uneasily asleep upon the handle of a corded-in basket wherein half a dozen pullets clucked and struggled wearily; there was a chapman with a priceless elixir for Saint Antony's fire, who sucked greedily at an empty tankard; there was an old man with a great green leaf on his head, sitting with closed eyes and clasped hands upon his basket of peascods; and there among the rest was Meg of Four Lane Ends, a fierce and uncouth figure, standing with arms akimbo and a sack of corn at her feet.

Meg was a good six foot high, with broad hips and shoulders, and an arm and fist like a blacksmith's. She might have been one of those Amazons who, the learned say, are shut up in the North with Gog and Magog, whence they will come with terror and woe and destruction at the dreadful Doomsday. 'God help the man she taketh to husband,' folk were wont to say; but lo how the Lord in His Providence provides—she married Gilbert of the Four Lane Ends, a somewhat stern albeit a kindly man, and one who could knock down an ox with one blow of his fist.

Her red hair straggled in wisps across her freckled face, her nostrils quivered like a mettled horse's, as she snuffed up the hot air, and her thin lips twitched and puckered nervously at the corners. Her steel-blue eyes now rested on the corn-sack at her feet and now roved wearily round

the market-place, searching for possible customers. She had carried the corn on her back five long miles that morning; there were three good bushels of it, and no one had offered her more than twelvepence the bushel for it, a malison on them.

She saw John the Miller come slowly across the market-place. She moistened her parched, black lips with her tongue and cried out to him in a cracked voice, 'Dost lack any corn, John Miller?'

He came across to her and, opening the sack, plunged his hand into the corn, running the grain through his fingers and feeling it between his finger and thumb.

'I will give thee elevenpence the bushel,' he said.

'By Christ's Passion,' she answered him wrathfully, 'I had rather fling it on the fire or to the swine.'

'Nay, nay, be not an angered.'

'I have been offered more this morning already.'

'Ay, hast thou? Well then, twelvepence, I 'll say twelvepence the bushel.'

'Nay, nor that either, as I am a mortal woman. Fourteenpence or I 'll not sell.'

John the Miller shook his head. 'I cannot more than twelve,' he said, ''tis a just price.'

'Then, by the Lord,' quoth Meg furiously, ''twill be for those that can and will.'

John the Miller shook his head again, smiled and passed on.

The Bailey called from within the hostelry of the 'Three Arrows,' where he drank his fourth flagon of ale.

'I told thee, little Meg, thou shouldst not get better than twelvepence the bushel.'

'To Hell with thee,' screamed Meg furiously.

The market square was like a furnace, her mouth was parched as a lime-kiln, but she had no pennies wherewith to buy ale until her corn was sold. The houses, pens, and booths seemed to rise and fall before her eyes in a fierce wave of heat. Directly before her stood the Town Church, its front bathed in the white glare of the sunlight; she gazed at it with hard and half-unwitting eyes. The little door in the porch was slowly pushed open, and an old woman came out and hobbled away on her stick down the side of the market hill. The door, swinging slowly to again, gave a momentary glimpse of the cool and shadowy interior. Meg gazed awhile at the closed door; then she stooped, shouldered the heavy sack of corn, and slowly crossed the torrid market-place.

She pushed open the little door and entered the church. She crossed herself at the font with holy water, and lifted some of the water in her hands and bathed her hot and dusty face. She carried some of it to her lips, but it was too salt.

Then she curtsied awkwardly to the Holy Altar, and going up to the rood-screen, sank down on her knees before a bench with her sack beside her. The church was very dark and still and cool, and the faint smell of flowers and incense filled it. Meg regarded the miraculous image of Our Lady and Her Blessed Babe, which, as folk think, was wrought by the Holy Saint Joseph himself in the exact portraiture of the Virgin and her Son. Before her shrine burned a dozen candles and the sacred lamp, which, according to usage, is never extinguished night nor day. The Blessed Virgin clasped the little Christ close to her bosom, but His little arms were stretched out towards Meg and His countenance gazed sweetly and lovingly upon her.

'O little Jesu,' cried Meg, stretching out her clasped hands in prayer and addressing Him, 'I can get but twelvepence a bushel for my corn, which, as Thou knowest and can see for Thyself, is worth at least fourteenpence, yea and more, were it not for the good year. Thou knowest I am no wicked regrater to demand an unjust price from poor men because of their need, but only a poor labouring woman asking for a fair recompense for having lugged this heavy sack of corn five miles this morning, and for having stood like a sick dog three hours in the cursed market-place yonder. Do but grant me, Little Jesu, fourteen-

pence the bushel and I will buy thee a penny wax candle at Eastertide.'

She crossed herself and said 'Hail Mary,' then, taking her sack, went out into the market-place. Other folk had now come in to buy and sell, amongst them several rich Roodborough merchants; the sun was beginning to drop westwards; traffic was brisker in the lengthening patch of shadow under the 'Three Arrows.' She went across and took her stand in the busiest of the crowd. 'Corn, corn, d' ye lack any fine corn,' she cried.

Presently she heard another cry 'Corn, corn, d' ye lack any fine corn,' and then another, and looking round she saw a half-dozen upland folk had brought in corn with them and were selling it as fast as they could. She frowned and grated her teeth and cried the more shrilly, 'Corn, corn, d' ye lack any corn?' But although some asked her how much, none stayed to buy of her. After she had stood a full hour and her knees were weak with standing and her voice worn to a whisper with crying, the Bailey and John the Miller came by.

The Bailey laughed to see her still there with her corn unsold.

'What, Meg, thou mad wench!' he cried, 'art thou still asking fourteenpence the bushel? Thou mightest cry it from now till Doomsday at that rate.'

'Fourteenpence?' quoth John the Miller. 'Tis no fair price, 'tis extortionate, good Meg.'

'Tis worth that or nothing,' cried Meg hoarsely.

'Nay then, 'tis worth nothing,' said the Bailey, 'for Hob of the Cross and Sim of the Wry-Mouth and the rest of the upland fellows yonder are selling as good as thine for tenpence.'

'Tenpence,' screamed Meg. 'Thou art a liar.'

'No liar, little Meg,' laughed the Bailey. 'Go thou and look.'

So Meg went and looked, and there was Hob of the Cross and Sim of the Wry-Mouth and the rest of the upland folk selling fine corn at tenpence the bushel. She grinned with rage and ground her teeth. An evil, black cloud came over her fierce face.

'Twas pity thou didst not let it go at twelvepence when thou hadst the chance,' said John the Miller.

Meg turned towards the Church and shook her fist passionately; she strove to blaspheme but her wrath choked her.

'Nay, nay,' said the Bailey. 'Be a wise wench. Lo, here are thirty pennies; give me the three bushels and get thee to the 'Three Arrows' and take a bite and a sup to sweeten thy sour heart, for thou art indeed a bitter herb and grown little in

God's grace, despite thy inches. Thou shalt not get a better price in the whole market, I warrant thee.'

'Give me the thirty pennies,' snarled Meg. The Bailey counted them out in her hand. She put them without a word of thanks into her leathern purse. Then pushing her way through the throng of people she crossed over to the Church again. She entered and went up to the Altar. Christ stretched out His little arms lovingly towards her as before. But she gnashed upon Him with her teeth, wrinkled her nose at Him and shook her great fist at Him with fierce vehemence.

'O little Christ,' she whispered, trembling with rage, 'hast Thou indeed done this to me? I might have had twelvepence at the first and I would not, but asked Thine aid instead, and now I cannot get but tenpence. Thou shalt get no penny candle at Eastertide of me, but I will pay Thee out for this, even at Thine Own Holy Season. Lo, now, thou little Jesu, as much shame and evil as Thou hast done to me will I do also unto Thee and more also.'

With that she flung herself out of the Church and hied sullenly homewards to Four Lane Ends.

II

Upon Easter Sunday Meg and Gilbert, her husband, having risen early, washed themselves well as was fitting, put on such new garments as they had, and, taking their walking-sticks into their hands, set out while yet it was dark to go to Mass at the Town Church.

As they went by the way and the Easter sun rose up red as a great fire upon their left hands, Gilbert began to talk in right cheerful and Christian fashion, for, albeit he was somedeal rough in his manners and no hypocrite to talk religion in matters secular, nevertheless he was a true son of the Church, and the sound of the Easter bells coming through the calm air of early morning filled him with much delight.

