

XII - THE NUNS OF MAWGAN.

About three miles from the large market-town of St. Columb Major, in the direction of the coast, is situated the Vale of Mawgan. The village of the same name occupies the lower part of the valley, and includes a few cottages, an old church, a yet older manor-house, and a clear running stream, crossed by a little stone bridge, all nestling close together on a few hundred yards of ground enclosed by some of the most luxuriant wood foliage in Cornwall. The trees bound each side of the stream, tinging it in deep places where it eddies smoothly, with hues of lustrous green; and dipping their lower branches into it, where it ripples on white pebbles or glides fast over grey sand. They cluster thickly about the old church-yard, as if to keep the place secret, throwing deep shadows over the graves, and hiding all outer objects from the eye. The small cottage garden and the spacious manor-house enjoy their verdant shelter alike; the bye-roads leading in and out of the village, are soon lost to view amid outspread branches; and not even a peep of the land that leads on to the sea in one direction, and back to the town in the other, is to be obtained through the natural screen of leaves above, and mosses, ferns, and high grass below, which closely shut in this part of the Vale of Mawgan from the open country around.

There is an unbroken, unworldly tranquillity about this secluded place, which communicates itself mysteriously to the stranger's thoughts; making him unconsciously slacken in his walk, and look and listen in silence, when he enters it, as if he had penetrated into a new sphere. Slight noises, rarely noticed elsewhere, are always audible here. The dull fall of the latch, when an idle child carelessly opens the churchyard wicket, sounds from one end of the village to the other. The curious traveller who wanders round the walls of the old church, peering through its dusty lattice windows at the dark religious solitude within, can hear the lightest flap of a duck's wing in the stream below; or the gentlest rustle of distant leaves, as the faint breeze moves them in the upland woods above. But these, and all other sounds, never break the peaceful charm of the place--they only deepen its unearthly stillness.

Within the church-yard, the bright colour of the turf, and the quiet grey hues of the mouldering tombstones, are picturesquely intermingled all over the uneven surface of the ground, save in one remote corner, where the graves are few and the grass grows rank and high. Here, the eye is abruptly attracted by the stern of a boat, painted white, and fixed upright in the

earth. This strange memorial, little suited though it be to the old monuments around, has a significance of its own which gives it a peculiar claim to consideration. Inscribed on it, appear the names of ten fishermen of the parish who went out to sea to pursue their calling, on one wintry night in 1846. It was unusually cold on land--on the sea, the frosty bitter wind cut through to the bones. The men were badly provided against the weather; and hardy as they were, the weather killed them that night. In the morning, the boat drifted on shore, manned like a spectre bark, by the ghastly figures of the dead--freighted horribly with the corpses of ten men all frozen to death. They are now buried in Mawgan church-yard; and the stern of the boat they died in tells their fatal story, and points to the last home which they share together.

But it is not from such a village tragedy as this; it is not from its retired situation, its Arcadian peacefulness, its embowering trees and hidden hermit-like beauties of natural scenery, that the vale of Mawgan derives its peculiar interest. It possesses an additional attraction, stronger than any of these, to fix our attention--it is the scene of a romance which we may still study, of a mystery which is of our own time. Even to this little hidden nook, even to this quiet bower of Nature's building, that vigilant and indestructible Papal religion, which defies alike hidden conspiracy and open persecution, has stretched its stealthy and far-spreading influence. Even in this remote corner of the remote west of England, among the homely cottages of a few Cornish peasants, the imperial Christianity of Rome has set up its sanctuary in triumph--a sanctuary not thrown open to dazzle and awe the beholder, but veiled in deep mystery behind gates that only open, like the fatal gates of the grave, to receive, but never to dismiss again to the world without.

It is this attribute of the vale of Mawgan which leads the stranger away from the cool, clear stream, and the pleasant, shadowy recesses among the trees, to an ancient building near the church, which he knows to have been once an old English manorial hall--to be now a convent of Carmelite nuns.

The House of Lanhearne, so it is named, comprises an ancient and a modern portion; the first dating back before the time of the Conquest, the second added probably not more than a century and a half ago. The place formerly belonged to the old Cornish family of the Arundels; but about the year 1700, their race became extinct, and the property passed into the possession of the present Lord Arundel. However, although the manor-house has changed masters, there is one peculiar circumstance connected with it, which has remained unaltered down to the present time--it has never had a Protestant owner.

