

CHAPTER VII

THE ABBOT'S OFFER

The Nunnery at Blossholme was a peaceful place, a long, grey-gabled house set under the shelter of a hill and surrounded by a high wall. Within this wall lay also the great garden--neglected enough--and the chapel, a building that still was beautiful in its decay.

Once, indeed, Blossholme Priory, which was older than the Abbey, had been rich and famous. Its foundress in the time of the first Edward, a certain Lady Matilda, one of the Plantagenets, who retired from the world after her husband had been killed in the Crusade, being childless, endowed it with all her lands. Other noble ladies who accompanied her there, or sought its refuge in after days, had done likewise, so that it grew in power and in wealth, till at its most prosperous time over twenty nuns told their beads within its walls. Then the proud Abbey rose upon the opposing hill, and obtained some royal charter that the Pope confirmed, under which the Priory of Blossholme was affiliated to the Abbey of Blossholme, and the Abbot of Blossholme became the spiritual lord of its religious. From that day forward its fortunes began to decline, since under this pretext and that the abbots filched away its lands to swell their own estates.

So it came about that at the date of our history the total revenue of this Nunnery was but £130 a year of the money of the day, and even of

this sum the Abbot took tithe and toll. Now in all the great house, that once had been so full, there dwelt but six nuns, one of whom was, in fact, a servant, while an aged monk from the Abbey celebrated Mass in the fair chapel where lay the bones of so many who had gone before. Also on certain feasts the Abbot himself attended, confessed the nuns, and granted them absolution and his holy blessing. On these days, too, he would examine their accounts, and if there were money in hand take a share of it to serve his necessities, for which reason the Prioress looked forward to his coming with little joy.

It was to this ancient home of peace that the distraught Cicely and her servant Emlyn were conveyed upon the morrow of the great burning. Indeed, Cicely knew it well enough already, since as a child during three years or more she had gone there daily to be taught by the Prioress Matilda, for every head of the Priory took this name in turn to the honour of their foundress and in accordance with the provisions of her will. Happy years they were, as these old nuns loved her in her youth and innocence, and she, too, loved them every one. Now, by the workings of fate, she was borne back to the same quiet room where she had played and studied--a new-made wife, a new-made widow.

But of all this poor Cicely knew nothing till three weeks or more had gone by, when at length her wandering brain cleared and she opened her eyes to the world again. At the moment she was alone, and lay looking about her. The place was familiar. She recognized the deep windows, the faded tapestries of Abraham cutting Isaac's throat with a butcher's

knife, and Jonah being shot into the very gateway of a castle where his family awaited him, from the mouth of a gigantic carp with goggle eyes, for the simple artist had found his whale's model in a stewpond. Well she remembered those delightful pictures, and how often she had wondered whether Isaac could escape bleeding to death, or Jonah's wife, with the outspread arms, withstand the sudden shock of her husband's unexpected arrival out of the interior of the whale. There also was the splendid fireplace of wrought stone, and above it, cunningly carved in gilded oak, gleamed many coats-of-arms without crests, for they were those of sundry noble prioresses.

Yes, this was certainly the great guest-chamber of the Blossholme Priory, which, since the nuns had now few guests and many places in which to put them, had been given up to her, Sir John Foterell's heiress, as her schoolroom. There she lay, thinking that she was a child again, a happy, careless child, or that she dreamed, till presently the door opened and Mother Matilda appeared, followed by Emlyn, who bore a tray, on which stood a silver bowl that smoked. There was no mistaking Mother Matilda in her black Benedictine robe and her white whimple, wearing the great silver crucifix which was her badge of office, and the golden ring with an emerald bezel whereon was cut St. Catherine being broken on the wheel--the ancient ring which every Prioress of Blossholme had worn from the beginning. Moreover, who that had ever seen it could forget her sweet, old, high-bred face, with the fine lips, the arched nose, and the quick, kind grey eyes!