'Hearken,' quoth he, 'never have I heard a sweeter sound of bells; needs must they ring so from here to Jerusalem, which is the middle of the world, and all the souls in Heaven and on Earth rejoice this day, yea, and those in Hell also, for as good Master Parson saith, on this day the very damned have respite from their pains. Is not the sound of these salvation bells sweet to thine ears, Meg, my wife?'

'I did not know thou wert a religious,' quoth Meg sneeringly.

'Nay, no religious am I, good Meg, a plain man and a lay, but a Christian betimes, as all men must be, and especially on a jolly Easter Day like this. Methinks I could almost make a vow to go to the alehouse less often hereafter, except I am no hypocrite. Look how the sun rises through yon wood. He cometh up all glorious like the sweet Christ from the tomb. Folk say that he danceth upon this day for very joy that our Lord is risen.'

'Yea,' quoth Meg and no more.

'To-day,' continued Gilbert, 'the Pope will stand in his great church at Rome before the True Cross of Christ and bless all Christian folk from East to West. Yea, Meg, my wife, it is a blessed thing that we lived not of old ere this great salvation came in, else we should have altogether perished with the just heathen, whereas now I may go to the alehouse or the dice as often as I will, and have more joy hereafter than Master Virgil or Master Cato or any of those righteous ancients of whom we hear so much from Master Parson, and who never saw the true light or heard of Our Lady or Christ.'

'Yea,' quoth Meg and no more.

'Upon Holy Day, look thou,' went on Gilbert, 'we Christian folk go up to the Altar and eat the very Body and Blood of Christ, and thereby become partakers with Him in everlasting joy;

so being deceased and shoved into our graves, we shall yet rise again like Him and live in delight and bliss for ever and ever. For these blessed privileges, being a plain man as I am, and of no great merits in myself, I am bound to say "Deo Gratias," and therefore should we this morning creep on our knees to the Cross and kiss it for a jewel, for it bore Christ's Body to our boot. Is it not so, Meg, my wife ? '

' Yea,' quoth Meg.

By this time they were gotten near the village and could see the Town Church.

' Look now,' quoth Gilbert, ' how the people throng ; they pour through the doorway like water over a mill-dam. Marry, but I have not seen such crowds this seven year ; there is that good fellow Hob of the Cross and the Bailey's wife and John the Miller, who would not give thee more than tenpence the bushel for thy corn.'

So they came into the Church and were fain to stand during the Blessed Sacrament of the Mass owing to the thick press of people. The Church was decked with fair flowers from the fields, a hundred white tapers burnt like stars before the Altar, a sweet smoke of incense went curling up among the rafters, and little clergy boys with faces like unto angels' sang loudly and clearly the Easter Hymn :

'Alleluia, alleluia,
O filii et filiae.
Rex coelestis, Rex gloriae,
Morte surrexit hodie.
Alleluia.'

Lit by candleshine, with white lilies round her feet, stood God's Mother clasping her little Son, and He stretched His little arms out and smiled towards them through the odorous mist. Gilbert's eyes filled with happy tears, and he said to himself as Master Parson had taught him to say whenever he entered the Church, 'I am glad in these things that are said to me; let us go in the House of the Lord: Our feet shall stand within thy walls, O thou Jerusalem.' But Meg said no word nor joined in the holy responses.

Then they went up in order to receive the Blessed Host, and Gilbert received it first, kneeling with due reverence. Then Meg knelt in her turn, but when the Priest put the Host upon her tongue instead of swallowing it forthwith as Holy Church commands, she put it into her cheek with her tongue and kept it there. Afterwards, while Gilbert greeted in kindly fashion the folk at the Church door, she found means privily to convey it into a kerchief and so into the pocket of her kirtle. Having exchanged greetings with many folk, they went their way homewards, Gilbert talking cheerfully as before but Meg moody and silent.

When they reached Four Lane Ends, quoth Gilbert to his wife, 'I' faith, good Meg, I am clammed. For the love of Christ, Who this morning rose from the dead for our sakes, hasten thee about dinner.'

'Thou shalt have it shortly,' answered Meg, 'for here is some bacon and young greenstuff. But do thou meanwhile go to the Halfacre and look to the swine.'

'Yea,' quoth he, 'but see it be ready when I return.'

Meg watched him going until he turned the corner by the Red Headland. Then quickly she ran behind the house and, bringing hence a leathern bucket, hastened with it to the inner room where stood their bed. In the corner of the room was a strong oak chest, bound with iron strips, studded with heavy nails and locked with a great lock, wherein was a great key. She threw herself on her knees before it, turned the key with both hands, and with an effort flung open the heavy lid. She laughed loudly and long. Then she rose to her feet and brought out from her pocket a doubled-up kerchief. She unfolded it and turned the contents into her hand with scrupulous care. She held her hand up high to the light of the little window; there rested the Holy Wafer, the Body and Blood of Christ. A beam of golden light shot suddenly through the window slit and

rested upon it like a sign out of heaven or a ray from the eye of God. The woman laughed to see her Creator lie there so white and still in the hollow of the palm of the thing that He had made.

'Ah, little Jesus,' she cried stridently, gloating like a Devil of Hell,—'Ah, little Jesus, that didst mock me and despise me and cozen me, when I prayed to Thee at the market; now shall I mock Thee and despise Thee and cozen Thee much more than ever Thou didst to me. I asked Thee for twopence more a bushel, for six little stingy pennies, and Thou wouldst not give me a single one from all Thy infinite store, nay, Thou tookest away even that which I might have had. Now all the pennies in the world shall not save Thee from my vengeance. I was hot, and wayworn, and famished, and thirsty, and Thou hadst no pity on me; now Thou art alone and helpless, and I will have no pity on Thee.'

She laughed like a wild woman and ran her free hand through her hair, until the red locks fell over her cruel blue eyes. Then she burst into a frenzied song of sorcery.

'Seven smiths sat working,
Working spears of hate;
Seven men came riding,
Riding, riding late.
Seven smiths sat working,
Working spears of woe;

Seven men came riding,
  Riding never mo.
So in and about,
When the moon 's put out,
Under rain, under snow
Must my little boy go.'

Kneeling, she carefully put the Holy Wafer in the bottom of the chest, and taking the bucket in her hand, emptied therefrom a full hideous toad with warty body and yellow eyes, black and terrible to gaze upon. O shame, O horror, O deadly sin! The poisonous beast fell with a dull thud beside the Most Holy Body of Our Lord. The daughter of Hell slammed to the heavy lid and locked the chest. She ran and hid the key in the bucket behind the house.

III

It was after midnight, and the night fell as calm as on the Sea of Galilee after Our Lord had rebuked the waves and bid the waters whist. Four Lane Ends was as quiet as a grave : the countless leaves of the wood rustled not ; there was no cry of any night bird or any beast, nor any sound of flowing waters. A full moon was in the heavens and rained down silver on charmed silence.

But in Gilbert's bedchamber was a thick darkness as of pitch, only pierced by a single moonbeam that smote like a bright sword across the

room from the little window. Gilbert was awake and sat up in bed; beside him his wife slept, or seemed to sleep, with her head hidden under the coverlet. Gilbert could scarcely draw breath, a fearful pressure was upon his ribs, the air tasted like a thick and poisonous syrup; it was as though the walls and the roof were closing in upon him, as though he were entombed in the deepest abysm of earth with immeasurable silences and darknesses above and around him. Entombed, yea, but not alone, for potent and terrible moved a disturbing presence, a vast agony, a gigantic and all-pervading effort. It was as though some mighty spirit strove ceaselessly with terrible and ever increasing strength to burst the narrow confines of the chamber.

Gilbert tried with staring eyes to pierce the dark, but in vain; he crossed himself and said *Pater Noster*. Almost instantly out of the blackness came a little piping cry, as though of a new-born babe. He listened intently. 'Nay,' thought he, 'I must be deceived; the Lord hath never blessed this house with bairns, and there are no children nearer than the Cross.' But anon the cry came again, a little louder than before. 'Holy Virgin,' he whispered hoarsely, 'this is a spirit.'

