

CHAPTER XVII

BETWEEN DOOM AND HONOUR

The day was about to break when at last, utterly worn out in body and mind, Cicely and her party rode their stumbling horses up to the gates of Blossholme Priory.

"Pray God the nuns are still here," said Emlyn, who held the child, "for if they have been driven out and my mistress must go farther, I think that she will die. Knock hard, Thomas, that old gardener is deaf as a wall."

Bolle obeyed with good will, till presently the grille in the door was opened and a trembling woman's voice asked who was there.

"That's Mother Matilda," said Emlyn, and slipping from her horse, she ran to the bars and began to talk to her through them. Then other nuns came, and between them they opened one of the large gates, for the gardener either could not or would not be aroused, and passed through it into the courtyard where, when it was understood that Cicely had really come again, there was a great welcoming. But now she could hardly speak, so they made her swallow a bowl of milk and took her to her old room, where sleep of some kind overcame her. When she awoke it was nine of the clock. Emlyn, looking little the worse, was already up and stood talking with Mother Matilda.

"Oh!" cried Cicely, as memory came back to her, "has aught been heard of my husband?"

They shook their heads, and the Prioress said--

"First you must eat, Sweet, and then we will tell you all we know, which is little."

So she ate who needed food sadly, and while Emlyn helped her to dress herself, hearkened to the news. It was of no great account, only confirming that which they had learnt from the Fenmen; that the Abbey was fortified and guarded by strange soldiers, rebellious men from the north or foreigners, and the Abbot supposed to be away.

Bolle, who had been out, reported also that a man he met declared that he had heard a troop of horsemen pass through the village in the night, but of this no proof was forthcoming, since if they had done so the heavy rain that was still falling had washed out all traces of them. Moreover, in those times people were always moving to and fro in the dark, and none could know if this troop had anything to do with the band they had seen in the forest, which might have gone some other way.

When Cicely was ready they went downstairs, and in Mother Matilda's private room found Jacob Smith and Thomas Bolle awaiting them.

"Lady Harflete," said Jacob, with the air of a man who has no time to lose, "things stand thus. As yet none know that you are here, for we have the gardener and his wife under ward. But as soon as they learn it at the Abbey there will be risk of an attack, and this place is not defensible. Now at your hall of Shefton it is otherwise, for there it seems is a deep moat with a drawbridge and the rest. To Shefton, therefore, you must go at once, unobserved if may be. Indeed, Thomas has been there already, and spoken to certain of your tenants whom he can trust, who are now hard at work preparing and victualling the place, and passing on the word to others. By nightfall he hopes to have thirty strong men to defend it, and within three days a hundred, when your commission and his captaincy are made known. Come, then, for there is no time to tarry and the horses are saddled."

So Cicely kissed Mother Matilda, who blessed and thanked her for all she had done, or tried to do on behalf of the sisterhood, and within five minutes once more they were on the backs of their weary beasts and riding through the rain to Shefton, which happily was but three miles away. Keeping under the lee of the woods they left the Priory unobserved, for in that wet few were stirring, and the sentinels at the Abbey, if there were any, had taken shelter in the guard-house. So thankfully enough they came unmolested to walled and wooded Shefton, which Cicely had last seen when she fled thence to Cranwell on the day of her marriage, oh, years and years ago, or so it seemed to her tormented heart.

It was a strange and a sad home-coming, she thought, as they rode over the drawbridge and through the sodden and weed-smothered pleasance to the familiar door. Yet it might have been worse, for the tenants whom Bolle had warned had not been idle. For two hours past and more a dozen willing women had swept and cleaned; the fires had been lit, and there was plenteous food of a sort in the kitchen and the store-room.

Moreover, in all the big hall were gathered about a score of her people, who welcomed her by raising their bonnets and even tried to cheer. To these at once Jacob read the King's commission, showing them the signet and the seal, and that other commission which named Thomas Bolle a captain with wide powers, the sight and hearing of which writings seemed to put a great heart into them who so long had lacked a leader and the support of authority. One and all they swore to stand by the King and their lady, Cicely Harflete, and her lord, Sir Christopher, or if he were dead, his child. Then about half of them took horse and rode off, this way and that, to gather men in the King's name, while the rest stayed to guard the Hall and work at its defences.

By sunset men were riding up from all sides, some of them driving carts loaded with provisions, arms and fodder, or sheep and beasts that could be killed for sustenance, while as they came Jacob enrolled their names upon a paper and by virtue of his commission Thomas Bolle swore them in. Indeed that night they had forty men quartered there, and the promise of many more.

