

CHAPTER VIII

EMLYN CALLS HER MAN

One by one the weeks passed over the heads of Cicely and Emlyn in their prison, and brought them neither hope nor tidings. Indeed, although they could not see its cords, they felt that the evil net which held them was drawing ever tighter. There were fear and pity as well as love in the eyes of Mother Matilda when she looked at Cicely, which she did only if she thought that no one observed her. The nuns also were afraid, though it was clear that they knew not of what. One evening Emlyn, finding the Prioress alone, sprang questions on her, asking what was in the wind, and why her lady, a free woman of full age, was detained there against her will.

The old nun's face grew secret. She answered that she did not know of anything unusual, and that, as regarded the detention, she must obey the commands of her spiritual superior.

"Then," burst out Emlyn, "I tell you that you do so at your peril. I tell you that whether my lady lives or dies, there are those who will call you to a strict account, aye, and those who will listen to the prayer of the helpless. Mother Matilda, England is not the land it was when as a girl they buried you in these mouldy walls. Where does God say that you have the right to hold free women like felons in a jail? Tell me."

"I cannot," moaned Mother Matilda, wringing her thin hands. "The right is very hard to find, this place is strictly guarded, and whatever I may think, I must do what I am bid, lest my soul should suffer."

"Your soul! You cloistered women think always of your miserable souls, but of those of other folk, aye, and of their bodies too, nothing. Then you'll not help me?"

"I cannot, I cannot, who am myself in bonds," she replied again.

"So be it, Mother; then I'll help myself, and when I do, God help you all," and with a contemptuous shrug of her broad shoulders she walked away, leaving the poor old Prioress almost in tears.

Emlyn's threats were bold as her own heart, but how could she execute even a tenth of them? The right was on their side, indeed, but, as many a captive has found in those and other days, right is no Joshua's trumpet to cause high walls to fall. Moreover, Cicely would not aid her. Now that her husband was dead she took interest in one thing only--his child who was to be.

For the rest she seemed to care nothing. Since she had no friends with whom she could communicate, and her wealth, as she understood, had been taken from her, what better place, she asked, could there be for that child to see the light than in this quiet Nunnery? When it was born and

she was well again she would consider other matters. Meanwhile she was languid, and why was Emlyn always prating to her of freedom? If she were free, what should she do and whither should she go? The nuns were very kind to her; they loved her as she did them.

So she talked on, and Emlyn, listening, did not dare to tell her the truth: that here she feared for the life of her child, dreading lest that news might bring about the death of both of them. So she let her be, and fell back on her own wits.

First she thought of escape, only to abandon the idea, for her mistress was in no state to face its perils. Moreover, whither should they go? Then rescue came into her mind, but, alas! who would rescue them? The great men in London, perhaps, as a matter of policy, but great men are hard to come at, even for the free. If she were free she might find means to make them listen, but she was not, nor could she leave her lady at such a time. What remained, then? So to contrive that they should be set free.

Perhaps it might be done at a price--that of Cicely's jewels, of which she alone knew the hiding-place, and with them a deed of indemnity against her persecutors. Emlyn was not minded to give either. Moreover, she guessed that it might be in vain. Once outside those walls, they knew too much to be allowed to live. And yet within those walls Cicely's child would not be allowed to live--the child that was heir to all.

What, then, could loose them and make them safe?

Terror, perhaps--such terror as that through which the Israelites escaped from bondage. Oh! if she could but find a Moses to call down the plagues of Egypt upon this Pharaoh of an Abbot--those plagues with which she had threatened him--but although she believed that they would fall (why did she believe it? she wondered), she was as yet impotent to fulfil.

Now Thomas Bolle! If only she could have words with that faithful Thomas Bolle, the fierce and cunning man whom they thought foolish!

This idea of Thomas Bolle took possession of Emlyn's mind--Thomas Bolle, who had loved her all his life, who would die to serve her. She strove in vain to get in touch with him. The old gardener was so deaf that he could not, or would not, understand. The silly Bridget gave the letter that she wrote to him to the Prioress by mistake, who burnt it before her eyes and said nothing. The monks who brought provisions to the Nunnery were always received by three of the sisters, set to spy on each other and on them, so that she could not come near to them alone. The priest who celebrated Mass was an old enemy of hers; with him she could do nothing, and no one else was allowed to approach the place except once or twice the Abbot, who was closeted for hours with the Prioress, but spoke to her no more.

