

CHAPTER X

MOTHER MEGGES AND THE GHOST

Flounder Megges, with all the paraphernalia of her trade, was established as nurse to Cicely at the Nunnery. This establishment, it is true, had not been easy since Emlyn, who knew something of the woman's repute, and suspected more, resisted it with all her strength, but here the Prioress intervened in her gentle way. She herself, she explained, did not like this person, who looked so odd, drank so much beer and talked so fast. Yet she had made inquiries and found that she was extraordinarily skilled in matters of that nature. Indeed, it was said that she had succeeded in cases that were wonderfully difficult which the leech had abandoned as hopeless, though of course there had been other cases where she had not succeeded. But these, she was informed, were generally those of poor people who did not pay her well. Now in this instance her pay would be ample, for she, Mother Matilda, had promised her a splendid fee out of her private store, and for the rest, since no man doctor might enter there, who else was competent? Not she or the other nuns, for none of them had been married save old Bridget, who was silly and had long ago forgotten all such things. Not Emlyn even, who was but a girl when her own child was born, and since then had been otherwise employed. Therefore there was no choice.

To this reasoning Emlyn agreed perforce, though she mistrusted her of the fat wretch, whose appearance poor Cicely also disliked. Still, for

very fear Emlyn was humble and civil to her, for if she were not, who could know if she would put out all her skill upon behalf of her mistress? Therefore she did her bidding like a slave, and spiced her beer and made her bed and even listened to her foul jests and talk unmurmuringly.

The business was over at length, and the child, a noble boy, born into the world. Had not the Flounder produced it in triumph laid upon a little basket covered with a lamb-skin, and had not Emlyn and Mother Matilda and all the nuns kissed and blessed it? Had it not also, for fear of accident (such was the fatherly forethought of the Abbot), been baptized at once by a priest who was waiting, under the names of John Christopher Foterell, John after its grandfather and Christopher after its father, with Foterell for a surname, since the Abbot would not allow that it should be called Harflete, being, as he averred, base-born?

So this child was born, and Mother Megges swore that of all the two hundred and three that she had issued into the world it was the finest, nine and a half pounds in weight at the very least. Also, as its voice and movements testified, it was lusty and like to live, for did not the Flounder, in sight of all the wondering nuns, hold it up hanging by its hands to her two fat forefingers, and afterwards drink a whole quart of spiced ale to its health and long life?

But if the babe was like to live, Cicely was like to die. Indeed, she was very, very ill, and perhaps would have passed away had it not been for a device of Emlyn's. For when she was at her worst and the Flounder, shaking her head and saying that she could do no more, had departed to her eternal ale and a nap, Emlyn crept up and took her mistress's cold hand.

"Darling," she said, "hear me," but Cicely did not stir. "Darling," she repeated, "hear me, I have news for you of your husband."

Cicely's white face turned a little on the pillow and her blue eyes opened.

"Of my husband?" she whispered. "Why, he is gone, as I soon shall be. What news of him?"

"That he is not gone, that he lives, or so I believe, though heretofore I have hid it from you."

The head was lifted for a moment, and the eyes stared at her with wondering joy.

"Do you trick me, Nurse? Nay, you would never do that. Give me the milk, I want it now. I'll listen. I promise you I'll not die till you have told me. If Christopher lives why should I die who only hoped to find him?"

So Emlyn whispered all she knew. It was not much, only that Christopher had not been buried in the grave where he was said to be buried, and that he had been taken wounded aboard the ship Great Yarmouth, of the fate of which ship fortunately she had heard nothing. Still, slight as they might be, to Cicely these tidings were a magic medicine, for did they not mean the rebirth of hope, hope that for nine long months had been dead and buried with Christopher? From that moment she began to mend.

When the Flounder, having slept off her drink, returned to the sick-bed, she stared at her amazed and muttered something about witchcraft, she who had been sure that she would die, as in those days so many women did who fell into hands like hers. Indeed, she was bitterly disappointed, knowing that this death was desired by her employer, who now after all might let the Ford Inn to another. Moreover, the child was no waster, but one who was set for life. Well, that at least she could mend, and if it were done quickly the shock might kill the mother. Yet the thing was not so easy as it looked, for there were many loving eyes upon that babe.

