

## CHAPTER XI

### DOOMED

It was the day of trial. From dawn Cicely and Emlyn had seen people hurrying in and out of the gates of the Nunnery, and heard workmen making preparation in the guest-hall below their chamber. About eight one of the nuns brought them their breakfast. Her face was scared and white; she only spoke in whispers, looking behind her continually as though she knew she was being watched.

Emlyn asked who their judges were, and she answered--

"The Abbot, a strange, black-faced Prior, and the Old Bishop. Oh! God help you, my sisters; God help us all!" and she fled away.

Now for a moment Emlyn's heart failed her, since before such a tribunal what chance had they? The Abbot was their bitter enemy and accuser; the strange Prior, no doubt, one of his friends and kindred; while the ecclesiastic spoken of as the "Old Bishop" was well known as perhaps the cruelest man in England, a scourge of heretics--that is, before heresy became the fashion--a hunter-out of witches and wizards, and a time-server to boot. But to Cicely she said nothing, for what was the use, seeing that soon she would learn all?

They ate their food, knowing both of them that they would need strength.

Then Cicely nursed her child, and, placing it in Emlyn's arms, knelt down to pray. While she was still praying the door opened and a procession appeared. First came two monks, then six armed men of the Abbot's guard, then the Prioress and three of her nuns. At the sight of the beautiful young woman kneeling at her prayers the guards, rough men though they were, stopped, as if unwilling to disturb her, but one of the monks cried brutally--

"Seize the accursed hypocrite, and if she will not come, drag her with you," at the same time stretching out his hand as though to grasp her arm.

But Cicely rose and faced him, saying--

"Do not touch me; I follow. Emlyn, give me the child, and let us go."

So they went in the midst of the armed men, the monks preceding, the nuns, with bowed heads, following after. Presently they entered the large hall, but on its threshold were ordered to pause while way was made for them. Cicely never forgot the sight of it as it appeared that day. The lofty, arched roof of rich chestnut-wood, set there hundreds of years before by hands that spared neither work nor timber, amongst the beams of which the bright light of morning played so clearly that she could see the spiders' webs, and in one of them a sleepy autumn wasp caught fast. The mob of people gathered to watch her public trial--faces, many of them, that she had known from childhood.

How they stared at her as she stood there by the head of the steps, her sleeping child held in her arms! They were a packed audience and had been prepared to condemn her--that she could see and hear, for did not some of them point and frown, and set up a cry of "Witch!" as they had been told to do? But it died away. The sight of her, the daughter of one of their great men and the widow of another, standing in her innocent beauty, the slumbering babe upon her breast, seemed to quell them, till the hardest faces grew pitiful--full of resentment, too, some of them, but not against her.

Then the three judges on the bench behind the table, at which sat the monkish secretaries; the hard-faced, hook-nosed "Old Bishop" in his gorgeous robes and mitre, his crozier resting against the panelling behind him, peering about him with beady eyes. The sullen, heavy-jawed Prior, from some distant county, on his left, clad in a simple black gown with a girdle about his waist. And on the right Clement Maldon, Abbot of Blossholme and enemy of her house, suave, olive-faced, foreign-looking, his black, uneasy eyes observing all, his keen ears catching every word and murmur as he whispered something to the Bishop that caused him to smile grimly. Lastly, placed already in the roped space and guarded by a soldier, poor old Bridget, the half-witted, who was gabbling words to which no one paid any heed.

The path was clear now, and they were ordered to walk on. Half-way up the hall something red attracted Cicely's attention, and, glancing

round, she saw that it was the beard of Thomas Bolle. Their eyes met, and his were full of fear. In an instant she understood that he dreaded lest he should be betrayed and given over to some awful doom.

"Fear nothing," she whispered as she passed, and he heard her, or perhaps Emlyn's glance told him that he was safe. At least, a sign of relief broke from him.

Now they had entered the roped space, and stood there.

"Your name?" asked one of the secretaries, pointing to Cicely with the feather of his quill.