Cicely strove to rise and to do her reverence, as had been her custom during those childish years, only to find that she could not, for lo! she fell back heavily upon her pillow. Thereon Emlyn, setting down the tray with a clatter upon a table, ran to her, and putting her arms about her, began to scold, as was her fashion, but in a very gentle voice; and Mother Matilda, kneeling by her bed, gave thanks to Jesus and His blessed saints--though why she thanked Him at first Cicely did not understand.

"Am I ill, reverend Mother?" she asked.

"Not now, daughter, but you were very ill," answered the Prioress in her sweet, low voice. "Now we think that God has healed you."

"How long have I been here?" she asked.

The Mother began to reckon, counting her beads, one for every day--for in such places time slips by--but long before she had finished Emlyn replied quickly--

"Cranwell Towers was burned three weeks yesternight."

Then Cicely remembered, and with a bitter groan turned her face to the wall, while the Mother reproached Emlyn, saying she had killed her.

"I think not," answered the nurse in a low voice. "I think she has that

which will not let her die"--a saying that puzzled the Prioress at this time.

Emlyn was right. Cicely did not die. On the contrary, she grew strong and well in her body, though it was long before her mind recovered. Indeed, she glided about the place like a ghost in her black mourning robe, for now she no longer doubted that Christopher was dead, and she, the wife of a week, widowed as well as orphaned.

Then in her utter desolation came comfort; a light broke on the darkness of her soul like the moon above a tortured midnight sea. She was no longer quite alone; the murdered Christopher had left his image with her. If she lived a child would be born to him, and therefore she would surely live. One evening, on her knees, she whispered her secret to the Prioress Matilda, whereat the old nun blushed like a girl, yet, after a moment's silent prayer, laid a thin hand upon her head in blessing.

"The Lord Abbot declares that your marriage was no true marriage, my daughter, though why I do not understand, since the man was he whom your heart chose, and you were wed to him by an ordained priest before God's altar and in presence of the congregation."

"I care not what he says," answered Cicely in a stubborn voice. "If I am not a true wife, then no woman ever was."

"Dear daughter," answered Mother Matilda, "it is not for us unlearned

women to question the wisdom of a holy Abbot who doubtless is inspired from on high."

"If he is inspired it is not from on high, Mother. Would God or His saints teach him to murder my father and my husband, to seize my heritage, or to hold my person in this gentle prison? Such inspirations do not come from above, Mother."

"Hush! hush!" said the Prioress, glancing round her nervously; "your woes have crazed you. Besides, you have no proof. In this world there are so many things that we cannot understand. Being an abbot, how could he do wrong, although to us his acts seem wrong? But let us not talk of these matters, of which, indeed, I only know from that rough-tongued Emlyn of yours, who, I am told, was not afraid to curse him terribly. I was about to say that whatever may be the law of it, I hold your marriage good and true, and its issue, should such come to you, pure and holy, and night by night I will pray that it shall be crowned with Heaven's richest blessings."

"I thank you, dear Mother," answered Cicely, as she rose and left her.

When she had gone the Prioress rose also, and, with a troubled face, began to walk up and down the refectory, for it was here that they had spoken together. Truly she could not understand, for unless all these tales were false--and how could they be false?--this Abbot, whom her high-bred English nature had always mistrusted, this dark, able Spanish

monk was no saint, but a wicked villain? There must be some explanation. It was only that she did not understand.

Soon the news spread throughout the Nunnery, and if the sisters had loved Cicely before, now they loved her twice as well. Of the doubts as to the validity to her marriage, like their Prioress, they took no heed, for had it not been celebrated in a church? But that a child was to be born among them--ah! that was a joyful thing, a thing that had not happened for quite two hundred years, when, alas!--so said tradition and their records--there had been a dreadful scandal which to this day was spoken of with bated breath. For be it known at once this Nunnery, whatever may or may not have been the case with some others, was one of which no evil could be said.

