

CHAPTER II

THE MURDER BY THE MERE

For a while Sir John and his retainer rode in silence. Then he laughed loudly.

"Jeffrey," he called, "that was a near touch. Sir Priest was minded to stick his Spanish pick-tooth between our ribs, and shrive us afterwards, as we lay dying, to salve his conscience."

"Yes, master; only, being reasonable, he remembered that English swords have a longer reach, and that his bullies are in the Ford ale-house seeing the Old Year out, and so put it off. Master, I have always told you that old October of yours is too strong to drink at noon. It should be saved till bed-time."

"What do you mean, man?"

"I mean that ale spoke yonder, not wisdom. You have showed your hand and played the fool."

"Who are you to teach me?" asked Sir John angrily. "I meant that he should hear the truth for once, the slimy traitor."

"Perhaps, perhaps; but these be bad days for Truth and those who court

her. Was it needful to tell him that to-morrow you journey to London upon a certain errand?"

"Why not? I'll be there before him."

"Will you ever be there, master? The road runs past the Abbey, and that priest has good ruffians in his pay who can hold their tongues."

"Do you mean that he will waylay me? I say he dare not. Still, to please you, we will take the longer path through the forest."

"A rough one, master; but who goes with you on this business? Most of us are away with the wains, and others make holiday. There are but three serving-men at the hall, and you cannot leave the Lady Cicely without a guard, or take her with you through this cold. Remember there's wealth yonder which some may need more even than your lands," he added meaningly. "Wait a while, then, till your people return or you can call up your tenants, and go to London as one of your quality should, with twenty good men at your back."

"And so give our friend the Abbot time to get Cromwell's ear, and through him that of the King. No, no; I ride to-morrow at the dawn with you, or, if you are afraid, without you, as I have done before and taken no harm."

"None shall say that Jeffrey Stokes is afraid of man or priest or

devil," answered the old soldier, colouring. "Your road has been good enough for me this thirty years, and it is good enough now. If I warned you it was not for my own sake, who care little what comes, but for yours and that of your house."

"I know it," said Sir John more kindly. "Take not my words ill, my temper is up to-day. Thank the saints! here is the hall at last. Why! whose horse has passed the gates before us?"

Jeffrey glanced at the tracks which the moonlight showed very clearly in the new-fallen snow.

"Sir Christopher Harflete's grey mare," he said. "I know the shoeing and the round shape of the hoof. Doubtless he is visiting Mistress Cicely."

"Whom I have forbidden to him," grumbled Sir John, swinging himself from the saddle.

"Forbid him not," answered Jeffrey, as he took his horse. "Christopher Harflete may yet be a good friend to a maid in need, and I think that need is nigh."

"Mind your business, knave," shouted Sir John. "Am I to be set at naught in my own house by a chit of a girl and a gallant who would mend his broken fortunes?"

"If you ask me, I think so," replied the imperturbable Jeffrey, as he led away the horses.

Sir John strode into the house by the backway, which opened on to the stable-yard. Taking the lantern that stood by the door, he went along galleries and upstairs to the sitting-chamber above the hall, which, since her mother's death, his daughter had used as her own, for here he guessed that he would find her. Setting down the lantern upon the passage table, he pushed open the door, which was not latched, and entered.

The room was large, and, being lighted only by the great fire that burned upon the hearth and two candles, all this end of it was hid in shadow. Near to the deep window-place the shadow ceased, however, and here, seated in a high-backed oak chair, with the light of the blazing fire falling full upon her, was Cicely Foterell, Sir John's only surviving child. She was a tall and graceful maiden, blue-eyed, brown-haired, fair-skinned, with a round and child-like face which most people thought beautiful to look upon. Just now this face, that generally was so arch and cheerful, seemed somewhat troubled. For this there might be a reason, since, seated upon a stool at her side, was a young man talking to her earnestly.

