

CHAPTER IV

THE ABBOT'S OATH

On the following morning, shortly after it was light, Christopher was called from his chamber by Emlyn, who gave him a letter.

"Whence came this?" he asked, turning it over suspiciously.

"A messenger has brought it from Blossholme Abbey," she answered.

"Wife Cicely," he called through the door, "come hither if you will."

Presently she appeared, looking quaint and lovely in her long fur cloak, and, having embraced her foster-mother, asked what was the matter.

"This, my darling," he answered, handing her the paper. "I never loved book-learnings over-much, and this morn I seem to hate them; read, you who are more scholarly."

"I mistrust me of that great seal; it bodes us no good, Chris," she replied doubtfully, and paling a little.

"The message within is no medlar to soften by keeping," said Emlyn.

"Give it me. I was schooled in a nunnery, and can read their scrawls."

So, nothing loth, Cicely handed her the paper, which she took in her strong fingers, broke the seal, snapped the silk, unfolded, and read. It ran thus--

"To Sir Christopher Harflete, to Mistress Cicely Foterell, to Emlyn Stower, the waiting-woman, and to all others whom it may concern.

"I, Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme, having heard of the death of Sir John Foterell, Knt., at the cruel hands of the forest thieves and outlaws, sent last night to serve the declaration of my wardship, according to my prerogative established by law and custom, over the person and property of you, Cicely, his only child surviving. My messengers returned saying that you had fled from your home of Shefton Hall. They said further that it was rumoured that you had ridden with your foster-mother, Emlyn Stower, to Cranwell Towers, the house of Sir Christopher Harflete. If this be so, for the sake of your good name it is needful that you should remove from such company at once, as there is talk about you and the said Sir Christopher Harflete. I purpose, therefore, God permitting me, to ride this day to Cranwell Towers, and if you be there, as your lawful guardian and ghostly father, to command you, being an infant under age, to accompany me thence to the Nunnery of Blossholme. There I have determined, in the exercise of my authority, you shall abide until a fitting husband is found for you, unless, indeed, God should move your heart to remain within its walls as one of the brides of Christ.

"Clement, Abbot."

Now when the reading of this letter was finished, the three of them stood a little while staring at each other, knowing well that it meant trouble for them all, till Cicely said--

"Bring me ink and paper, Nurse. I will answer this Abbot."

So they were brought, and Cicely wrote in her round, girlish hand--

"My Lord Abbot,

"In answer to your letter, I would have you know that as my noble father (whose cruel death must be inquired of and avenged) bade me with his last words, I, fearing that a like fate would overtake me at the hands of his murderers, did, as you suppose, seek refuge at this house. Here, yesterday, I was married in the face of God and man in the church of Cranwell, as you may learn from the paper sent herewith. It is not, therefore, needful that you should seek a husband for me, since my dear lord, Sir Christopher Harflete, and I are one till death do part us. Nor do I admit that now, or at any time, you had or have right of wardship over my person or the lands and goods which I hold and inherit. "Your humble servant,

"Cicely Harflete."

This letter Cicely copied out fair and sealed, and presently it was given to the Abbot's messenger, who placed it in his pouch and rode off as fast as the snow would let him.

They watched him go from a window.

"Now," said Christopher, turning to his wife, "I think, dear, we shall do well to ride also as soon as may be. Yonder Abbot is sharp-set, and I doubt whether letters will satisfy his appetite."

"I think so also," said Emlyn. "Make ready and eat, both of you. I go to see that the horses are saddled."

An hour later everything was prepared. Three horses stood before the door, and with them an escort of four mounted men, who were all having arms and beasts to ride that Christopher could gather at such short notice, though others of his tenants and servants had already assembled at the Towers in answer to his summons, to the number of twelve, indeed. Without the snow was falling fast, and although she tried to look brave and happy, Cicely shivered a little as she saw it through the open door.

"We go on a strange honeymoon, my sweet," said Christopher uneasily.

"What matter, so long as we go together?" she answered in a gay voice that yet seemed to ring untrue, "although," she added, with a little choke of the throat, "I would that we could have stayed here until I had found and buried my father. It haunts me to think of him lying somewhere in the snows like a perished ox."

