

CHAPTER XVI

THE VOICE IN THE FOREST

The four were back safe in their lodging in Cheapside, whither, after the deeds had been sealed, three soldiers escorted them by command.

"Have we done well, have we done well?" asked Jacob, rubbing his hands.

"It would seem so, Master Smith," replied Cicely, "thanks to you; that is, if all the King said is really in those writings."

"It is there sure enough," said Jacob; "for know, that with the aid of a lawyer and three scribes, I drafted them myself in the Lord Cromwell's office this morning, and oh, I drew them wide. Hard, hard we worked with no time for dinner, and that was why I was ten minutes late by the clock, for which Emlyn here chided me so sharply. Still, I'll read them through again, and if aught is left out we will have it righted, though these are the same parchments, for I set a secret mark upon them."

"Nay, nay," said Cicely, "leave well alone. His Grace's mood may change, or the Queen--that matter of the pearl."

"Ah, the pearl, it grieved me to part with that beautiful pearl. But there was no way out, it must be sold and the money handed over, our

honour is on it. Had I refused, who knows? Yes, we may thank God, for if the most of your jewels are gone, the wide Abbey lands have come and other things. Nothing is forgot. Bolle is unfrocked and may wed; Cousin Stower has got a husband----"

Then Emlyn, who until now had been strangely silent, burst out in wrath----

"Am I, then, a beast that I should be given to this man like a heriot at yonder King's bidding?" she exclaimed, pointing with her finger at Bolle, who stood in the corner. "Who gave you the right, Thomas, to demand me in marriage?"

"Well, since you ask me, Emlyn, it was you yourself; once, many years ago, down in the mead by the water, and more lately in the chapel of Blossholme Priory before I began to play the devil."

"Play the devil! Aye, you have played the devil with me. There in the King's presence I must stand for an hour or more while all talked and never let a word slip between my lips, and at last hear myself called by his Grace a woman of temper and you a fool for wishing to marry me. Oh, if ever we do marry, I'll prove his words."

"Then perhaps, Emlyn, we who have got on a long while apart, had best stay so," answered Thomas calmly. "Yet, why you should fret because you must keep your tongue in its case for an hour, or because I asked leave

to marry you in all honour, I do not know. I have worked my best for you and your mistress at some hazard, and things have not gone so ill, seeing that now we are quit of blame and in a fair way to peace and comfort. If you are not content, why then, the King was right, and I'm a fool, and so good-bye, I'll trouble you no more in fair weather or in foul. I have leave to marry, and there are other women in the world should I need one."

"Tread on their tails and even worms will turn," soliloquized Jacob, while Emlyn burst into tears.

Cicely ran to console her, and Bolle made as though he would leave the room.

Just then there came a great knocking on the street door, and the sound of a voice crying--

"In the King's name! In the King's name, open!"

"That's Commissioner Legh," said Thomas. "I learned the cry from him, and it is a good one at a pinch, as some of you may remember."

Emlyn dried her tears with her sleeve; Cicely sat down and Jacob shovelled the parchments into his big pockets. Then in burst the Commissioner, to whom some one had opened.

"What's this I hear?" he cried, addressing Cicely, his face as red as a turkey cock's. "That you have been working behind my back; that you have told falsehoods of me to his Grace, who called me knave and thief; that I am commanded to pay my fees into the Treasury? Oh, ungrateful wench, would to God that I had let you burn ere you disgraced me thus."

"If you bring so much heat into my poor house, learned Doctor, surely all of us will soon burn," said Jacob suavely. "The Lady Harflete said nothing that his Highness did not force her to say, as I know who was present, and among so many pickings cannot you spare a single dole? Come, come, drink a cup of wine and be calm."

But Dr. Legh, who had already drunk several cups of wine, would not be calm. He reviled first one of them and then the other, but especially Emlyn, whom he conceived to be the cause of all his woes, till at length he called her by a very ill name. Then came forward Thomas Bolle, who all this while had been standing in the corner, and took him by the neck.