Thus, whatever religious traditions are connected with it, are Roman Catholic traditions. A secret recess remains in the wall of the old house, where a priest was hidden from his pursuers, during the reign of Elizabeth, for eighteen months; the place being only large enough to allow a man to stand upright in it. The skull of another priest who was burnt at the same period, is also preserved with jealous care, as one of the important relics of the ancient history of Lanhearne.

About the commencement of this century, the manor-house entirely changed its character. It was at that time given to the Carmelite nuns, who now inhabit it, by Lord Arundel. The sisterhood was originally settled in France, and was removed thence to Antwerp, at the outbreak of the first French Revolution. Shortly afterwards, when the affairs of the Continent began to assume a threatening and troubled aspect, the nuns again migrated, and sought in England, at Lanhearne House, the last asylum which they still occupy.

The strictness of their order is preserved with a severity of discipline which is probably without parallel anywhere else in Europe. It is on our free English ground, in one of our simplest and prettiest English villages, that the austerities of a Carmelite convent are now most resolutely practised, and the seclusion of a Carmelite convent most vigilantly preserved, by the nuns of Mawgan! They are at present twenty in number: two of them are Frenchwomen, the rest are all English. They are of every age, from the very young to the very old. The eldest of the sisterhood has long passed the ordinary limits of human life--she has attained ninety-five years.

The nuns never leave the convent, and no one even sees them in it. Women even are not admitted to visit them: the domestic servants, who have been employed in the house for years, have never seen their faces, have never heard them speak. It is only in cases of severe and dangerous illness, when their own skill and their own medicines do not avail them, that they admit, from sheer necessity, the only stranger who ever approaches them--the doctor; and on these occasions, whenever it is possible, the face of the patient is concealed from the medical man.

The nuns occupy the modern part of the house, which is entirely built off, inside, from the ancient. Their only place for exercise is a garden of two acres, enclosed by lofty walls, and surrounded by trees. Their food and other necessaries are conveyed to them through a turning door; all personal communion with the servants' offices being carried on through the medium of lay sisters. The nuns have a private way, known only to themselves, to the

chapel choir, which is constructed in the form of a gallery, boarded in at the sides and concealed by a curtain and close grating in front. The chapel itself is in the old part of the house, and occupies what was formerly the servants' hall. The officiating priest who undertakes the duties here, lives in this portion of the building, and leads a life of complete solitude, until he is relieved by a successor. He never sees the face of one of the nuns; he cannot even ask one of his own profession to dine with him, without first of all obtaining (by letter) the express permission of the Abbess; and when his visitor is at length admitted, it is impossible to gain for him--let him be who he may--the additional indulgence of being allowed to sleep in the house.[5]

The chapel is the only part of the whole interior of the building to which strangers can be admitted: those who desire to do so can attend mass there on Sundays. The casual visitor, when permitted to enter it, is not allowed to pass beyond the pillars which support the gallery of the choir above him; for if he advanced farther, the nuns who might then be occupying it, might see him while they were engaged at their devotions. The chapel exhibits nothing in the way of ornament, beyond the altar furniture and a few copies from pictures on sacred subjects by the old masters. Some of the more valuable objects devoted to its service are not shown. These consist of the sacred vestments and the sacramental plate, which are said to be of extraordinary beauty and value, and are preserved in the keeping of the Abbess. The worth of one of the jewelled chalices alone has been estimated at a thousand pounds.

Much of the land in the neighbourhood belongs to the convent, which has been enriched by many valuable gifts. The nuns make a good use of their wealth. Neither the austerities and mortifications to which their lives are devoted, nor their rigid and terrible self-exclusion from all intercourse with their fellow-beings in the world around them, have diminished their sympathy for affliction, or their readiness in ministering to the wants of the poor. Any assistance of any kind that they can render, is always at the service of those who require it, without distinction of rank or religion. No wandering beggar who rings at the convent bell, ever leaves the door without a penny and a piece of bread to help him on his way.