He was a stalwart young man, very broad about the shoulders, clean-cut in feature, with a long, straight nose, black hair, and merry black eyes. Also, as such a gallant should do, he appeared to be making love

with much vigour and directness, for his face was upturned pleading with the girl, who leaned back in her chair answering him nothing. At this moment, indeed, his copious flow of words came to an end, perhaps from exhaustion, perhaps for other reasons, and was succeeded by a more effective method of attack. Suddenly sinking from the stool to his knees, he took the unresisting hand of Cicely and kissed it several times; then, emboldened by his success, threw his long arms about her, and before Sir John, choked with indignation, could find words to stop him, drew her towards him and treated her red lips as he had treated her fingers. This rude proceeding seemed to break the spell that bound her, for she pushed back the chair and, escaping from his grasp, rose, saying in a broken voice----

"Oh! Christopher, dear Christopher, this is most wrong."

"May be," he answered. "So long as you love me I care not what it is."

"That you have known these two years, Christopher. I love you well, but, alas! my father will have none of you. Get you hence now, ere he returns, or we both shall pay for it, and I, perhaps, be sent to a nunnery where no man may come."

"Nay, sweet, I am here to ask his consent to my suit----"

Then at last Sir John broke out.

"To ask my consent to your suit, you dishonest knave!" he roared from the darkness; whereat Cicely sank back into her chair looking as though she would faint, and the strong Christopher staggered like a man pierced by an arrow. "First to take my girl and hug her before my very eyes, and then, when the mischief is done, to ask my consent to your suit!" and he rushed at them like a charging bull.

Cicely rose to fly, then, seeing no escape, took refuge in her lover's arms. Her infuriated father seized the first part of her that came to his hand, which chanced to be one of her long brown plaits of hair, and tugged at it till she cried out with pain, purposing to tear her away, at which sight and sound Christopher lost his temper also.

"Leave go of the maid, sir," he said in a low, fierce voice, "or, by God! I'll make you."

"Leave go of the maid?" gasped Sir John. "Why, who holds her tightest, you or I? Do you leave go of her."

"Yes, yes, Christopher," she whispered, "ere I am pulled in two."

Then he obeyed, lifting her into the chair, but her father still kept his hold of the brown tress.

"Now, Sir Christopher," he said, "I am minded to put my sword through you."

"And pierce your daughter's heart as well as mine. Well, do it if you will, and when we are dead and you are childless, weep yourself and go to the grave."

"Oh! father, father," broke in Cicely, who knew the old man's temper, and feared the worst, "in justice and in pity, listen to me. All my heart is Christopher's, and has been from a child. With him I shall have happiness, without him black despair; and that is his case too, or so he swears. Why, then, should you part us? Is he not a proper man and of good lineage, and name unstained? Until of late did you not ever favour him much and let us be together day by day? And now, when it is too late, you deny him. Oh! why, why?"

"You know why well enough, girl? Because I have chosen another husband for you. The Lord Despard is taken with your baby face, and would marry you. But this morning I had it under his own hand."

"The Lord Despard?" gasped Cicely. "Why, he only buried his second wife last month! Father, he is as old as you are, and drunken, and has grandchildren of well-nigh my age. I would obey you in all things, but never will I go to him alive."

"And never shall he live to take you," muttered Christopher.

"What matter his years, daughter? He is a sound man, and has no son,

and should one be born to him, his will be the greatest heritage within three shires. Moreover, I need his friendship, who have bitter enemies. But enough of this. Get you gone, Christopher, before worse befall you."

"So be it, sir, I will go; but first, as an honest man and my father's friend, and, as I thought, my own, answer me one question. Why have you changed your tune to me of late? Am I not the same Christopher Harflete I was a year or two ago? And have I done aught to lower me in the world's eye or in yours?"

"No, lad," answered the old knight bluntly; "but since you will have it, here it is. Within that year or two your uncle whose heir you were has married and bred a son, and now you are but a gentleman of good name, and little to float it on. That big house of yours must go to the hammer, Christopher. You'll never stow a bride in it."

"Ah! I thought as much. Christopher Harflete with the promise of the Lesborough lands was one man; Christopher Harflete without them is another--in your eyes. Yet, sir, I hold you foolish. I love your daughter and she loves me, and those lands and more may come back, or I, who am no fool, will win others. Soon there will be plenty going up there at Court, where I am known. Further, I tell you this: I believe that I shall marry Cicely, and earlier than you think, and I would have had your blessing with her."

"What! Will you steal the girl away?" asked Sir John furiously.