Why, wondered Emlyn, should less than half-a-mile of space be such a barrier between her and Thomas Bolle? If he stood within twenty yards of

her she could make him understand; why not, then, when he stood within five hundred? This idea possessed her; these limitations of nature made her mad. She refused to accept them. Night by night, lying brooding in her bed, while Cicely slept in peace at her side, she threw out her strong soul towards the soul of her old lover, Thomas Bolle, commanding him to listen, to obey, to come.

At first nothing happened. Afterwards she had a vague sense of being answered; although she could not see or hear him, she felt his presence. Then one afternoon, looking from an upper dormer window, she saw a scuffle going on outside the gateway, and heard angry voices. Thomas Bolle was trying to force his way in at the door, whence he was repelled by the Abbot's men who always watched there.

In the evening she gathered the truth from the nuns, who did not know that she was listening to what they said. It seemed that Thomas, whom they spoke of as a madman or as drunk, had tried to break into the Nunnery. When he was asked what he wanted, he answered that he did not know, but he must speak with Emlyn Stower. At this tidings she smiled to herself, for now she knew that he had heard her, and that in this way or in that he would obey her summons and come.

Two days later Thomas came--thus.

The September evening was fading into night, and Emlyn, leaving Cicely resting on her bed, which now she often did for a while before the

supper-hour, had gone into the garden to enjoy the pleasant air. There she walked until she wearied of its sameness, then entered the old chapel by a side door and sat herself down to think in the chancel, not far from a life-sized statue of the Virgin, in painted oak, which stood here because of its peculiarities, for the back half of it seemed to be built into the masonry. Also the eye-sockets were empty, which suggested to the observant Emlyn either that they had once held jewels or that this was no likeness of the holy Mother, but rather one of the blind St. Lucy.

While Emlyn mused there quite alone--for at this hour none entered the place, nor would until the next morning--she thought that she heard strange noises, as of some one stirring, which came from the neighbourhood of the statue. Now many would have been scared and departed; but not so Emlyn, who only sat still and listened. Presently, without moving her head, she looked also. As it happened, the light of the setting sun, pouring through the west window, fell almost full upon the figure, and by it she saw, or thought she saw, that the eye-sockets were no longer empty; there were eyes in them which moved and flashed.

Now for a moment even Emlyn was frightened. Then she reasoned with herself, reflecting that a priest or one of the nuns was watching her from behind the statue, which they might do for as long as they pleased. Or perhaps this was a miracle, such as she had heard so much of but never seen. Well, why should she fear spies or miracles? She would sit where she was and see what happened. Nor had she long to wait, for

presently a voice, a hoarse, manly voice, whispered--

"Emlyn! Emlyn Stower!"

"Yes," she answered, also in a whisper. "Who speaks?"

"Who do you think?" asked the voice, with a chuckle. "A devil, perhaps."

"Well, if it be a friendly devil I don't know that I mind, who need company in this lone place. So appear, man or devil," answered Emlyn stoutly. But in secret she crossed herself beneath her cape, for in those days folk believed in the appearance of devils for no good purposes.

The statue began to creak, then opened like a door, though very unwillingly, as though its hinges had been fixed for a long, long time and rusted in the damp, which was indeed the case. Inside of it, like a corpse in an upright coffin, appeared a figure, a square, strong figure, clad in a tattered monk's robe, surmounted by a large head with fiery red hair and beetling brows, beneath which shone two wild grey eyes. Emlyn, whose heart had stood still--for, after all, Satan is awkward company for a mortal woman--waited till it gave a jump in her breast and went on again as usual. Then she said quietly--

"What are you doing here, Thomas Bolle?"

"That is what I want to know, Emlyn. Night and day for weeks you have been calling me, and so I came."

"Yes, I have been calling you; but how did you come?"

"By the old monk's road. They have forgotten it long ago, but my grandfather told me of it when I was a boy, and at last a fox showed me where it ran. It's a dark road, and when first I tried it I thought I should be poisoned, but now the air is none so bad. It ran to the Abbey once, and may still, but my door and Mrs. Fox's is in the copse by the park wall, where none would ever look for it. If you would like a cub to play with, I will bring you one. Or perhaps you want something more than cubs," he added, with his cunning laugh.