Beneath their black robes, however, these old nuns were still as much women as the mothers who bore them, and this news of a child stirred them to the marrow. Among themselves in their hours of recreation they talked of little else, and even their prayers were largely occupied with this same matter. Indeed, poor, weak-witted, old Sister Bridget, who hitherto had been secretly looked down upon because she was the only one of the seven who was not of gentle birth, now became very popular. For Sister Bridget in her youth had been married and borne two children, both of whom had been carried off by the smallpox after she was widowed, whereon, as her face was seamed by this same disease, so that she had no hope of another husband, as her neighbours said, or because her heart was broken, as she said, she entered into religion.

Now she constituted herself Cicely's chief attendant, and although that lady was quite well and strong, persecuted her with advice and with noxious mixtures which she brewed, till Emlyn, descending on her like a storm, hunted her from the room and cast her medicines through the window.

That these sisters should be thus interested in so small a matter was not, indeed, wonderful, seeing that if their lives had been secluded before, since the Lady Cicely came amongst them they were ten times more so. Soon they discovered that she and her servant, Emlyn Stower, were, in fact, prisoners, which meant that they, her hostesses, were prisoners also. None were allowed to enter the Nunnery save the silent old monk who confessed them and celebrated the Mass, nor, by an order of the Abbot, were they suffered to go abroad upon any business whatsoever.

For the rest, as their only means of communication with those who dwelt beyond was the surly gardener, who was deaf and set there to spy on them, little news ever reached them. They were almost dead to the world, which, had they known it, was busy enough just then with matters that concerned them and all other religious houses.

At length one day, when Cicely and Emlyn were seated in the garden beneath a flowering hawthorn-tree--for now June had come and with it warm weather--of a sudden Sister Bridget hurried up saying that the Abbot of Blossholme desired their presence. At this tidings Cicely

turned faint, and Emlyn rated Bridget, asking if her few wits had left her, or if she thought that name was so pleasant to her mistress that she should suddenly bawl it in her ear.

Thereon the poor old soul, who was not too strong-brained and much afraid of Emlyn since she had thrown her medicines out of the window, began to weep, protesting that she had meant no harm, till Cicely, recovering, soothed her and sent her back to say that she would wait upon his lordship.

"Are you afraid of him, Mistress?" asked Emlyn, as they prepared to follow.

"A little, Nurse. He has shown himself a man to be afraid of, has he not? My father and my husband are in his net, and will he spare the last fish in the pool--a very narrow pool?" and she glanced at the high walls about her. "I fear lest he should take you from me, and wonder why he has not done so already."

"Because my father was a Spaniard, and through him I know that which would ruin him with his friends, the Pope and the Emperor. Also, he believes that I have the evil eye, and dreads my curse. Still, one day he may try to murder me; who knows? Only then the secret of the jewels will go with me, for that is mine alone; not yours even, for if you had it they would squeeze it out of you. Meanwhile he will try to profess you a nun, but push him off with soft words. Say that you will think of

it after your child is born. Till then he can do nothing, and, if Mother Matilda's fresh tidings are true, by that time perchance there will be no more nuns in England."

Now very quietly and by the side door they were entering the old reception-hall, that was only used for the entertainment of visitors and on other great occasions, and close to them saw the Abbot seated in his chair, while the Prioress stood before him, rendering her accounts.

"Whether you can spare it or no," they heard him say sharply, "I must have the half-year's rent. The times are evil; we servants of the Lord are threatened by that adulterous king and his proud ministers, who swear they will strip us to the shirt and turn us out to starve. I'm but just from London, and, although our enemy Anne Boleyn has lost her wanton head, I tell you the danger is great. Money must be had to stir up rebellion, for who can arm without it, and but little comes from Spain. I am in treaty to sell the Foterell lands for what they will fetch, but as yet can give no title. Either that stiff-necked girl must sign a release, or she must profess, for otherwise, while she lives, some lawyer or relative might upset the sale. Is she yet prepared to take her first vows? If not, I shall hold you much to blame."

"Nay," answered the Prioress; "there are reasons. You have been away, and have not heard"--she hesitated and looked about her nervously, to see Cicely and Emlyn standing behind them. "What do you there, daughter?" she asked, with as much asperity as she ever showed.

