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DISSOLUTION

1536-7

Suffered by Brother Ambrose, of Beeleigh
Abbey, Temp. Henry VIII.

COMPILED FROM ANCIENT RECORDS

BY

A. E. G.

TEMP. GEORGE V.

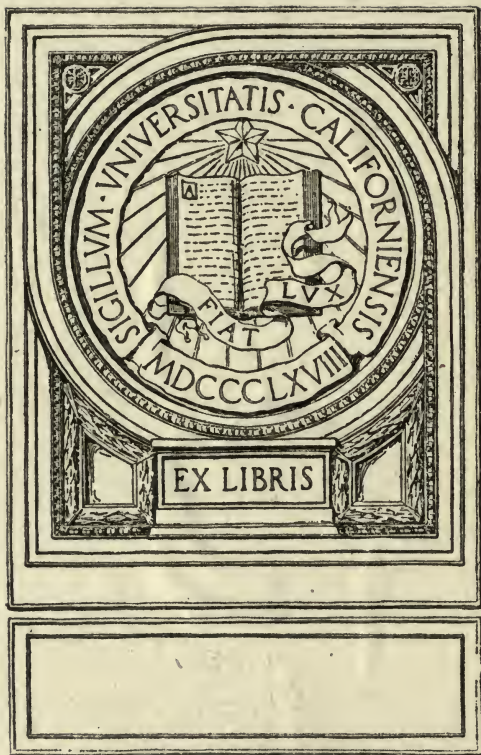
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London :

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*They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy
their business in great waters, these men see the works
of the Lord and His wonders in the deep.*

DISSOLUTION

1536-7.

DISSOLUTION—dissolution—dissolution.

One had talked of it before, often—every day—but vaguely as one speaks of death from behind a wall of unused years.

Now it was here, merciless, absolute, proclaimed on open market-place, declared the new law of the realm. And the law must be obeyed.

Square in crimson and brown fur the Mayor was present.

And the Sheriff and the hangman.

And a crowd inquisitive, indifferent.

Let the white Canons be made homeless.

Much good land would be set free, much revenue enrich the Crown. True they were the friends of the afflicted.

For centuries charity had flowed forth from the cloistered walls. Learning too. But only the old learning of authority, of faith, laboriously compiled in rare and precious manuscripts.

And it was the new learning that men wanted, the new learning of inquiry and research, printed on light paper, indefinitely multiplied, which pennies were enough to buy.

Why should the Monasteries retain their wealth?

Let it give strength to the new learning, food to the King. Then perhaps taxation would diminish. It weighed heavy on the town.

Wherefore as the sharp words of the royal statute cut the air the Mayor square in crimson and brown fur licked his lips slowly, and a grin went broadening over the faces of the crowd, a purr as of a hunger soon to be appeased.

Brother Ambrose heard it; turned away lest he should forget he and that crowd were of one flesh.

Of one flesh?

In the moment of his greatest trouble all he heard was that purr as of a hunger soon to be appeased, and the eyes which followed him held nothing but triumphant scorn.

He felt it clinging to his cowl, to his rosary, to his sandals, robbing them of all their meaning, making them a masquerade, fit only to be flung away. Yet with what joy he had clothed himself in them, that luminous first day when he gathered all his years, his young years and his ripe years and his old years, into one great sheaf and laid it down upon the altar of the Church.

For always.

But there *is* no always.

A hand touched his, shaky, old, and a worn voice from the cobbles:

"The Saints protect us, Brother Ambrose—ill times, ill times."

"Yea, Mother Janet, ill indeed."

"The King has evil counsellors. What will become of us when the Abbey is destroyed? Who will take care of poor Mother Janet when the monks are gone away? The King?"

"God."

But the worn voice quavered still:

"Ill times, ill times."

She knew the Canons. They were near. Loaves abundant at their door.

God was far. Would God give loaves?

True they said He had created her. But then He had created hunger also.

"Ill times, ill times."

And the rheumy eyes strained a long while after the white figure moving away from her, back to the ancient Abbey, the King's counsellors had doomed.

Ill times.

AWAY in the past when the thirteenth century began to show in morning skies and a choir of domes and towers rose up out of the earth to greet the wonder of that dawn with fretted stones and gilded crosses and sonorous chiming of great bells, a white brotherhood from France came into England: where growing fast they needed ever more space for their three great vows:

Vows of poverty, because Christ had blessed the poor ;

Of chastity, because the will grows strong in the hardest discipline ;

Of humility, because man was little and God almighty and most hard to understand.

In Essex in a green hollow by a tidal stream they built another Abbey.

And the tide of that eastward-flowing stream ran deep and strong, filled the inland Monastery with salt and savour of the sea. Brought dove-grey marble for the pillars, ivory for reliquaries and crucifix, silks for altar cloths and vestments, parchment for illuminated missals, stained windows that the very hues of Heaven should kindle on the Chapel floor.

A bounteous tide. Now to be wholly drained away.

And it would be ebb-time always, and the slime of ebb-time would be everywhere, creep in through the masonry, spread green contagion from arch to arch, from wall to wall, loosening, decomposing. The evil-smelling ooze would grow and gape hideous like an ulcerous wound, would suck down the foundations of the Abbey, would close over its last fragments and absorb them with a purr as of a hunger now at last appeased.