"By no means, sir. But this is a strange world of ours, in which from hour to hour top becomes bottom, and bottom top, and there--I think I shall marry her. At least I am sure that Despard the sot never will, for I'll kill him first, if I hang for it. Sir, sir, surely you will not throw your pearl upon that muckheap. Better crush it beneath your heel at once. Look, and say you cannot do it," and he pointed to the pathetic figure of Cicely, who stood by them with clasped hands, panting breast, and a face of agony.

The old knight glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes, and saw something that moved him to pity, for at bottom his heart was honest, and though he treated her so roughly, as was the fashion of the times, he loved his daughter more than all the world.

"Who are you, that would teach me my duty to my bone and blood?" he grumbled. Then he thought a while, and added, "Hear me, now, Christopher Harflete. To-morrow at the dawn I ride to London with Jeffrey Stokes on a somewhat risky business."

"What business, sir?"

"If you would know--that of a quarrel with yonder Spanish rogue of an Abbot, who claims the best part of my lands, and has poisoned the ear of that upstart, the Vicar-General Cromwell. I go to take the deeds and prove him a liar and a traitor also, which Cromwell does not know. Now,

is my nest safe from you while I am away? Give me your word, and I'll believe you, for at least you are an honest gentleman, and if you have poached a kiss or two, that may be forgiven. Others have done the same before you were born. Give me your word, or I must drag the girl through the snows to London at my heels."

"You have it, sir," answered Christopher. "If she needs my company she must come for it to Cranwell Towers, for I'll not seek hers while you are away."

"Good. Then one gift for another. I'll not answer my Lord of Despard's letter till I get back again--not to please you, but because I hate writing. It is a labour to me, and I have no time to spare to-night. Now, have a cup of drink and be off with you. Love-making is thirsty work."

"Aye, gladly, sir, but hear me, hear me. Ride not to London with such slight attendance after a quarrel with Abbot Maldon. Let me wait on you. Although my fortunes be so low I can bring a man or two--six or eight, indeed--while yours are away with the wains."

"Never, Christopher. My own hand has guarded my head these sixty years, and can do so still. Also," he added, with a flash of insight, "as you say, the journey is dangerous, and who knows? If aught went wrong, you might be wanted nearer home. Christopher, you shall never have my girl; she's not for you. Yet, perhaps, if need were, you would strike a blow

for her even if it made you excommunicate. Get hence, wench. Why do you stand there gaping on us, like an owl in sunlight? And remember, if I catch you at more such tricks, you'll spend your days mumbling at prayers in a nunnery, and much good may they do you."

"At least I should find peace there, and gentle words," answered Cicely with spirit, for she knew her father, and the worst of her fear had departed. "Only, sir, I did not know that you wished to swell the wealth of the Abbots of Blossholme."

"Swell their wealth!" roared her father. "Nay, I'll stretch their necks. Get you to your chamber, and send up Jeffrey with the liquor."

Then, having no choice, Cicely curtsayed, first to her father and next to Christopher, to whom she sent a message with her eyes that she dared not utter with her lips, and so vanished into the shadows, where presently she was heard stumbling against some article of furniture.

"Show the maid a light, Christopher," said Sir John, who, lost in his own thoughts, was now gazing into the fire.

Seizing one of the two candles, Christopher sprang after her like a hound after a hare, and presently the pair of them passed through the door and down the long passage beyond. At a turn in it they halted, and once more, without word spoken, she found her way into those long arms.

"You will not forget me, even if we must part?" sobbed Cicely.

"Nay, sweet," he answered. "Moreover, keep a brave heart; we do not part for long, for God has given us to each other. Your father does not mean all he says, and his temper, which has been stirred to-day, will soften. If not, we must look to ourselves. I keep a swift horse or two, Cicely. Could you ride one if need were?"

"I have ever loved riding," she said meaningly.

"Good. Then you shall never go to that fat hog's sty, for I'll stick him first. And I have friends both in Scotland and in France. Which like you best?"

"They say the air of France is softer. Now, away from me, or one will come to seek us," and they tore themselves apart.

"Emlyn, your foster-mother, is to be trusted," he said rapidly; "also she loves me well. If there be need, let me hear of you through her."

"Aye," she answered, "without fail," and glided from him like a ghost.

"Have you been waiting to see the moon rise?" asked Sir John, glancing at Christopher from beneath his shaggy eyebrows as he returned.