"All know it, it is Cicely Harflete," she answered gently, whereon the clerk said roughly that she lied, and the old wrangle began again as to the validity of her marriage, the Abbot maintaining that she was still Cicely Foterell, the mother of a base-born child.

Into this argument the Bishop entered with some zest, asking many questions, and seeming more or less to take her side, since, where matters of religion were not concerned, he was a keen lawyer, and just enough. At length, however, he swept the thing away, remarking brutally that if half he had heard were true, soon the name by which she had last been called in life would not concern her, and bade the clerks write her down as Cicely Harflete or Foterell.

Then Emlyn gave her name, and Sister Bridget's was written without question. Next the charge against them was read. It was long and technical, mixed up with Latin words and phrases, and all that Cicely made out of it was that they were accused of many horrible crimes, and of having called up the devil and consorted with him in the shape of a monster with horns and hoofs, and of her father's ghost. When it was finished they were commanded to answer, and pleaded Not Guilty, or rather Cicely and Emlyn did, for Bridget broke into a long tale that could not be followed. She was ordered to be silent, after which no one took any more heed of what she said.

Now the Bishop asked whether these women had been put to the question, and when he was told No, said that it seemed a pity, as evidently they were stubborn witches, and some discipline of the sort might have saved trouble. Again he asked if the witch's marks had been found on them--that is, the spot where the devil had sealed their bodies, on which, as was well known, his chosen could feel no pain. He even suggested that the trial should be adjourned until they had been pricked all over with a nail to find this spot, but ultimately gave up the point to save time.

A last question was raised by the beetle-browed Prior, who submitted that the infant ought also to be accused, since he, too, was said to have consorted with the devil, having, according to the story, been rescued from death by him and afterwards been carried in his arms and given to the nun Bridget, which was the only evidence against the said

Bridget. If she was guilty, why, then, was the infant innocent? Ought not they to burn together, since a babe that had been nursed by the Evil One was obviously damned?

The legal-minded Bishop found this argument interesting, but ultimately decided that it was safer to overrule it on account of the tender age of the criminal. He added that it did not matter, since doubtless the foul fiend would claim his own ere long.

Lastly, before the witnesses were called, Emlyn asked for an advocate to defend them, but the Bishop replied, with a chuckle, that it was quite unnecessary, since already they had the best of all advocates--Satan himself.

"True, my Lord," said Cicely, looking up, "we have the best of all advocates, only you have mis-named him. The God of the innocent is our advocate, and in Him I trust."

"Blaspheme not, Sorceress," shouted the old man; and the evidence commenced.

To follow it in detail is not necessary, and, indeed, would be long, for it took many hours. First of all Emlyn's early life was set out, much being made of the fact that her mother was a gypsy who had committed suicide and that her father had fallen under the ban of the Inquisition, an heretical work of his having been publicly burned. Then the Abbot

himself gave evidence, since, where the charge was sorcery, no one seemed to think it strange that the same man should both act as judge and be the principal witness for the prosecution. He told of Cicely's wild words after the burning of Cranwell Towers, from which burning she and her familiar, Emlyn, had evidently escaped by magic, without the aid of which it was plain they could not have lived. He told of Emlyn's threats to him after she had looked into the bowl of water; of all the dreadful things that had been seen and done at Blossholme, which no doubt these witches had brought about--here he was right--though how he knew not. He told of the death of the midwife and of the appearance which she presented afterwards--a tale that caused his audience to shudder; and, lastly, he told of the vision of the ghost of Sir John Foterell holding converse with the two accused in the chapel of the Nunnery, and its vanishing away.

When at length he had finished Emlyn asked leave to cross-examine him, but this was refused on the ground that persons accused of such crimes had no right to cross-examine.

Then the Court adjourned for a while to eat, some food being brought for the prisoners, who were forced to take it where they stood. Worse still, Cicely was driven to nurse her child in the presence of all that audience, who stared and giped at her rudely, and were angry because Emlyn and some of the nuns stood round her to form a living screen.