HUNGER. Brother Ambrose felt its cruel eyes gleam at him from every corner, from the pity of the woman on the cobbles, from the derision of the crowd, from the black mud of the stream.

And there was hunger in him also—hunger for justice, the eternal hunger of the oppressed, before they clamour for revenge.

This dissolution was so wrong, so unbearable a wrong.

When the King's Commissioners sent to inspect the Monasteries first came, the white Canons welcomed them as men welcome a physician when a plague infects the land.

For many houses of religion were sick with worldliness and wealth. Their blood flowed sluggish in congested veins, made the heart in them beat lifeless, faint.

But the white Canons of the Abbey by the tidal stream had kept their three great vows untarnished through the centuries; their valiant light shone bright as though it had been lit that very day.

The King's Commissioners took note; asked many questions, some from the Monks, most from neighbours coveting the Abbey lands; and they could find nothing, nothing but those three unbroken vows and the gratitude of the homeless and the sick.

Wherefore the white Canons had no fear. Was not the King the Defender of the Faith? The dissolution *he* decreed would be wisdom, justice, a lopping off of rotten branches that the healthy ones might gain in strength.

But it had come otherwise.

All were to go—false and faithful, sound and sick,
heaped together in one ruin.

And the three great vows were to be broken by the
order of the King.

SURELY not of the King, only of his evil counsellors.

Mother Janet must be right.

The King had evil counsellors.

Was it because the good ones stood aloof?

Were they afraid?

But it was wrong to be afraid.

Then Brother Ambrose suddenly thought he understood why God had not burnt with lightning the wicked hands snatching at the possessions of His Church.

God was *not* indifferent.

It was His will that Brother Ambrose should set forth to seek the King, and singly, like the prophet sent to David, hold the truth up to his face.

And the King would listen.

For to be a King was to hate evil.

To be a King was to do justice.

To be a King was at all costs to fight the battles of the unrighteously oppressed.

Yes, he, Brother Ambrose, was the chosen one by God to seek the ear of the King.

SILENCE had fallen on the Abbot from that ill day the dissolution was proclaimed.

Not the silence of repose.

A hundred anxious questions quivered through it, roosted a little at its edges, then flitted round again and round and never knocked against an answer.

It was as if his soul had suddenly grown blind and sought for guidance in a voice, and the voice were far away.

He spent much time in the Scriptorium. With hands that always trembled now he took book after book from off the shelves, and always put them back again. There was no answer in the books.

And he would kneel before the Altar, kneel and kneel.

But he could feel the silence tower above him more and more, rise above the sculptured arches, rise into the very sky, crush him like a dome of lead.

And the most fervent prayer that he said was but a fluttering of fear fainting back unto the floor.

PLEAD with the King?

Persuade the King to rescind the cruel law?

That was the answer Brother Ambrose found.

The true answer?

Let him try.

'T were so good to be allowed to die in one's own cell, to have one's knell tolled by the brothers' hands.

And o'er the deep-dug Abbot's tomb the masses and the incense fume would leave no room for troubled thought.

Let Brother Ambrose seek the Court.

BROTHER Ambrose had knelt before the Abbot a long while.

The Abbot had spoken to him about his journey, given him a long letter to the King, sealed it with his own hands, listened to him a little, and then he had forgotten him.

He was waiting for the voice he could not hear.

And Brother Ambrose noticed that the writing quavered on the letter, that the impress of the arms and legend of the Abbey was but a blurr on the green wax as though it had lost faith in its own self.

The cellarer brought in wine, in chiselled silver, amber-brown.

As one feeds the very helpless he gave the Abbot some to sip, and the Abbot's soul, which had spread and scattered among its many yesterdays, gathered itself again, fell back heavily into to-day.

"Brother Ambrose waits thy blessing."

So there still was some one wanting to be blessed by him, blessed with the old sweet symbol of surrender, of self-sacrifice. He recalled the years when crowds had clamoured for his blessing, thrown themselves across his

path—the pathway of the great processions, broidered vestments, painted banners, big with winds of festival. And the Gregorian chants, the golden flecks of burning tapers, trailed ribbons of sheer light and music along roads white between Easter blossoming of trees.

Now only a few asked for his blessing, furtively, when they knew that their neighbours could not see.

He would not bless them any more.

All his power of benediction should rest on the head of Brother Ambrose, who went forth like the dove out of the ark in that flood of irreligion which was drowning the whole land.

He would control the trembling, as he raised his hands slowly, solemnly to Heaven.

And his hands had the colour of the ivory of the crucifix, and all the sorrow of the crucifix flowed into his suppliant voice.

“God be with thee, son.

“God protect thee, brother.”

And there were more words of help and comfort which he wished to utter, but suddenly it had grown late, time to rest.

Brother Ambrose kissed the hem of the white robe.

He had the Abbot's letter and the Abbot's blessing.

And as he closed the door he saw the cellarer hold the brown wine in the chiselled silver to an old man's mouth, and a bloodless tongue cautiously lap up the drops, the amber drops which still held life.

MAY. Sunshine flooding the whole world down to its deepest, bitterest roots. Everything hard and cold and separating, broken, dissolved in one great bath of warmth and gold.