He shook Meg by the shoulder until she could not be anything else but awake.

'What ails thee, man?' she asked in a low strained voice.

'Hearest thou naught?'

'Nay.'

'Listen.'

Anon it came again, the wail of a babe.

'Holy Saints defend us,' cried Gilbert, 'what makest thou of that?'

Meg seemed to swallow something in her throat, and then she spoke in a harsh and toneless voice. ''Twas the cry of an owl.'

'Nay.'

''Twas the shriek of a bat.'

'Nay, it was neither. It was a babe or a spirit; a damned goblin or a soul in torment. Christ, how this air suffocates me; I choke, I swoon.'

He tore open his vest about the throat, and began to pray aloud. He stopped suddenly.

'For the love of Our Lady, pray,' he cried to his wife. But she did not utter one word.

A shrill wail cut through the darkness, a wail of immeasurable anguish and pleading, the sorrow of eternal ages in the cry of a chrisom child.

'The chest, the chest,' he whispered hoarsely.

'O Christ,' his wife answered, ''tis not that.'

'It is, it is,' he screamed, leaping from the bed and feeling with his hands over the surface of the wall nigh where the key of the chest was usually hung.

'Tis not here,' he cried. 'Where is it?'

'I know not; I have not seen it many days.'

'A light, a light,' he moaned.

He stumbled into the other room, and presently returned with a torch he had kindled at the still glimmering house-fire.

'Help thou to search,' he whispered.

His wife rose mechanically from the bed, and together they searched both chambers for the key.

'Hast thou not seen it?' asked Gilbert.

'Nay.'

He flung open the house door and let the cool air of the night blow upon his brow and bosom. The moon was beginning to pale and the darkness trembled before the dawn. Ever and anon from the bedchamber came the long-drawn wails. At each cry Meg shuddered anew as though at a spasm of pain that tore her entrails. Her head was sunk on her bosom and her hair fell over her face.

'Lord have mercy upon us,' groaned Gilbert, burying his face in his hands, 'Christ have mercy upon us.'

His wife gave a suppressed scream; she was as a woman in travail.

'Christ deliver us from the Powers of Hell,' said Gilbert suddenly, 'but with the Lord's help will I open the chest.'

'Nay, nay,' implored Meg, ''tis some Devil.'

'We are in the Lord's hands,' said Gilbert. 'Away, woman.'

He went to the ingle nook where his axe hung and took it down. Then he stepped into the bed-chamber pushing aside his wife, who would have stayed him. She followed him whimpering, and ever and anon bursting into a great dry sob. The inky darkness had given place to the wan light of earliest morning. They regarded each other in the face; their countenances were ashen grey and had aged ten years in the single night. Wailing filled the chamber.

'It must be done,' quoth Gilbert. 'It must be done. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'

He swung the great axe twice or thrice in the air. His wife cowered down on the bed and hid her face in her lap. He swung the great axe again and brought it down with all his force on the lid of the chest just above the lock. It bit a deep dent in the iron. Again, and yet again, and at the third blow the tough iron was cut clean in twain and the lock fell to pieces. Gilbert dropped the axe and, flinging himself upon his knees, flung back the heavy lid. His wife started convulsively to her feet and peered over his shoulder.

Within the chest sat a little naked Babe, clad

in light and crowned with living glory. With one tiny hand it waved away a huge toad which crept poisonously towards it, and with the other it covered its eyes. It wept piteously as though its heart would break; the radiance of its body filled the chamber.

Meg fell on her husband's shoulder, uttering shriek after shriek. 'I have sinned, I have sinned,' she cried. 'Have mercy, have mercy.'

Gilbert regarded her not. He clasped his hands in prayer before him, and his eyes were fixed in deepest devotion and pity on that fair naked Babe.

'Listen, husband, listen,' moaned Meg desperately, clinging to her husband's neck. 'I have done this: I put the Holy Wafer in the chest with the toad.'

As she finished speaking there came a blinding flash of light and the Holy Babe vanished. The room filled with a sweet odour and blissful music came up from the valleys. They fell upon their faces.

IV

Easter fell full early the year following, and it was a cruel, bitter season. Then it was that Sir Geoffrey's new barn was levelled to the earth by weight of snow, and there was a great flood

in the village by reason of the swelling of the stream.

All the year preceding, Master Parson had come often to Four Lane Ends, and he comforted Meg as much as he might, bidding her earnestly to trust in the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and to cease not from importuning the Blessed Virgin that she would intercede for her at the Throne of Grace. Moreover, he said that though her sins were as scarlet yet might they be whiter than snow, and that our God was a God of mercy and not of vengeance, and would abundantly pardon such as returned to Him with weeping and amendment.

'Nay,' quoth Meg sadly, 'I have sinned the unpardonable sin for which there is no forgiveness.'

'Tush, tush, woman,' cried Master Parson, 'thou talkest nonsense. To sin against the Holy Ghost were indeed to be in evil case, but thou hast sinned against Christ alone, and He is full soft and kind and forgiving.'

By this time Meg was so infirm of her body that she could only walk with difficulty, and it was sore trouble for her to do about the house, much more to go hoeing and weeding in the fields as she was wont to do. When the sun shone brightly on the Red Headland she would sit in the doorway of the cottage sadly regarding the

green-budding hawthorns and the early violets that grew under the bank, and at whiles her lips moved as though she prayed. Much she thought in those days of her former wild words and deeds, and many bitter tears she shed therefore.

'My sins are too black for even Christ to forgive,' she would say.

''Twould much ease her heart,' quoth Gilbert to Master Parson, 'if she could but think she was forgiven.'

Towards Easter she grew more feeble, weakening as the year strengthened, and when the earth began to put on its robe of green she began to strip off, as it were, her robe of mortality. About a week before Easter Day her husband came in from his work in the fields to see how she fared. She was sitting deep in thought at the doorway.

'I have been thinking, husband,' quoth she, 'that I would above all things partake of the Blessed Sacrament in the Town Church this Easter. But I am unworthy and that I know. The Lord hath taken the strength out of my joints. Pray for me, dear husband.'

'Why, Meg,' quoth he. 'Hob of the Cross would gladly lend me a hand and we two could right easily carry thee to Church, an there were need, the Holy Day.'

'Thou art indeed a kind man and a good to me,' said his wife. 'If the Lord granted me to

partake once more of His precious Body and Blood, I should die happy, for I should know that He had forgiven my sin and done away mine iniquity.'

On Easter day Gilbert looked from the little window. The air was chill as death, and a soft darkness brooded dumbly over a waste of snow. The branches of the trees bowed under their burden ; the ways were choked. Tears came into his eyes.

'It lies thick with snow,' he said sadly.

Meg bowed her head. 'The Lord is not willing. How can He forgive me?' she said simply.

But anon and in the good time he had promised came Hob of the Cross, his round face like a glowing coal, his breath going up like a white cloud from his mouth.

'What, Meg,' quoth he, stamping the snow from his shoes before the hearth fire and clapping his hands noisily together. 'Art ready for Church? We shall fetch thee there right readily, I warrant thee.'

A faint colour tinged her faded cheeks and a light flickered in her eyes. Gilbert stood doubtfully by.

'Would God it were possible,' she said.

'It lies three feet deep in places, I guess, good Hob?' said Gilbert.

'Yea, neighbour, but if thy wife here be ready, it might be done.'

''Twould do her mortal harm, I 'm feared,' said Gilbert.

'When I have partaken of the Blessed Sacrament this Easter Day,' quoth Meg, 'happy will I die straightway.'

Then, turning from one to another with more alacrity than she had used this many a long day, she said, 'Good husband mine and kindest neighbour Hob, do ye but take me in your arms this morning to the Town Church and leave the rest to the Lord. Fear not for the snow or the foul ways; I must die and that soon, and I might die the happier for your kindness.'

Hob looked at Gilbert.

'We will do as she wishes,' said Gilbert.

They joined hands with crossed arms and took Meg upon their wrists, she staying herself thereon by clasping their shoulders. Thus they carried her forth between them in the twilight of the early morning. Their feet sank deeply into the snow even to their knees, and much ado they had to keep their footing on the rough way under such a burden and going in such a fashion. Often they stayed by the way to get their breath and to rest a while, when Meg stood leaning heavily upon her husband. Once as they stood thus she spied a dead bird that had

dropped frozen upon the snow from the branches overhead.