When the judges returned the evidence went on. Though most of it was

entirely irrelevant, its volume was so great that at length the Old Bishop grew weary, and said he would hear no more. Then the judges went on to put, first to Cicely and afterwards to Emlyn, a series of questions of a nature so abominable that after denying the first of them indignantly, they stood silent, refusing to answer--proof positive of their guilt, as the black-browed Prior remarked in triumph. Lastly, these hideous queries being exhausted, Cicely was asked if she had anything to say.

"Somewhat," she answered; "but I am weary, and must be brief. I am no witch; I do not know what it means. The Abbot of Blossholme, who sits as my judge, is my grievous enemy. He claimed my father's lands--which lands I believe he now holds--and cruelly murdered my said father by King's Grave Mount in the forest as he was riding to London to make complaint of him and reveal his treachery to his Grace the King and his Council----"

"It is a lie, witch," broke in the Abbot, but, taking no heed, Cicely went on--

"Afterwards he and his hired soldiers attacked the house of my husband, Sir Christopher Harflete, and burnt it, slaying, or striving to slay--I know not which--my said husband, who has vanished away. Then he imprisoned me and my servant, Emlyn Stower, in this Nunnery, and strove to force me to sign papers conveying all my own and my child's property to him. This I refused to do, and therefore it is that he puts me on my



trial, because, as I am told, those who are found guilty of witchcraft are stripped of all their possessions, which those take who are strong enough to keep them. Lastly, I deny the authority of this Court, and appeal to the King, who soon or late will hear my cry and avenge my wrongs, and maybe my murder, upon those who wrought them. Good people all, hear my words. I appeal to the King, and to him under God above I entrust my cause, and, should I die, the guardianship of my orphan son, whom the Abbot sent his creature to murder--his vile creature, upon whose head fell the Almighty's justice, as it will fall on yours, you slaughterers of the innocent."

So spoke Cicely, and, having spoken, worn out with fatigue and misery, sank to the floor--for all these hours there had been no stool for her to sit on--and crouched there, still holding her child in her arms--a piteous sight indeed, which touched even the superstitious hearts of the crowd who watched her.

Now this appeal of hers to the King seemed to scare the fierce Old Bishop, who turned and began to argue with the Abbot. Cicely, listening, caught some of his words, such as--

"On your head be it, then. I judge only of the cause ecclesiastic, and shall direct it to be so entered upon the records. Of the execution of the sentence or the disposal of the property I wash my hands. See you to it."

"So spoke Pilate," broke in Cicely, lifting her head and looking him in the eyes. Then she let it fall again, and was silent.

Now Emlyn opened her lips, and from them burst a fierce torrent of words.

"Do you know," she began, "who and what is this Spanish priest who sits to judge us of witchcraft? Well, I will tell you. Years ago he fled from Spain because of hideous crimes that he had committed there. Ask him of Isabella the nun, who was my father's cousin, and her end and that of her companions. Ask him of----"

At this point a monk, to whom the Abbot had whispered something, slipped behind Emlyn and threw a cloth over her face. She tore it away with her strong hands, and screamed out--

"He is a murderer, he is a traitor. He plots to kill the King. I can prove it, and that's why Foterell died--because he knew----"

The Abbot shouted something, and again the monk, a stout fellow named Ambrose, got the cloth over her mouth. Once more she wrenched herself loose, and, turning towards the people, called--

"Have I never a friend, who have befriended so many? Is there no man in Blossholme who will avenge me of this brute Ambrose? Aye, I see some."

Then this Ambrose, and others aiding him, fell upon her, striking her on the head and choking her, till at length she sank, half stunned and gasping, to the ground.

Now, after a hurried word or two with his colleagues, the Bishop sprang up, and as darkness gathered in the hall--for the sun had set--pronounced the sentence of the Court.

First he declared the prisoners guilty of the foulest witchcraft. Next he excommunicated them with much ceremony, delivering their souls to their master, Satan. Then, incidentally, he condemned their bodies to be burnt, without specifying when, how, or by whom. Out of the gloom a clear voice spoke, saying--

"You exceed your powers, Priest, and usurp those of the King. Beware!"

A tumult followed, in which some cried "Aye" and some "Nay," and when at length it died down the Bishop, or it may have been the Abbot--for none could see who spoke--exclaimed--

"The Church guards her own rights; let the King see to his."