But the charities of the nuns of Mawgan do not stop short at the first good work of succouring the afflicted; they extend also to a generous sympathy for those human weaknesses of impatience and irresolution in others, which they have surmounted, but not forgotten themselves. Rather more than twelve years since, a young girl of eighteen applied to be admitted to share the dreary life-in-death existence of the Carmelite sisterhood. She was received for her year of probation: it expired, and she still held firmly to her

first determination. But the nuns, in pity to her youth, and perhaps mournfully remembering, even in their life-long seclusion of mind and body, how strong are the ties which bind together the beings of this world and the things of this world, gave her more time yet to search her own motives, to look back on what she was abandoning, to look forward on what she desired to obtain. Mercifully refusing to grant her her own wishes, they forebore the performance of the fatal ceremony which irrevocably took her from earth to give her up only to Heaven, until she had undergone an additional year of probation. This last solemn period of delay which Christian charity and sisterly love had piously granted, expired, and found her still determined to adhere to her resolution. She took the veil; and the dreary gates of Lanhearne have closed on all that is mortal of her for ever!

The convent has two burial places. The first is in an ancient recess within the village church, and was given to the nuns with the manor-house. Those among them who first expired on English ground, lie buried here--the Catholic dead have returned to the once Catholic edifice, where the Protestant living now worship! When the Carmelite funeral procession entered this place, it entered at the dead of night, to avoid the chance of any intrusion. But as the nuns have no private entrance to their burial-vault, and have been by law prohibited from making one; as they are obliged to pass through the public door of the church and walk up the nave, they are at the mercy of any stranger who can gain admittance to the building, and who may be led by idle curiosity to watch the ceremonies which accompany their midnight service for the dead. Feeling this, they have of late years abandoned their burial place, after first carefully boarding it off from all observation. No inquisitive eyes can now behold, no intruding footsteps can now approach, the tombs of the nuns of Mawgan.

The second cemetery, which they use at present, is situated in one of the convent-gardens, and can therefore be secured, whenever they please, from all observation. A wooden door at one corner of the ancient portion of the manor-house leads into it. The place is merely a small, square plot of ground, damp, shady, and overgrown with long grass. An old and elaborately carved stone cross stands in it; and about this appear the graves of the nuns, marked by plain slate tablets. But even here, the mystery which hangs darkly over the Carmelite household does not clear--the seclusion that has hidden the living in the Convent, is but the forerunner of the secrecy that veils from us on the tombstone the history of the dead. The saint's name once assumed by the nun, and the short yet beautiful supplication of the Roman Church for the repose of the soul of the departed, form the only inscriptions that appear over the graves.

This is all--all of the lives, all of the deaths of the sisterhood at Lanhearne that we can ever know! The remainder must be conjecture. We have but the bare stern outline that has been already drawn--who shall venture, even in imagination, to colour and complete the picture which it darkly, yet plainly, indicates?

Even if we only endeavour to image to ourselves the externals of the life which those massy walls keep secret, what have we to speculate on? Nothing but the day that in winter and summer, in sunshine and in storm, brings with it year after year, to young and to old alike, the same monotony of action and the same monotony of repose--the turning door in the wall (sole indication to those within, that there is a world without), moved in silence, ever at the same stated hour, by invisible hands--the prayer and penance in the chapel choir, always a solitude to its occupants, however many of their fellow-creatures may be standing beneath it--the short hours of exercise amid high garden walls, which shut out everything but the distant sky. Beyond this, what remains but that utter vacancy where even thought ends; that utter gloom in which the brightest fancy must cease to shine?

Should we try to look deeper than the surface; to strip the inner life of the convent of all its mysteries and coverings, and anatomising it inch by inch, search it through down to the very heart? Should we pry into the dread and secret processes by which, among these women, one human emotion after another may be suffering, first ossification, then death? No!--this is a task which is beyond our power; an investigation which, of our own knowledge, we cannot be certain of pursuing aright. We may imagine grief that does not exist, remorse that is not felt, error that has not been committed. It is not for us to criticise the catastrophe of the drama, when we have no acquaintance with the scenes which have preceded it. It is not for us, guided by our own thoughts, moved by the impulses of the world we live in, to decide upon the measure of good or evil contained in an act of self-sacrifice at the altar of religion, which is in its own motive and result so utterly separated from all other motives and results, that we cannot at the outset even so much as sympathise with it. The purpose of the convent system is of those purposes which are conceived in this world, but which appeal for justification or condemnation only to the next.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged!" Those words sink deep into our hearts, as we look our last upon the convent walls, and leave the living-dead at old Lanhearne.

FOOTNOTES:

[5] All the particulars here related of the convent discipline, were communicated to me by the resident priest. This gentleman was certainly not a prejudiced witness on the side of austerity--for he frankly complained of the lonely life which the rules of the Sisterhood inflicted on him, and unhesitatingly acknowledged that he was anxious for the time when his clerical successor would come to relieve him.