"Nay, sir, but the passages in this old house of yours are most wondrous

long, and I took a wrong turn in threading them."

"Oh!" said Sir John. "Well, you have a talent for wrong turns, and such partings are hard. Now, do you understand that this is the last of them?"

"I understand that you may say so, sir."

"And that I mean it, too, I hope. Listen, Christopher," he added, with earnestness, but in a kindly voice. "Believe me, I like you well, and would not give you pain, or the maid yonder, if I could help it. Yet I have no choice. I am threatened on all sides by priest and king, and you have lost your heritage. She is the only jewel that I can pawn, and for your own safety's sake and her children's sake, must marry well. Yonder Despard will not live long, he drinks too hard; and then your day may come, if you still care for his leavings--perhaps in two years, perhaps in less, for she will soon see him out. Now, let us talk no more of the matter, but if aught befalls me, be a friend to her. Here comes the liquor--drink it up and be off. Though I seem rough with you, my hope is that you may quaff many another cup at Shefton."

It was seven o'clock of the next morning, and Sir John, having eaten his breakfast, was girding on his sword--for Jeffrey had already gone to fetch the horses--when the door opened and his daughter entered the

great hall, candle in hand, wrapped in a fur cloak, over which her long hair fell. Glancing at her, Sir John noted that her eyes were wide and frightened.

"What is it now, girl?" he asked. "You'll take your death of cold among these draughts."

"Oh! father," she said, kissing him, "I came to bid you farewell, and--and--to pray you not to start."

"Not to start? And why?"

"Because, father, I have dreamed a bad dream. At first last night I could not sleep, and when at length I did I dreamed that dream thrice," and she paused.

"Go on, Cicely; I am not afraid of dreams, which are but foolishness--coming from the stomach."

"Mayhap; yet, father, it was so plain and clear I can scarcely bear to tell it to you. I stood in a dark place amidst black things that I knew to be trees. Then the red dawn broke upon the snow, and I saw a little pool with brown rushes frozen in its ice. And there--there, at the edge of the pool, by a pollard willow with one white limb, you lay, your bare sword in your hand and an arrow in your neck, shot from behind, while in the trunk of the willow were other arrows, and lying near you two slain.

Then cloaked men came as though to carry them away, and I awoke. I say I dreamed it thrice."

"A jolly good morrow indeed," said Sir John, turning a shade paler. "And now, daughter, what do you make of this business?"

"I? Oh! I make that you should stop at home and send some one else to do your business. Sir Christopher, for instance."

"Why, then I should baulk your dream, which is either true or false. If true, I have no choice, it must be fulfilled; if false, why should I heed it? Cicely, I am a plain man and take no note of such fancies. Yet I have enemies, and it may well chance that my day is done. If so, use your mother wit, girl; beware of Maldon, look to yourself, and as for your mother's jewels, hide them," and he turned to go.

She clasped him by the arm.

"In that sad case what should I do, father?" she asked eagerly.

He stopped and stared at her up and down.

"I see that you believe in your dream," he said, "and therefore, although it shall not stay a Foterell, I begin to believe in it too. In that case you have a lover whom I have forbid to you. Yet he is a man after my own heart, who would deal well by you. If I die, my game is

played. Set your own anew, sweet Cicely, and set it soon, ere that Abbot is at your heels. Rough as I may have been, remember me with kindness, and God's blessing and mine be on you. Hark! Jeffrey calls, and if they stand, the horses will take cold. There, fare you well. Fear not for me, I wear a chain shirt beneath my cloak. Get back to bed and warm you," and he kissed her on the brow, thrust her from him and was gone.

Thus did Cicely and her father part--for ever.

All that day Sir John and Jeffrey, his serving-man, trotted forward through the snow--that is, when they were not obliged to walk because of the depth of the drifts. Their plan was to reach a certain farm in a glade of the woodland within two hours of sundown, and sleep there, for they had taken the forest path, leaving again for the Fens and Cambridge at the dawn. This, however, proved not possible because of the exceeding badness of the road. So it came about that when the darkness closed in on them a little before five o'clock, bringing with it a cold, moaning wind and a scurry of snow, they were obliged to shelter in a faggot-built woodman's hut, waiting for the moon to appear among the clouds. Here they fed the horses with corn that they had brought with them, and themselves also from their store of dried meat and barley cakes, which Jeffrey carried on his shoulder in a bag. It was a poor meal eaten thus in the darkness, but served to stay their stomachs and pass away the time.