"He will, he will," answered the same voice. "The Pope is in his bag. Monks, your day is done."

Again there was tumult, a very great tumult. In truth the scene, or

rather the sounds, were strange. The Bishop shrieking with rage upon the bench, like a hen that has been caught upon her perch at night, the black-browed Prior bellowing like a bull, the populace surging and shouting this and that, the secretary calling for candles, and when at length one was brought, making a little star of light in that huge gloom, putting his hand to his mouth and roaring--

"What of this Bridget? Does she go free?"

The Bishop made no answer; it seemed as though he were frightened at the forces which he had let loose; but the Abbot hallooed back--

"Burn the hag with the others," and the secretary wrote it down upon his brief.

Then the guards seized the three of them to lead them away, and the frightened babe set up a thin, piercing wail, while the Bishop and his companions, preceded by one of the monks bearing the candle--it was that Ambrose who had choked Emlyn--marched in procession down the hall to gain the great door.

Ere ever they reached it the candle was dashed from the hand of Ambrose, and a fearful tumult arose in the dense darkness, for now all light had vanished. There were screams, and sounds of fighting, and cries for help. These died away; the hall emptied by degrees, for it seemed that none wished to stay there. Torches were lit, and showed a strange scene.

The Bishop, the Abbot, and the foreign Prior lay here and there, buffeted, bleeding, their robes torn off them, so that they were almost naked, while by the Bishop was his crozier, broken in two, apparently across his own head. Worse of all, the monk Ambrose leaned against a pillar; his feet seemed to go forward but his face looked backward, for his neck was twisted like that of a Michaelmas goose.

The Bishop looked about him and felt his hurts; then he called to his people--

"Bring me my cloak and a horse, for I have had enough of Blossholme and its wizardries. Settle your own matters henceforth, Abbot Maldon, for in them I find no luck," and he glanced at his broken staff.

Thus ended the great trial of the Blossholme witches.

Cicely had sunk to sleep at last, and Emlyn watched her, for, since there was nowhere else to put them, they were back in their own room, but guarded by armed men, lest they should escape. Of this, as Emlyn knew well, there was little chance, for even if they were once outside the Priory walls, how could they get away without friends to help, or food to eat, or horses to carry them? They would be run down within a mile. Moreover, there was the child, which Cicely would never leave,

and, after all she had undergone, she herself was not fit to travel. Therefore it was that Emlyn sat sleepless, full of bitter wrath and fear, for she could see no hope. All was black as the night about them.

The door opened, and was shut and locked again. Then, from behind the curtain, appeared the tall figure of the Prioress, carrying a candle that made a star of light upon the shadows. As she stood there holding it up and looking about her, something came into Emlyn's mind. Perhaps she would help, she who loved Cicely. Did she not look like a figure of hope, with her sweet face and her taper in the gloom? Emlyn advanced to meet her, her finger on her lips.

"She sleeps; wake her not," she said. "Have you come to tell us that we burn to-morrow?"

"Nay, Emlyn; the Old Bishop has commanded that it shall not be for a week. He would have time to get across England first. Indeed, had it not been for the beating of him in the dark and the twisting of the neck of Brother Ambrose, I believe that he would not have suffered it at all, for fear of trouble afterwards. But now he is full of rage, and swears that he was set upon by evil spirits in the hall, and that those who loosed them shall not live. Emlyn, who killed Father Ambrose? Was it men or----?"

"Men, I think, Mother. The devil does not twist necks except in monkish dreams. Is it wonderful that my lady--the greatest lady of all these

parts and the most foully treated--should have friends left to her? Why, if they were not curs, ere now her people would have pulled that Abbey stone from stone and cut the throat of every man within its walls."

"Emlyn," said the Prioress again, "in the name of Jesus and on your soul, tell me true, is there witchcraft in all this business? And if not, what is its meaning?"