Old age was dead, sickness ended, every ugliness ashamed, injustice hidden out of sight.

Life was from everlasting and God's dayspring from on high.

Was not that the song the larks were singing—the larks who had been suffered to worship God in the same way from the day of their creation?

Surely the Monks would be allowed to do the same.

Dissolution was not a reality, only a threat to test them, the fiery furnace that alone could separate the dross from gold.

Let it be welcome then.

Welcome too the wide wind of the long white road, welcome the space heaped up around it luring it to wondrous depths. Brother Ambrose stretched his arms out wide as if to seize whole sheaves of air, of boundless space, strain them against the heaving of his breast.

There were no roofs, no walls, to fritter distances to little crumbs a child could hold.

Space was again the earliest, greatest mystery, gigantic, scarcely held in leash by the blue line of vast horizons merging into ever richer, deeper blue.

And the mystery was a thing to be pursued, and conquered and possessed. For generations men had hurled themselves against it, fallen back defeated. But the conquerors would come at last, men so strong they would stand upright on their subdued desires, without

the help of prayers and vows, and work God's will beyond the shelter of a Church.

Conquerors! Oh, to be one of them or the ancestor of one of them!

A seafarer spoke to Brother Ambrose on the road. Spoke of space that was nothing but salt water for such endless months, to man's endurance they seemed years. Infinite space of winds and waters, angry because they had no shore but their own foam, no limit but the scowling of their clouds.

And he spoke of space so cold the drifting ice froze into mountains; of space so hot the paint flaked off in blisters from the scorched sides of the ship. And Brother Ambrose saw that the seafarer's eyes still held the marvel of those far horizons—that they had measured distances by stars which never burnt in English skies.

Only once before had he seen such eyes, in a picture—and it was the picture of a martyr and a saint.

AND strolling players walked along the road, pedlars, their backs bent low beneath a load of books and pamphlets printed in type dazzlingly black.

Market-women, merchantmen; monks—not many.

Yet the monks first made that road.

Now the new ideas moved along it, not like the old, with folded hands, eyes bent humbly to the ground or lifted up to Heaven.

The new ideas were young, inquisitive, peering everywhere, eager to discern and seize, and their hands were the hot impatient hands of children who tear the flowers which they pick.

But they wore colours rich with future, bright with hope. In their hair played the wide wind of the road.

Why not trust them? Become friends?

If one held the Monastery doors open to them very wide they would run in, and the sculptured stones, the lofty arches, the music there would teach them that it is greater to adapt the old to the uses of the new than to destroy it and make war and waste of ruins where there had been wealth and peace.

He would tell this to the King.

And he saw himself kneeling at the royal feet on the gold steps of the throne in a palace all of gold.

Heard the King summoning his evil counsellors into his presence, upbraiding them in righteous anger, declaring the dissolution of the Abbey to be a thing of wickedness which he never would allow.

Only good seemed possible.

It was May, and sunshine steeped the world down to its deepest, bitterest roots.

WAS it still May? Or had London crushed it,
buried it beneath the cobbles of its streets?

Roofs again and walls—tall thin walls with jealous
windows hating each other across dark lanes.

Space crumbled up in a tangled maze of arteries;
the blue horizon sliced into ribbons frayed at the edge
with smoke and fumes.

Wearily the wide wind of the road fell into openings
of garrets; listless the sunshine trailed in rusty gutters.
All the foulness the houses spewed into the street tried
to climb up to the roof-tops, up to the sunshine and the
wind that it might lose itself in them. But they
shook it down again and it tumbled back through doors
and windows, through every chink of those thin walls,
poisoning all who dwelt therein.

The town was sick, sick in its bowels and its heart.

The new ideas and the old fought imprisoned in its
blood.

And its rulers deemed blood-letting the only cure.

Wherefore fears went about and scares and treasons,
rumours of strange happenings at the Court—in
whispers—it was not safe to speak aloud.

BROTHER Ambrose slept ill that night in the Priory which gave him shelter.

With wintry stones and rusty bars it cowered in the shadow of the houses, merchant guilds had built around it.

And the houses took great windowfuls of air and light, and Brother Ambrose saw that they were high and narrow, that they hungered for more space.

He had to knock often at the door to be let in. When it opened, it did so grudgingly, stingily, like one long disaccustomed from opening itself to friends.

There was no welcome on the closed face of the porter, no welcome in the chilly cloisters where the damp of many autumns had been suffered to accumulate and was eating all the strength out of the stones.

From the street ribald songs and the clatter of armed men.

“Spying,” growled the porter.

And the Sub-prior said :

“Gold makes us poor. Our sacristy contains much treasure. They fear we might smuggle it away. So we are spied on, watched and persecuted, deprived of our head, locked in the Tower. Greed and injustice everywhere.”

“But the King—” urged Brother Ambrose.

“The King ! He finds May weather bright at Hampton Court. Royal pleasures cannot be bought except for many ducats.”

Suddenly he put out the light.

“’Tis late ; they must not think we are still awake to prate.”

And left without good-night.

His mind was troubled with the gold, and the new ideas and the old stirred strange fevers in his blood.

Brother Ambrose stood alone in the dark guest-room, and could not sleep.

Space and May seemed far away.

