The Lady Of Blossholme

By

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CHAPTER I

SIR JOHN FOTERELL

Who that has ever seen them can forget the ruins of Blossholme Abbey, set upon their mount between the great waters of the tidal estuary to the north, the rich lands and grazing marshes that, backed with woods, border it east and south, and to the west by the rolling uplands, merging at last into purple moor, and, far away, the sombre eternal hills! Probably the scene has not changed very much since the days of Henry VIII, when those things happened of which we have to tell, for here no large town has arisen, nor have mines been dug or factories built to affront the earth and defile the air with their hideousness and smoke.

The village of Blossholme we know has scarcely varied in its population, for the old records tell us this, and as there is no railway here its aspect must be much the same. Houses built of the local grey stone do not readily fall down. The folk of that generation walked in and out of the doorways of many of them, although the roofs for the most part are now covered with tiles or rough slates in place of reeds from the dike. The parish wells also, fitted with iron pumps that have superseded the old rollers and buckets, still serve the place with drinking-water as they have done since the days of the first Edward, and perhaps for centuries before.

Although their use, if not their necessity, has passed away, not far from the Abbey gate the stocks and whipping-post, the latter arranged with three sets of iron loops fixed at different heights and of varying diameters to accommodate the wrists of man, woman, and child, may still be found in the middle of the Priests' Green. These stand, it will be remembered, under a quaint old roof supported on rough, oaken pillars, and surmounted by a weathercock which the monkish fancy has fashioned to the shape of the archangel blowing the last trump. His clarion or coach-horn, or whatever instrument of music it was he blew, has vanished. The parish book records that in the time of George I a boy broke it off, melted it down, and was publicly flogged in consequence, the last time, apparently, that the whipping-post was used. But Gabriel still twists about as manfully as he did when old Peter, the famous smith, fashioned and set him up with his own hand in the last year of King Henry VIII, as it is said to commemorate the fact that on this spot stood the stakes to which Cicely Harflete, Lady of Blossholme, and her foster-mother, Emlyn, were chained to be burned as witches.

So it is with everything at Blossholme, a place that Time has touched but lightly. The fields, or many of them, bear the same names and remain identical in their shape and outline. The old farmsteads and the few halls in which reside the gentry of the district, stand where they always stood. The glorious tower of the Abbey still points upwards to the sky, although bells and roof are gone, while half-a-mile away the parish church that was there before it--having been rebuilt indeed upon Saxon foundations in the days of William Rufus--yet lies among its

ancient elms. Farther on, situate upon the slope of a vale down which runs a brook through meadows, is the stark ruin of the old Nunnery that was subservient to the proud Abbey on the hill, some of it now roofed in with galvanised iron sheets and used as cow-sheds.

It is of this Abbey and this Nunnery and of those who dwelt around them in a day bygone, and especially of that fair and persecuted woman who came to be known as the Lady of Blossholme, that our story has to tell.

It was dead winter in the year 1535--the 31st of December, indeed. Old Sir John Foterell, a white-bearded, red-faced man of about sixty years of age, was seated before the log fire in the dining-hall of his great house at Shefton, spelling through a letter which had just been brought to him from Blossholme Abbey. He mastered it at length, and when it was done any one who had been there to look might have seen a knight and gentleman of large estate in a rage remarkable even for the time of the eighth Henry. He dashed the document to the ground; he drank three cups of strong ale, of which he had already had enough, in quick succession; he swore a number of the best oaths of the period, and finally, in the most expressive language, he consigned the body of the Abbot of Blossholme to the gallows and his soul to hell.

"He claims my lands, does he?" he exclaimed, shaking his fist in the direction of Blossholme. "What does the rogue say? That the abbot

who went before him parted with them to my grandfather for no good consideration, but under fear and threats. Now, writes he, this Secretary Cromwell, whom they call Vicar-General, has declared that the said transfer was without the law, and that I must hand over the said lands to the Abbey of Blossholme on or before Candlemas! What was Cromwell paid to sign that order with no inquiry made, I wonder?"

Sir John poured out and drank a fourth cup of ale, then set to walking up and down the hall. Presently he halted in front of the fire and addressed it as though it were his enemy.

"You are a clever fellow, Clement Maldon; they tell me that all Spaniards are, and you were taught your craft at Rome and sent here for a purpose. You began as nothing, and now you are Abbot of Blossholme, and, if the King had not faced the Pope, would be more. But you forget yourself at times, for the Southern blood is hot, and when the wine is in, the truth is out. There were certain words you spoke not a year ago before me and other witnesses of which I will remind you presently. Perhaps when Secretary Cromwell learns them he will cancel his gift of my lands, and mayhap lift that plotting head of yours up higher. I'll go remind you of them."

