

CHAPTER III

A WEDDING

About noon of the day after that upon which Sir John had come to his death, Cicely Foterell sat at her meal in Shefton Hall. Not much of the rough midwinter fare passed her lips, for she was ill at ease. The man she loved had been dismissed from her because his fortunes were on the wane, and her father had gone upon a journey which she felt, rather than knew, to be very dangerous. The great old hall was lonesome, also, for a young girl who had no comrades near. Sitting there in the big room, she bethought her how different it had been in her childhood, before some foul sickness, of which she knew not the name or nature, had swept away her mother, her two brothers, and her sister all in a single week, leaving her untouched. Then there were merry voices about the house where now was silence, and she alone, with naught but a spaniel dog for company. Also most of the men were away with the wains laden with the year's clip of wool, which her father had held until the price had heightened, nor in this snow would they be back for another week, or perhaps longer.

Oh! her heart was heavy as the winter clouds without, and young and fair as she might be, almost she wished that she had gone when her brothers went, and found her peace.

To cheer her spirits she drank from a cup of spiced ale, that the

manservant had placed beside her covered with a napkin, and was glad of its warmth and comfort. Just then the door opened, and her foster-mother, Mrs. Stower, entered. She was still a handsome woman in her prime, for her husband had been carried off by a fever when she was but nineteen, and her baby with him, whereon she had been brought to the Hall to nurse Cicely, whose mother was very ill after her birth. Moreover, she was tall and dark, with black and flashing eyes, for her father had been a Spaniard of gentle birth, and, it was said, gypsy blood ran in her mother's veins.

There were but two people in the world for whom Emlyn Stower cared--Cicely, her foster-child, and a certain playmate of hers, one Thomas Bolle, now a lay-brother at the Abbey who had charge of the cattle. The tale was that in their early youth he had courted her, not against her will, and that when, after her parents' tragic deaths, as a ward of the former Abbot of Blossholme, she was married to her husband, not with her will, this Thomas put on the robe of a monk of the lowest degree, being but a yeoman of good stock though of little learning.

Something in the woman's manner attracted Cicely's attention, and gave a hint of tragedy. She paused at the door, fumbling with its latch, which was not her way, then turned and stood upright against it, like a picture in its frame.

"What is it, Nurse?" asked Cicely in a shaken voice. "From your look you bear tidings."

Emlyn Stower walked forward, rested one hand upon the oak table and answered--

"Aye, evil tidings if they be true. Prepare your heart, my sweet."

"Quick with them, Emlyn," gasped Cicely. "Who is dead? Christopher?"

She shook her head, and Cicely sighed in relief, adding--

"Who, then? Oh! was that dream true?"

"Aye, dear; you are an orphan."

The girl's head fell forward. Then she lifted it, and asked--

"Who told you? Give me all the truth or I shall die."

"A friend of mine who has to do with the Abbey yonder; ask not his name."

"I know it, Emlyn; Thomas Bolle," she whispered back.

"A friend of mine," repeated the tall, dark woman, "told me that Sir John Foterell, your sire, was murdered last night in the forest by a gang of armed men, of whom he slew two."

"From the Abbey?" queried Cicely in the same whisper.

"Who knows? I think it. They say that the arrow in his throat was such as they make there. Jeffrey Stokes was hunted, but escaped on to some ship that had her anchor up."

"I'll have his life for it, the coward!" exclaimed Cicely.

"Blame him not yet. He met another friend of mine, and sent a message. It was that he did but obey his master's last orders, and, as he had seen too much and to linger here was certain death, if he lived, he would return from over-seas with the papers when the times are safer. He prayed that you would not doubt him."

"The papers! What papers, Emlyn?"

She shrugged her broad shoulders.

"How should I know? Doubtless some that your father was taking to London and did not desire to lose. His iron chest stands open in his chamber."

Now poor Cicely remembered that her father had spoken of certain "deeds" which he must take with him, and began to sob.

"Weep not, darling," said her foster-mother, smoothing Cicely's brown

hair with her strong hand. "These things are decreed of God, and done with. Now you must look to yourself. Your father is gone, but one remains."

Cicely lifted her tear-stained face.

"Yes, I have you," she said.

"Me!" she answered, with a quick smile. "Nay, of what use am I? Your nursing days are over. What did you tell me your father said to you before he rode--about Sir Christopher? Hush! there's no time to talk; you must away to Cranwell Towers."