"In truth I know not, Mother," answered Cicely. "Sister Bridget told us that the Lord Abbot desired our presence."

"I bid her say that you were to wait him in my chamber," said the Prioress in a vexed voice.

"Well," broke in the Abbot, "it would seem that you have a fool for a messenger; if it is that pockmarked hag, her brain has been gone for years. Ward Cicely, I greet you, though after the sorrows that have fallen on you, whereof by your leave we will not speak, since there is no use in stirring up such memories, I grieve to see you in that worldly garb, who thought you would have changed it for a better. But ere you entered the holy Mother here spoke of some obstacle that stood between you and God. What is it? Perchance my counsel may be of service. Not this woman, as I trust," and he frowned at Emlyn, who at once answered, in her steady voice--

"Nay, my Lord Abbot, I stand not between her and God and His holiness, but between her and man and his iniquity. Still I can tell you of that obstacle--which comes from God--if you so need."

Now the old Prioress, blushing to her white hair, bent forward and whispered in the Abbot's ear words at which he sprang up as though a wasp had stung him.

"Pest on it! it cannot be," he said. "Well, well, there it is, and must be swallowed with the rest. Pity, though," he added, with a sneer on his dark face, "since many a year has gone by since these walls have seen a bastard, and, as things are, that may pull them down about your ears."

"I know such brats are dangerous," interrupted Emlyn, looking Maldon full in the eyes; "my father told me of a young monk in Spain--I forget his name--who brought certain ladies to the torture in some such matter. But who talks of bastards in the case of Dame Cicely Harflete, widow of Sir Christopher Harflete, slain by the Abbot of Blossholme?"

"Silence, woman. Where there is no lawful marriage there can be no lawful child----"

"To take that lawful inheritance that it lawfully inherits. Say, my Lord Abbot, did Sir Christopher make you his heir also?"

Then, before he could answer, Cicely, who had been silent all this while, broke in--

"Heap what insults you will on me, my Lord Abbot, and having robbed me of my father, my husband, and my heart, rob me of my goods also, if you can. In my case it matters little. But slander not my child, if one should be born to me, nor dare to touch its rights. Think not that you can break the mother as you broke the girl, for there you will find that you have a she-wolf by the ear."

He looked at her, they all looked at her, for in her eyes was something that compelled theirs. Clement Maldon, who knew the world and how a she-wolf can fight for its cub, read in them a warning which caused him to change his tone.

"Tut, tut, daughter," he said; "what is the good of vapouring of a child that is not and may never be? When it comes I will christen it, and we will talk."

"When it comes you will not lay a finger on it. I'd rather that it went unbaptized to its grave than marked with your cross of blood."

He waved his hand.

"There is another matter, or rather two, of which I must speak to you, my daughter. When do you take your first vows?"

"We will talk of it after my child is born. 'Tis a child of sin, you say, and I am unrepentant, a wicked woman not fit to take a holy vow, to which, moreover, you cannot force me," she replied, with bitter sarcasm.

Again he waved his hand, for the she-wolf showed her teeth.

"The second matter is," he went on, "that I need your signature to a writing. It is nothing but a form, and one I fear you cannot read,

nor in faith can I," and with a somewhat doubtful smile he drew out a crabbed indenture and spread it before her on the table.

"What?" she laughed, brushing aside the parchment. "Have you remembered that yesterday I came of age, and am, therefore, no more your ward, if such I ever was? You should have sold my inheritance more swiftly, for now the title you can give is rotten as last year's apples, and I'll sign nothing. Bear witness, Mother Matilda, and you, Emlyn Stower, that I have signed and will sign nothing. Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme, I am a free woman of full age, even though, as you say, I am a wanton. Where is your right to chain up a wanton who is no religious? Unlock these gates and let me go."

Now he felt the wolf's fangs, and they were sharp.

"Whither would you go?" he asked.

"Whither but to the King, to lay my cause before him, as my father would have done last Christmas-time."

It was a bold speech, but foolish. The she-wolf had loosed her hold to growl--to growl at a hunter with a bloody sword.