At length a ray of light pierced the doorway of the hut.

"She's up," said Sir John, "let us be going ere the nags grow stiff."

Making no answer, Jeffrey slipped the bits back into the horses' mouths and led them out. Now the full moon had appeared like a great white eye between two black banks of cloud and turned the world to silver. It was a dreary scene on which she shone; a dazzling plain of snow, broken by patches of hawthorns, and here and there by the gaunt shape of a pollard oak, since this being the outskirts of the forest, folk came hither to lop the tops of the trees for firing. A hundred and fifty yards away or so, at the crest of a slope, was a round-shaped hill, made, not by Nature, but by man. None knew what that hill might be, but tradition said that once, hundreds or thousands of years before, a big battle had been fought around it in which a king was killed, and that his victorious army had raised this mound above his bones to be a memorial for ever.

The story was indeed that, being a sea-king, they had built a boat or dragged it thither from the river shore and set him in it with all the slain for rowers; also that he might be seen at nights seated on his horse in armour, and staring about him, as when he directed the battle. At least it is true that the mound was called King's Grave, and that people feared to pass it after sundown.

As Jeffrey Stokes was holding his master's stirrup for him to mount, he uttered an exclamation and pointed. Following the line of his outstretched hand, in the clear moonlight Sir John saw a man, who sat, still as any statue, upon a horse on the very point of King's Grave. He appeared to be covered with a long cloak, but above it his helmet glittered like silver. Next moment a fringe of black cloud hid the face of the moon, and when it passed away the man and horse were gone.

"What did that fellow there?" asked Sir John.

"Fellow?" answered Jeffrey in a shaken voice, "I saw none. That was the Ghost of the Grave. My grandfather met him ere he came to his end in the forest, none know how, for the wolves, of which there were plenty in his day, picked his bones clean, and so have many others for hundreds of years; always just before their doom. He is an ill fowl, that Ghost of the Grave, and those who clap eyes on him do wisely to turn their horses' heads homewards, as I would to-night if I had my way, master."

"What use, Jeffrey? If the sight of him means death, death will come. Moreover, I believe nothing of the tale. Your ghost was some forest reeve or herdsman."

"A forest reeve or herdsman who wanders about in a steel helm on a fine horse in snow-time when there are no trees to cut or cattle to mind! Well, have it as you will, master; only God save me from such reeves and herdmen, for I think they hail from hell."

"Then he was a spy watching whither we go," answered Sir John angrily.

"If so, who sent him? The Abbot of Blossholme? In that case I would sooner meet the devil, for this means mischief. I say that we had better ride back to Shefton."

"Then do so, Jeffrey, if you are scared, and I will go on alone, who, being on an honest business, fear not Satan or an abbot, either."

"Nay, master. Many a year ago, when we were younger, I stood by you on Flodden Field when Sir Edward, Christopher Harflete's father, was killed at our side, and those red-bearded Scotch bare-breeks pressed us hard, yet I never itched to turn my back, even after that great fellow with an axe got you down, and we thought that all was lost. Then shall I do so now?--though it is true that I fear yon goblin more than all the Highlanders beyond the Tweed. Ride on; man can die but once, and for my part I care not when it comes, who have little to lose in an ill world."

So without more words they started forward, peering about them as they went. Soon the forest thickened, and the track they followed wound its way round great trunks of primeval oaks, or the edges of bog-holes, or through brakes of thorns. Hard enough it was to find it at times, since the snow made it one with the bordering ground, and the gloom of the oaks was great. But Jeffrey was a woodman born, and from his childhood had known the shape of every tree in that waste, so that they held

safely to their road. Well would it have been for them if they had not!

They came to a place where three other tracks crossed that which they rode upon, and here Jeffrey Stokes, who was ahead, held up his hand.

"What is it?" asked Sir John.

"It is the marks of ten or a dozen shod horses passed within two hours, since the last snow fell. And who be they, I wonder?"