From the street oaths and the clatter of spurred feet. Spying, swearing, the armed servants of the King.

WHAT was happening?

Something great surely.

The crowd was so big. And they all looked one way, as if they only had one eye.

"There! There!" some one said, and pointed.

Women tried to stand on tiptoe, but were swept up, forced on to where the finger pointed—a scaffold black above the zigzag of low walls.

Then the crowd grew savage with the lust to see, flung and flattened itself against the stones, one fierce wedge fighting its way right through the gates, overflowing the halberdiers who vainly tried to guard them.

"She comes!"

"Who?"

Five women moved out of the darkness of an inner passage into the light of the small square; stumbled up the steps—freely—no one pushed them; like the crowd

urged by a shuddering curiosity; wondering about this new experience—Death upon a scaffold.

Yet all the blood had fled out of their faces, was throbbing mad with fear within the tight walls of their hearts.

“That is her, Anne Boleyn.”

“Which one?” Brother Ambrose asked. But ere anyone had answered him, he knew.

She stood more firmly than the others, held her head up with more pride. One felt her lips had once been red and sweet with smiles.

Now they had almost faded from her face.

But her eyes were left, lustrous, black.

In their hard glitter all her thirst of life, her unslaked passion for revenge crouched together before their final leap out of time into eternity.

Her eyes were left and her white neck, dazzling beautiful in the warm frolic of May morning-light.

But every now and then the beautiful white neck would turn and jerk. It knew that there, behind, in the corner of the scaffold, something brighter than itself and stronger waited, watched; something round which the May light also frolicked, plucking jets of brilliant sparkles from its edges, splashing them into the round eyes of the crowd.

She stepped forward, spoke of pardon, of forgiveness.

But she was not listening to her words.

She was listening for the swinging of the sword.

Slowly from off her hair she raised her velvet head-dress stiff with pearls; carefully, as if she were to put it

on again to-morrow, she handed it to one of the trembling waiting-women.

Two others knelt on the scaffold, somewhere—tried to pray.

The fourth placed a silken kerchief across the black, the lustrous eyes.

The condemned one knelt, and for two stupendous seconds Anne Boleyn was imprisoned in the dark, alone with all her past, with all her passions, all her power of hating and of suffering.

“God have mercy on my soul.”

The beautiful white neck bowed low. A little curl laughed in the May light.

“God—”

But that other brighter thing leaped out.

The brilliant sparkles splashed into the round eyes of the crowd—and something else, sticky, red—something that trickled off the scaffold, that lay in puddles on the ground, emptied away out of the head, welled up from where the neck had been and where now an angry gash screamed against the day. It flowed and flowed as if it streamed from the very source of life, and behold it was the blood of a Mother and a Queen.

ALL the long way to Hampton Court it rained red before the eyes of Brother Ambrose: red on the glossy waters of the river, red on the green reeds of the bank.

He would have prayed for that murdered woman's spirit, flung from the scaffold into the boundlessness of death, but that more urgent prayers lifted their wings within his soul. They flew a little, then fell back—unhappily.

The old way to the peaceful God of Monasteries ran red and angry too with that downpour from the block.

True, Anne Boleyn had been slain by the order of the King, the King whom the Pope had called the Defender of the Faith, and who called himself the Supreme Head of the Church.

Which Faith?

Which Church?

And the prayers beat their wings in fear as little birds do when the thunder rides up wildly on the gale.

Then he knew it was not prayer that was needed most, but strength—the strength pulsating in the thrust of some new life which rushes towards fulfilment.

But what he carried in the worn folds of his cassock were the trembling lines and the blurred seal of a letter written by an old and broken man.

Darkly he began to wonder: Is right alone enough to win.?

AT last towers, buildings, battlements—the Palace. Banners flinging their crimson and their royal blue joyously into the day.

In the road outside the entrance, crowds, held back by the glitter of bright spears, straining their eagerness to see long-necked towards the courtyard.

Blare of trumpets.

Somewhere above the green a peal of bells.

Out of the shadow of the gateway colour, display—a cavalcade richly caparisoned of courtiers, men full of blood and appetites, high-bosomed women dazzling the air with perfumed damask, gleaming teeth; soldiers, jesters, councillors.

The King—

“Long live the King!”

Mountainous on massive charger, a blaze of gems and cloth of gold, with mighty neck, swift eyes, and feline lips, the man who knew no master but the minute's pleasure, who from a multitude of gratified desires emerged jocund, clamorous for more.

“The King! God save the King!”

And he laughed back at the people, laughed to the white woman by his side, shook his bejewelled reins that they splashed radiance into the round eyes of the crowd.

And it seemed the same crowd that had stood about the scaffold asking nothing from its King but some great display, brilliant or black—no matter—if only the round eyes got filled.

In a whirl of pomp and colours the cavalcade rode on, rode over a small dog, who howled among the hoofs and perished.

Blare of trumpets, peal of bells.

“God save the King!”

Strength, thought Brother Ambrose—here was strength.

AND once again he saw the King.

He had waited a long while near the place where he should land; a long while watched the royal barge glide down the stream, down the glittering ripples of the sunset which the dipping oars sprayed into strings of diamonds.

It was an evening of gold.