'Alas,' quoth she, 'thou poor bird.'

As they got nearer the town the morning lightened.

'Are we far off yet?' she asked anxiously.

'Nay, not far,' quoth Gilbert.

A little while after they caught a glimpse of the smoking roofs of the town lying down in the hollow, and with that they heard the first merry peal of Easter bells chiming up over the snow.

'Jesus be praised,' cried Meg faintly.

'Hold fast, good Meg,' panted Hob. 'We shall win through at last. Holy Virgin, how I sweat.'

Then they saw the Town Church itself and the people streaming through the porch.

'Jesus, Jesus, for but a little while longer,' murmured Meg.

Gilbert and Hob hastened their toilsome steps. So at last they came to the Church and, the folk courteously making way for them, they bore her to a stool by the rood-screen.

The Church was decked with fair flowers, white tapers burnt like stars before the Altar, a sweet smoke of incense went up to the rafters, the clergy boys sang loudly and clearly 'Alleluia.' Lit by candleshine, with white lilies round her

feet, stood God's Mother clasping her Little Son, and He stretched His little arms out and smiled towards her through the odorous mist. Meg had been overcome by faintness once or twice by the way, but now all her mortal powers concentrated themselves on the act of devotion. As she listened to the words of the Priest her eyes closed, and she turned her face upwards to Heaven like as she had been one born blind. Her lips moved at the responses but made no sound, except, when the sacring bell rang, a deep sob burst from her and shook her weakened frame from head to foot. In her turn she would have gone toward the Altar to receive the Blessed Sacrament but for her bodily weakness she might not, so her husband aided her upon the one side and Hob upon the other, and the three of them knelt together thus side by side. Then came the Priest and said, 'This is the cup of My Blood which is shed for you,' and placed the Sacred Wafer upon her tongue. As she received and swallowed it a blissful light as of a great peace shone out of her countenance; she lifted up her hands joined together towards Heaven, and cried in a clear joyful voice that all might hear, 'Jesu!' She fell back into Gilbert's arms, and the Priest, gazing upon her face, knew she was dead.

They began to bear her away, and, as they did

so, Gilbert saw that Hob of the Cross wept. He turned to him with a right steadfast and glad countenance and cried in a joyful voice, 'Weep not, dear Hob, the Lord hath judged His servant worthy to depart in peace.'

The Life and Death of Saint Simon of Blewberry

WHEN folk come into Roodborough for the market 'tis easy to tell the Blewberry people from all other. For these, when they will take oath in their talk, say 'By blessed Peter,' or 'By Saint Thomas of Canterbury,' or 'By Saint George,' but folk from Blewberry swear never but by Saint Simon, and this Saint Simon is not the Holy Apostle whose festival we keep with Saint Jude's in the month of October, but is indeed a Blewberry Saint born and bred.

Like many other holy men, Saint Simon of Blewberry was of lowly and obscure birth. Of his parentage little certain is known. Some say that his father was a man-at-arms broken in the French wars, others a wandering tumbler and rope dancer, and others again one Rutterkin, a travelling scribe. Lo, did not five cities of Greece contend to be accounted the birthplace of Dan Homer, that great and famous Greekish poet? Among so many claimants I may not any more decide who was the father of the Holy Simon. Certainly,

however, his mother was the daughter of a poor villein of Sir Robert of Blewberry, a woman much noted in her younger days for the sin of gadding and haunting alehouses. In her latter years, however, it was granted to her to repent and, when she was somewhat past her prime, she entered into wedlock with one Walter Thinshanks, an aged villein of some threescore winters.

Simon's infancy and boyhood were marked by no signs of the grace and piety which distinguished his maturer years. Him indeed in his green days Satan seems to have especially tempted and tried, and full seldom, as he himself was accustomed afterwards to relate, did he escape the snare of the fowler. Chiefly at this time was he filled with carnal desires for dainty food, and to satisfy these ravenous lusts he was wont to steal meat and pies even from the neighbours' ovens, to rob the Parson's orchard of pears and apples while they were yet unripe, and to kill and devour in secret such pullets and tender fowls as he could come at. When he was accused of any such sins he would lie remorselessly to save himself from deserved chastisement, saying secretly, 'Better a soft answer than a sore breech,' and so deft was he with his tongue, that his tender boy's flesh usually escaped correction at the expense of his immortal soul. He was a stout lad of his body and a lusty and a great quarreller, so that he was

ceaselessly embroiled with the other lads of the village, and generally by reason of his uncommon physical strength had the victory. Folk noted him as a rare companion of wenches at a somewhat premature age, and there were not to lack (and among them observant and sagacious men) who prophesied that his end would be sudden, and neither on the earth nor in the water.

But even while they spoke thus, honestly misled by appearances, the spirit of inward grace was stirring in the bosom of the young man, and though now he hid his light under a bushel, it was soon to shine forth with glorious radiance before the eyes of men. Yet such was the jealous humility with which he veiled the true piety of his disposition, that perhaps it had never been brought to light, nay, not during the whole course of his life, had it not been for a chance so happy and unexpected as to more than smack of God's Providence. It fell out in this way.

One Holy Day Master Parson was officiating at Mass, and at the solemn moment when he says 'Hoc est Corpus' a loud burst of laughter interrupted him. Casting his eyes towards whence it came, he spied Simon seated between two fat wenches and laughing as though his sides would burst. Whereupon Master Parson closed his lips on that very blessed word 'Corpus,' and would not proceed with the Sacrament until

Simon had ceased. After Mass was finished he had Simon sent for and brought to him in the vestry.

Master Parson was a very devout man and a charitable, although somewhat simple, and was much loved therefore on all sides in the village. So Simon came without fear and stood before him cap in hand, humbly and gravely. The Parson gazing upon and noting his bowed head, downcast eyes and clasped hands, thought there was no more godly-looking young fellow in the whole village, and marvelled that the Lord should fashion so deceptively a church-brawler and a ribald.

'Thou profane knave,' quoth he, 'how was it thou didst belch forth such a loud guffaw in the midst of the Blessed Sacrament?'

'"Belch"? "Guffaw"?' said the young man in meek surprise. 'Good Sir John, I wot full well I had laughed, but methinks it had not been so loud.'

'"Loud?"' quoth Sir John. '"*Loud?*" 'Twas loud enough to set the steeple tumbling about our ears. If it had been a common vulgar laugh, it might have been pardoned, but a guffaw like a thunder-clap, why boy, 'tis an outrage, 'tis rank blasphemy!'

'Then I humbly and unfeignedly beseech pardon, good Sir John,' said Simon in a gentle and subdued voice.

'This shall not serve thy turn,' cried Master Parson wrathfully, for he weened Simon played the hypocrite. 'I will know what it was that made thee laugh like the Bull of Bashan in the middle of my Latinity. Why sattest thyself down between those fat and wanton wenches?'

'Fat and wanton wenches? "wenches," Sir John?' repeated Simon in great wonderment.

'Yea, fat wenches, two fat wenches, wenches fat as Flanders mares, dost understand English?'

'If thou sayest so, Sir John, then indeed I must have sat between two fat wenches. But my mind was so on the matter of my devotion that I wot not of it.'

The pious Simon spoke in so quiet and humble a tone, and with such a grave face, that Master Parson was struck all of a heap. He bethought himself that he must have erred in his judgment of the young man, who stood so meekly and transparently sincere before him.

'Come now,' quoth he, 'tell me why thou didst laugh. Happen thou hadst some reason that may excuse thee somewhat.'

'Dost thou command me to speak, good Sir John, for I had lief not for humility's sake.'

'"Humility's sake?" I do indeed command thee to speak.'

'Then,' said Simon, 'I will tell thee why I laughed, but, good Sir John, thou wilt bear

witness for me if ever in the future question be made, that I told thee against my will and at thy express command ? '

' Yea,' quoth Sir John, much mystified, ' I will bear witness.'

' Thou didst notice who sat on either side of me, Sir John, the which I omitted, but didst thou also note the gossips who sat on the bench before me ? '

' Nay, yea—one was the Bailey's wife and the other—the Saints bless me—the other——'

' The other was the Miller's.'