"Why?" asked Cicely. "He cannot bring my father back to life, and it would be thought strange indeed that at such a time I should visit a man in his own house. Send and tell him the tidings. I bide here to bury my father, and," she added proudly, "to avenge him."

"If so, sweet, you bide here to be buried yourself in yonder Nunnery. Hark, I have not told you all my news. The Abbot Maldon claims the Blossholme lands under some trick of law. It was as to them that your father quarrelled with him the other night; and with the land goes your wardship, as once mine went under this monk's charter. Before sunset the Abbot rides here with his men-at-arms to take them, and to set you for safe-keeping in the Nunnery, where you will find a husband called Holy Church."

"Name of God! is it so?" said Cicely, springing up; "and the most of the men are away! I cannot hold the Hall against that foreign Abbot and his hirelings, and an orphaned heiress is but a chattel to be sold. Oh! now I understand what my father meant. Order horses. I'll off to Christopher. Yet, stay, Nurse. What will he do with me? It may seem shameless, and will vex him."

"I think he will marry you. I think to-night you will be a wife. If not, I'll know the reason why," she added viciously.

"A wife! To-night!" exclaimed the girl, turning crimson to her hair.

"And my father but just dead! How can it be?"

"We'll talk of that with Harflete. Mayhap, like you, he'll wish to wait and ask the banns, or to lay the case before a London lawyer. Meanwhile, I have ordered horses and sent a message to the Abbot to say you come to learn the meaning of these rumours, which will keep him still till nightfall; and another to Cranwell Towers, that we may find food and lodging there. Quick, now, and get your cloak and hood. I have the jewels in their case, for Maldon seeks them more even than your lands, and with them all the money I can find. Also I have bid the sewing-girl make a pack of some garments. Come now, come, for that Abbot is hungry and will be stirring. There is no time for talk."

Three hours later in the red glow of the sunset Christopher Harflete, watching at his door, saw two women riding towards him across the snow, and knew them while they were yet far off.

"It is true, then," he said to Father Roger Necton, the old clergyman of Cranwell, whom he had summoned from the vicarage. "I thought that fool of a messenger must be drunk. What can have chanced, Father?"

"Death, I think, my son, for sure naught else would bring the Lady Cicely here unaccompanied save by a waiting-woman. The question is--what will happen now?" and he glanced sideways at him.

"I know well if I can get my way," answered Christopher, with a merry laugh. "Say now, Father, if it should so be that this lady were willing, could you marry us?"

"Without a doubt, my son, with the consent of the parents;" and again he looked at him.

"And if there were no parents?"

"Then with the consent of the guardian, the bride being under age."

"And if no guardian had been declared or admitted?"

"Then such a marriage duly solemnized, being a sacrament of the Church, would hold fast until the crack of doom unless the Pope annulled it, and, as you know, the Pope is out of favour in this realm on this very matter of marriage. Let me explain the law to you, ecclesiastic and civil----"

But Christopher was already running towards the gate, so the old parson's lecture remained undelivered.

The two met in the snow, Emlyn Stower riding on ahead and leaving them together.

"What is it, sweetest?" he asked. "What is it?"

"Oh! Christopher," she answered, weeping, "my poor father is dead--murdered, or so says Emlyn."

"Murdered! By whom?"

"By the Abbot of Blossholme's soldiers--so says Emlyn, yonder in the forest last eve. And the Abbot is coming to Shefton to declare me his ward and thrust me into the Nunnery--that was Emlyn's tale. And so, although it is a strange thing to do, having none to protect me, I have fled to you--because Emlyn said I ought."

"She is a wise woman, Emlyn," broke in Christopher; "I always thought

well of her judgment. But did you only come to me because Emlyn told you?"

"Not altogether, Christopher. I came because I am distraught, and you are a better friend than none at all, and--where else should I go? Also my poor father with his last words to me, although he was so angry with you, bade me seek your help if there were need--and--oh! Christopher, I came because you swore you loved me, and, therefore, it seemed right. If I had gone to the Nunnery, although the Prioress, Mother Matilda, is good, and my friend, who knows, she might not have let me out again, for the Abbot is her master, and not my friend. It is our lands he loves, and the famous jewels--Emlyn has them with her."