"Aye, Thomas, I want much more. Man," she said fiercely, "will you do what I tell you?"

"That depends, Mistress Emlyn. Have I not done what you told me all my life, and for no reward?"

She moved across the chancel and sat herself down against him, pushing the image door almost to and speaking to him through the crack.

"If you have had no reward, Thomas," she said in a gentle voice, "whose fault was it? Not mine, I think. I loved you once when we were young, did I not? I would have given myself to you, body and soul, would I not?"

Well, who came between us and spoiled our lives?"

"The monks," groaned Thomas; "the accursed monks, who married you to Stower because he paid them."

"Yes, the accursed monks. And now our youth has gone, and love--of that sort--is behind us. I have been another man's wife, Thomas, who might have been yours. Think of it--your loving wife, the mother of your children. And you--they have tamed you and made you their servant, their cattle-herd, the strong fellow to fetch and carry, the half-wit, as they call you, who can still be trusted to run an errand and hold his tongue, the Abbey mule that does not dare to kick, the grieve of your own stolen lands--you, whose father was almost a gentleman. That's what they have done for you, Thomas; and for me, the Church's ward--well, I will not speak of it. Now, if you had your will, what would you do for them?"

"Do for them? Do for them?" gasped Thomas, worked up to fury by this recital of his wrongs. "Why, if I dared I'd cut their throats, every one, and grallock them like deer," and he ground his strong white teeth. "But I am afraid. They have my soul, and month by month I must confess. You remember, Emlyn, I warned you when you and the lady would have ridden to London before the siege. Well, afterward--I must confess it--the Abbot heard it himself, and oh! sore, sore was my penance. Before I had done with it my ribs showed through my skin and my back was like a red osier basket. There's only one thing I didn't tell them, because, after all, it is no sin to grub the earth off the face of a

corpse."

"Ah!" said Emlyn, looking at him. "You're not to be trusted. Well, I thought as much. Good-bye, Thomas Bolle, you coward. I'll find me a man for a friend, not a whimpering, priest-ridden hound who sets a Latin blessing which he does not understand above his honour. God in heaven! to think I should ever have loved such a thing. Oh! I am shamed, I am shamed. I'll go wash my hands. Shut your trap and get you gone down your rat-run, Thomas Bolle, and, living or dead, never dare to speak to me again. Also forget not to tell your monks how I called you to my side--for that's witchcraft, you know, and I shall burn for it, and your soul gain benefit. God in heaven! to think that once you were Thomas Bolle," and she made as though to go away.

He stretched out his great arm and caught her by the robe, exclaiming--

"What would you have me do, Emlyn? I can't bear your scorn. Take it off me or I go kill myself."

"That's what you had best do. You'll find the devil a better master than a foreign abbot. Farewell for ever."

"Nay, nay; what's your will? Soul or no soul, I'll work it."

"Will you? Will you indeed? If so, stay a moment," and she ran down the chapel, bolting the doors; then returned to him, saying--

"Now come forth, Thomas, and since you are once more a man, kiss me as you used to do twenty years ago and more. You'll not confess to that, will you? There. Now, kneel before the altar here and swear an oath. Nay, listen to it before you swear, for it is wide."

Emlyn said the oath to him. It was a great and terrible oath. Under it he bound himself to be her slave and join himself with her in working woe to the monks of Blossholme, and especially to their Abbot, Clement Maldon, in payment of the wrongs that these had done to them both; in payment for the murder of Sir John Foterell and of Christopher Harflete, and of the imprisonment and robbery of Cicely Harflete, the daughter of the one and the wife of the other. He bound himself to do those things which she should tell him. He bound himself neither in the confessional nor, should it come to that, on the bed of torture or the scaffold to breathe a word of all their counsel. He prayed that if he did so his soul might pay the price in everlasting torment, and of all these things he took Heaven to be his witness.

"Now," said Emlyn, when she had finished setting out this fearful vow, "will you be a man and swear and thereby avenge the dead and save the innocent from death; or will you who have my secret be a crawling monk and go back to Blossholme Abbey and betray me?"