"I think your father never reached his Grace with his sack of falsehoods; nor might you, Cicely Foterell. The times are rough, rebellion is in the air, and many wild men hunt the woods and roads. No,

no; for your own sake you bide here in safety till----"

"Till you murder me. Oh! it is in your mind. Do you remember the angel who spoke with me in the fire and told me my husband was not dead?"

"A lying spirit, then; no angel."

"I am not so sure," and again she passed her hand across her eyes, as she had done in that dreadful dawn at Cranwell. "Well, I prayed to God to help me, and last night that angel came again and spoke in my sleep. He told me to fear you not at all, my Lord Abbot; however sore my case and however near my death might seem, since God had shaped a stone to drop upon your head. He showed it me; it was like an axe."

Now the old Prioress held up her hands and gasped in horror, but the Abbot leapt from his seat in rage--or was it fear?

"Wanton, you named yourself," he exclaimed; "but I name you witch also, who, if you had your deserts, should die the death of a witch by fire. Mother Matilda, I command you, on your oath, keep this witch fast and make report to me of all her sorceries. It is not fitting that such a one should walk abroad to bring evil on the innocent. Witch and wanton, begone to your chamber!"

Cicely listened, then, without another word, broke into a little scornful laugh, and, turning, left the room, followed by the Prioress.

But Emlyn did not go; she stayed behind, a smile on her dark, handsome face.

"You've lost the throw, though all your dice were loaded," she said boldly.

The Abbot turned on her and reviled her.

"Woman," he said, "if she is a witch, you're the familiar, and certainly you shall burn even though she escape. It is you who taught her how to call up the devil."

"Then you had best keep me living, my Lord Abbot, that I may teach her how to lay him. Nay, threaten not. Why, the rack might make me speak, and the birds of the air carry the matter!"

His face paled; then suddenly he asked--

"Where are those jewels? I need them. Give me the jewels and you shall go free, and perchance your accursed mistress with you."

"I told you," she answered. "Sir John took them to London, and if they were not found upon his body, then either he threw them away or Jeffrey Stokes carried them to wherever he has gone. Drag the mere, search the forest, find Jeffrey and ask him."

"You lie, woman. When you and your mistress fled from Shefton a servant there saw you with the box that held those jewels in your hand."

"True, my Lord Abbot, but it no longer held them; only my mistress's love-letters, which she would not leave behind."

"Then where is the box, and where are those letters?"

"We grew short of fuel in the siege, and burned both. When a woman has her man she doesn't want his letters. Surely, Maldonado," she added, with meaning, "you should know that it is not always wise to keep old letters. What, I wonder, would you give for some that I have seen and that are not burned?"

"Accursed spawn of Satan," hissed the Abbot, "how dare you flaunt me thus? When Cicely was wed to Christopher she wore those very gems; I have it from those who saw her decked in them--the necklace on her bosom, the priceless rosebud pearls hanging from her ears."

"Oho! oho!" said Emlyn; "so you own that she was wed, the pure soul whom but now you called a wanton. Look you, Sir Abbot, we will fence no more. She wore the jewels. Jeffrey took nothing hence save your death-warrant."

"Then where are they?" he asked, striking his fist upon the table.

"Where? Why, where you'll never follow them--gone up to heaven in the fire. Thinking we might be robbed, I hid them behind a secret panel in her chamber, purposing to return for them later. Go, rake out the ashes; you might find a cracked diamond or two, but not the pearls; they fly in fire. There, that's the truth at last, and much good may it do to you."

The Abbot groaned. Like most Spaniards he was emotional, and could not help it; his bitterness burst from his heart.

Emlyn laughed at him.