"In the King's name!" he said, "nay, complain not, 'tis your own cry and I have warrant for it," and he knocked Legh's head against the door-post. "In the King's name, get out of this," and he gave him such a kick as never Royal Commissioner had felt before, shooting him down the passage. "For the third time in the King's name!" and he hurled him out in a heap into the courtyard. "Begone, and know if ever I see your pudding face again, in the King's name, I'll break your neck!"

Thus did Visitor Legh depart out of the life of Cicely, though in due course she paid him her first year's rent, nor ever asked who took the benefit.

"Thomas," said Emlyn, when he returned smiling at the memory of that farewell kick, "the King was right, I am quick-tempered at times, no ill thing for it has helped me more than once. Forget, and so will I," and she gave him her hand, which he kissed, then went to see about the supper.

While they ate, which they did heartily who needed food, there came another knock.

"Go, Thomas," said Jacob, "and say we see none to-night."

So Thomas went and they heard talk. Then he re-entered followed by a cloaked man, saying--

"Here is a visitor whom I dare not deny," whereon they all rose, thinking in their folly that it was the King himself, and not one almost as mighty in England for a while--the Lord Cromwell.

"Pardon me," said Cromwell, bowing in his courteous manner, "and if you will, let me be seated with you, and give me a bite and a sup, for I need them, who have been hard-worked to-day."

So he sat down among them, and ate and drank, talking pleasantly of many things, and telling them that the King had changed his mind at the Council, as he thought, because of the words of Thomas Bolle, which he believed had stuck there, and would not go north to fight the rebels after all, but would send the Duke of Norfolk and other lords. Then when he had done he pushed away his cup and platter, looked at his hosts and said--

"Now to business. My Lady Harflete, fortune has been your friend this day, for all you asked has been granted to you, which, as his Grace's temper has been of late, is a wondrous thing. Moreover, I thank you that you did not answer a certain question as to myself which I learn he put to you urgently."

"My Lord," said Cicely, "you have befriended me. Still, had he pressed me further, God knows. Commissioner Legh did not thank me to-night," and she told him of the visit they had just received, and of its ending.

"A rough man and a greedy, who doubtless henceforth will be your enemy," replied Cromwell. "Still you were not to blame, for who can reason with a bull in his own yard? Well, while I have power I'll not forget your faithfulness, though in truth, my Lady of Blossholme, I sit upon a slippery height, and beneath waits a gulf that has swallowed some as great, and greater. Therefore I will not deny it, I lay by while I may, not knowing who will gather."

He brooded a while, then went on, with a sigh--

"The times are uncertain; thus, you who have the promise of wealth may yet die a beggar. The lands of Blossholme Abbey, on which you hold a bond that will never be redeemed, are not yet in the King's hands to give. A black storm is bursting in the north and, I say this in secret, the fury of it may sweep Henry from the throne. If it should be so, away with you to any land where you are not known, for then after this day's

work here a rope will be your only heritage. More, this Queen, unlike Anne who is gone, is a friend to the party of the Church, and though she affects to care little for such things, is bitter about that pearl, and therefore against you, its owner. Have you no jewel left that you could spare which I might take to her? As for the pearl itself, which Master Smith here swore to me was not to be found in the whole world when he showed me its fellow, it must be sold as the King commanded," and he looked at Jacob somewhat sourly.

Now Cicely spoke with Jacob, who went away and returned presently with a brooch in which was set a large white diamond surrounded by five small rubies.

"Take her this with my duty, my Lord," said Cicely.

"I will, I will. Oh! fear not, it shall reach her for my own sake as

well as yours. You are a wise giver, Lady Harflete, who know when and where to cast your bread upon the waters. And now I have a gift for you that perchance will please you more than gems. Your husband, Christopher Harflete, accompanied by a servant, has landed in the north safe and well."

"Oh, my Lord," she cried, "then where is he now?"

"Alas! the rest of the tale is not so pleasing, for as he journeyed, from Hull I think, he was taken prisoner by the rebels, who have him fast at Lincoln, wishing to make him, whose name is of account, one of their company. But he being a wise and loyal man, contrived to send a letter to the King's captain in those parts, which has reached me this night. Here it is, do you know the writing?"

"Aye, aye," gasped Cicely, staring at the scrawl that was ill writ and worse spelt, for Christopher was no scholar.