He thought a moment, rubbing his red head, for the thing frightened him, as well it might. The scales of the balance of his mind hung evenly, and

Emlyn knew not which way they would turn. She saw, and put out all her woman's strength. Resting her hand upon his shoulder, she leaned forward and whispered into his ear.

"Do you remember, Thomas, how first we told our young love that spring day down in the copse by the water, and how sweet the daffodils bloomed about our feet--the daffodils and the wood-lilies? Do you remember how we swore ourselves each to each for all our lives, aye, and all the lives that were to come, and how for us two the earth was turned to heaven? And then--do you remember how that monk walked by--it was this Clement Maldon--and froze us with his cruel eyes, and said, 'What do you with the witch's daughter? She is not for you.' And--oh! Thomas, I can no more of it," and she broke down and sobbed, then added, "Swear nothing; get you gone and betray me, if you will. I'll bear you no malice, even when I die for it, for after more than twenty years of monkcraft, how could I hope that you would still remain a man? Come, get you gone swiftly, ere they take us together, and your fair fame is besmirched. Quick, now, and leave me and my lady and her unborn child to the doom Maldon brews for us. Alas! for the copse by the river; alas! for the withered lilies!"

Thomas heard; the big blue veins stood out upon his forehead, his great breast heaved, his utterance choked. At length the words came in a thick torrent.

"I'll not go, dearie; I'll swear what you will, by your eyes and by your

lips, by the flowers on which we trod, by all the empty years of aching woe and shame, by God upon His throne in heaven, and by the devil in his fires in hell. Come, come," and he ran to the altar and clasped the crucifix that stood there. "Say the words again, or any others that you will, and I'll repeat them and take the oath, and may fiery worms eat me living for ever and ever if I break a letter of it."

With a little smile of triumph in her dark eyes Emlyn bent over the kneeling man and whispered--whispered through the gathering bloom, while he whispered after her, and kissed the Rood in token.

It was done, and they drew away from the altar back to the painted saint.

"So you are a man after all," she said, laughing aloud. "Now, man--my man--who, if we live through this, shall be my husband if you will--yes, my husband, for I'll pay, and be proud of it--listen to my commands. See you, I am Moses, and yonder in the Abbey sits Pharaoh with a hardened heart, and you are the angel--the destroying angel with the sword of the plagues of Egypt. To-night there will be fire in the Abbey--such fire as fell on Cranwell Towers. Nay, nay, I know; the church will not burn, nor all the great stone halls. But the dormitories, and the storehouses, and the hayricks, and the cattle-byres, they'll flame bravely after this time of drought, and if the wains are ashes, how will they draw in their harvest? Will you do it, my man?"

"Surely. Have I not sworn?"

"Then away to the work, and afterwards--to-morrow or next day--come back and make report. Just now I am much moved to solitary prayer, so wait till you see me here alone upon my knees. Stay! Wrap yourself in grave-clothes, for then if you are seen they will think you are a ghost, such as they say haunt this place. Fear not, by then I will have more work for you. Have you mastered it?"

He nodded his head. "All. All, especially your promise. Oh! I'll not die now; I'll live to claim it."

"Good. There's on account," and again she kissed him. "Go."

He reeled in the intoxication of his joy; then said--

"One word; my head swims; I forgot. Sir Christopher is not dead, or wasn't----"

"What do you mean?" she almost hissed at him. "In Christ's name be quick; I hear voices without."

"They buried another man for Christopher. I scraped him up and saw. Christopher was sent foreign, sore wounded, on the ship--pest! I have forgotten its name--the same ship that took Jeffrey Stokes."

"Blessings on your head for that tidings," exclaimed Emlyn, in a strange, low voice. "Away; they are coming to the door!"

The wooden figure creaked to and stared at her blandly, as it had stared for generations. For a moment Emlyn stood still, her hand upon her heart. Then she walked swiftly down the chapel, unlocked the door, and in the porch, just entering it, met the Prioress Matilda, another nun, and old Bridget, who was chattering.

"Oh! it is you, Mistress Stower," said Mother Matilda, with evident relief. "Sister Bridget here swore that she heard a man talking in the chapel when she came to shut the outer window at sunset."