By now they were across the moat and at the steps of the house, so, without answering, Christopher lifted her tenderly from the saddle, pressing her to his breast as he did so, for that seemed his best answer. A groom came to lead away the horses, touching his bonnet, and staring at them curiously; and, leaning on her lover's shoulder, Cicely passed through the arched doorway of Cranwell Towers into the hall, where a great fire burned. Before this fire, warming his thin hands, stood Father Necton, engaged in eager conversation with Emlyn Stower. As the pair advanced this talk ceased, evidently because it was of them.

"Mistress Cicely," said the kindly-faced old man, speaking in a nervous fashion, "I fear that you visit us in sad case," and he paused, not knowing what to add.

"Yes, indeed," she answered, "if all I hear is true. They say that my father is killed by cruel men--I know not for certain why or by whom--and that the Abbot of Blossholme comes to claim me as his ward and immure me in Blossholme Priory, whither I would not go. I have fled here to escape him, having no other refuge, though you may think ill of me for this deed."

"Not I, my child. I should not speak against yonder Abbot, for he is my superior in the Church, though, mind you, I owe him no allegiance, since this benefice is not in his gift, nor am I a Benedictine. Therefore I will tell you the truth. I hold the man not honest. All is provender that comes to his maw; moreover, he is no Englishman, but a Spaniard, one sent here to work against the welfare of this realm; to suck its wealth, stir up rebellion, and make report of all that passes in it, for the benefit of England's enemies."

"Yet he has friends at Court, or so said my father."

"Aye, aye, such folks have ever friends--their money buys them; though mayhap an ill day is at hand for him and his likes. Well, your poor father is gone, God knows how, though I thought for long that would be his end, who ever spoke his mind, or more; and you with your wealth are the morsel that tempts Maldon's appetite. And now what is to be done? This is a hard case. Would you refuge in some other Nunnery?"

"Nay," answered Cicely, glancing sideways at her lover.

"Then what's to be done?"

"Oh! I know not," she said, bursting into a fit of weeping. "How can I tell you, who am mazed with grief and doubt? I had but a single friend--my father, though at times he was a rough one. Yet he loved me in his way, and I have obeyed his last counsel;" and, all her courage gone, she sank into a chair and rocked herself to and fro, her head resting on her hands.

"That is not true," said Emlyn in her bold voice. "Am I who suckled you no friend, and is Father Necton here no friend, and is Sir Christopher no friend? Well, if you have lost your judgment, I have kept mine, and here it is. Yonder, not two bowshots away, stands a church, and before me I see a priest and a pair who would serve for bride and bridegroom. Also we can rake up witnesses and a cup of wine to drink your health; and after that let the Abbot of Blossholme do his worst. What say you, Sir Christopher?"

"You know my mind, Nurse Emlyn; but what says Cicely? Oh! Cicely, what say you?" and he bent over her.

She raised herself, still weeping, and, throwing her arms about his neck, laid her head upon his shoulder.

"I think it is the will of God," she whispered, "and why should I fight against it, who am His servant?--and yours, Chris."

"And now, Father, what say you?" asked Emlyn, pointing to the pair.

"I do not think there is much to say," answered the old clergyman, turning his head aside, "save that if it should please you to come to the church in ten minutes' time you will find a candle on the altar, and a priest within the rails, and a clerk to hold the book. More we cannot do at such short notice."

Then he paused for a while, and, hearing no dissent, walked down the hall and out of the door.

Emlyn took Cicely by the hand, led her to a room that was shown to them, and there made her ready for her bridal as best she might. She had no fine dress in which to clothe her, nor, indeed, would there have been time to don it. But she combed out her beautiful brown hair, and, opening that box of Eastern jewels which were the great pride of the Foterells--being the rarest and the most ancient in all the countryside--she decked her with them. On her broad brow she set a circlet from which hung sparkling diamonds that had been brought, the story said, by her mother's ancestor, a Carfax, from the Holy Land, where once they were the peculiar treasure of a paynim queen, and upon her bosom a necklet of large pearls. Brooches and rings also she found for her breast and fingers, and for her waist a jewelled girdle with

a golden clasp, while to her ears she hung the finest gems of all--two great pearls pink like the hawthorn-bloom when it begins to turn. Lastly she flung over her head a veil of lace most curiously wrought, and stood back with pride to look at her.