"As much witchcraft as dwells in your gentle heart; no more. A man did these things; I'll not give you his name, lest it should be wrung from you. A man wore Foterell's armour, and came here by a secret hole to take counsel with us in the chapel. A man burnt the Abbey dormers and the stacks, and harried the beasts with a goatskin on his head, and dragged the skull of drunken Andrew from his grave. Doubtless it was his hand also that twisted Ambrose's neck because he struck me."

The two women looked each other in the eyes.

"Ah!" said the Prioress. "I think I can guess now; but, Emlyn, you choose rough tools. Well, fear not; your secret is safe with me." She paused a moment; then went on, "Oh! I am glad, who feared lest the Fiend's finger was in it all, as, in truth, they believe. Now I see my path clear, and will follow it to the death. Yes, yes; I will save you all or die."

"What path, Mother?"

"Emlyn, you have heard no tidings for these many months, but I have. Listen; there is much afoot. The King, or the Lord Cromwell, or both, make war upon the lesser Houses, dissolving them, seizing their goods, turning the religious out of them upon the world to starve. His Grace sends Royal Commissioners to visit them, and be judge and jury both. They were coming here, but I have friends and some fortune of my own, who was not born meanly or ill-dowered, and I found a way to buy them off. One of these Commissioners, Thomas Legh, as I heard only to-day, makes inquisition at the monastery of Bayfleet, in Yorkshire, some eighty miles away, of which my cousin, Alfred Stukley, whose letter reached me this morning, is the Prior. Emlyn, I'll go to this rough man--for rough he is, they say. Old and feeble as I am, I'll seek him out and offer up the ancient House I rule to save your life and Cicely's--yes, and Bridget's also."

"You will go, Mother! Oh! God's blessing be on you. But how will you go? They will never suffer it."

The old nun drew herself up, and answered--

"Who has the right to say to the Prioress of Blossholme that she shall not travel whither she will? No Spanish Abbot, I think. Why, but now that proud priest's servants would have forbidden me to enter your chamber in my own House, but I read them a lesson they will not forget. Also I have horses at my command, but it is true I need an escort, who



am not too strong and little versed in the ways of the outside world, where I have scarcely strayed for many years. Now I have bethought me of that red-haired lay-brother, Thomas Bolle. I am told that though foolish, he is a valiant man whom few care to face; moreover, that he understands horses and knows all roads. Do you think, Emlyn Stower, that Thomas Bolle will be my companion on this journey, with leave from the Abbot, or without it?" and again she looked her in the eyes.

"He might, he might; he is a venturesome man, or so I remember him in my youth," answered Emlyn. "Moreover, his forefathers have served the Harfletes and the Foterells for generations in peace and war, and doubtless, therefore, he loves my lady yonder. But the trouble is to get at him."

"No trouble at all, Emlyn; he is one of the watch outside the gate. But, woman, what token?"

Emlyn thought for a moment, then drew a ring off her finger in which was set a cornelian heart.

"Give him this," she said, "and say that the wearer bade him follow the bearer to the death, for the sake of that wearer's life and another's. He is a simple soul, and if the Abbot does not catch him first I believe that he will go."

Mother Matilda took the ring and set it on her own finger. Then she

walked to where Cicely lay sleeping, looked at her and the boy upon her breast. Stretching out her thin hands, she called down the blessing and protection of Almighty God upon them both, then turned to depart.

Emlyn caught her by the robe.

"Stay," she said. "You think I do not understand; but I do. You are giving up everything for us. Even if you live through it, this House, which has been your charge for many years, will be dissolved; your sheep will be scattered to starve in their toothless age; the fold that has sheltered them for four hundred years will become a home of wolves. I understand full well, and she"--pointing to the sleeping Cicely--"will understand also."

"Say nothing to her," murmured Mother Matilda; "I may fail."

"You may fail, or you may succeed. If you fail and we burn, God shall reward you. If you succeed and we are saved, on her behalf I swear that you shall not suffer. There is wealth hidden away--wealth worth many priories; you and yours shall have your share of it, and that Commissioner shall not go lacking. Tell him that there is some small store to pay him for his trouble, and that the Abbot of Blossholme would rob him of it. Now, my Lady Margaret--for that, I think, used to be your name, and will be again when you have done with priests and nuns--bless me also and begone, and know that, living or dead, I hold you great and holy."