"See how the wise and mighty of this world overshoot themselves," she said. "Clement Maldonado, I have known you for some twenty years, and when I was called the Beauty of Blossholme, and the Abbot who went before you made me the Church's ward, though I ever hated you, who hunted down my father, you had softer words for me than those you name me by to-day. Well, I have watched you rise and I shall watch you fall, and I know your heart and its desires. Money is what you lust for and must have, for otherwise how will you gain your end? It was the jewels that you needed, not the Shefton lands, which are worth little now-a-days, and will soon be worth less. Why, one of those pink pearls placed among the Jews would buy three parishes, with their halls thrown in. For the sake of those jewels you have brought death on some and misery on some, and on your own soul damnation without end, though had you but been wise and consulted me--why, they, or some of them, might

have been yours. Sir John was no fool; he would have parted with a pearl or two, of which he did not know the value, to end a feud against the Church and safeguard his title and his daughter. And now, in your madness, you've burnt them--burnt a king's ransom, or what might have pulled down a king. Oh! had you but guessed it, you'd have hacked off the hand that put a torch to Cranwell Towers, for now the gold you need is lacking to you, and therefore all your grand schemes will fail, and you'll be buried in their ruin, as you thought we were in Cranwell."

The Abbot, who had listened to this long and bitter speech in patience, groaned again.

"You are a clever woman," he said; "we understand each other, coming from the same blood. You know the case; what is your counsel to me now?"

"That which you will not take, being foredoomed for your sins. Still I'll give it honestly. Set the Lady Cicely free, restore her lands, confess your evil doings. Fly the kingdom before Cromwell turns on you and Henry finds you out, taking with you all the gold that you can gather, and bribe the Emperor Charles to give you a bishopric in Granada or elsewhere--not near Seville, for reasons that you know. So shall you live honoured, and one day, after you have been dead a long while and many things are forgotten, perchance be beatified as Saint Clement of Blossholme."

The Abbot looked at her reflectively.

"If I sought safety only and old age comforts your counsel might be good, but I play for higher stakes."

"You set your head against them," broke in Emlyn.

"Not so, woman, for in any case that head must win. If it stays upon my shoulders it will wear an archbishop's mitre, or a cardinal's hat, or perhaps something nobler yet; and if it parts from them, why, then a heavenly crown of glory."

"Your head? Your head?" exclaimed Emlyn, with a contemptuous laugh.

"Why not?" he answered gravely. "You chance to know of some errors of my youth, but they are long ago repented of, and for such there is plentiful forgiveness," and he crossed himself. "Were it not so, who would escape?"

Emlyn, who had been standing all this while, sat herself down, set her elbows on the table and rested her chin upon her clenched hands.

"True," she said, looking him in the eyes; "none of us would escape. But, Clement Maldon, how about the unrepented errors of your age? Sir John Foterell, for instance; Sir Christopher Harflete, for instance; my Lady Cicely, for instance; to say nothing of black treason and a few other matters?"

"Even were all these charges true, which I deny, they are no sins, seeing that they would have been done, every one of them, not for my own sake, but for that of the Church, to overset her enemies, to rebuild her tottering walls, to secure her eternally in this realm."

"And to lift you, Clement Maldon, to the topmost pinnacle of her temple, whence Satan shows you all the kingdoms of the world, swearing that they shall be yours."

Apparently the Abbot did not resent this bold speech; indeed, Emlyn's apt illustration seemed to please him. Only he corrected her gently, saying--

"Not Satan, but Satan's Lord." Then he paused a while, looked round the chamber to see that the doors were shut and make sure that they were alone, and went on, "Emlyn Stower, you have great wits and courage--more than any woman that I know. Also you have knowledge both of the world and of what lies beyond it, being what superstitious fools call a witch, but I, a prophetess or a seer. These things come to you with your blood, I suppose, seeing that your mother was of a gypsy tribe and your father a high-bred Spanish gentleman, very learned and clever, though a pestilent heretic, for which cause he fled for his life from Spain."

"To find his dark death in England. The Holy Inquisition is patent and has a long arm. If I remember right, also it was this business of the

heresy of my father that first brought you to Blossholme, where, after his vanishing and the public burning of that book of his, you so greatly prospered."

"You are always right, Emlyn, and therefore I need not tell you further that we had been old enemies in Spain, which is why I was chosen to hunt him down and how you come to know certain things."