' Yea, yea.'

' They are the two most notorious gossips in the town, good Sir John, as thou knowest full well. Their tongues drop adders and vipers, their mouths are full of backbiting and scandal, so that there is no man or woman in this town, wed or unwed, but hath suffered from their malice and slander. Even of thyself, good father, I have heard them say full often that——'

' Pass that over, pass that over,' interrupted Master Parson hastily.

' Yea, it is shameful, but I will pass that over,' said Simon. ' As these two old women sat before me during the Blessed Mass they chattered together loudly like monkeys, how Cicely's petticoat was shorter than it had been, how Sir Robert was too often to see the Smith's bonny daughter,

how 'twas somedeal late for Tom the Hedger and Rose of the Crown to patch their sinful bodies together in Holy Matrimony, and a great deal more of such scandalous stuff as made my ears burn and my eyes water to harken to it, so that I could not for their infernal cackling keep my thoughts on thy words or my devotions. Sorely was I vexed with them, and, groaning in spirit, I turned my eyes towards Heaven to invoke the aid of the Blessed Saints, when lo! upon the great beam just above the heads of the two impious women I saw a little black Devil.'

'Devil?' quoth the Parson.

'Yea, a little black Devil, and he held himself fast on the beam by his feet and his tail. In one hand he had a long scroll of parchment and in the other a quill, and there was an inkhorn slung round his neck such as Rutterkin the scribe carries. Anon he listened with one hand behind his ear to the gossips, and anon he dipped his quill into the ink and wrote at great pace every evil word that they said. Blessed Virgin, how he scribbled and scribbled until he had already filled one side of his scroll and the sweat ran in great drops down his brow. Then he turned over to the other side of the scroll and scribbled and scribbled again until he was ready to drop with exhaustion and had filled every corner of the parchment on both sides. Then was he mightily

perplexed and annoyed, for the gossips ceased not to commit sin with their tongues, and he had no fair parchment left whereon to record their foul words. So having considered for a little, as it seemed to me, he grasped one end of the roll with his teeth and seized the other end with his claws and pulled so as to stretch the parchment. He tugged and tugged with all his strength, jerking back his head mightily at every tug, and at last giving such a fierce jerk as should have lengthened the scroll by an inch at least, but lo, such was the fury of the jerk that he suddenly lost his balance and fell head over heels from the beam to the floor. At this it was, good Sir John, that I was constrained to burst into laughter.

'"Tis strange,' mused the Parson, much astonished at this narration. '"Tis indeed strange that thine eyes should have been opened to this while mine were closed. But didst thou observe the Devil narrowly?'

'Yea, indeed,' quoth Simon, 'I beheld him while thou mightest have said two dozen *Pater Nosters* and three dozen *Aves*.' With that he described him from the tips of his horns to the end of his tail, and with such wonderful detail and exactness that Master Parson was able to recognise him as the devil Tutivillius, of whom he had read a description lately in one of his learned books.

'Truly,' said he, 'thou art an Israelite in whom

there is no guile, for never else but by beholding this sly Devil wouldst thou be able to describe him so aptly. It is clear to me that the Lord hath endowed thee with the gift of spiritual sight for His own holy purposes; I must ponder the matter more at large.'

Then he blessed Simon and dismissed him with many words of commendation and good comfort.

Presently the story of what Simon had seen got all over the village, and he was forced to tell it again a round dozen of times, and the more it was told and heard the more true it seemed (for such as the learned Lollius saith is the strange character of truth). More especially was it believed because Sir John told it everywhere he came, and because the Bailey's wife and the Miller's were heartily hated of every one. So it came to pass that people openly jeered at these two wicked women in the way, and, whenever they went abroad for business or delight, the little boys would pursue them, crying after them, 'Tutivillius hath it in his roll,' or 'Tutivillius listeneth,' or some such like admonition, the very babes and sucklings thus crying shame upon them.

Good Master Parson had been so much impressed by the humble piety and reverence of demeanour with which Simon had related his wonderful vision, that he marvelled much at his own lack of discernment in not earlier recognising

that the young man's wildness and seeming irregularity of behaviour had been nothing more nor less than the frothy turbulence of a saintly soul, secretly consumed with religious fervour, although not yet fully broken in to the yoke of the Lord. After due consideration, therefore, he went up to the Great House to Sir Geoffrey, and fully explained to that devout Lord how the Almighty had bestowed upon Simon the gift of Divine Vision, and craved his permission that the young man might be made a priest. Sir Geoffrey marvelled much at what he heard, and gave his consent gladly to all that the Parson proposed, giving thanks to God with tears in his eyes that such a saintly soul should be born in his village.

But when Master Parson came to Simon and proposed to him that he should become a priest, Simon violently opposed himself thereto, crying at the top of his voice with surprising vehemence that he had no call to serve the Lord, that he was a mean, worthless, unlettered rascal and unfit for such an office; and further, moreover, that he would much rather succeed his father, Walter Thinshanks, in his holding. Then Sir John understood his deep humility, and thanked the Lord, that He had let him live to see and hear such religion. But he pleaded with him earnestly and went on to show him that if he took Holy

Orders, Sir Geoffrey would entirely release him from his servility and would liberally provide for him in the future, exhorting him to beware by the example of Jonah from shrinking from the burden that the Lord had clearly laid upon his shoulders. So in the end this humble Christian man was compelled, as it were against his will, to serve God as a priest.

He gained such schooling as was fit for his holy calling from Master Parson, and, although he was by nature ever more apt to seek the Lord in His wonderful works than in mere books, yet, God willing, he became in process of time a sub-deacon. When good Sir John departed this life Sir Geoffrey gave to him the benefice of Blewberry, saying that it was indeed fit that he should minister in the Church where God had first called him in a vision. Never did priest take more delight in his pastoral labours than Simon; he was never absent from love-feasts, at christening and churching ales none was more welcome than he; he mingled with his parishioners in pleasant Christian sort, laughing with them merrily in all honest mirth as though he had been a man of no more religion than they, and openly saying that he was not one of those who show how they love God by hating their neighbour, and that nothing kept the Devil and his Angels so much at a distance as clean and hearty conviviality. For which

things he was much loved by all the people, except for a few malicious and hypocritical backbiters, who, seeing him hale-fellow-well-met with all sorts and conditions of men at all times and places, imitated the wickedness of the Pharisees of old, and called him a glutton and a winebibber.

A little time after Simon had succeeded to the benefice, the Bishop of the diocese, who loved, after the manner of bishops, to put his finger in every pie whether of his own or other's making, sent round in his presumption certain vain and supercilious clerks to examine the parish clergy of the diocese as to their proficiency in Divine Learning and, more especially, as to their ability to read the services of Holy Church with a just pronunciation and understanding of the Latin tongue. When these fellows came to Blewberry, they called before them Master Simon and caused him to read aloud to them from the Canon of the Mass. This he did with an enunciation so clear and accurate as to be little short of miraculous, giving every syllable its just quantity whether short or long. So finding that they might catch him in no fault of pronunciation, they straightway impertinently proceeded to question him upon the grammar thereof, not considering in their vain hearts that the words of the Holy Mass are no fit subject for the wranglings of schoolmen.

' " Te igitur, clementissime Pater," ' quoth one of them, ' and in what case falleth " Te," Master Simon ? '

The good Simon was silent, and hung his head, and cast down his eyes as though ashamed. Whereat these insolent clerks sniggered audibly, thinking that he was confounded, and asked him again and badgered him much to reply, but yet he would not.

Quoth one, ' Tell us at least, then, what governeth " Te " ? '

Then Simon lifted up his face and beholding them steadily made answer that ' Pater governeth " Te," for Pater governeth all things.'

At this the examiners (as might have been expected of such base fellows) burst into a roar of coarse laughter, and said he was an ignoramus and an unlettered ass. But when folk heard how the Blessed Simon had replied to them, they much approved his answer, and said that surely he had been inspired to speak such good religion, and if what he had said was not in the Mass Book, then it was time it was put there.