Now Cicely, who all this while had been silent and unresisting, spoke for the first time, saying--

"How came this here, Nurse?"

"Your mother wore it at her bridal, and her mother too, so I have been told. Also once before I wrapped it about you--when you were christened, sweet."

"Mayhap; but how came it here?"

"In the bosom of my robe. Not knowing when we should get home again, I brought it, thinking that perhaps one day you might marry, when it would be useful. And now, strangely enough, the marriage has come."

"Emlyn, Emlyn, I believe that you planned all this business, whereof God alone knows the end."

"That is why He makes a beginning, dear, that His end may be fulfilled in due season."

"Aye, but what is that end? Mayhap this is my shroud you wrap about me. In truth, I feel as though death were near."

"He is ever that," replied Emlyn unconcernedly. "But so long as he doesn't touch, what does it matter? Now hark you, sweetest, I've Spanish and gypsy blood in me with which go gifts, and so I'll tell you something for your comfort. However oft he snatches, Death will not lay his bony hand on you for many a long year--not till you are well-nigh as thin with age as he is. Oh! you'll have your troubles like all of us, worse than many, mayhap, but you are Luck's own child, who lived when the rest were taken, and you'll win through and take others on your back, as a whale does barnacles. So snap your fingers at death, as I do," and she suited the action to the word, "and be happy while you may, and when you're not happy, wait till your turn comes round again. Now follow me and, though your father is murdered, smile as you should in such an hour, for what man wants a sad-faced bride?"

They walked down the broad oaken stairs into the hall where Christopher stood waiting for them. Glancing at him shyly, Cicely saw that he was clad in mail beneath his cloak, and that his sword was girded at his side, also that some men with him were armed. For a moment he stared at her glittering beauty confused, then said--

"Fear not this hint of war in love's own hour," and he touched his shining armour. "Cicely, these nuptials are strange as they are happy, and some might try to break in upon them. Come now, my sweet lady;" and

bowing before her he took her by the hand and led her from the house, Emlyn walking behind them and the men with torches going before and following after.

Outside it was freezing sharply, so that the snow crunched beneath their feet. In the west the last red glow of sunset still lingered on the steely sky, and over against it the great moon rose above the round edge of the world. In the bushes of the garden, and the tall poplars that bordered the moat, blackbirds and fieldfares chattered their winter evening song, while about the grey tower of the neighbouring church the daws still wheeled.

The picture of that scene whereof at the time she seemed to take no note, always remained fixed in the mind of Cicely: the cold expanse of snow, the inky trees, the hard sky, the lambent beams of the moon, the dull glow of the torches caught and reflected by her jewels and her lover's mail, the midwinter sound of birds, the barking of a distant hound, the black porch of the church that drew nearer, the little oblong mounds which hid the bones of hundreds who in their day had passed it as infants, as bridegrooms and as brides, and at last as cold, white things that had been men and women.

Now they were in the nave of the old fane where the cold struck them like a sword. The dim lights of the torches showed them that, short as had been the time, the news of this marvellous marriage had spread about, for at least a score of people were standing here and there in

knots, or a few of them seated on the oak benches near the chancel. All these turned to stare at them eagerly as they walked towards the altar where stood the priest in his robes, and since his sight was dim, behind him the old clerk with a stable-lantern held on high to enable him to read from his book.

They reached the carven rood-screen, and at a sign kneeled down. In a clear voice the clergyman began the service; presently, at another sign, the pair rose, advanced to the altar-rails and again knelt down. The moonlight, flowing through the eastern window, fell full on both of them, turning them to cold, white statues, such as those that knelt in marble upon the tomb at their side.

All through the holy office Cicely watched these statues with fascinated eyes, and it seemed to her that they and the old crusaders, Harfletes of a long-past day who lay near by, were watching her with a wistful and kindly interest. She made certain answers, a ring that was somewhat too small was thrust upon her finger--all the rest of her life that ring hurt her at times, but she would have never it moved, and then some one was kissing her. At first she thought it must be her father, and remembering, nearly wept till she heard Christopher's voice calling her wife, and knew that she was wed.