When she wished to take it to her bed at night Emlyn forbade her fiercely, and on being appealed to, the Prioress, who knew the creature's drunken habits and had heard rumours of the fate of the Smith infant and others, gave orders that it was not to be. So, since the mother was too weak to have it with her, the boy was laid in a little

cot at her side. And always day and night one or more of the sweet-faced nuns stood at the head of that cot watching as might a guardian angel. Also it took only Nature's food since from the first Cicely would nurse it, so that she could not mix any drug with its milk that would cause it to sleep itself away.

So the days went on, bringing black wrath, despair almost, to the heart of Mother Megges, till at length there came the chance she sought. One fine evening, when the nuns were gathered at vespers, but as it happened not in the chapel, because since the tale of the hauntings they shunned the place after high noon, Cicely, whose strength was returning to her, asked Emlyn to change her garments and remake her bed. Meanwhile, the babe was given to Sister Bridget, who doted on it, with instructions to take it to walk in the garden for a time, since the rain had passed off and the afternoon was now very soft and pleasant. So she went, and there presently was met by the Flounder, who was supposed to be asleep, but had followed her, a person of whom the half-witted Bridget was much afraid.

"What are you doing with my babe, old fool?" she screeched at her, thrusting her fat face to within an inch of the nun's. "You'll let it fall and I shall be blamed. Give me the angel or I will twist your nose for you. Give it me, I say, and get you gone."

In her fear and flurry old Bridget obeyed and departed at a run. Then, recovering herself a little, or drawn by some instinct, she returned,

hid herself in a clump of lilac bushes and watched.

Presently she saw the Flounder, after glancing about to make sure that she was alone, enter the chapel, carrying the child, and heard her bolt the door after her. Now Bridget, as she said afterwards, grew very frightened, she knew not why, and, acting on impulse, ran to the chancel window and, climbing on to a wheelbarrow that stood there, looked through it. This is what she saw.

Mother Megges was kneeling in the chancel, as she thought at first, to say her prayers, till she perceived, for a ray from the setting sun showed it all, that on the paving before her lay the infant and that this she-devil was thrusting her thick forefinger down its throat, for already it grew black in the face, and as she thrust muttering savagely. So horror-struck was Bridget that she could neither move nor cry.

Then, while she stood petrified, suddenly there appeared the figure of a man in rusty armour. The Flounder looked up, saw him and, withdrawing her finger from the mouth of the child, let out yell after yell. The man, who said nothing, drew a sword and lifted it, whereon the murderess screamed--

"The ghost! The ghost! Spare me, Sir John, I am poor and he paid me. Spare me for Christ's sake!" and so saying, she rolled on to the floor in a fit, and there turned and twisted until she lay still.

Then the man, or the ghost of a man, having looked at her, sheathed his sword and lifting up the babe, which now drew its breath again and cried, marched with it down the aisle. The next thing of which Bridget became aware was that he stood before her, the infant in his arms, holding it out to her. His face she could not see, for the vizor was down, but he spoke in a hollow voice, saying--

"This gift from Heaven to the Lady Harflete. Bid her fear nothing, for one devil I have garnered and the others are ripe for reaping."

Bridget took the child and sank down on to the ground, and at that moment the nuns, alarmed by the awful yells, rushed through the side door, headed by Mother Matilda. They too saw the figure, and knew the Foterell cognizance upon its helm and shield. But it waited not to speak to them, only passed behind some trees and vanished.

Their first care was for the infant, which they thought the man was stealing; then, after they were sure that it had taken no real hurt, they questioned old Bridget, but could get nothing from her, for all she did was to gibber and point first to the barrow and next to the chancel window. At length Mother Matilda understood and, climbing on to the barrow, looked through the window as Bridget had done. She looked, she saw, and fell back fainting.

An hour had gone by. The child, unhurt save for a little bruising of its tender mouth, was asleep upon its mother's breast. Bridget, having recovered, at length had told all her tale to every one of them save Cicely, who as yet knew nothing, for she and Emlyn did not hear the screams, their rooms being on the other side of the building. The Abbot had been sent for, and, accompanied by monks, arrived in the midst of a thunder-storm and pouring rain. He, too, had heard the tale, heard it with a pale face while his monks crossed themselves. At length he asked of the woman Megges. They replied that living or dead she was, as they supposed, still in the chapel, which none of them had dared to enter.

"Come, let us see," said the Abbot, and they went there to find the door locked as Bridget had said.