The whole fragrance of a cloudless May breathed o'er the earth like some immense forgiveness.

The royal barge gleamed like a jewel.

The sound of lutes and singing rose from the golden boat, rang across the golden waters like a voice of perfect joy from the very heart of life.

Brother Ambrose stood and waited, troubled—dark—outside the splendour.

The music ended.

The King was helped unto the shore.

Brother Ambrose lay beseeching at his feet.

He felt that he was kneeling before power clothed in flesh and velvet, before something too hard to feel another's pain.

Yet he pleaded—pleaded for the three great vows kept untarnished throughout time, for the Abbot who would surely die, for the friendless ones, the sick, the poor.

But the King :

“By God there’ll be no poor in England when the Abbey lands are parcelled out.”

And angrily :

“’Tis you and your base kind have made the poor.”

Then tapped the suppliant head contemptuously with the silver ferrule of his stick.

“Fool monk, grow some hair on thy bald pate, then come again,” laughed to the white woman at his side, strode on.

Imploringly Brother Ambrose held out the letter.

A courtier seized it, mocked at the shaky handwriting, the quavering seal ; old Father Abbot had been drunk !

A jester tapped the tonsured head with the jingle of his bells, echoing his master’s voice :

“Fool monk, grow some hair on thy bald pate—the ladies like it auburn.”

And laughter.

Shouts : “The King ! Long live the King.”

Tramp of spurred feet, resounding crash of the closing of great gates.

He had pleaded, and in vain.

He had failed utterly.

He was the dog who howled among the hoofs and perished.

And God ?

The waters of the Thames aglow with sunset lapped golden against the gold barge of the King.

The whole fragrance of a cloudless May breathed o'er the earth tenderly like some immense forgiveness.

God was not angry with the King.

With Brother Ambrose? With the Monks?

Had they sinned?

And a new sorrow fell heavily into his heart.

ONCE more the road—dusty, dreary. All the distance heaped around it narrowing to the doorway of an Abbey that was doomed.

Dissolution, dissolution! What could hinder, stay it now?

Only a miracle.

Whose eyes had seen a miracle?

The eyes of Brother Ambrose had beheld the merchant houses tall and hungry for more space, had been burnt by the horror of the block, dazzled by the splendour of the Court.

And behind all these they had perceived as something infinitely precious the new Vision of that far stretch of unknown space which the seafarer could not forget.

The unknown space. The earliest mystery to be pursued and conquered and possessed. And what could conquer space but motion? Ceaseless motion in unending space.

In a manner time too was motion, time and life.

But the monks who dreamed they already held eternity had taught him it was holy to be motionless.

They had loaded God with creeds, weighted His hands with granite slabs, riveted litanies unto His feet, lest moving once He should be lost to them for ever.

He had been so hard to find.

It was comforting to dream of Him as absolute, fixed in eternity far out of time, for ever void of motion.

But now, now was He not moving, altering?

He was not angry with the King who wanted to destroy His monks, not wroth with the new learning.

Perhaps He was a lovely woman who wearies of always being worshipped the same way.

Or perhaps that was the only miracle He never tired of repeating—change, change which was not a mere sum in addition or subtraction of the immeasurable past, but a new birth, a fresh creation, a new pathway for His feet.

And the new birth—was it not always unjust and bitter to the old?

Men's souls were still so weak, so little. It was beyond their strength to hold them both.

And Brother Ambrose, walking silent in the grey dust of the road, knew now which was the birth that had to go.

DAYLIGHT was worn down into dew and gloaming when he saw his Abbey darken towards him from out the hollow by the tidal stream.

Mist drifted heavy from the marshes.

In a little it would rise higher than the roof-top, higher than the Chapel tower, higher than the cross upon the tower, and till daybreak the whole Abbey would be a thing submerged and lost.

A sound of bells—Vespers—

And it seemed a voice out of the past, too frail to reach into to-morrow.

THE rainy summer wept itself away into autumn, winter.

Swollen rivers poured muddy floods over meadows, roads, low-lying houses. Landmarks were swept away.

Bridges dissolved into sheer water. Men got drowned, and cattle.

Sea-storms hurled angrily inland, flung bitter tides over the banks already choked with too much wet.

Seagulls fled screeching unto higher ground, where in obliterated furrows seeds lay scattered rotting.

Then the wind found the green hollow by the tidal stream, beat against the Abbey walls, and died there in its anger, unforgiving.

NONE else came.

The Abbey lay as though forgotten, cut off from the outer world. Yet not at peace. It knew the world was only waiting; that when the roads were dry again, the King's agents not employed elsewhere, it would spring upon its neck, drive hungry talons greedily into its flesh and blood.

The Abbot's hands trembled so much now that they spilt all the food over his breast. But he resisted being fed. So his clothes got worn from too much washing.

His mind too found it ever harder still to hold things stedfastly.

Names dropped out and faces.

Even the great happenings of his own experience fell off as though from over-ripeness.

But in every twitching nerve he felt the sorrow of his Abbey, a sorrow none could speak about, because the darkest words were still too bright.

ONCE news dropped in, quivering, like withered leaves, brought by travellers more courageous than the others or driven by more urgent needs.

News of how in Lincolnshire the dissolution of a Nunnery, the rapacity of royal agents, had torn the common folk from lazy guilt of acquiescence.