"It is his murderers that I wish to bury," exclaimed Christopher; "and, by God's name, I swear I'll do it ere all is done. Think not, dear, that I forget your griefs because I do not speak much of them, but bridals and burials are strange company. So while we may, let us take what joy we can, since the ill that goes before oftentimes follows after also. Come, let us mount and away to London to find friends and justice."

Then, having spoken a few words to his house-people, he lifted Cicely to her horse, and they rode out into the softly-falling snow, thinking that they had seen their last of the Towers for many a day. But this was not to be. For as they passed along the Blossholme highway, purposing to leave the Abbey on their left, when they were about three miles from Cranwell, suddenly a tall fellow, who wore a great sheepskin coat with a monk's hood to it and carried a thick staff in his hand, burst through the fence and stood in front of them.

"Who are you?" asked Christopher, laying his hand upon his sword.

"You'd know me well enough if my hood were back," he answered in a deep

voice; "but if you want my name, it's Thomas Bolle, cattle-reeve to the Abbey yonder."

"Your voice proves you," said Christopher, laughing. "And now what is your business, lay-brother Bolle?"

"To get up a bunch of yearling steers that have been running on the forest-edge, living, like the rest of us, on what they can find, as the weather is coming on hard enough to starve them. That's my business, Sir Christopher. But as I see an old friend of mine there," and he nodded towards Emlyn, who was watching him from her horse, "with your leave I'll ask her if she has any confession to make, since she seems to be on a dangerous journey."

Now Christopher made as though he would push on, for he was in no mood to chat with cattle-reeves. But Emlyn, who had been eyeing the man, called out--

"Come here, Thomas, and I will answer you myself, who always have a few sins to spare for a priest's wallet, and need a blessing or two to warm me."

He strode forward, and, taking her horse by the bridle, led it a little way apart, and as soon as they were out of earshot fell into an eager conversation with its rider. A minute or so later Cicely, looking round--for they had ridden forward at a slow pace--saw Thomas Bolle

leap through the other fence of the roadway and vanish at a run into the falling snow, while Emlyn spurred her horse after them.

"Stop," she said to Christopher; "I have tidings for you. The Abbot, with all his men-at-arms and servants, to the number of forty or more, waits for us under shelter of Blossholme Grove yonder, purposing to take the Lady Cicely by force. Some spy has told him of this journey."

"I see no one," said Christopher, staring at the Grove, which lay below them about a quarter of a mile away, for they were on the top of a rise.

"Still, the matter is not hard to prove," and he called to the two best mounted of his men and bade them ride forward and make report if any lurked behind that wood.

So the men went off, while they remained where they were, silent, but anxious enough. Ten minutes or so later, before they could see them, for the snow was now falling quickly, they heard the sound of many horses galloping. Then the two men appeared, calling out as they came--

"The Abbot and all his folk are after us. Back to Cranwell, ere you be taken!"

Christopher thought for a moment, then, remembering that with but four men and cumbered by two women it was not possible to cut his way through so great a force, and admonished by that sound of advancing hoofs, he gave a sudden order. They turned about, and not too soon, for as they

did so, scarce two hundred yards away, the first of the Abbot's horsemen appeared plunging towards them up the slope. Then the race began, and well for them was it that their horses were good and fresh, since before ever they came in sight of Cranwell Towers the pursuers were not ninety yards behind. But here on the flat their beasts, scenting home, answered nobly to whip and spur, and drew ahead a little. Moreover, those who watched within the house saw them, and ran to the drawbridge. When they were within fifty yards of the moat Cicely's horse stumbled, slipped, and fell, throwing her into the snow, then recovered itself and galloped on alone. Christopher reined up alongside of her, and, as she rose, frightened but unharmed, put out his long arm, and, lifting her to the saddle in front of him, plunged forward, while those behind shouted "Yield!"

Under this double burden his horse went but slowly. Still they reached the bridge before any could lay hands upon them, and thundered over it.

"Wind up," shouted Christopher, and all there, even the womenfolk, laid hands upon the cranks. The bridge began to rise, but now five or six of the Abbot's folk, dismounting, sprang at it, catching the end of it with their hands when it was about six feet in the air, and holding on so that it could not be lifted, but remained, moving neither up nor down.