Smiths were sent for and broke it in while all stood in the pouring rain and watched. It was open at last, and they entered with torches and tapers, for now the darkness was dense, the Abbot leading them. They came to the chancel, where something lay upon the floor, and held down the torches to look. Then they saw that which caused them all to turn and fly, calling on the saints to protect them. In her life Mother Megges had not been lovely, but in the death that had overtaken her----!

It was morning. The Lord Abbot and his monks were assembled in the guest-chamber, and opposite to them were the Lady Prioress and her nuns,

and with them Emlyn.

"Witchcraft!" shouted the Abbot, smiting his fist upon the table, "black witchcraft! Satan himself and his foulest demons walk the countryside and have their home in this Nunnery. Last night they manifested themselves----"

"By saving a babe from a cruel death and bringing a hateful murderess to doom," broke in Emlyn.

"Silence, Sorceress," shouted the Abbot. "Get thee behind me, Satan. I know you and your familiars," and he glared at the Prioress.

"What may you mean, my Lord Abbot?" asked Mother Matilda, bristling up.

"My sisters and I do not understand. Emlyn Stower is right. Do you call that witchcraft which works so good an end? The ghost of Sir John Foterell appeared here--we admit it who saw that ghost. But what did the spirit do? It slew the hellish woman whom you sent among us and it rescued the blessed babe when her finger was down its throat to choke out its pure life. If that be witchcraft I stand by it. Tell us what did the wretch mean when she cried out to the spirit to spare her because she was poor and had been bribed for her iniquity? Who bribed her, my Lord Abbot? None in this house, I'll swear. And who changed Sir John Foterell from flesh to spirit? Why is he a ghost to-day?"

"Am I here to answer riddles, woman, and who are you that you dare put

such questions to me? I depose you, I set your house under ban. The judgment of the Church shall be pronounced against you all. Dare not to leave your doors until the Court is composed to try you. Think not you shall escape. Your English land is sick and heresy stalks abroad; but," he added slowly, "fire can still bite and there is store of faggots in the woods. Prepare your souls for judgment. Now I go."

"Do as it pleases you," answered the enraged Mother Matilda. "When you set out your case we will answer it; but, meanwhile, we pray that you take what is left of your dead hireling with you, for we find her ill company and here she shall have no burial. My Lord Abbot, the charter of this Nunnery is from the monarch of England, whatever authority you and those that went before you have usurped. It was granted by the first Edward, and the appointment of every prioress since his day has been signed by the sovereign and no other. I hold mine under the manual of the eighth Henry. You cannot depose me, for I appeal from the Abbot to the King. Fare you well, my Lord," and, followed by her little train of aged nuns, she swept from the room like an offended queen.

After the terrible death of the child-murderess and the restoration of her babe to her unharmed, Cicely's recovery was swift. Within a week she was up and walking, and within ten days as strong, or stronger, than ever she had been. Nothing more had been heard of the Abbot, and though all knew that danger threatened them from this quarter they were content to enjoy the present hour of peace and wait till it was at hand.

But in Cicely's awakened mind there arose a keen desire to learn more of what her nurse had hinted to her when she lay upon the very edge of death. Day by day she plied Emlyn with questions till at length she knew all; namely, that the tidings came from Thomas Bolle, and that he, dressed in her father's armour, was the ghost who had saved her boy from death. Now nothing would serve her but that she must see Thomas herself, as she said, to thank him, though truly, as Emlyn knew well, to draw from his own lips every detail and circumstance that she could gather concerning Christopher.

For a while Emlyn held out against her, for she knew the dangers of such a meeting; but in the end, being able to refuse her lady nothing, she gave way.

At length at the appointed hour of sunset Emlyn and Cicely stood in the chapel, whither the latter told the nuns she wished to go to return thanks for her deliverance from many dangers. They knelt before the altar, and while they made pretence to pray there heard knocks, which were the signal of the presence of Thomas Bolle. Emlyn answered them with other knocks, which told that all was safe, whereon the wooden image turned and Thomas appeared, dressed as before in Sir John Foterell's armour. So like did he seem to her dead father in this familiar mail that for a moment Cicely thought it must be he, and her knees trembled until he knelt before her, kissing her hand, asking after her health and that of the infant and whether she were satisfied with his service.

"Indeed and indeed yes," she answered; "and oh, friend! all that I have henceforth is yours should I ever have anything again, who am but a prisoned beggar. Meanwhile, my blessing and that of Heaven rest upon you, you gallant man."