How up north through blackness of November nights, beacon fires, fanned by gales, flashed far and wide the

call to arms. How great gatherings of men and clash of spears rent the rotten peace in twain.

How Abbeys, towns, and villages pulled at their bells till every steeple pealed into the suffering land :

Revolt !

THE white Canons and their Abbot sat together in the Chapter house, close—doors well locked.

Revolt !

Was it not just, a holy war ? Did not those insurgents march behind the gleam of crosses, priests and abbots in their midst, on their banner the five great bleeding wounds of Christ ?

The country too was wounded, bleeding, its wealth, its freedom and its faith bitten into, nigh devoured by monstrous tyranny of upstart blood.

The King had evil counsellors. It was not rebellious, it was loyal, to free him from their baneful yoke.

“**H**IS counsellors are of his choosing,” said Brother Ambrose. Then let them fall together. Were they themselves so feeble? Would not every monk in England join them—all who clung to the old Faith, the poor?

“The poor are the poor of heart. Pick up crumbs at any door.”

But they would spread a hideous terror if they rose up in their rags.

Further, were it not base cowardice to let the northern brethren fight alone? Why had their sudden fires kindled, their anguished belfries pealed: Arise!—but that the people screamed for justice, had suffered more than they could bear, would tolerate no further crimes in the ruthless ones who ruled?

Revolt! Revolt!

And eager hands, weary of appealing against dissolution on the beads of rosaries, thrust themselves up in the thin light of a winter day, acclaimed: Revolt!

The Abbot’s hands from the beginning had played aimlessly with the carved arms of his chair.

What were the brethren saying?

Why did their eyes flash out like swords?

Why did they hold their hands up so?

Brother Ambrose spoke gently to the fading mind:

Counties had risen against dissolution, were up in arms against injustice. The Canons here longed to join them, to march behind the flowing of their banner whereon were painted the five great bleeding wounds of Christ.

“Of Christ?”

The hands still trembled aimlessly.

But the blind soul began to kindle with a great, a wondrous light: the voice it had waited for so long was speaking—audibly through his own mouth.

“But I say unto ye, resist not evil, and if one smite thee on thy right cheek, offer him thy left cheek also.”

So the news of the revolt against oppression fell idle—dead leaves that were swept away.

And it was winter—endlessly.

WITH sickness, Brother Ambrose fell ill too.

He could not tell how long his sickness lasted.

In the infirmary there was no morning and no evening, only a change from worn-out back to aching side.

Bits of forgetfulness so heavy the narrow pallet seemed a grave, and a weary stretch of watchful pain, a wilderness where nightmares grew and every fever of the brain.

They said the cold had struck him from too long a vigil on the stones beneath the silver lamp before the Altar. But he knew it was because the God he had been taught in childhood had vanished for him from that Altar, because none had told him yet where he would see the God of manhood, a God so great one could forgive His cruelty.

WITH the first gusts of March fresh news blew in,
fresh news and ill.

Revolt had failed. From gibbets, blocks, and smoking
faggots tidings came smiling to the King :

“ The northern counties are at peace.”

Heads cut off, goods confiscated, an abbot hanged in
chains and quartered before the gate of his own chapel,
nuns driven forth, monks dragged to prison—

How would *they* fare, the white Canons by the tidal
stream ?

THE trembling hands wrote, wrote all day—humbly
to give no hold to royal wrath, asking for nothing
for themselves, only that those entrusted to their charge
should be spared starvation.

And there was much careful trimming of the graves
of the Brothers whom one still remembered, much special
tenderness towards the animals whom one had reared,
much lingering in the sunny corners one loved most—

The beginning of farewell.

THEY had come, they were there, the Commissioners of the King.

Domineering in the Guest-house, loud in the Refectory, broad in Chapter-house and Church—overflowing everywhere—the masters.

Scornfully they nosed into the intimate and humble.

Greedily they ransacked stores. Impiously they emptied aumbries, dim with incense, full of jewelled chasubles and copes.

Illuminated manuscripts they tore to pieces, defaced statues, besmirched sacred paintings on the walls. Then sat down, made lists and lists of all time and piety had brought into the holy building, and against each thing, testing, weighing, valuing, they wrote its worth in money.

Item an alabaster table by the high altar praised at 13 shillings 4 pence.

Item a hanging for the same of green and russet praised at 10.

Item a cross of copper gilt with the gilt unto the same and the cloth 5 shillings.

Item a censer of silver gilt : shillings 71 and 6 pence.

Item a pyx inlaid with gems—lb 12, 9 shillings 4 pence.

The pyx—which never had been touched before, except by hands of solemnly anointed priests, the golden pyx wherein the sacring bell ringing above bowed heads of worshippers had proclaimed the Real Presence—now glibly identified with common coins—money.

Had the pyx become so worthless?

Or had money swollen to almightiness?

Money—these royal agents, these new men, spoke of no other value.

And Brother Ambrose hearing them wondered if perhaps that were the God so great, men could forgive His cruelty.

FOURS of crude arithmetic, days of turmoil, anger.

So much unrest among the living, one wondered how it was the dead could sleep.

At last the inventory was closed, the inventory, and the surrender.