"Then I'll read it to you, and afterwards certify a copy to multiply the evidence."

"To the Captain of the King's Forces outside Lincoln.

"This to give notice to you, his Grace, and his ministers and all others, that we, Christopher Harflete, Knight, and Jeffrey Stokes,

his servant, when journeying from the seaport whither we had come from Spain, were taken by rebels in arms against the King and brought here to Lincoln. These men would win me to their party because the name of Harflete is still strong and known. So violent were they that we have taken some kind of oath. Yet this writing advises you that so I only did to save my life, having no heart that way who am a loyal man and understand little of their quarrel. Life, in sooth, is of small value to me who have lost wife, lands and all. Yet ere I die I would be avenged upon the murderous Abbot of Blossholme, and therefore I seek to keep my breath in me and to escape.

"I learn that the said Abbot is afoot with a great following within fifty miles of here. Pray God he does not get his claws in me again, but if so, say to the King, that Harflete died faithful.

"Christopher Harflete.

"Jeffrey Stokes, X his mark."

"My Lord," said Cicely, "what shall I do, my Lord?"

"There is naught to be done, save trust in God and hope for the best. Doubtless he will escape, and at least his Grace shall see this letter to-morrow morning and send orders to help him if may be. Copy it, Master Smith."

Jacob took the letter and began to write swiftly, while Cromwell thought.

"Listen," he said presently. "Round Blossholme there are no rebels, all of that colour have drawn off north. Now Foterell and Harflete are good names yonder, cannot you journey thither and raise a company?"

"Aye, aye, that I can do," broke in Bolle. "In a week I will have a hundred men at my back. Give commission and money to my Lady there and name me captain and you'll see."

"The commission and the captaincy under the privy signet shall be at this house by nine of the clock to-morrow," answered Cromwell. "The money you must find, for there is none outside the coffers of Jacob Smith. Yet pause, Lady Harflete, there is risk and here you are safe."

"I know the risk," she answered, "but what do I care for risks who have taken so many, when my husband is yonder and I may serve him?"

"An excellent spirit, let us trust that it comes from on high," remarked Cromwell; but old Jacob, as he wrote *vera copia* for his Lordship's signature at the foot of the transcript of Christopher's letter, shook his head sadly.

In another minute Cromwell had signed without troubling to compare the two, and with some gentle words of farewell was gone, having bigger

matters waiting his attention.

Cicely never saw him again, indeed with the exception of Jacob Smith she never saw any of those folk again, including the King, who had been concerned in this crisis of her life. Yet, notwithstanding his cunning and his extortion, she grieved for Cromwell when some four years later the Duke of Suffolk and the Earl of Southampton rudely tore the Garter and his other decorations off his person and he was haled from the Council to the Tower, and thence after abject supplications for mercy, to perish a criminal upon the block. At least he had served her well, for he kept all his promises to the letter. One of his last acts also was to send her back the pink pearl which he had received as a bribe from Jacob Smith, with a message to the effect that he was sure it would become her more than it had him, and that he hoped it would bring her a better fortune.

When Cromwell had gone Jacob turned to Cicely and inquired if she were leaving his house upon the morrow.

"Have I not said so?" she asked, with impatience. "Knowing what I know how could I stay in London? Why do you ask?"

"Because I must balance our account. I think you owe me a matter of twenty marks for rent and board. Also it is probable that we shall need

money for our journey, and this day has left me somewhat bare of coin."

"Our journey?" said Cicely. "Do you, then, accompany us, Master Smith?"

"With your leave I think so, Lady. Times are bad here, I have no shilling left to lend, yet if I do not lend I shall never be forgiven.

Also I need a holiday, and ere I die would once again see Blossholme, where I was born, should we live to reach it. But if we start to-morrow I have much to do this night. For instance, your jewels which I hold in pawn must be set in a place of safety; also these deeds, whereof copies should be made, and that pearl must be left in trusty hands for sale. So at what hour do we ride on this mad errand?"

"At eleven of the clock," answered Cicely, "if the King's safe-conduct and commission have come by then."

"So be it. Then I bid you good-night. Come with me, worthy Bolle, for there'll be no sleep for us. I go to call my clerks and you must go to the stable. Lady Harflete and you, Cousin Emlyn, get you to bed."