Father Roger, the old clerk still holding the lantern behind him, writing something in a little vellum book, asking her the date of her birth and her full name, which, as he had been present at her

christening, she thought strange. Then her husband signed the book, using the altar as a table, not very easily for he was no great scholar, and she signed also in her maiden name for the last time, and the priest signed, and at his bidding Emlyn Stower, who could write well, signed too. Next, as though by an afterthought, Father Roger called several of the congregation, who rather unwillingly made their marks as witnesses. While they did so he explained to them that, as the circumstances were uncommon, it was well that there should be evidence, and that he intended to send copies of this entry to sundry dignities, not forgetting the holy Father at Rome.

On learning this they appeared to be sorry that they had anything to do with the matter, and one and all of them melted into the darkness of the nave and out of Cicely's mind.

So it was done at last.

Father Necton blew on his little book till the ink was dry, then hid it away in his robe. The old clerk, having pocketed a handsome fee from Christopher, lit the pair down the nave to the porch, where he locked the oaken door behind them, extinguished his lantern and trudged off through the snow to the ale-house, there to discuss these nuptials and hot beer. Escorted by their torch-bearers Cicely and Christopher walked silently arm-in-arm back to the Towers, whither Emlyn, after embracing the bride, had already gone on ahead. So having added one more ceremony to its countless record, perhaps the strangest of them all, the ancient

church behind them grew silent as the dead within its graves.

The Towers reached, the new-wed pair, with Father Roger and Emlyn, sat down to the best meal that could be prepared for them at such short notice; a very curious wedding feast. Still, though the company was so small it did not lack for heartiness, since the old clergyman proposed their health in a speech full of Latin words which they did not understand, and every member of the household who had assembled to hear him drank to it in cups of wine. This done, the beautiful bride, now blushing and now pale, was led away to the best chamber, which had been hastily prepared for her. But Emlyn remained behind a while, for she had words to speak.

"Sir Christopher," she said, "you are fast wed to the sweetest lady that ever sun or moon shone on, and in that may hold yourself a lucky man. Yet such deep joys seldom come without their pain, and I think that this is near at hand. There are those who will envy you your fortune, Sir Christopher."

"Yet they cannot change it, Emlyn," he answered anxiously. "The knot that was tied to-night may not be unloosed."

"Never," broke in Father Roger. "Though the suddenness and the circumstances of it may be unusual, this marriage is a sacrament celebrated in the face of the world with the full consent of both parties and of the Holy Church. Moreover, before the dawn I'll send the

record of it to the bishop's registry and elsewhere, that it may not be questioned in days to come, giving copies of the same to you and your lady's foster-mother, who is her nearest friend at hand."

"It may not be loosed on earth or in heaven," replied Emlyn solemnly, "yet perchance the sword can cut it. Sir Christopher, I think that we should all do well to travel as soon as may be."

"Not to-night, surely, Nurse!" he exclaimed.

"No, not to-night," she answered, with a faint smile. "Your wife has had a weary day, and could not. Moreover, preparation must be made which is impossible at this hour. But to-morrow, if the roads are open to you, I think we should start for London, where she may make complaint of her father's slaying and claim her heritage and the protection of the law."

"That is good counsel," said the vicar, and Christopher, with whom words seemed to be few, nodded his head.

"Meanwhile," went on Emlyn, "you have six men in this house and others round it. Send out a messenger and summon them all here at dawn, bidding them bring provision with them, and what bows and arms they have. Set a watch also, and after the Father and the messenger have gone, command that the drawbridge be triced."

"What do you fear?" he asked, waking from his dream.

"I fear the Abbot of Blossholme and his hired ruffians, who reckon little of the laws, as the soul of dead Sir John knows now, or can use them as a cover to evil deeds. He'll not let such a prize slip between his fingers if he can help it, and the times are turbulent."

"Alas! alas! it is true," said Father Roger, "and that Abbot is a relentless man who sticks at nothing, having much wealth and many friends both here and beyond the seas. Yet surely he would never dare----"

"That we shall learn," interrupted Emlyn. "Meanwhile, Sir Christopher, rouse yourself and give the orders."

So Christopher summoned his men and spoke words to them at which they looked very grave, but being true-hearted fellows who loved him, said they would do his bidding.

A while later, having written out a copy of the marriage lines and witnessed it, Father Roger departed with the messenger. The drawbridge was hoisted above the moat, the doors were barred, and a man set to watch in the gateway tower, while Christopher, forgetful of all else, even of the danger in which they were, sought the company of her who waited for him.