So the Prioress blessed her ere she glided thence in her stately fashion, and the oaken door opened and shut behind her.

Three days later the Abbot visited them alone.

"Foul and accursed witches," he said, "I come to tell you that next Monday at noon you burn upon the green in front of the Abbey gate, who, were it not for the mercy of the Church, should have been tortured also till you discovered your accomplices, of whom I think that you have many."

"Show me the King's warrant for this slaughter," said Cicely.

"I will show you nothing save the stake, witch. Repent, repent, ere it be too late. Hell and its eternal fires yawn for you."

"Do they yawn for my child also, my Lord Abbot?"

"Your brat will be taken from you ere you enter the flames and laid upon the ground, since it is baptized and too young to burn. If any have pity on it, good; if not, where it lies, there it will be buried."

"So be it," answered Cicely. "God gave it; God save it. In God I put my

trust. Murderer, leave me to make my peace with Him," and she turned and walked away.

Now the Abbot and Emlyn were face to face.

"Do we really burn on Monday?" she asked.

"Without doubt, unless faggots will not take fire. Yet," he added slowly, "if certain jewels should chance to be found and handed over, the case might be remitted to another Court."

"And the torment prolonged. My Lord Abbot, I fear that those jewels will never be found."

"Well, then you burn--slowly, perhaps, for much rain has fallen of late and the wood is green. They say the death is dreadful."

"Doubtless one day you will find it so, Clement Maldonado, here or hereafter. But of that we will talk together when all is done--of that and many other things. I mean before the Judgment-seat of God. Nay, nay, I do not threaten after your fashion--it shall be so. Meanwhile I ask the boon of a dying woman. There are two whom I would see--the Prioress Matilda, in whose charge I desire to leave a certain secret, and Thomas Bolle, a lay-brother in your Abbey, a man who once engaged himself to me in marriage. For your own sake, deny me not these favours."

"They should be granted readily enough were it in my power, but it is not," answered the Abbot, looking at her curiously, for he thought that to them she might tell what she had refused to him--the hiding-place of the jewels, which afterwards he could wring out.

"Why not, my Lord Abbot?"

"Because the Prioress has gone hence, secretly, upon some journey of her own, and Thomas Bolle has vanished away I knew not where. If they, or either of them, return ere Monday you shall see them."

"And if they do not return I shall see them afterwards," replied Emlyn, with a shrug of her shoulders. "What does it matter? Fare you well till we meet at the fire, my Lord Abbot."

On the Sunday--that is, the day before the burning--the Abbot came again.

"Three days ago," he said, addressing them both, "I offered you a chance of life upon certain conditions, but, obstinate witches that you are, you refused to listen. Now I offer you the last boon in my power--not life, indeed; it is too late for that--but a merciful death. If you will give me what I seek, the executioner shall dispatch you both before the fire bites--never mind how. If not--well, as I have told you, there has

been much rain, and they say the faggots are somewhat green."

Cicely paled a little--who would not, even in those cruel days?--then asked--

"And what is it that you seek, or that we can give? A confession of our guilt, to cover up your crime in the eyes of the world? If so, you shall never have it, though we burn by inches."

"Yes, I seek that, but for your own sakes, not for mine, since those who confess and repent may receive absolution. Also I seek more--the rich jewels which you have in hiding, that they may be used for the purposes of the Church."

Then it was that Cicely showed the courage of her blood.

"Never, never!" she cried, turning on him with eyes ablaze. "Torture and slay me if you will, but my wealth you shall not thieve. I know not where these jewels are, but wherever they may be, there let them lie till my heirs find them, or they rot."

The Abbot's face grew very evil.

"Is that your last word, Cicely Foterell?" he asked.

She bowed her head, and he repeated the question to Emlyn, who

answered--

"What my mistress says, I say."

"So be it!" he exclaimed. "Doubtless you sorceresses put your trust in the devil. Well, we shall see if he will help you to-morrow."

"God will help us," replied Cicely in a quiet voice. "Remember my words when the time comes."

Then he went.