On the following morning Cicely rose with the dawn, nor was she sorry to do so, who had spent but a troubled night. For long sleep would not come to her, and when it did at length, she was tossed upon a sea of dreams, dreams of the King, who threatened her with his great voice; of Cromwell, who took everything she had down to her cloak; of Commissioner Legh, who dragged her back to the stake because he had lost his bribe.

But most of all she dreamed of Christopher, her beloved husband, who was so near and yet as far away as he had ever been, a prisoner in the hands of the rebels; her husband who deemed her dead.

From all these phantasies she awoke weeping and oppressed by fears. Could it be that when at length the cup of joy was so near her lips fate waited to dash it down again? She knew not, who had naught but faith to lean on, that faith which in the past had served her well. Meanwhile, she was sure that if Christopher lived he would make his way to Cranwell or to Blossholme, and, whatever the risk, thither she would go also as fast as horses could carry her.

Hurry as they would, midday was an hour gone ere they rode out of Cheapside. There was so much to do, and even then things were left undone. The four of them travelled humbly clad, giving out that they were a party of merchant folk returning to Cambridge after a visit to London as to an inheritance in which they were interested, especially Cicely, who posed as a widow named Johnson. This was their story, which they varied from time to time according to circumstances. In some ways their minds were more at ease than when they travelled to the great city, for now at least they were clear of the horrid company of Commissioner Legh and his people, nor were they haunted by the knowledge that they had about them jewels of great price. All these jewels were left behind in safe keeping, as were also the writings under the King's hand and seal, of which they only took attested copies, and with them

the commission that Cromwell had duly sent to Cicely addressed to her husband and herself, and Bolle's certificate of captaincy. These they hid in their boots or the linings of their vests, together with such money as was necessary for the costs of travel.

Thus riding hard, for their horses were good and fresh, they came unmolested to Cambridge on the night of the second day and slept there. Beyond Cambridge, they were told, the country was so disturbed that it would not be safe for them to journey. But just when they were in despair, for even Bolle said that they must not go on, a troop of the King's horse arrived on their way to join the Duke of Norfolk wherever he might lie in Lincolnshire.

To their captain, one Jeffreys, Jacob showed the King's commission, revealing who they were. Seeing that it commanded all his Grace's officers and servants to do them service, this Captain Jeffreys said that he would give them escort until their roads separated. So next day they went on again. The company was not pleasant, for the men, of whom there were about a hundred, proved rough fellows, still, having been warned that he who insulted or laid a finger on them should be hanged, they did them no harm. It was well, indeed, that they had their protection, for they found the country through which they passed up in arms, and were more than once threatened by mobs of peasants, led by priests, who would have attacked them had they dared.

For two days they travelled thus with Captain Jeffreys, coming on the

evening of the second to Peterborough, where they found lodgings at an inn. When they rose the next morning, however, it was to discover that Jeffreys and his men had already gone, leaving a message to say that he had received urgent orders to push on to Lincoln.

Now once more they told their old tale, declaring that they were citizens of Boston, and having learned that the Fens were peaceful, perhaps because so few people lived in them, started forward by themselves under the guidance of Bolle, who had often journeyed through that country, buying or selling cattle for the monks. An ill land was it to travel in also in that wet autumn, seeing that in many places the floods were out and the tracks were like a quagmire. The first night they spent in a marshman's hut, listening to the pouring rain and fearing fever and ague, especially for the boy. The next day, by good fortune, they reached higher land and slept at a tavern.

Here they were visited by rude men, who, being of the party of rebellion, sought to know their business. For a while things were dangerous, but Bolle, who could talk their own dialect, showed that they were scarcely to be feared who travelled with two women and a babe, adding that he was a lay-brother of Blossholme Abbey disguised as a serving-man for dread of the King's party. Jacob Smith also called for ale and drank with them to the success of the Pilgrimage of Grace, as their revolt was named.

In this way they disarmed suspicion with one tale and another.

Moreover, they heard that as yet the country round Blossholme remained undisturbed, although it was said that the Abbot had fortified the Abbey and stored it with provisions. He himself was with the leaders of the revolt in the neighbourhood of Lincoln, but he had done this that he might have a strong place to fall back on.