"Leave go, you knaves," shouted Christopher; but by way of answer one of them, with the help of his fellows, scrambled on to the end of the bridge, and stood there, hanging to the chains.

Then Christopher snatched a bow from the hand of a serving-man, and the arrow being already on the string, again shouted--

"Get off at your peril!"

In answer the man called out something about the commands of the Lord Abbot.

Christopher, looking past him, saw that others of the company had dismounted and were running towards the bridge. If they reached it he knew well that the game was played. So he hesitated no longer, but, aiming swiftly, drew and loosed the bow. At that distance he could not miss. The arrow struck the man where his steel cap joined the mail beneath, and pierced him through the throat, so that he fell back dead. The others, scared by his fate, loosed their hold, so that now the bridge, relieved of the weight upon it, instantly rose up beyond their reach, and presently came home and was made fast.

As they afterwards discovered, this man, it may here be said, was a captain of the Abbot's guard. Moreover, it was he who had shot the arrow that killed Sir John Foterell some forty hours before, striking him through the throat, as it was fated that he himself should be struck. Thus, then, one of that good knight's murderers reaped his just reward.

Now the men ran back out of range, for they feared more arrows, while

Christopher watched them go in silence. Cicely, who stood by his side, her hands held before her face to shut out the sight of death, let them fall suddenly, and, turning to her husband, said, as she pointed to the corpse that lay upon the blood-stained snow of the roadway--

"How many more will follow him, I wonder? I think that is but the first throw of a long game, husband."

"Nay, sweet," he answered, "the second; the first was cast two nights gone by King's Grave Mount in the forest yonder, and blood ever calls for blood."

"Aye," she answered, "blood calls for blood." Then, remembering that she was orphaned and what sort of a honeymoon hers was like to be, she turned and sought her chamber, weeping.

Now, while Christopher still stood irresolute, for he was oppressed by the sense of this man-slaying, and knew not what he should do next, he saw three men separate from the knot of soldiers and ride towards the Towers, one of whom held a white cloth above his head in token of parley. Then Christopher went up into the little gateway turret, followed by Emlyn, who crouched down behind the brick battlement, so that she could see and hear without being seen. Having reached the further side of the moat, he who held the white cloth threw back the hood of his long cape, and they saw that it was the Abbot of Blossholme himself, also that his dark eyes flashed and that his olive-hued face

was almost white with rage.

"Why do you hunt me across my own park and come knocking so rudely at my doors, my Lord Abbot?" asked Christopher, leaning on the parapet of the gateway.

"Why do you work murder on my servant, Christopher Harflete?" answered the Abbot, pointing to the dead man in the snow. "Know you not that whoso sheds blood, by man shall his blood be shed, and that under our ancient charters, here I have the right to execute justice on you, as, by God's holy Name, I swear that I will do?" he added in a choked voice.

"Aye," repeated Christopher reflectively, "by man shall his blood be shed. Perhaps that is why this fellow died. Tell me, Abbot, was he not one of those who rode by moonlight round King's Grave lately, and there chanced to meet Sir John Foterell?"

The shot was a random one, yet it seemed that it went home; at least, the Abbot's jaw dropped, and some words that were on his lips never passed them.

"I know naught of the meaning of your talk," he said presently in a quieter voice, "or of how my late friend and neighbour, Sir John--may God rest his soul--came to his end. Yet it is of him, or rather of his, that we must speak. It seems that you have stolen his daughter, a woman under age, and by pretence of a false marriage, as I fear, brought her

to shame--a crime even fouler than this murder."

"Nay, by means of a true marriage I have brought her to such small honour as may be the share of Christopher Harflete's lawful wife. If there be any virtue in the rites of Holy Church, then God's own hand has bound us fast as man can be tied to woman, and death is the only pope who can loose that knot."

"Death!" repeated the Abbot in a slow voice, looking up at him very curiously. For a little while he was silent, then went on, "Well, his court is always open, and he has many shrewd and instant messengers, such as this," and he pointed to the arrow in the neck of the slain soldier. "Yet I am a man of peace, and although you have murdered my servant, I would settle our cause more gently if I may. Listen now, Sir Christopher; here is my offer. Yield up to me the person of Cicely Foterell----"

"Of Cicely Harflete," interrupted Christopher.