The trembling hands pressed the Abbey-seal into the green wax—firmly, for they still were proud.

The Commissioners swept all away into their pockets, even the seal—it was never to be used again.

Went.

Followed the creaking of the waggons heavy with what of treasure could be moved.

Wearily the porter closed the Abbey gates behind them—not with blessing. They had done nothing but destroy.

Wearily the brethren tried to piece together their old life out of the fragments that remained. And could not.

The day was fixed when they must go.

It was the end—even of farewell.

EVENING—the last. So dark it seemed to ooze out of the pierced heart of the Abbey, rise through the floors, pour from the windows, run over at the roof top, as if the lead and rafters had fallen in already. And the sunset flung fire into the great rose of the Church.

EVENING, evening—the very last.

Boxes and bags, the few things one could carry with one brought together in small heaps, stowed away :

Fresh soled shoes—for the journey might be long—a loaf of bread, a breviary, a relic, a bunch of herbs out of the garden—And there was dust and emptiness where the daily life of three unbroken centuries had made a well-filled world of use and order.

EVENING, evening—the very last.

It broke out in patches from dark corners of the walls, hung in cobwebs from the corbels, fell like curtains from the cross-bars of the windows.

It was a sigh in the dim cloisters, and a moan amongst the crosses of the graves.

One could not eat. There was too much evening in the Refectory, and behind that evening too much night.

The bread clung sour between the teeth; even the wine stuck in the throat.

A BROTHER read :

Let there be none to extend kindness unto him.

Neither let there be any to have pity on his fatherless children.

Let his posterity be cut off : in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with God : and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.

Let them be before God continually : that He may cut off the memory of them from the earth ;

Because he remembered not to show kindness : but persecuted the poor and needy man and the broken in heart to slay him.

And the words were as daggers slashing the gloom with the glitter of revenge.

IN the dorter anxious whispers :

“Where will *you* go?”

“Home. My old mother will be glad.”

But he who had read the Psalm at supper :

“Rome—the Pope needs men. I go to Rome.”

And his eyes shone black with hunger—not for justice.

“And you, Father Ambrose?”

Father Ambrose made a wide vague gesture of despair.

“Somewhere—into the world.”

And the world seemed just one long and dreary road ; beside its ruts only a rushlight here and there, some huts, a wayside tavern, where no one was allowed to stay longer than a single night.

THE call to Compline quavered faintly down the shadows, and it seemed too small a bell to ring the death-knell of a whole age of faith and thought.

The white Canons sat in their appointed places, knelt on the wonted stones smooth from much bygone kneeling, found voices for the accustomed words and prayers ; but their thoughts were without prayer.

The many blessed yesterdays which never had been yesterday till now were dying in them with too fierce an agony ; the unknown horrible to-morrow was waiting too close, too sure, behind the door.

Prayers could alter nothing now.

TILL the Abbot rose up in his seat with its canopy of sculptured leaves, opened a book, began to read :

“ In the Lord have I put my hopes— ”

And the brethren answered : “ Let us never be confounded.”

“ Bow down Thine ear to me— ”

“ Hasten to deliver me.”

The trembling hands gripped the cold edge of the lectern—hard. It must be held down to the end the anguish that was slaying him—But it was rising.

“ Be thou unto me a God—”

The letters swam before his eyes.

“ A protector—”

He could no longer see them.

He remembered :

“ A house of refuge—out of this snare—which—”

He forgot—

“ Into thy hands, O God of truth—”

His voice broke off. Anguish had risen up too high.

Then he bowed his head down—deep down—that the brethren should not see. But they felt his tears scorch their eyes.

And Brother Ambrose at the organ gave voice to all they dumbly suffered, drew the ache and bitterness out of each man's heart and poured it out into the great heart of the world, and widened it and sweetened it.

“ The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away.

“ Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Lingeringly the white Canons left their Church.

And they were ghosts already, shadows—past.

A minor chord yearning for redemption vibrated down the darkening aisles, a chord long-drawn like the deep last sigh of one who knows that he must die, while others sleep before the dawn. Then silence but for the ever more receding sound of feet that part on ever farther and more distant floors.

Silence—complete.

And the pierced heart of the Abbey beat no more.

BROTHER Ambrose stayed in the Church.

It had just only lived its last pale hour.

It was wrong to leave the dead before they had had time to grow accustomed to their death. The unwonted was less terrible when hands still warm with life were spread out before it, disguising it a little.

A thousand vigils merged into his watching, for he was big with sorrow, loneliness, and night.

Night had built her own walls around the dead walls of the Church, black—a gigantic catafalque.

And dense, weighing on everything—not to be moved, only a little more transparent where the silver lamp before the altar shed the circle of its light.

Perhaps the watchful eye of God?—

But it would be closed to-morrow.

THROUGH the tracery of the windows other lamps burned, white, trembling in a dark-blue black with depth—the stars.

But night was bigger than the stars.

Then Brother Ambrose understood that God is night—night which sets things free from the oppression of their outlines, dissolves their hard identity, opens the way to infinite communions where ideals are conceived strong enough to breed fresh life.

That God is darkness—the fathomless around whose edge moons swim, and stars, islands of radiance to guide souls on their slow way towards Him.