So in the end the men went away full of strong beer, and that danger passed by.

Next morning they started forward early, hoping to reach Blossholme by sunset though the days were shortening much. This, however, was not to be, for as it chanced they were badly bogged in a quagmire that lay about two miles off their inn, and when at length they scrambled out had to ride many miles round to escape the swamp. So it happened that it was already well on in the afternoon when they came to that stretch of forest in which the Abbot had murdered Sir John Foterell. Following the woodland road, towards sunset they passed the mere where he had fallen. Weary as she was, Cicely looked at the spot and found it familiar.

"I know this place," she said. "Where have I seen it? Oh, in the ill dream I had on that day I lost my father."

"That is not wonderful," answered Emlyn, who rode beside her carrying the child, "seeing that Thomas says it was just here they butchered him. Look, yonder lie the bones of Meg, his mare; I know them by her black mane."

"Aye, Lady," broke in Bolle, "and there he lies also where he fell; they buried him with never a Christian prayer," and he pointed to a little careless mound between two willows.

"Jesus, have mercy on his soul!" said Cicely, crossing herself. "Now, if I live, I swear that I will move his bones to the chancel of Blossholme church and build a fair monument to his memory."

This, as all visitors to the place know, she did, for that monument remains to this day, representing the old knight lying in the snow, with the arrow in his throat, between the two murderers whom he slew, while round the corner of the tomb Jeffrey Stokes gallops away.

While Cicely stared back at this desolate grave, muttering a prayer for the departed, Thomas Bolle heard something which caused him to prick his ears.

"What is it?" asked Jacob Smith, who saw the change in his face.

"Horses galloping--many horses, master," he answered; "yes, and riders on them. Listen."

They did so, and now they also heard the thud of horse's hoofs and the shouts of men.

"Quick, quick," said Bolle, "follow me. I know where we may hide," and he led them off to a dense thicket of thorn and beech scrub which grew about two hundred yards away under a group of oaks at a place where four tracks crossed. Owing to the beech leaves, which, when the trees are young, as every gardener knows, cling to the twigs through autumn and winter, this place was very close, and hid them completely.

Scarcely had they taken up their stand there, when, in the red light of the sunset, they saw a strange sight. Along, not that road they had followed, but another, which led round the farther side of King's Grave Mount, now seen and now hidden by the forest trees, a tall man in armour mounted on a grey horse, accompanied by another man in a leathern jerkin mounted on a black horse, galloped towards them, whilst, at a distance of not more than a hundred yards behind them, appeared a motley mob of pursuers.

"Escaped prisoners being run down," muttered Bolle, but Cicely took no heed. There was something about the appearance of the rider of the grey horse that seemed to draw her heart out of her.

She leaned forward on her beast's neck, staring with all her eyes. Now the two men were almost opposite the thicket, and the man in mail turned his face to his companion and called cheerily--

"We gain! We'll slip them yet, Jeffrey."

Cicely saw the face.

"Christopher!" she cried; "Christopher!"

Another moment and they had swept past, but Christopher--for it was he--had caught the sound of that remembered voice. With eyes made quick by love and fear she saw him pulling on his rein. She heard him shout to Jeffrey, and Jeffrey shout back to him in tones of remonstrance. They halted confusedly in the open space beyond. He tried to turn, then perceived his pursuers drawing nearer, and, when they were already at his heels, with an exclamation, pulled round again to gallop away. Too late! Up the slope they sped for another hundred yards or so. Now they were surrounded, and now, at the crest of it, they fought, for swords flashed in the red light. The pursuers closed in on them like hounds on an outrun fox. They went down--they vanished.

Cicely strove to gallop after them, for she was crazed, but the others held her back.

At length there was silence, and Thomas Bolle, dismounting, crept out to look. Ten minutes later he returned.

"All have gone," he said.

"Oh! he is dead!" wailed Cicely. "This fatal place has robbed me of father and of husband."

"I think not," answered Bolle. "I see no bloodstains, nor any signs of a man being carried. He went living on his horse. Still, would to Heaven that women could learn when to keep silent!"