She nodded, and he went on--

"So much for the heretic father--now for the gypsy mother. She died, by her own hand it is said, to escape the punishment of the law."

"No need to beat about the bush, Abbot; let's have truth between old friends. You mean, to escape being burnt by you as a witch, because she had the letters which were not burned and threatened to use them--as I do."

"Why rake up such tales, Emlyn?" he interposed blandly. "At least she died, but not until she had taught you all she knew. The rest of the history is short. You fell in love with old yeoman Bolle's son, or said you did--that same great, silly Thomas who is now a lay-brother at the Abbey----"

"Or said I did," she repeated. "At least he fell in love with me, and perhaps I wished an honest man to protect me, who in those days was

young and fair. Moreover, he was not silly then. That came upon him after he fell into your hands. Oh! have done with it," she went on, in a voice of suppressed passion. "The witch's fair daughter was the Church's ward, and you ruled the Abbot of that time, and he forced me into marriage with old Peter Stower, as his third wife. I cursed him, and he died, as I warned him that he would, and I bore a child, and it died. Then with what was left to me I took refuge with Sir John Foterell, who ever was my friend, and became foster-mother to his daughter, the only creature, save one, that I have loved in this wide, wicked world. That's all the story; and now what more do you want of me, Clement Maldonado--evil-gifted one?"

"Emlyn, I want what I always wanted and you always refused--your help, your partnership. I mean the partnership of that brain of yours--the help of the knowledge that you have--no more. At Cranwell Towers you called down evil on me. Take off that ban, for I'll speak truth, it weighs heavy on my mind. Let us bury the past; let us clasp hands and be friends. You have the true vision. Do you remember that when you thought Cicely dead, you said that her seed should rise up against me, and now it seems that it will be so."

"What would you give me?" asked Emlyn curiously.

"I will give you wealth; I will give you what you love more--power, and rank too, if you wish it. The whole Church shall listen to you. What you desire shall be done in this realm--yes, and across the world. I speak

no lie; I pledge my soul on it, and the honour of those I serve, which I have authority to do. In return all I ask of you is your wisdom--that you should read the future for me, that you should show me which way to walk."

"Nothing more?"

"Yes, two things--that you should find me those burned jewels and with them the old letters that were not burned, and that this child of the Lady Cicely shall not chance to live to take what you promised to it. Her life I give you, for a nun more or less can matter little."

"A noble offer, and in this case I am sure you will pay what you promise--should you live. But what if I refuse?"

"Then," answered the Abbot, dropping his fist upon the table, "then death for both of you--the witch's death, for I dare not let you go to work my ruin. Remember, I am master here, you are my prisoners. Few know that you live in this place, except a handful of weak-brained women who will fear to speak--puppets that must dance when I pull the string--and I'll see that no soul shall come near these walls. Choose, then, between death and all its terrors or life and all its hopes."

On the table there stood a wooden bowl filled with roses. Emlyn drew it to her, and taking the roses into her hands, threw them to the floor.

Then she waited for the water to steady, saying--

"The riddle is hard; perhaps, if in truth I have such power, I shall find its answer here." Presently, as he gazed at her, fascinated, she breathed upon the water and stared into it for a long while. At length she looked up, and said--

"Death or Life; that was the choice you gave me. Well, Clement Maldonado, on behalf of myself and the Lady Cicely, and her husband Sir Christopher, and the child that shall be born, and of God who directs all these things, I choose--death."

There was a solemn silence. Then the Abbot rose, and said--

"Good! On your own head be it."

Again there was a silence, and, as she made no answer, he turned and walked towards the door, leaving her still staring into the bowl.

"Good!" she repeated, as he laid his hand upon the latch. "I have told you that I choose death, but I have not told you whose death it is I choose. Play your game, my Lord Abbot, and I'll play mine, remembering that God holds the stakes. Meanwhile I confirm the words I spoke in my rage at Cranwell. Expect evil, for I see now that it shall fall on you and all with which you have to do."

Then with a sudden movement she upset the bowl upon the table and

watched him go.