"Thank me not, Lady," answered the honest Thomas. "To speak truth it was Emlyn whom I served, for though monks parted us we have been friends for many a year. As for the matter of the child and that spawn of hell, the Flounder, be grateful to God, not to me, for it was by mere chance that I came here that evening, which I had not intended to do. I was going about my business with the cattle when something seemed to tell me to arm and come. It was as though a hand pushed me, and the rest you know, and so I think by now does Mother Megges," he added grimly.

"Yes, yes, Thomas; and in truth I do thank God, Whose finger I see in all this business, as I thank you, His instrument. But there are other things whereof Emlyn has spoken to me. She said--ah! she said my husband, whom I thought slain and buried, in truth was only wounded and not buried, but shipped over-sea. Tell me that story, friend, omitting nothing, but swiftly for our time is short. I thirst to hear it from your own lips."

So in his slow, wandering way he told her, word by word, all that he had seen, all that he had learned, and the sum of it was that Sir Christopher had been shipped abroad upon the Great Yarmouth, sorely

wounded but not dead, and that with him had sailed Jeffrey Stokes and the monk Martin.

"That's ten months gone," said Cicely. "Has naught been heard of this ship? By now she should be home again."

Thomas hesitated, then answered--

"No tidings came of her from Spain. Then, although I said nothing of it even to Emlyn, she was reported lost with all hands at sea. Then came another story----"

"Ah! that other story?"

"Lady, two of her crew reached the Wash. I did not see them, and they have shipped again for Marseilles in France. But I spoke with a shepherd who is half-brother to one of them, and he told me that from him he learned that the Great Yarmouth was set upon by two Turkish pirates and captured after a brave fight in which the captain Goody and others were killed. This man and his comrade escaped in a boat and drifted to and fro till they were picked up by a homeward-bound caravel which landed them at Hull. That's all I know--save one thing."

"One thing! Oh, what thing, Thomas? That my husband is dead?"

"Nay, nay, the very opposite, that he is alive, or was, for these men

saw him and Jeffrey Stokes and Martin the priest, no craven as I know, fighting like devils till the Turks overwhelmed them by numbers, and, having bound their hands, carried them all three unwounded on board one of their ships, wishing doubtless to make slaves of such brave fellows."

Now, although Emlyn would have stopped her, still Cicely plied him with questions, which he answered as best he could, till suddenly a sound caught his ear.

"Look at the window!" he exclaimed.

They looked, and saw a sight that froze their blood, for there staring at them through the glass was the dark face of the Abbot, and with it other faces.

"Betray me not, or I shall burn," he whispered. "Say only that I came to haunt you," and silently as a shadow he glided to his niche and was gone.

"What now, Emlyn?"

"One thing only--Thomas must be saved. A bold face and stand to it. Is it our fault if your father's ghost should haunt this chapel? Remember, your father's ghost, no other. Ah! here they come."

As she spoke the door was thrown wide, and through it came the Abbot

and his rout of attendants. Within two paces of the women they halted, hanging together like bees, for they were afraid, while a voice cried, "Seize the witches!"

Cicely's terror passed from her and she faced them boldly.

"What would you with us, my Lord Abbot?" she asked.

"We would know, Sorceress, what shape was that which spoke with you but now, and whither has it gone?"

"The same that saved my child and called the Sword of God down upon the murderess. It wore my father's armour, but its face I did not see. It has gone whence it came, but where that is I know not. Discover if you can."

"Woman, you trifle with us. What said the Thing?"

"It spoke of the slaughter of Sir John Foterell by King's Grave Mount and of those who wrought it," and she looked at him steadily until his eyes fell before hers.

"What else?"

"It told me that my husband is not dead. Neither did you bury him as you put about, but shipped him hence to Spain, whence it prophesied he will

return again to be revenged upon you. It told me that he was captured by the infidel Moors, and with him Jeffrey Stokes, my father's servant, and the priest Martin, your secretary. Then it looked up and vanished, or seemed to vanish, though perhaps it is among us now."

"Aye," answered the Abbot, "Satan, with whom you hold converse, is always among us. Cicely Foterell and Emlyn Stower, you are foul witches, self-confessed. The world has borne your sorceries too long, and you shall answer for them before God and man, as I, the Lord Abbot of Blossholme, have right and authority to make you do. Seize these witches and let them be kept fast in their chamber till I constitute the Court Ecclesiastic for their trial."

So they took hold of Cicely and Emlyn and led them to the Nunnery. As they crossed the garden they were met by Mother Matilda and the nuns, who, for a second time within a month, ran out to see what was the tumult in the chapel.