"Doubtless travellers like ourselves. Ride on, man; that farm is not a mile ahead."

Then Jeffrey broke out.

"Master, I like it not," he said. "Battle-horses have gone by here, not chapmen's or farmers' nags, and I think I know their breed. I say that we had best turn about if we would not walk into some snare."

"Turn you, then," grumbled Sir John indifferently. "I am cold and weary, and seek my rest."

"Pray God that you may not find it when you are colder," muttered Jeffrey, spurring his horse.

They went on through the dead winter silence, that was broken only by

the hoots of a flitting owl hungry for the food that it could not find, and the swish of the feet of a galloping fox as it looped past them through the snow. Presently they came to an open place ringed in by forest, so wet that only marsh-trees would grow there. To their right lay a little ice-covered mere, with sere, brown reeds standing here and there upon its face, and at the end of it a group of stark pollarded willows, whereof the tops had been cut for poles by those who dwelt in the forest farm near by. Sir John looked at the place and shivered a little--perhaps because the frost bit him. Or was it that he remembered his daughter's dream, which told of such a spot? At any rate, he set his teeth, and his right hand sought the hilt of his sword. His weary horse sniffed the air and neighed, and the neigh was answered from close at hand.

"Thank the saints! we are nearer to that farm than I thought," said Sir John.

As he spoke the words a number of men appeared galloping down on them from out of the shelter of a thorn-brake, and the moonlight shone on the bared weapons in their hands.

"Thieves!" shouted Sir John. "At them now, Jeffrey, and win through to the farm."

The man hesitated, for he saw that their foes were many and no common robbers, but his master drew his sword and spurred his beast, so he

must do likewise. In twenty seconds they were among them, and some one commanded them to yield. Sir John rushed at the fellow, and, rising in his stirrups, cut him down. He fell all of a heap and lay still in the snow, which grew crimson about him. One came at Jeffrey, who turned his horse so that the blow missed, then took his weight upon the point of his sword, so that this man, too, fell down and lay in the snow, moving feebly.

The rest, thinking this greeting too warm for them, swung round and vanished again among the thorns.

"Now ride for it," said Jeffrey.

"I cannot," answered Sir John. "One of those knaves has hurt my mare," and he pointed to blood that ran from a great gash in the beast's foreleg, which it held up piteously.

"Take mine," said Jeffrey; "I'll dodge them afoot."

"Never, man! To the willows; we will hold our own there;" and, springing from the wounded beast, which tried to hobble after them, but could not, for its sinews were cut, he ran to the shelter of the trees, followed by Jeffrey on his horse.

"Who are these rogues?" he asked.

"The Abbot's men-at-arms," answered Jeffrey. "I saw the face of him I spitted."

Now Sir John's jaw dropped.

"Then we are sped, friend, for they dare not let us go. Cicely dreams well."

As he spoke an arrow whistled by them.

"Jeffrey," he went on, "I have papers on me that should not be lost, for with them might go my girl's heritage. Take them," and he thrust a packet into his hand, "and this purse also. There's plenty in it. Away--anywhere, and lie hid out of reach a while, or they'll still your tongue. Then I charge you on your soul, come back with help and hang that knave Abbot--for your Lady's sake, Jeffrey. She'll reward you, and so will God above."

The man thrust away purse and deeds in some deep pocket.

"How can I leave you to be butchered?" he muttered, grinding his teeth.

As the words left his lips he heard his master utter a gurgling sound, and saw that an arrow, shot from behind, had pierced him through the throat; saw, too, he who was skilled in war, that the wound was mortal. Then he hesitated no longer.

"Christ rest you!" he said. "I'll do your bidding or die;" and, turning his horse, he drove the rowels into its sides, causing it to bound away like a deer.

For a moment the stricken Sir John watched him go. Then he ran out of his cover, shaking his sword above his head--ran into the open moonlight to draw the arrows. They came fast enough, but ere ever he fell, for that steel shirt of his was strong, Jeffrey, lying low on his horse's neck, was safe away, and though the murderers followed hard they never caught him.

Nor, though they searched for days, could they find him at Shefton or elsewhere, for Jeffrey, who knew that all roads were blocked, and who dared not venture home, doubling like a hare across country, had won down to the water, where a ship lay foreign bound, and by dawn was on the sea.