Sir John strode to the door and shouted; it would not be too much to say that he bellowed like a bull. It opened after a while, and a serving-man appeared, a bow-legged, sturdy-looking fellow with a shock of black hair.

"Why are you not quicker, Jeffrey Stokes?" he asked. "Must I wait your pleasure from noon to night?"

"I came as fast as I could, master. Why, then, do you rate me?"

"Would you argue with me, fellow? Do it again and I will have you tied to a post and lashed."

"Lash yourself, master, and let out the choler and good ale, which you need to do," replied Jeffrey in his gruff voice. "There be some men who never know when they are well served, and such are apt to come to ill and lonely ends. What is your pleasure? I'll do it if I can, and if not, do it yourself."

Sir John lifted his hand as though to strike him, then let it fall again.

"I like one who braves me to my teeth," he said more gently, "and that was ever your nature. Take it not ill, man; I was angered, and have cause to be."

"The anger I see, but not the cause, though, as a monk came from the Abbey but now, perhaps I can hazard a guess."

"Aye, that's it, that's it, Jeffrey. Hark; I ride to yonder

crows'-nest, and at once. Saddle me a horse."

"Good, master. I'll saddle two horses."

"Two? I said one. Fool, can I ride a pair at once, like a mountebank?"

"I know not, but you can ride one and I another. When the Abbot of Blossholme visits Sir John Foterell of Shefton he comes with hawk on wrist, with chaplains and pages, and ten stout men-at-arms, of whom he keeps more of late than a priest would seem to need about him. When Sir John Foterell visits the Abbot of Blossholme, at least he should have one serving-man at his back to hold his nag and bear him witness."

Sir John looked at him shrewdly.

"I called you fool," he said, "but you are none except in looks. Do as you will, Jeffrey, but be swift. Stop. Where is my daughter?"

"The Lady Cicely sits in her parlour. I saw her sweet face at the window but now staring out at the snow as though she thought to see a ghost in it."

"Um," grunted Sir John, "the ghost she thinks to see rides a grand grey mare, stands over six feet high, has a jolly face, and a pair of arms well made for sword and shield, or to clip a girl in. Yet that ghost must be laid, Jeffrey."

"Pity if so, master. Moreover, you may find it hard. Ghost-laying is a priest's job, and when maids' waists are willing, men's arms reach far."

"Be off, sirrah," roared Sir John, and Jeffrey went.

Ten minutes later they were riding for the Abbey, three miles away, and within half-an-hour Sir John was knocking, not gently, at its gate, while the monks within ran to and fro like startled ants, for the times were rough, and they were not sure who threatened them. When they knew their visitor at last they set to work to unbar the great doors and let down the drawbridge, that had been hoist up at sunset.

Presently Sir John stood in the Abbot's chamber, warming himself at the great fire, and behind him stood his serving-man, Jeffrey, carrying his long cloak. It was a fine room, with a noble roof of carved chestnut wood and stone walls hung with costly tapestry, whereon were worked scenes from the Scriptures. The floor was hid with rich carpets made of coloured Eastern wools. The furniture also was rich and foreign-looking, being inlaid with ivory and silver, while on the table stood a golden crucifix, a miracle of art, and upon an easel, so that the light from a hanging silver lamp fell on it, a life-sized picture of the Magdalene by some great Italian painter, turning her beauteous eyes to heaven and beating her fair breast.

Sir John looked about him and sniffed.

"Now, Jeffrey, would you think that you were in a monk's cell or in some great dame's bower? Hunt under the table, man; sure, you will find her lute and needlework. Whose portrait is that, think you?" and he pointed to the Magdalene.

"A sinner turning saint, I think, master. Good company for laymen when she was sinner, and good for priests now that she is saint. For the rest, I could snore well here after a cup of yon red wine," and he jerked his thumb towards a long-necked bottle on a sideboard. "Also, the fire burns bright, which is not to be wondered at, seeing that it is made of dry oak from your Sticksley Wood."

"How know you that, Jeffrey?" asked Sir John.

"By the grain of it, master--by the grain of it. I have hewn too many a timber there not to know. There's that in the Sticksley clays which makes the rings grow wavy and darker at the heart. See there."

Sir John looked, and swore an angry oath.

"You are right, man; and now I come to think of it, when I was a little lad my old grandsire bade me note this very thing about the Sticksley oaks. These cursed monks waste my woods beneath my nose. My forester is a rogue. They have scared or bribed him, and he shall hang for it."