Simon's divine gifts of supernatural vision and for working miracles began now to be clearly seen on all sides. Such by God's favour was the clearness of his sight that folk who had lost or mislaid anything, by coming to him with a small offering for the Church, were often resolved by him

where that they had lost lay hid. In this way Sir Geoffrey recovered his lost purse.

One Holy Day this pious knight came to Mass with the great silken purse he bore at his girdle plainly crammed with French crowns. With it thus dangling by his side he went up to receive the Blessed Sacrament at the hands of the good Simon. When after Communion he returned to his pew, great was his perturbation and distress to find that his purse had vanished, the strings thereof having been cut clean through, as though with a sharp knife. After Mass, therefore, he went, as was his wont when in any trouble, to the good Priest and told him of his heavy loss. Master Simon said he was in no way surprised thereat, for it had been granted him in a vision to see how the fiends raged against Sir Geoffrey because of his pious way of life and especially because of his almsgiving, and that he made no manner of doubt that the devils had stolen his purse, out of the bitter spite they cherished towards him. At this Sir Geoffrey was much gratified, and said that he was glad to have lost the purse and the French crowns into the bargain if it was for God's sake. 'Therein thou showest thyself a truly devout Christian,' quoth Simon; 'but trust me, I will pray to the Lord this night that the purse may be returned to thee nevertheless.' This the holy man did according to his promise, and such was

the efficacy of his prayers, that shortly after he was enabled to take Sir Geoffrey into the Church (as he had been directed in a vision) and to bring forth the purse from behind the Altar, with the strings thereof clean cut, just as it had been stolen from the Knight's girdle. When Sir Geoffrey opened it, however, instead of twenty crowns therein he found only ten, the others having been changed by the malice of the Devil into worthless pebbles. Nevertheless, so grateful was Sir Geoffrey for the prayers of the Blessed Simon that he generously gave these remaining crowns into his hands for the poor of the parish, to which use they were punctually applied in due course.

Not only were Simon's eyes thus clear to see the things of the present, but he could often see also far into the future. Of this one example must suffice.

There was in Blewberry an ancient villein who had been married some six years to a lusty young wench and had yet gotten neither son nor daughter by her. This ancient man coming from his work at mid-day met the Blessed Simon upon his threshold and complained bitterly to him that the Lord had not yet seen fit to bless him with children. Simon turned to him with eyes glowing with the celestial light of prophecy.

'Be of good cheer,' quoth he. 'Verily, I say

unto thee that in nine months she shall bring forth to thee a man-child.'

In the end it fell out just as Simon had foretold, even to the very day.

Many were the miracles this good man wrought, of which perhaps his casting out of the devils from the clergy-boys of Roodborough is the most famous.

These lads were possessed by certain evil spirits, which tormented them grievously, compelling them to quiver from head to foot as though with an ague, to roar and gnash with their teeth like wild beasts, to hurl themselves on the ground, and to kick like mad horses, to vomit nails, and stones, and straw, and ofttimes to dance until they dropped with exhaustion. More especially were they afflicted thus when there was any question of their going into the Abbey Church to sing, to their book-learning, or to any other wholesome labour. Many priests and holy men had attempted to exorcise them by prayers, holy water, and precious relics, some of which last were brought many miles for the purpose, but all to no effect. At length the sanctity of Master Simon being in every one's mouth, and coming to the ears of the Roodborough folk, entreaty was made by a special messenger to him that he would come over forthwith and heal them, if so he might. The good Simon having been informed

of every detail of the matter, replied that the morrow he must commune with God thereon, but the day following he would come without fail, and do whatever it might be revealed him to do.

On that day, having come to Roodborough as he had promised, he ordered the clergy boys to be brought into the Abbey Garden and, standing before them there, he addressed the evil spirits that possessed them in the following fashion:

'Imps of Satan and Spawn of Hell, I am told that ye grievously vex and torment these boys' bodies whenever they strive to go to the Abbey Church, to their book learning or any other labour which it is meet for them to perform. Now, give heed to my solemn words and mark me well. Much as ye grieve their bodies, mayhap I shall grieve them still more.' (Here he brought forth from under his cassock a birch rod, such as schoolmasters use, but huge in size and cunningly wrought, and indeed most painful and terrible to behold, and bared his hairy and muscular right arm to the shoulder.) 'The first boy whom ye cause to quiver, to dance, to vomit, to squeal, nay even to tremble a hair's-breadth, shall I beat with this birch rod until he is black and blue from head to foot, and there is no more life left in his miserable body than there is in a stone.

Yea, I will do it an there be forty thousand devils in his body.'

The holy man waved the birch three times in the air with religious fervour and cried, 'Boys, loosen the hinder points of your hose so they may fall the more easily if there should be need.' Anon trembling, the clergy boys did as he commanded. 'Now,' quoth he, 'we will go into the Church.'

Thereat the boys walked into the Church as soberly and staidly as the Lord Abbot himself. At the sound of the Blessed Simon's voice the devils had slunk away out of them, defeated and ashamed, neither dared they trouble the boys any more after that, for they knew that the man of God was more powerful than they. By this miracle the Saint's fame was enlarged in all corners of the realm, so that people came from afar to see and converse with him, often bringing with them gracious gifts for the Church at Blewberry, and to these, under God, he was able to give much spiritual assistance and comfort.

But now, even while the holy man was in the prime of his years and labours, and long before he had fulfilled the natural term of man's life, it pleased the Lord in his Providence to call him from this vale of tears to Himself, and it was sweet and comfortable to the lovers and admirers of the Saint to reflect that the summons came to him

even as he was engaged in the actual discharge of his sacred functions. The manner of his decease was in worthy keeping with the manner of his life, and it is hard to write of it without tears.

It chanced that he officiated at the churching of Robert's wife of Haydock, and after the churching he was asked to the ale, whither many gossips had repaired to celebrate the occasion with plenty that was fit both to eat and to drink. Being, as has been said, no enemy of honest mirth, Simon courteously consented to drink somewhat with them for good fellowship's sake, and being much importuned remained with the company until late that evening. But after it had grown dark, and the moon was gotten up and most of the guests had well drunken, he took his leave with some haste, saying that he had bethought him of certain devotions he was bound to make that night. About an hour after, three others took their leave also, going the same way to town as the good Simon had gone before them. These three fellows had not gone more than a mile from Haydock, making their way along the road with arms lovingly linked for friendship's sake, when one of them spied something dark lying by the wayside. They made their way slowly toward it, and, when they had gazed upon it for some time, they recognised Master Simon lying peacefully

upon his back as though absorbed in a deep meditation. His face was turned upward towards the bright moon and his feet lay in a great pool of water. They took him by the shoulder and shook him with all the force they might, saying, ' Rise, Master Parson, or thou wilt perish from wet and cold.'

The good Simon stirred uneasily, opened his eyes slowly, and blinked solemnly at the moonlight.

' Put some more clothes on my feet,' quoth he in a full soft and broken voice, ' and blow out the light and leave me to the contemplation of God.'

Whereat these three men, after much contention and sagacious deliberation, concluding that he was absorbed in divine meditation, left him anon and brought each other home in safety.

The same night it came on heavily to rain.

Next morning an old woman going to drive pigs, found the holy man dead, exactly as he had been left the night before, his eyes rapt and fixed upon the Heavens as though in the last and greatest of his visions.

Then folk called to mind his last words, how he had asked to be left alone to the contemplation of God, and they knew that he had foretold his own death, albeit to dull and uncomprehending ears. Also they called to mind divers others of his

prophecies and wonderful works and said one to another, 'Surely there has been a Saint among us.' After his interment many sick folk were miraculously healed of their diseases at his tomb.

Thus it is that when you go through Roodborough market-place on a fair day, you will hear Blewberry folk swear never by Saint George or Saint Peter or Saint Thomas of Canterbury, but by Saint Simon, and this Saint Simon, as I have told you, is a Blewberry Saint born and bred.