"Of Cicely Foterell, and I swear to you that no violence shall be done to her, nor shall she be given to a husband till the King or his Vicar-General, or whatever court he may appoint, has passed judgment in this matter and declared this mock marriage of yours null and void."

"What!" broke in Christopher scoffingly; "does the Abbot of Blossholme announce that the powers temporal of this realm have right of divorce?"

Ere now I have heard him argue differently, and so have others, when the case of Queen Catherine was in question."

The Abbot bit his lip, but continued, taking no heed--

"Nor will I lay any complaint against you as to the death of my servant here, for which otherwise you should hang. That I will write down as an accident, and, further, compensate his family. Now you have my offer--answer."

"And what if I refuse this same generous offer to surrender her whom I hold dearer than a thousand lives?"

"Then, by virtue of my rights and authority, I will take her by force, Christopher Harflete, and if harm should happen to come to you, now or hereafter, on your own head be it."

At this Christopher's rage broke out.

"Do you dare to threaten me, a loyal Englishman, you false priest and foreign traitor," he shouted, "whom all men know to be in the pay of Spain, and using the cover of a monk's dress to plot against the land on which you fatten like a horse-leech? Why was John Foterell murdered in the forest two nights gone? You won't answer? Then I will. Because he rode to Court to prove the truth about you and your treachery, and therefore you butchered him. Why do you claim my wife as your ward?"

Because you wish to steal her lands and goods to feed your plots and luxury. You think you have bought friends at Court, and that for money's sake those in power there will turn a blind eye to your crimes. So it may be for a while; but wait, wait. All eyes are not blind yonder, nor all ears deaf. That head of yours shall yet be lifted higher than you think--so high that it sticks upon the top of Blossholme Towers, a warning to all who would sell England to her enemies. John Foterell lies dead with your knave's arrow in his throat, but Jeffrey Stokes is away with the writings. And now do your worst, Clement Maldon. If you want my wife, come take her."

The Abbot listened, listened intently, drinking in every ominous word. His swarthy face went white with fear, then turned black with rage. The veins upon his forehead gathered into knots; even from that distance Christopher could see them. He looked so evil that his countenance became twisted and ridiculous, and Christopher, noting it, burst into one of his hearty laughs.

The Abbot, who was not accustomed to mockery, whispered something to the two men who were with him, whereon they lifted the crossbows which they carried and pulled trigger. One quarel went wide and hit the wall of the house behind, where it stuck fast in the joints of the stud-work. But the other, better aimed, smote Christopher above the heart, causing him to stagger, but being shot from below and turned by the mail he wore glanced upwards over his left shoulder. The men, seeing that he was unhurt, pulled their horses round and galloped off, but Christopher,

setting another arrow to the string of the bow he carried, drew it to his ear, covering the Abbot.

"Loose, and make an end of him," muttered Emlyn from her shelter behind the parapet. But Christopher thought a moment, then cried--

"Stay a while, Sir Abbot; I have more to say to you."

He took no heed who was also turning about.

"Stay!" thundered Christopher, "or I will kill that fine nag of yours;" then, as the Abbot still dragged upon the reins, he let the arrow fly. The aim was true enough. Right through the arch of the neck it sped, cutting the cord between the bones, so that the poor beast reared straight up and fell in a heap, tumbling its rider off into the snow.

"Now, Clement Maldon," cried Christopher, "will you listen, or will you bide with your horse and servant and hear no more till Judgment Day? If you do not guess it, learn that I have practised archery from my youth. Should you doubt, hold up your hand and I'll send a shaft between your fingers."

The Abbot, who was shaken but unhurt, rose slowly and stood there, the dead horse on one side and the dead man on the other.

"Speak," he said in a muffled voice.

"My Lord Abbot," went on Christopher, "a minute ago you tried to murder me, and, had not my mail been good, would have succeeded. Now your life is in my hand, for, as you have seen, I do not miss. Those servants of yours are coming to your help. Call to them to halt, or----" and he lifted the bow.

The Abbot obeyed, and the men, understanding, stayed where they were, at a distance, but within earshot.

"You have a crucifix upon your breast," continued Christopher. "Take it in your right hand now and swear an oath."

Again the Abbot obeyed.