"Did she?" answered Emlyn indifferently. "Then her luck's better than my own, who long for the sound of a man's voice in this home of babbling women. Nay, be not shocked, good Mother; I am no nun, and God did not create the world all female, or we should none of us be here. But, now you speak of it, I think there's something strange about that chapel. It is a place where some might fear to be alone, for twice when I knelt there at my prayers I have heard odd sounds, and once, when there was no sun, a cold shadow fell upon me. Some ghost of the dead, I suppose, of whom so many lie about. Well, ghosts I never feared; and now I must away to fetch my lady's supper, for she eats in her room to-night."

When she had gone the Prioress shook her head and remarked in her gentle fashion--

"A strange woman and a rough, but, my sisters, we must not judge her harshly, for she is of a different world to ours, and I fear has met with sorrows there, such as we are protected from by our holy office."

"Yes," answered the sister, "but I think also that she has met with the ghost that haunts the chapel, of which there are many records, and that once I saw myself when I was a novice. The Prioress Matilda--I mean the fourth of that name, she who was mixed up with Edward the Lame, the monk, and died suddenly after the----"

"Peace, sister; let us have no scandal about that departed--woman, who left the earth two hundred years ago. Also, if her unquiet spirit still haunts the place, as many say, I know not why it should speak with the voice of a man."

"Perhaps it was the monk Edward's voice that Bridget heard," replied the sister, "for no doubt he still hangs about her skirts as he did in life, if all tales are true. Well, Mistress Emlyn says that she does not mind ghosts, and I can well believe it, for she is a witch's daughter, and has a strange look in her eyes. Did you ever see such bold eyes, Mother? However it may be, I hate ghosts, and rather would I pass a month on bread and water than be alone in that chapel at or after sundown. My back creeps to think of it, for they say that the unhallowed babe walks too, and gibbers round the font seeking baptism--ugh!" and she shuddered.

"Peace, sister, peace to your goblin talk," said Mother Matilda again.

"Let us think of holier things lest the foul fiend draw near to us."

That night, about one in the morning, the foul fiend drew very near to Blossholme, and he came in the shape of fire. Suddenly the nuns were aroused from their beds by the sound of bells tolling wildly. Running to the window-places, they saw great sheets of flame leaping from the Abbey roofs. They threw open the casements and stared out terrified. Sister Bridget was sent even to wake the deaf gardener and his wife, who lived in the gateway, and command them to go forth and learn what passed, and the meaning of the shouts they heard, for they feared that Blossholme was attacked by some army.

A long while went by, and Bridget returned with a confused tale, which, as it had been gathered by an imbecile from a deaf gardener, was not easy to understand. Meanwhile the shoutings went on and the fire at the Abbey burnt ever more fiercely, so that the nuns thought that their last hour had come, and knelt down to pray at the casement.

Just then Cicely and Emlyn appeared among them, and stared at the great fire.

Suddenly Cicely turned round, and, fixing her large blue eyes on Emlyn,

said, in the hearing of them all--

"The Abbey burns. Why, Nurse, they told me that you said it would be so, yonder amid the ashes of Cranwell Towers. Surely you are foresighted."

"Fire calls for fire," answered Emlyn grimly, and the nuns around looked at her with doubtful eyes.

It was a very fierce fire, which appeared to have begun in the dormitories, whence, even at that distance, they saw half-clad monks escaping through the windows, some by means of bed-coverings tied together and some by jumping, notwithstanding the height. Presently the roof of the building fell in, sending up showers of glowing embers, which lit upon the thatch of the farm byres and sheds, and upon the ricks built and building in the stackyard, so that all these caught also, and before dawn were utterly consumed.

One by one the watchers in the Nunnery wearied of the lamentable sight, and muttering prayers, departed terrified to their beds. But Emlyn sat on at the open casement till the rim of the splendid September sun showed above the hills. There she sat, her head resting on her hand, her strong face set like that of a statue. Only her dark eyes, in which the flames were reflected, seemed to smile hardly.

"Thomas is a great tool," she muttered to herself at length, "and the first cut has bitten to the bone. Well, there shall be worse to come.

You will live to beg Emlyn's mercy yet, Clement Maldonado."