"First prove the crime, master, which won't be easy; then talk of hanging, which only kings and abbots, 'with right of gallows,' can do at will. Ah! you speak truth," he added in a changed voice; "it is a lovely chamber, though not good enough for the holy man who dwells in it, since such a saint should have a silver shrine like him before the altar yonder, as doubtless he will do when ere long he is old bones," and, as though by chance, he trod upon his lord's foot, which was somewhat gouty.

Round came Sir John like the Blossholme weathercock on a gusty day.

"Clumsy toad!" he yelled, then paused, for there within the arras, that had been lifted silently, stood a tall, tonsured figure clothed in rich furs, and behind him two other figures, also tonsured, in simple black robes. It was the Abbot with his chaplains.

"Benedicite!" said the Abbot in his soft, foreign voice, lifting the two fingers of his right hand in blessing.

"Good-day," answered Sir John, while his retainer bowed his head and crossed himself. "Why do you steal upon a man like a thief in the night, holy Father?" he added irritably.

"That is how we are told judgment shall come, my son," answered the Abbot, smiling; "and in truth there seems some need of it. We heard loud quarrelling and talk of hanging men. What is your argument?"

"A hard one of oak," answered old Sir John sullenly. "My servant here said those logs upon your fire came from my Sticksley Wood, and I answered him that if so they were stolen, and my reeve should hang for it."

"The worthy man is right, my son, and yet your forester deserves no punishment. I bought our scanty store of firing from him, and, to tell truth, the count has not yet been paid. The money that should have discharged it has gone to London, so I asked him to let it stand until the summer rents come in. Blame him not, Sir John, if, out of friendship, knowing it was naught to you, he has not bared the nakedness of our poor house."

"Is it the nakedness of your poor house"--and he glanced round the sumptuous chamber--"that caused you to send me this letter saying that you have Cromwell's writ to seize my lands?" asked Sir John, rushing at his grievance like a bull, and casting down the document upon the table; "or do you also mean to make payment for them--when your summer rents come in?"

"Nay, son. In that matter duty led me. For twenty years we have disputed of those estates which, as you know, your grandsire took from us in a time of trouble, thus cutting the Abbey lands in twain, against the protest of him who was Abbot in those days. Therefore, at last I laid the matter before the Vicar-General, who, I hear, has been pleased to

decide the suit in favour of this Abbey."

"To decide a suit of which the defendant had no notice!" exclaimed Sir John. "My Lord Abbot, this is not justice; it is roguery that I will never bear. Did you decide aught else, pray you?"

"Since you ask it--something, my son. To save costs I laid before him the sundry points at issue between us, and in sum this is the judgment: Your title to all your Blossholme lands and those contiguous, totalling eight thousand acres, is not voided, yet it is held to be tainted and doubtful."

"God's blood! Why?" asked Sir John.

"My son, I will tell you," replied the Abbot gently. "Because within a hundred years they belonged to this Abbey by gift of the Crown, and there is no record that the Crown consented to their alienation."

"No record," exclaimed Sir John, "when I have the indentured deed in my strong-box, signed by my great-grandfather and the Abbot Frank Ingham! No record, when my said forefather gave you other lands in place of them which you now hold? But go on, holy priest."

"My son, I obey you. Your title, though pronounced so doubtful, is not utterly voided; yet it is held that you have all these lands as tenant of this Abbey, to which, should you die without issue, they will

relapse. Or should you die with issue under age, such issue will be ward to the Abbot of Blossholme for the time being, and failing him, that is, if there were no Abbot and no Abbey, of the Crown."

Sir John listened, then sank back into a chair, while his face went white as ashes.

"Show me that judgment," he said slowly.

"It is not yet engrossed, my son. Within ten days or so I hope----But you seem faint. The warmth of this room after the cold outer air, perhaps. Drink a cup of our poor wine," and at a motion of his hand one of the chaplains stepped to the sideboard, filled a goblet from the long-necked flask that stood there, and brought it to Sir John.

He took it as one that knows not what he does, then suddenly threw the silver cup and its contents into the fire, whence a chaplain recovered it with the wood-tongs.

"It seems that you priests are my heirs," said Sir John in a new, quiet voice, "or so you say; and, if that is so, my life is likely to be short. I'll not drink your wine, lest it should be poisoned. Hearken now, Sir Abbot. I believe little of this tale, though doubtless by bribes and other means you have done your best to harm me behind my back up yonder in London. Well, to-morrow at the dawn, come fair weather or come foul, I ride through the snows to London, where I too have friends,

and we will see, we will see. You are a clever man, Abbot Maldon, and I know that you need money, or its worth, to pay your men-at-arms and satisfy the great costs at which you live--and there are our famous jewels--yes, yes, the old Crusader jewels. Therefore you have sought to rob me, whom you ever hated, and perchance Cromwell has listened to your tale. Perchance, fool priest," he added slowly, "he had it in his mind to fat this Church goose of yours with my meal before he wrings its neck and cooks it."