The Lie of the Flesh

I

FRIAR GREGORY ceased reading, and looked round the little room. A low truckle-bed occupied one side, two other walls were lined with oaken book-cases quaintly carved, and on the fourth hung a few articles of simple clothing. The bookshelves were full of large books, bound, some in vellum, some in leather. The Friar sat on a wooden chair at a low table whereon flared a bronze lamp. *Intrate per angustam portam, quia lata porta est quae ducit ad perditionem.* As he looked up from the minuscule of the parchment, the guttering flame of the lamp hurt his tired eyes and a yellow mist surged before them. Little beads of moisture hung upon the stone wall and the air was close. *Quam angusta porta, et arcta via est quae ducit ad vitam.* His vision cleared and his eyes wandered among the books which he knew so well and the pages of which he had turned so often, and as scholars said, to such good account : *Homilia Sancti Augustini, Origen de Virginitate, Divi Lanfranci Liber de Corpore et Sanguine Domini Nostri, Joannis Scoit de*

Eucharista, and the rest of the abstruse works in Theology, Logic, and Music upon which he had spent the vigour of his manhood.

His eyes were wont to glow with affectionate reverence when they lighted on the books, the Noble Masters whom he had followed these thirty years with more zeal and enthusiasm than a lover his mistress. But to-night the Friar's spirit was heavy; his eyes ached, his brain comprehended only with difficulty the sense of the written words; hope and self-belief seem to have been suddenly extinguished in his breast. The faith in his labours, which had made them labours of desire to him, seemed suddenly departed, and his life looking forward, looking backward, appeared a blank, a desert, a precious period in the endless and remorseless procession of time, irrevocably wasted in misdirected effort. This state of mind had come upon him in a moment as it were, or rather, he had only apprehended it the instant he had raised his eyes from his book.

He sat motionless a few minutes. Outside, the bell of St. Mary the Virgin tolled eight o'clock. The Friar sighed and raised his hand to his head. That day his lecture in the Schools had been exceptionally well received. Never before had Bradwardine and St. Augustine been so acutely elucidated in the University, and as he finished his exposition the scholars had risen to their feet

and had clapped and cheered him. Many learned Doctors and Professors had crowded round to applaud and congratulate him. Yet the *doctissimus frater*, the *erudissimus lector* had lost heart. Learning is a bitter-sweet fruit.

The Friar rose to his feet, and threw open the little lattice window. The cool night struck on his brow. The moon glowed large and fair over the city of spires and towers ; in the distance the river lay a band of silver. A light wind stirred the branches of a neighbouring poplar. A girl passed humming a popular tune, and the distant shout of some hilarious scholar came through the air like the cry of a lonely ghost. The Friar breathed deeply of the pure air and loathed the confines of his narrow room. His eye regarded the great silent moon and glanced from spire to spire and tower to tower, silvered in the floods of light that poured from the heavens ; his mind suddenly reverted to a similar scene of his boyhood. He remembered the night when his father had brought him, after travelling all day, to the monastery where he was to live henceforth and receive instruction, and how descending the hill-path they had first sighted the monastery on the other side of the valley, clothed in a vivid moonlight which revealed every detail of its exquisite architecture. As it broke upon his vision, it had seemed to the boy a mystic shrine

of God, an exquisite casket wherein the Holy of Holies had His dwelling in the midst of chaste splendours and mildly luminous glories. Hence the Friar's mind wandered back to earlier memories, to the house built of wattles and mud beneath the little hill, to the couple of oxen kept in the stall which he used to feed, to his sisters Peronelle and Alice, and his brothers Robert and Adam, with whom he used to play in the long water-meadows, and to his mother feeding, as was her accustomed task, the poultry on the headland. His eyes grew misty as he thought of them. He remembered the foresters bringing the dead deer up to the Manor, the shouting villeins driving the great plough through the furrows, and the festivals at Easter and Harvest. He called to mind his young days, before Sir John the parish priest had picked him out and had him instructed in good learning, when he ran like a greyhound through the wild wood, climbed the trees like a squirrel, swam like an otter in the swift river, and could shoot with his bow and play his quarterstaff with any boy in town. Then life was a real thing, a vivid enjoyment; physical activities and elemental emotions made up the sum of his careless, happy being.

But now he had drunk deep of learning; he had wandered widely in the mazes of theology and philosophy. The heedless certainty of those un-

trammelled days had gone by for ever; he was now endlessly immersed in doubt and argument; a subtle logic was his, powerful to destroy but very weak to build. His learning had brought him to a land of shadows. Truth and reality, that had environed his youth, now the more escaped him the more he pursued them.

This was the fruit of many books and of many teachers. He turned from the window to survey his room. He saw his books piled up in the gloom of their shelves, his nostrils caught the smell of warm leather and parchment, and a great loathing of them and the life to which they belonged rose up in his heart.

Oh for Life, Life, real Life—away from books, away from disputations, away from endless reflectings and researchings.

Oh for Life, the Life of the free spirit, moving of itself, uncontrolled, self-expressive.

He glanced once more out of the open window; the moon poured down her silvery floods. The lamp was dying on the table; the room grew darker and closer. He took his wallet and staff and went out.

II

It was broad noonday on the highway which led like a ragged ribbon over the wide Berkshire downs. The smell of gorse and brambleberry

drowsed in the warm air. Twenty miles behind lay the towers and cloisters of Oxford. The sun was hot upon the road; a squat, diminutive shadow clung fantastically beneath the Friar's sandals. The Friar was tired, the Friar was hungry, the Friar was thirsty, but he tramped doggedly on, aiding himself with his staff. At a turn of the road a man in a blue kirtle came in sight, leading an emaciated horse with a large bale upon its back. An iron bell hung down from the horse's shoulder and clanked dully against the beast's projecting ribs. The Friar knew the man for a travelling merchant.

'Save thee, Father,' cried the Pedlar.

'Bless thee, my son,' answered the Friar. Then he added, 'I think thou sellest garments.'

'That I do,' said the Pedlar. 'Vair and grey for lordings; jerkins and hosen for fellows; gowns, brocades, and ribbons for the belles amies of every vill.'

'Show me thy ware, honest man.'

The Pedlar took the bale from the horse's back, unfastened the rope wherewith it was tied, and spread out its contents upon a cloth upon the ground. The Friar chose hosen and jerkin and hood and shoes, all of a sober, comely colour, and a purse of rich, red velvet, tied with a golden cord.

'How much, honest man?'

'Thirty pence.'

Friar Gregory remembered that Our Lord was sold for thirty pieces of silver.

'By Our Blessed Lady, I will give thee twenty-five,' he cried.

'Doubtless the holy Father desires these garments for the purposes of religion. Nicholas Brainford was never the man to refuse to God the things that are God's. I will take twenty-five pennies, but of thy charity, holy Father, say ten masses for the soul of my mother, who departed this life five months ago this very day, and now lies in the churchyard of Saint Ethelreda, East-cheap, God rest her soul.'

'I will say twenty masses for her soul,' said the Friar, and counted out twenty-five pennies.

'Gramercy, holy Father, and may God in Heaven, and Christ His Son and the Blessed Virgin and all Saints keep thee on thy way.'

The Pedlar packed his bale again, loaded his horse, and departed. The dull clang of his bell sounded in the Friar's ears long after he was lost to sight in the windings of the road.

Friar Gregory walked on another mile, when he came to a thick wood. He entered it, fighting his way through the undergrowth of hawthorn and blackberry, until he came to a place where a clear stream murmured coolly over the round stones. He drank heartily of the limpid waters, and, presently divesting himself of the brown

habit of his order, clad himself in the clothes he had bought. He hid his habit in a hollow by the stream and covered it over with bracken and stones. Then regaining the highroad he walked on.

When he had journeyed for a couple of hours more, he saw on his left hand, a little removed from the road and half hidden in a thick grove of oaks, a little village, lying under the shadow of quiet, green hills. Now the grey church tower caught his eye and now thatched roofs, scattered here and there among the trees. So he turned from the highway and went through a lane to the village. As he approached he heard the sound of merry making, and the doorways of the cottages he passed were decorated with flowers, and green branches had been placed upright along the way. Then the Friar remembered it was the Feast of Corpus Christi, and he instinctively crossed himself.

He came to an inn, and entering, he called for meat and drink. The alewife brought him fresh fish, peas and ryebread, and a great tankard of beer, and he ate till he was filled.

'By our Lady,' said the alewife, ''tis not thou that lackest appetite.'

'I have travelled far,' he answered, and she brought him some more ale.