Was it therefore He forsook the Church, because it dragged Him out into too absolute a light, mutilated Him with names, clogged the vastness of His freedom with faith in narrow certainties, petrified the teeming heat of His creative passion into a thing that could be told?

Perhaps too with its arches, pinnacles, and angels steep and winged it had rushed into the sky too swiftly, not plunged deep enough into the darkness of the soil.

But it was there the fountains flowed together, the hidden fires, the burrowings of fruitful roots.

What men loved most themselves of music, gold, and adulation they brought into this Church, calling it the house of God.

But God knew it was a prison ; laboured at the times that would seek Him on a wider, harder way. Escaped.

BUT once He *had* dwelt there, while they were building, while the Abbey rose more articulate day by day, growing with the growth of a great tree.

His feet had walked amidst the swaying of the scaffolds. He had hung His voice high in the belfry, pressed His weight into the keystone of the arches that much heaviness might rest thereon, had moulded the impress of His hands upon the stones that for all time beauty should be imaged there. For God loves beauty which is a pause and a fulfilment, and life which is desire, and endless building and becoming.

WHAT would life build around the new ideas that the many might find them and believe in them?

Not Churches. Men did not pray for Churches now.

They *had* done once—prayed, prayed, through the endless wet of weeks of rain—prayed for the Church they were too poor to build themselves.

And behold one sunrise hour of dewy gold, above the reeds in the green meadow where the flood had been, a wooden Church, a well-made house to shelter their belief in God.

But that was very long ago.

WHAT did men pray for now, or work for? For they still only prayed their fathers' prayers, not yet their own.

And Brother Ambrose thought of the seafarer's eyes vague with the light of new horizons, with the lure of boundless space.

And he remembered what he witnessed as he stood where the tidal stream grows broad and deep, feeling the nearness of the sea. Riggings, masts, hulks fit to wrestle with elemental winds and waves; men straining outwards, seawards, with eager speech of those who know they will discover gold.

They still offered up some votive prayer in the Church above the harbour, but quickly, hurriedly, that they might not miss the tide. The tide which was to bear them to a world of waters, rich in adventure and in fame, where power waited to be snatched from fate, from the greed of other men; where space called boundless, wondrous, unexplored, to be pursued, and conquered, and possessed.

Seawards to give vent to the inner meaning of their race, rein to their surest instinct; outwards to slay the fever in their blood with reckless draughts of dangers and discoveries.

FOR such aims was it not ships one needed most?
Life would build ships around the new ideas—ever bigger, swifter ships.

And Brother Ambrose felt that when once these could be judged even like this Church, as something ended and completed in the calm, still balance of the past, it would be found that with their sails so full of light and air, their keels embedded in so much heaviness and night, they had conquered in the flow of time another pathway for the restless feet of God.

TES, men would work for ships, for everything that yielded further motion in yet more space. For God had again become the distant and the unattained, only in some flash of revelation the harbour where the soul could rest.

And even as his vigil ended Brother Ambrose felt his spirit lifted, absorbed into the depth of night, the boundless blue where all was heaven, and the breath went of a God so great one could forgive His cruelty. And there his suffering self dissolved insignificant as dust.

BUT space, through which his soul had broken, grew near again, oppressive, narrow.

Out of gradually subsiding darkness things rose in their familiar outlines, separate, closed.

Tier by tier night broke down its walls, drew back behind the rising sun, lingered only in thin, light shadows on the ground.

The catafalque that had hung silent and sumptuous as black velvet round the Church, vanished within the veil of day. The dead lay bare and piteous beneath shrillness of awakening birds.

All his scattered suffering condensed again around the lonely watcher's heart, and all the dread of living through the coming hours of severance stole a leaden poison through his veins.

Strength! Strength!

He kissed the sorrow of the Crucifix, the cold stones of the silent Altar, took from them what was left of the great sheaf of his gathered years, his ripe years, and his old years.

"Into Thy hands, O God of truth."

And it was day, the day of Dissolution.

A GARISH day.

Knocking, ringing, impatient bursting of the gate.
The enemy.

Brutally the new owners took possession.

Allowed no respite even for early Mass.

The monks might say it in their hearts.

But those could hold nothing now but utmost
weariness of grief. They were ended, broken.

Too broken even to cling together.

They parted, scattered. They became of no account.

BROTHER Ambrose and another shielded the Abbot
with their love, listened when the blind soul heard
the voice.

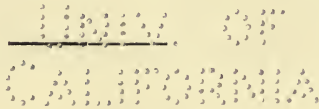
Not long.

One day warm with ripening harvests, the trembling
hands twitched a little and lay still.

Tenderly Brother Ambrose closed the eyes which
dying took with them a whole age of faith and trust.

Then with the sound of harvest songs still in his ears
he found his way unto a ship, a ship that was to sail at
sunrise, gliding seawards with the tide.

SEAWARDS, away from where they robbed and slew the sacred past, seawards over unsailed waves to unknown shores, distances to which the hunger of the race began to suck its eager way. There was much light and air in the tall rigging, much night and heaviness around the keel. A star shone golden at the mast. And beneath it, in the pearly twilight breathed the wide wind of the road, full already of the night, fresh from the splendour of the sea, the perilous track, where the God of manhood beckoned, vast and manifold and free.



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