At these words the Abbot started for the first time, and even the two impassive chaplains glanced at each other.

"Ah! does that touch you?" asked Sir John Foterell. "Well, then, here is what shall make you smart. You think yourself in favour at the Court, do you not? because you took the oath of succession which braver men, like the brethren of the Charterhouse, refused, and died for it. But you forget the words you said to me when the wine you love had a hold of you in my hall----"

"Silence! For your own sake, silence, Sir John Foterell!" broke in the Abbot. "You go too far."

"Not so far as you shall go, my Lord Abbot, ere I have done with you. Not so far as Tower Hill or Tyburn, thither to be hung and quartered as a traitor to his Grace. I tell you, you forget the words you spoke, but I will remind you of them. Did you not say to me when the guests had

gone, that King Henry was a heretic, a tyrant, and an infidel whom the Pope would do well to excommunicate and depose? Did you not, when I led you on, ask me if I could not bring about a rising of the common people in these parts, among whom I have great power, and of those gentry who know and love me, to overthrow him, and in his place set up a certain Cardinal Pole, and for the deed promise me the pardon and absolution of the Pope, and much advancement in his name and that of the Spanish Emperor?"

"Never," answered the Abbot.

"And did I not," went on Sir John, taking no note of his denial, "did I not refuse to listen to you and tell you that your words were traitorous, and that had they been spoken otherwhere than in my house, I, as in duty bound by my office, would make report of them? Aye, and have you not from that hour striven to undo me, whom you fear?"

"I deny it all," said the Abbot again. "These be but empty lies bred of your malice, Sir John Foterell."

"Empty words, are they, my Lord Abbot! Well, I tell you that they are all written down and signed in due form. I tell you I had witnesses you knew naught of who heard them with their ears. Here stands one of them behind my chair. Is it not so, Jeffrey?"

"Aye, master," answered the serving-man. "I chanced to be in the little

chamber beyond the wainscot with others waiting to escort the Abbot home, and heard them all, and afterward I and they put our marks upon the writing. As I am a Christian man that is so, though, master, this is not the place that I should have chosen to speak of it, however much I might be wronged."

"It will serve my turn," said the enraged knight, "though it is true that I will speak of it louder elsewhere, namely, before the King's Council. To-morrow, my Lord Abbot, this paper and I go to London, and then you shall learn how well it pays you to try to pluck a Foterell of his own."

Now it was the Abbot's turn to be frightened. His smooth, olive-coloured cheeks sank in and went white, as though already he felt the cord about his throat. His jewelled hand shook, and he caught the arm of one of his chaplains and hung to it.

"Man," he hissed, "do you think that you can utter such false threats and go hence to ruin me, a consecrated abbot? I have dungeons here; I have power. It will be said that you attacked me, and that I did but strive to defend myself. Others can bring witness besides you, Sir John," and he whispered some words in Latin or Spanish into the ear of one of his chaplains, whereon that priest turned to leave the room.

"Now it seems that we are getting to business," said Jeffrey Stokes, as, lying his hand upon the knife at his girdle, he slipped between the monk

and the door.

"That's it, Jeffrey," cried Sir John. "Stop the rat's hole. Look you, Spaniard, I have a sword. Show me to your gate, or, by virtue of the King's commission that I hold, I do instant justice on you as a traitor, and afterward answer for it if I win out."

The Abbot considered a moment, taking the measure of the fierce old knight before him. Then he said slowly--

"Go as you came, in peace, O man of wrath and evil, but know that the curse of the Church shall follow you. I say that you stand near to ill."

Sir John looked at him. The anger went out of his face, and, instead, upon it appeared something strange--a breath of foresight, an inspiration, call it what you will.

"By heaven and all its saints! I think you are right, Clement Maldon," he muttered. "Beneath that black dress of yours you are a man like the rest of us, are you not? You have a heart, you have members, you have a brain to think with; you are a fiddle for God to play on, and however much your superstitions mask and alter it, out of those strings now and again will come some squeak of truth. Well, I am another fiddle, of a more honest sort, mayhap, though I do not lift two fingers of my right hand and say, 'Benedicite, my son,' and 'Your sins are forgiven you'; and just now the God of both of us plays His tune in me, and I will tell

you what it is. I stand near to death, but you stand not far from the gallows. I'll die an honest man; you will die like a dog, false to everything, and afterwards let your beads and your masses and your saints help you if they can. We'll talk it over when we meet again elsewhere. And now, my Lord Abbot, lead me to your gate, remembering that I follow with my sword. Jeffrey, set those carrion crow in front of you, and watch them well. My Lord Abbot, I am your servant; march!"