Before the inn lay a wide green, and beyond

the green lay the churchyard, and beyond the churchyard lay a little Priory. The alehouse was full of wenches and fellows in their bright holiday clothes. Some played at dice and others at quoits; some told merry tales and others listened to them. A minstrel sang a lay to a group of village folk, who lay stretched out at ease on the green.

'A good day, Master Traveller,' cried Long Hugh. 'Thou hast travelled far from the dust on thy shoes and hose. But a long drink caps a long journey best.'

'Ay, and therefore do I drink,' returned the Friar, 'and therefore do thou drink with me.'

'God's blessing on thee,' said Long Hugh. 'I would drink with any man in Christendom, and so would my wench here.'

Alice, the Miller's daughter, laughed.

'Before God I am dry,' she said.

So they all three drank together, and the Friar grew merry in heart.

'Drink, drink, good fellows all,' he cried, and they all drank, Long Hugh, Brown Alice, Watkin the Ploughman, Purnel of the Hollow-way, Thomas the Cobbler, Clarice of Cock Lane, William the Hackneyman, Rose the Hedger, Pierce the Clerk, Nicholas the Waggoner, Kate Coil, and Clement the Cuckold.

'God in Heaven,' cried the Friar, 'let us drink

again. And they all drank again. And the Friar threw the dice, and they all threw the dice; and the longer they played the more the Friar won, until he had a long score against them all chalked up on the wall.

'Thou'st won twelve pence of me,' said Watkin the Ploughman. 'For the love of Our Lady, I would not that my wife, Tyb, heard thereof.'

'For my part,' said Clement the Cuckold, 'I care no more what my wife should say than the heel of my left boot, although Master Traveller has won sixteen good pennies of me.'

'Fy, fy, Clement Carry-Lie,' cried Clarice of Cock's Lane.

'This fellow has the luck of Ragman Roll,' said Thomas the Cobbler.

'That cursed quean must score me up on the door with her chalk,' said Long Hugh, 'for I shall have no more pennies for ale till next market-day.'

'What, good fellows all,' cried the Friar, 'do you vex yourselves for a little coin? Why, take this and share it amongst you,' and he threw on the board a handful of silver pennies.

'Why, this is a good master,' they cried as they shared the coin among them. 'This cock crows in the right sort.'

Then came a jolly company of musicians on the green outside the alehouse door, and made a

merry noise with pipes and tabors and drums and cymbals. The tune they played ran through the head like a Devil's own canticle, sighing and skirling by turns through the secret cells of the brain, where all the desires of the sweet flesh are locked up and whence they only escape when they brim over their narrow confines, or are charmed forth by sweet music, or some other cunning allurement.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee,
Down in the meadows so early;
Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee,
And the green wheat and the barley.'

For an instant the Friar thought of his narrow room, of his books, of his studies, of the hour-glass, the solemn bell, the dim organ, the divine services; the panorama of that other life passed through his brain like the swift shadow on the green grass.

'Oh, a Carol, a Carol!' cried Brown Alice. 'I love a Carol of all things.'

'Where got ye your trouble, my dear?
Where got ye it, plain to be seen?
Oh, I got it St. John's, a-dancing Carols,
At night on our village green.

Who gave you your trouble, my dear?
Who gave you it, plain to be seen?
Oh, I cannot tell how I got it myself,
That night on our village green.'

The wanton words of Brown Alice set the Friar's heart on fire. All the sweet bells in Christendom began to ring in his ears, the merry music played in his toes, in his arms, in his head, in his trunk, in his whole body. He leapt to his feet and waved his arms fantastically round his head, whilst his toes beat the floor in time.

'A round dance, a round dance,' he cried.

'A Carol, a Carol,' cried Clarice of Cock's Lane.

'A Ballad, a Ballad,' cried Watkin the Ploughman and Nicholas the Waggoner together.

'Play up, minstrels, play up,' cried Pierce the Clerk, Rose the Hedger, and William the Hackneyman.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee,' went the musicians.

'Join hands,' cried Friar Gregory.

'Join hands,' echoed Brown Alice.

'Join hands,' echoed Kate Coil and Purnel of the Hollow-way.

'In and out, in and out,' cried Friar Gregory.

'In and out, in and out,' they all cried together.

'Up and down, up and down,' cried Friar Gregory.

'Up and down, up and down,' they all cried together.

Then in and out, up and down they went over the green grass; nimble feet and ready hands keeping time to the music.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee,' light as wind and quick as thought; now to the middle, now to the rear, now under arm, now over head; lithe as kittens, swift as harts in springtime.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee,' dancing, laughing, singing, kissing; was there never such a Carol on the green before, was there never such jolly music played, was there never such a leader as the merry stranger.

And the sun went down over the green hills, the stars came up and the noise of their merry-making went up to the quiet heavens.

'Drink, drink, more drink, tapster,' cried the Friar. He felt the hot blood throb through his whole body; it seemed as though the veins and arteries must burst with the rebellious pulsation. This was Life, Reality at last. To follow out the brave imaginings of the spirit with the eager flesh and the nimble limbs, to forget the austere and crushing will that chains up the realisation of self, as Death the bodies of the departed, to give every thought its act and every whim its gratification,—this was Life indeed, and Pleasure, poignant, if you like, to madness and pain, but still the pure expression of the nature within him.

'The Churchyard grass is shorter and smoother,' cried Long Hugh.

'To the Churchyard, to the Churchyard,' cried the Friar. 'Drink, my friends, drink.'

So they drank, and some brought lanterns and placed them on the stones in the Churchyard, and some hung lights among the boughs of the yew trees, for it was now quite dark except for the stars.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee.' They danced on the smooth turf of the Churchyard, up and down, in and out, by the carved stones and in the shadow of the tower; and the Friar danced with Clarice of Cock's Lane. Now he held her in his arms, now she slipped away; now he grasped her hands, now she clasped his neck, now he knelt to her, now she knelt to him.

'Tira-la-lee.' Round and round they went, now they embraced, now they parted. In the night, Clarice was very fair to look upon. Her eyes were like dewy stars, hair like the raven's wing, lips of liquid laughter, her face an Eastertide lily. Her bare arms and neck glanced snowily in the darkness.

'Tira-la-lee'; now he implored, now she refused, now she consented, now he pursued, now she fled.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee'; over the gravestones, round the yew trees, over the half-made graves, round the church buttresses.

'Tira-la-lee, tira-la-lee'; the music grew fainter in his ears, he was giddy with dancing, the strong ale weighted down his brain. He stumbled

towards her, his arms open to embrace her; he slipped and fell heavily, senseless in a drunken swoon.

. . . . . .

Friar Gregory awoke. The sky was pale. The stars were fading into the chill light of breaking day. Above his head rose the Church tower, clad in mist. A heavy dew mantled the Churchyard grass. The Friar was chilled to the bone; his head and limbs ached; his soul was numb within him. Slowly he recollected the Feast of Corpus Christi, the alehouse, the Carol dance, the Churchyard and the woman. He moaned and rested his head between his hands. A bitter remorse overcame him. He seemed alone in the midst of desolation, in the darkness of a great pit.

He had left the hard and certain way; he had tired of that life of noble austerities and forsaken it like a child for painted flowers; he had eaten the deceitful fruit of the Dead Sea, and the dust and ashes were yet bitter in his mouth. He loathed the gross world into which he had flung himself with rash madness; he loathed the nature within him which had betrayed him to such grossness. He had wished more room, more scope for the surging activities and desires of his nature; he had not remembered that he was shapen in wickedness and in sin conceived.

Now there was nowhere he could go. He could not sit with the holy Fathers again ; he could not converse with them, he could not pray with them ; to their holy conversation he could not come again. Nor could he accustom himself to that gross and bestial world with which he had madly mingled himself the night before.

His soul was homeless from this time forth. Two heavy tears rolled down his cheeks.

Suddenly from the little Priory beyond the Churchyard floated forth, clear and strong upon the morning air, the chant of the monks singing at Mass.

'Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us :
Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, give unto us peace.'

Friar Gregory listened, and his lips began to move in unison with the sweet words. The tears fell down his face like rain.

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The next Saturday, Father Gregory was in his place in the Schools and lectured on the mysteries of fate and free will.

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