"What is it now, Cicely?" asked the Prioress.

"Now we are witches, Mother," she answered, with a sad smile.

"Aye," broke in Emlyn, "and the charge is that the ghost of the murdered Sir John Foterell was seen speaking to us."

"Why, why?" exclaimed the Prioress. "If the spirit of a woman's father

appears to her is she therefore to be declared a witch? Then is poor Sister Bridget a witch also, for this same spirit brought the child to her?"

"Aye," said the Abbot, "I had forgotten her. She is another of the crew, let her be seized and shut up also. Greatly do I hope, when it comes to the hour of trial, that there may not be found to be more of them," and he glanced at the poor nuns with menace in his eye.

So Cicely and Emlyn were shut within their room and strictly guarded by monks, but otherwise not ill-treated. Indeed, save for their confinement, there was little change in their condition. The child was allowed to be with Cicely, the nuns were allowed to visit her.

Only over both of them hung the shadow of great trouble. They were aware, and it seemed to them purposely suffered to be aware, that they were about to be tried for their lives upon monstrous and obscene charges; namely, that they had consorted with a dim and awful creature called the Enemy of Mankind, whom, it was supposed, human beings had power to call to their counsel and assistance. To them who knew well that this being was Thomas Bolle, the thing seemed absurd. Yet it could not be denied that the said Thomas at Emlyn's instigation had worked much evil on the monks of Blossholme, paying them, or rather their Abbot, back in his own coin.

Yet what was to be done? To tell the facts would be to condemn Thomas

to some fearful fate which even then they would be called upon to share, although possibly they might be cleared of the charge of witchcraft.

Emlyn set the matter before Cicely, urging neither one side nor the other, and waited her judgment. It was swift and decisive.

"This is a coil that we cannot untangle," said Cicely. "Let us betray no one, but put our trust in God. I am sure," she added, "that God will help us as He did when Mother Megges would have murdered my boy. I shall not attempt to defend myself by wronging others. I leave everything to Him."

"Strange things have happened to many who trusted in God; to that the whole evil world bears witness," said Emlyn doubtfully.

"May be," answered Cicely in her quiet fashion, "perhaps because they did not trust enough or rightly. At least there lies my path and I will walk in it--to the fire if need be."

"There is some seed of greatness in you; to what will it grow, I wonder?" replied Emlyn, with a shrug of her shoulders.

On the morrow this faith of Cicely's was put to a sharp test. The Abbot came and spoke with Emlyn apart. This was the burden of his song--

"Give me those jewels and all may yet be well with you and your

mistress, vile witches though you are. If not, you burn."

As before she denied all knowledge of them.

"Find me the jewels or you burn," he answered. "Would you pay your lives for a few miserable gems?"

Now Emlyn weakened, not for her own sake, and said she would speak with her mistress.

He bade her do so.

"I thought that those jewels were burned, Emlyn, do you then know where they are?" asked Cicely.

"Aye, I have said nothing of it to you, but I know. Speak the word and I give them up to save you."

Cicely thought a while and kissed her child, which she held in her arms, then laughed aloud and answered--

"Not so. That Abbot shall never be richer for any gem of mine. I have told you in what I trust, and it is not jewels. Whether I burn or whether I am saved, he shall not have them."

"Good," said Emlyn, "that is my mind also, I only spoke for your sake,"

and she went out and told the Abbot.

He came into Cicely's chamber and raged at them. He said that they should be excommunicated, then tortured and then burned; but Cicely, whom he had thought to frighten, never winced.

"If so, so let it be," she replied, "and I will bear all as best I can.

I know nothing of these jewels, but if they still exist they are mine, not yours, and I am innocent of any witchcraft. Do your work, for I am sure that the end shall be far other than you think."

"What!" said the Abbot, "has the foul fiend been with you again that you talk thus certainly? Well, Sorceress, soon you will sing another tune," and he went to the door and summoned the Prioress.

"Put these women upon bread and water," he said, "and prepare them for the rack, that they may discover their accomplices."

Mother Matilda set her gentle face, and answered--

"It shall not be done in this Nunnery, my Lord Abbot. I know the law, and you have no such power. Moreover, if you move them hence, who are my guests, I appeal to the King, and meanwhile raise the country on you."

"Said I not that they had accomplices?" sneered the Abbot, and went his way.

But of the torture no more was heard, for that appeal to the King had an ill sound in his ears.