"Swear thus," he said, Emlyn, who was crouched beneath the parapet, prompting him from time to time; "I, Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme, in the presence of Almighty God in heaven, and of Christopher Harflete and others upon earth," and he jerked his head backwards towards the windows of the house, where all therein were gathered, listening, "make oath upon the symbol of the Rood. I swear that I abandon all claim of wardship over the body of Cicely Harflete, born Cicely Foterell, the lawful wife of Christopher Harflete, and all claim to the lands and goods that she may possess, or that were possessed by her father, John Foterell, Knight, or by her mother, Dame Foterell, deceased. I swear that I will raise no suit in any court,

spiritual or temporal, of this or other realms against the said Cicely Harflete or against the said Christopher Harflete, her husband, nor seek to work injury to their bodies or their souls, or to the bodies or the souls of any who cling to them, and that henceforth they may live and die in peace from me or any whom I control. Set your lips to the Rood and swear thus now, Clement Maldon."

The Abbot hearkened, and so great was his rage, for he had no meek heart, that he seemed to swell like an angry toad.

"Who gave you authority to administer oaths to me?" he asked at length. "I'll not swear," and he cast the crucifix down upon the snow.

"Then I'll shoot," answered Christopher. "Come, pick up that cross."

But Maldon stood silent, his arms folded on his breast. Christopher aimed and loosed, and so great was his skill--for there were few archers in England like to him--that the arrow pierced Maldon's fur cap and carried it away without touching the shaven head beneath.

"The next shall be two inches lower," he said, as he set another on the string. "I waste no more good shafts."

Then, very slowly, to save his life, which he loved well enough, Maldon bent down, and, lifting the crucifix from the snow, held it to his lips and kissed it, muttering--

"I swear." But the oath he swore was very different to that which Christopher had repeated to him, for, like a hunted fox, he knew how to meet guile with guile.

"Now that I, a consecrated abbot, deeming it right that I should live on to fulfil my work on earth, have done your bidding, have I leave to go about my business, Christopher Harflete?" he asked, with bitter irony.

"Why not?" asked Christopher. "Only be pleased henceforth not to meddle with me and my business. To-morrow I wish to ride to London with my lady, and we do not seek your company on the road."

Then, having found his cap, the Abbot turned and walked back towards his own men, drawing the arrow from it as he went, and presently all of them rode away over the rise towards Blossholme.

"Now that is well finished, and I have an oath that he will scarcely dare to break," said Christopher presently. "What say you, Nurse?"

"I say that you are even a bigger simpleton than I took you to be," answered Emlyn angrily, as she rose and stretched herself, for her limbs were cramped. "The oath, pshaw! By now he is absolved from it as given under fear. Did you not hear me whisper to you to put an arrow through his heart, instead of playing boy's pranks with his cap?"

"I did not wish to kill an abbot, Nurse."

"Foolish man, what is the difference in such a matter between him and one of his servants? Moreover, he will only say that you tried to slay him, and missed, and produce the cap and arrow in evidence against you. Well, my talk serves nothing to mend a bad matter, and soon you will hear it straighter from himself. Go now and make your house ready for attack, and never dare to set a foot without its doors, for death waits you there."

Emlyn was right. Within three hours an unarmed monk trudged up to Cranwell Towers through the falling snow and cast across the moat a letter that was tied to a stone. Then he nailed a writing to one of the oak posts of the outer gate, and, without a word, departed as he had come. In the presence of Christopher and Cicely, Emlyn opened and read this second letter, as she had read the first. It was short, and ran--

"Take notice, Sir Christopher Harflete, and all others whom it may concern, that the oath which I, Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme, swore to you this day, is utterly void and of none effect, having been wrung from me under the threat of instant death. Take notice, further, that a report of the murder which you have done has been forwarded to the King's grace and to the Sheriff and other officers of this county, and that by virtue of my rights and authority, ecclesiastical and civil, I shall proceed to possess myself of the person of Cicely Foterell, my

ward, and of the lands and other property held by her father, Sir John Foterell, deceased, upon the former of which I have already entered on her behalf, and by exercise of such force as may be needful to seize you, Christopher Harflete, and to hand you over to justice. Further, by means of notice sent herewith, I warn all that cling to you and abet you in your crimes that they will do so at the peril of their souls and bodies.

"Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme."