CHAPTER IX

THE BLOSSHOLME WITCHINGS

On the afternoon of that day the Abbot came again to visit the Nunnery, and sent for Cicely and Emlyn. They found him alone in the guest-hall, walking up and down its length with a troubled face.

"Cicely Foterell," he said, without any form of greeting, "when last we met you refused to sign the deed which I brought with me. Well, it matters nothing, for that purchaser has gone back upon his bargain."

"Saying that he liked not the title?" suggested Cicely.

"Aye; though who taught you of titles and the ins and outs of law? But what need to ask----?" and he glowered at Emlyn. "Well, let it pass, for now I have a paper with me that you must sign. Read it if you will. It is harmless--only an instruction to the tenants of the lands your father held to pay their rents to me this Michaelmas, as warden of that property."

"Do they refuse, then, seeing that you hold it all, my Lord Abbot?"

"Aye, some one has been at work among them, and the stubborn churls will not without instruction under your hand and seal. The farms your father worked himself I have reaped, but last night every grain of corn and

every fleece of wool were burned in the fire."

"Then I pray you keep account of them, my Lord, that you may pay me their value when we come to settle our score, seeing that I never gave you leave to shear my sheep and harvest my corn."

"You are pleased to be saucy, girl," he replied, biting his lip. "I have no time to bandy words--sign, and do you witness, Emlyn Stower."

Cicely took the document, glanced at it, then slowly tore it into four pieces and threw it to the floor.

"Rob me and my unborn child if you can and will, at least I'll be no thief's partner," she said quietly. "Now, if you want my name, go forge it, for I sign nothing."

The Abbot's face grew very evil.

"Do you remember, woman," he asked, "that here you are in my power? Do you not know that rebellious sinners such as you are can be shut in a dark dungeon and fed on the bread and water of affliction and beaten with the rods of penance? Will you do my bidding, or shall these things fall on you?"

Cicely's beautiful face flushed up, and for a moment her blue eyes filled with the tears of shame and terror. Then they cleared again, and

she looked at him boldly and answered--

"I know that a murderer can be a torturer also. Why should not he who butchered the father scourge the daughter too? But I know also that there is a God who protects the innocent, though sometimes He is slow to lift His hand, and to Him I appeal, my Lord Abbot. I know, moreover, that I am Foterell and Carfax, and that no man or woman of my blood has ever yet yielded to fear or pain. I sign nothing," and, turning, she left the room.

Now the Abbot and Emlyn were alone. Suddenly, before she could speak, for her tongue was tied with rage, he began to rate and curse her and to threaten horrible things against her and her mistress, such things as only a cruel Spaniard could imagine. At length he paused for breath, and she broke in--

"Peace, wicked man, lest the roof fall on you, for I am sure that every cruel word you speak shall become a snake to strike you. Will you not take warning by what befell you last night, or must there be more such lessons?"

"Oho!" he answered; "so you know of that, do you? As I thought, your witchcraft was at work there."

"How can I help knowing what the whole sky blazoned? The fat monks of Blossholme must draw their girdles tight this winter. Those stolen lands

bring no luck, it seems, and John Foterell's blood has turned to fire. Be warned, I say, be warned. Nay, I'll hear no more of your foul tongue. Lay a finger on that poor lady if you dare, and pay the price," and she too turned and went.

Ere he left the Nunnery the Abbot had an interview with Mother Matilda.

Cicely must be disciplined, he said; gently at first, afterwards with roughness, even to scourging, if need were--for her soul's sake. Also her servant Emlyn must be kept away from her--for her soul's sake, since without doubt she was a dangerous witch. Also, when the time of the birth of the child came on, he would send a wise woman to wait upon her, one who was accustomed to such cases--for her body's sake and that of her child. In the midst of the great trouble that had fallen upon them through the terrible fire at the Abbey, which had cost them such fearful loss, to say nothing of the lives of two of the servants and others burned and maimed, he had not much time to talk of such small things; but did she understand?

Then it was that Mother Matilda, the meek and gentle, brought pain and astonishment to the heart of the Lord Abbot, her spiritual superior.

She did not understand in the least. Such discipline as he suggested, whatever might be her faults and frailty, was, she declared with vigour, entirely unsuited to the case of the Lady Cicely, who, in her opinion, had suffered much for a small cause, and who, moreover, was about to

become a mother, and therefore should be treated with every gentleness. For her part, she washed her hands of the whole business, and rather than enforce such commands would lay the case before the Vicar-General in London, who, she understood, was ready to look into such matters. Or at least she would set the Lady Harflete and her servant outside the gates and call upon the charitable to assist them. Of course, however, if his Lordship chose to send a skilled woman to wait upon her in her trouble, she could have no objection, provided that this woman were a person of good repute. But in the circumstances it was idle to talk to her of bread and water and dark cells and scourgings. Such things should never happen while she was Prioress. Before they did, she and her sisters would walk out of the Nunnery and leave the King's Courts to judge of the matter.

Now the state of the Abbot was very like to that of a terrier dog which, being accustomed to worry and torment a certain ewe-sheep, comes upon the same after it has lambed and finds a new creature--one that, instead of running in affright, turns upon it and, with head and hood and all its weight of mutton, butts, and leaps, and tramples. Then what chance has that dog against the terrible and unsuspected fury of the sheep, born, as it thought, for it to tear? Then what can it do but run, panting and discomfited, to its kennel? So it was with the Abbot at the onslaught of Mother Matilda in the defence of her lamb--Cicely. With Emlyn he had been prepared to exchange bite for bite--but Mother Matilda! his own pet quarry. It was too much. He could only go away, cursing all women and their infinite variety, on which no man might

build. Who would have thought it of Mother Matilda, of all people on the earth!

So it came to pass that at the Nunnery, notwithstanding these terrible threats, things went on much as they had done before, since the times were such that even an all-powerful and remote Lord Abbot, with "right of gallows," could not drive matters to an extremity. Cicely was not shut into the dungeon and fed on bread and water, much less was she scourged. Nor was she separated from her nurse Emlyn, although it is true that the Prioress reproved her for her resistance to established authority, and when she had finished her lecture, kissed and blessed her, and called her "her sweet child, her dove and joy."

But if there was sameness at the Nunnery, at the Abbey there was constant change and excitement. Only three days after the fire the great flock of eight hundred lambs rushed one night over the Red Cliff on the fell, where, as all shepherds in that country know, there is a sheer drop of forty feet. Never was lamb's flesh so cheap in Blossholme and the country round as on the morrow of that night, while every hind within ten miles could have a winter coat for the skinning. Moreover, it was said and sworn to by the shepherds that the devil himself, with horns and hoofs, and mounted on a jackass, had been seen driving the same lambs.

Next the ghost of Sir John Foterell appeared, clad in armour, sometimes mounted and sometimes afoot, but always at night-time. First this

dreadful spirit was perceived walking in the gardens of Shefton Hall, where it met the Abbot's caretaker--for the place was now shut up--as he went to set a springe for hares. He was a man advanced in years, yet few horses ever covered the distance between Shefton and Blossholme Abbey more quickly than he did that night.

Nor would he or any other return to his charge, so that henceforth Shefton was left as a dwelling for the ghost, which, as all might see from time to time, shone in the window-places like a candle. Moreover, the said ghost travelled far and wide, for on dark, windy nights it knocked upon the doors of those that in its lifetime had been its tenants, and in a hollow voice declared that it had been murdered by the Abbot of Blossholme and his underlings, who held its daughter in durance, and, under threats of unearthly vengeance, commanded all men to bring him to justice, and to pay him neither fees nor homage.

So much terror did this ghost cause that Thomas Bolle, the swift of foot, was set to watch for it, and returned announcing that he had seen it and that it called him by his name, whereon he, being a bold fellow and believing that it was but a man, sent an arrow straight through it, at which it laughed and forthwith vanished away. More; in proof of these things he led the Abbot and his monks to the very place, and showed them where he had stood and where the ghost stood--yes, and the arrow, of which all the feathers had been mysteriously burnt off and the wood seared as though by fire, sunk deep into a tree beyond. Then, as this thing had become a scandal and a dread, the Abbot, in his robes,

solemnly laid the ghost, Thomas Bolle showing him exactly where it had passed.

This spirit being well and truly laid (like a foundation-stone), the Abbot and his monks returned homeward through the wood, but as they went a dreadful voice, which all recognized as that of Sir John Foterell, called these words from the shadows of an impenetrable thicket--for now the night was falling--

"Clement Maldonado, Abbot of Blossholme, I, whom thou didst murder, summon thee to meet me within a year before the throne of God."

Thereon all fled; yes, even the Abbot fled, or rather, as he said, his horse did, Thomas Bolle, who had lagged behind, outrunning them every one and getting home the first, saying Aves as he went.

After this, although the whole countryside hunted for it, Sir John's ghost was seen no more. Doubtless its work was done; but the Abbot explained matters differently. Other and worse things were seen, however.

One moonlight night a disturbance was heard among the cows, that bellowed and rushed about the field into which they had been turned after milking. Thinking that dogs had got amongst them, the herd and a watchman--for now no man would stir alone after sunset at Blossholme--went to see what was happening, and presently fell down half

dead with fright. For there, leaning over the gate and laughing at them, was the foul fiend himself--the fiend with horns and tail, and in his hand an instrument like a pitchfork.

How the pair got home again, they never knew, but this is certain, that after that night no one could milk those cows; moreover, some of them slipped their calves, and became so wild that they must be slaughtered.

Next came rumours that even the Nunnery itself was haunted, especially the chapel. Here voices were heard talking, and Emlyn Stower, who was praying there, came out vowing that she had seen a ball of fire which rolled up and down the aisle, and in the centre of it a man's head, that seemed to try to talk to her, but could not.

Into this matter inquiry was held by the Abbot himself, who asked Emlyn if she knew the face that was in the ball of fire. She answered that she thought so. It seemed very like to one of his own guards, named Andrew Woods, or more commonly Drunken Andrew, a Scotchman whom Sir Christopher Harflete was said to have killed on the night of the great burning. At least his Lordship would remember that this Andrew had a broken nose, and so had the head in the fire, but, as it appeared to have changed a great deal since death, she could not be quite certain. All she was sure of was that it seemed to be trying to give her some message.

Now, recalling the trick that had been played with the said Andrew's body, the Abbot was silent. Only he asked shrewdly, if Emlyn had seen so

terrible a thing there, how it came about that she was not afraid to be alone in the chapel, which he was informed she frequented much. She answered, with a laugh, that it was men she dreaded, not spirits, good or ill.

"No," he exclaimed, with a burst of rage, "you do not dread them, woman, because you are a witch, and summon them; nor shall we be free from these wizardries until the fire has you and your company."

"If so," replied Emlyn coolly, "I will ask dead Andrew for his message to you next time we meet, unless he chooses to deliver it to you himself."

So they parted, but that very night there happened the worst thing of all. It was about one in the morning when the Abbot, whose window was set open, was wakened by a voice that spoke with a Scotch accent and repeatedly called him by his name, summoning him to look out and see. He and others rose and looked, but could see nothing, for the night was very dark and rain fell. When the dawn came, however, their search was rewarded, for there, set upon a pinnacle of the Abbey church, and staring straight into the window of his Lordship's sleeping-room, from which it was but a few yards distant, was the dreadful head of Andrew Woods!

Furiously the Abbot asked who had done this horrible thing, but the monks, who were sure that it was the same being that had bewitched the

cows, only shrugged their shoulders, and suggested that the grave of Andrew should be opened to see if he had lost his head. This was done at length, although, for his own reasons, the Abbot forbade it, talking of the violation of the dead.

Well, the grave was opened when Maldon was away on one of his mysterious journeys, and lo! no Andrew was there, but only a beam of oakwood stuffed out with straw to the shape of a man and sewn up in a blanket. For the real Andrew, or rather what was left of him, lay, it may be remembered, in another grave that was supposed to be filled by Sir Christopher Harflete.

From this day forward the whole countryside for fifty miles round rang with the tales of what were known as the Blossholme witchings, of which a proof was still to be seen by all men in the withered head of Andrew perched upon its pinnacle, whence none could be found to remove it for love or money. Only it was noted that the Abbot changed his sleeping-chamber, after which, except for a sickness which struck the monks--it was thought from the drinking of sour beer--these bedevilments were abated.

Indeed, at that time men had other things to think of, since the air was thick with rumours of impending change. The King threatened the Church, and the Church prepared to resist the King. There was talk of the suppression of the monasteries--some, in fact, had already been suppressed--and more talk of a rising of the faithful in the shires of

York and Lincoln; high matters which called Abbot Maldon much away from home.

One day he returned weary, but satisfied, from a long journey, and amongst the news that awaited him found a message from the Prioress, over which he pondered while he ate his food. Also there was a letter from Spain, which he studied eagerly.

Some nine months had passed since the ship Great Yarmouth sailed, and during this time all that had been heard of her was that she had never reached Seville, so that, like every one else, the Abbot believed she had foundered in the deep seas. This was a sad event which he had borne with resignation, seeing that, although it meant the loss of his letters, which were of importance, she had aboard of her several persons whom he wished to see no more, especially Sir Christopher Harflete and Sir John Foterell's serving-man, Jeffrey Stokes, who was said to carry with him certain inconvenient documents. Even his secretary and chaplain, Brother Martin, could be spared, being, Maldon felt, a character better suited to heaven than to an earth where the best of men must be prepared sometimes to compromise with conscience.

In short, the vanishing of the Great Yarmouth was the wise decree of a far-seeing Providence, that had removed certain stumbling-blocks from his feet, which of late had been forced to travel over a rough and thorny road. For the dead tell no tales, although it was true that the ghost of Sir John Foterell and the grinning head of Drunken Andrew

on his pinnacle seemed to be instances to the contrary. Christopher Harflete and Jeffrey Stokes at the bottom of the Bay of Biscay could bring no awkward charges, and left him none to deal with save an imprisoned and forgotten girl and an unborn child.

Now things were changed again, however, for the Spanish letter in his hand told him that the Great Yarmouth had not sunk, since two members of her crew who escaped--how, it was not said--declared that she had been captured by Turkish or other infidel pirates and taken away through the Straits of Gibraltar to some place unknown. Therefore, if he had survived the voyage, Christopher Harflete might still be living, and so might Jeffrey Stokes and Brother Martin. Yet this was not likely, for probably they would have perished in the fight, being hot-headed Englishmen, all three of them, or at the best have been committed to the Turkish galleys, whence not one man in a thousand ever returned.

On the whole, then, he had little cause to fear them, who were dead, or as good as dead, especially in the midst of so many more pressing dangers. All he had to fear, all that stood between him, or rather the Church, and a very rich inheritance was the girl in the Nunnery and an unborn child, and--yes, Emlyn Stower. Well, he was sure that the child would not live, and probably the mother would not live. As for Emlyn, as she deserved, she would be burned for a witch, ere long too, now that he had time to see to it, and, if she survived her sickness, although he grieved for her, Cicely, her accomplice, should justly accompany her to the stake. Meanwhile, as Mother Matilda's message told him, this matter

of the child was urgent.

The Abbot called a monk who was waiting on him and bade him send word to a woman known as Goody Megges, bidding her come at once. Within ten minutes she entered, having, as she explained, been warned to be close at hand.

This Goody Megges, who had some local repute as a "wise woman," was a person of about fifty years of age, remarkable for her enormous size, a flat face with small oblong eyes and a little, twisted mouth, which had caused her to be nicknamed "the Flounder." She greeted the Abbot with much reverence, curtseying till he thought she would fall backwards, and having received his fatherly blessing, sank into a chair, that seemed to vanish beneath her bulk.

"You will wonder why I summon you here, friend, since this is no place for the services of those of your trade," began the Abbot, with a smile.

"Oh, no, my Lord," answered the woman; "I've heard it is to wait upon Sir Christopher Harflete's wife in her trouble."

"I wish that I could call her by the honoured name of wife," said the Abbot, with a sigh. "But a mock-marriage does not make a wife, Mistress Megges, and, alas! the poor babe, if ever it should be born, will be but a bastard, marked from its birth with the brand of shame."

Now, the Flounder, who was no fool, began to take her cue.

"It is sad, very sad, your Holiness--no, that's wrong; but never mind, it will be right before all's done, and a good omen, I say, coming so sudden and chancy--your Lordship, I mean--not but what there's lots of the sort about here, as is generally the case round a--I mean everywhere. Moreover, they generally grow up bad and ungrateful, as I know well from my own three--not but what, of course, I was married fast enough. Well, what I was going to say was, that when things is so, sometimes it is a true blessing if the little innocents should go off at the first, and so be spared the finger of shame and the sniff of scorn," and she paused.

"Yes, Mistress Megges, or at least in such a case it is not for us to rail at the decree of Heaven--provided, of course, that the infant has lived long enough to be baptized," he added hastily.

"No, your Eminence, no. That's just what I said to that Smith girl last spring, when, being a heavy sleeper, I happened to overlie her brat and woke up to find it flat and blue. When she saw it she took on, bellowing like a heifer that has lost its first calf, and I said to her, 'Mary, this isn't me; it's Heaven. Mary, you should be very thankful, since my burden has rid you of your burden, and you can bury such a tiny one for next to nothing. Mary, cry a little if you like, for that's natural with the first, but don't come here flying in the face of Heaven with your railings, and gates, and posts--especially the rails, for Heaven hates

'em.'"

"Ah!" asked the Abbot, with mild interest, "and pray what did Mary do then?"

"Do, the graceless wench? Why, she said, 'Is it rails you're talking of, you pig-smothering old sow? Then here's a rail for you,' and she pulled the top bar off my own fence--for we were talking by the door--oak it was, and three by two--and knocked me flat--here's the scar of it on my head--singing out, 'Is that enough, or will you have the gate and the posts too?' Oh! If there's one thing I hate, it is railing, 'specially if made of hard oak and held edgeways."

So the wicked old hag babbled on, after her hideous fashion, while the Abbot stared at the ceiling.

"Enough of these sad stories of vice and violence. Such mischances will happen, and of course you were not to blame. Now, good Mistress Megges, will you undertake this case, which cannot be left to ignorant nuns? Though times are hard here, since of late many losses have fallen on our house, your skill shall be well paid."

The woman shuffled her big feet and stared at the floor, then looked up suddenly with a glance that seemed to bore to his heart like a bradawl, and asked--

"And if perchance the blessed babe should fly to heaven through my fingers, as in my time I have known dozens of them do, should I still get that pay?"

"Then," the Abbot answered, with a smile--a somewhat sickly smile--"then I think, mistress, you should have double pay, to console you for your sorrow and for any doubts that might be thrown upon your skill."

"Now that's noble trading," she replied, with an evil leer, "such as one might hope for from an Abbot. But, my Lord, they say the Nunnery is haunted, and I can't face ghosts. Man or woman, with rails or without 'em, Mother Flounder doesn't mind, but ghosts--no! Also Mistress Stower is a witch, and might lay a curse on me; and those nuns are full of crinks and cranks, and can pray an honest soul to death."

"Come, come, my time is short. What is it you want, woman? Out with it."

"The inn there at the ford--your Lordship, will need a tenant next month. It's a good paying house for those who know how to keep their mouths shut and to look the other way, and through vile scandal and evil slanderers, such as the Smith girl, my business isn't what it was. Now if I could have it without rent for the first two years, till I had time to work up the trade----"

The Abbot, who could bear no more of the creature, rose from his chair and said sharply--

"I will remember. Yes, I will promise. Go now; the reverent Mother is advised of your coming. And report to me night and morning of the progress of the case. Why, woman, what are you doing?" for she had suddenly slid to her knees and grasped his robes with her thick, filthy hands.

"Absolution, holy Lordship; I ask absolution and blessing--pax Meggiscum, and the rest of it."

"Absolution? There is nothing to absolve."

"Oh! yes, my Lord, there is plenty, though I am wondering who will absolve you for your half. Also there are rows of little angels that sometimes won't let me sleep, and that's why I can't stomach ghosts. I'd rather sup in winter on cold small ale and half-cooked pork than face even a still-born ghost."

"Begone!" said the Abbot, in such a voice that she scrambled to her feet and went, unblessed and unabsolved.

When the door had closed behind her he went to the window and flung it wide, although the night was foul.

"By all the saints!" he muttered, "that beastly murderess poisons the air. Why, I wonder, does God allow such filthy things to live? Cannot

she ply her hell-trade less grossly? Oh! Clement Maldonado, how low are you sunk that you must use tools like these, and on such a business. And yet there is no other way. Not for myself, but for the Church, O Lord! The great plot thickens, and all men clamour to me, its head and spring, for money. Give me money, and within six months Yorkshire and the North will be up, and without a year Henry the Anti-Christ will be dead and the Princess Mary fast upon the throne, with the Emperor and the Pope for watchdogs. That stiff-necked Cicely must die and her babe must die, and then I'll twist the secret of the jewels out of the witch, Emlyn--on the rack, if need be. Those jewels--I've seen them so often; why, they would feed an army; but while Cicely or her brat lives where is my claim to them? So, alas! they must die, but oh! the hag is right. Who shall give me absolution for a deed I hate? Not for me, not for me, O my Patron, but for the Church!" and flinging himself to the floor before the holy image of his chosen Saint, he rested his head upon its feet and wept.