By now, however, the secret was out, for the story had gone round and the smoke from the Shefton chimneys told its own tale. First a single spy appeared on the opposite rise, watching. Then he galloped away, to return an hour later with ten armed and mounted men, one of whom carried a banner on which were embroidered the emblems of the Pilgrimage of Grace. These men rode to within a hundred paces of Shefton Hall, apparently with the object of attacking it, then seeing that the drawbridge was up and that archers with bent bows stood on either side, halted and sent forward one of their number with a white flag to parley.

"Who holds Shefton," shouted this man, "and for what cause?"

"The Lady Harflete, its owner, and Captain Thomas Bolle, for the cause of the King," called old Jacob Smith back to him.

"By what warrant?" asked the man. "The Abbot of Blossholme is lord of Shefton, and Thomas Bolle is but a lay-brother of his monastery."

"By warrant of the King's Grace," said Jacob, and then and there at the top of his voice he read to him the Royal Commission, which when the envoy had heard, he went back to consult with his companions. For a while they hesitated, apparently still meditating attack, but in the end rode away and were seen no more.

Bolle wished to follow and fall on them with such men as he had, but the cautious Jacob Smith forbade it, fearing lest he should tumble into

some ambush and be killed or captured with his people, leaving the place defenceless.

So the afternoon went by, and ere evening closed in they had so much strength that there was no more cause for fear of an attack from the Abbey, whose garrison they learned amounted to not over fifty men and a few monks, for most of these had fled.

That night Cicely with Emlyn and old Jacob were seated in the long upper room where her father, Sir John Foterell, had once surprised Christopher paying his court to her, when Bolle entered, followed by a man with a hang-dog look who was wrapped in a sheepskin coat which seemed to become him very ill.

"Who is this, friend?" asked Jacob.

"An old companion of mine, your worship, a monk of Blossholme who is weary of Grace and its pilgrimages, and seeks the King's comfort and pardon, which I have made bold to promise to him."

"Good," said Jacob, "I'll enter his name, and if he remains faithful your promise shall be kept. But why do you bring him here?"

"Because he bears tidings."

Now something in Bolle's voice caused Cicely, who was brooding apart, to

look up sharply and say--

"Speak, and be swift."

"My Lady," began the man in a slow voice, "I, who am named Basil in religion, have fled the Abbey because, although a monk, I am true to the King, and moreover have suffered much from the Abbot, who has just returned raging, having met with some reverse out Lincoln way, I know not what. My news is that your lord, Sir Christopher Harflete, and his servant Jeffrey Stokes are prisoners in the Abbey dungeons, whither they were brought last night by a company of the rebels who had captured them and afterwards rode on."

"Prisoners!" exclaimed Cicely. "Then he is not dead or wounded? At least he is whole and safe?"

"Aye, my Lady, whole and safe as a mouse in the paws of a cat before it is eaten."

The blood left Cicely's cheeks. In her mind's eye she saw Abbot Maldon turned into a great cat with a monk's head and patting Christopher with his claws.

"My fault, my fault!" she said in a heavy voice. "Oh, if I had not called him he would have escaped. Would that I had been stricken dumb!"

"I don't think so," answered Brother Basil. "There were others watching for him ahead who, when he was taken, went away and that is how you came to get through so neatly. At least there he lies, and if you would save him, you had best gather what strength you can and strike at once."

"Does he know that I live?" asked Cicely.

"How can I tell, Lady? The Abbey dungeons are no good place for news. Yet the monk who took him his food this morning said that Sir Christopher told him that he had been undone by some ghost which called to him with the voice of his dead wife as he rode near King's Grave Mount."

Now when Cicely heard this she rose and left the room accompanied by Emlyn, for she could bear no more.

But Jacob Smith and Bolle remained questioning the man closely upon many matters, and, having learned all he could tell them, sent him away under guard and sat there till midnight consulting and making up their plans with the farmers and yeomen whom they called to them from time to time.

Next morning early they sought out Cicely and told her that to them it seemed wise that the Abbey should be attacked without delay.

"But my husband lies there," she answered in distress, "and then they will kill him."

"So I fear they may if we do not attack," replied Jacob. "Moreover, Lady, to tell the truth, there are other things to be thought of. For instance, the King's cause and honour, which we are bound to forward, and the lives and goods of all those who through us have declared themselves for him. If we lie idle Abbot Maldon will send messengers to the north and within a few days bring down thousands upon us, against whom we cannot hope to stand. Indeed, it is probable that he has already sent. But if they hear that the Abbey has fallen the rebels will scarcely come for revenge alone. Lastly, if we sit with folded hands, our own people may grow cold with doubts and fears and melt away, who now are hot as fire."

"If it must be, so let it be. In God's hands I leave his life," said Cicely in a heavy voice.

That day the King's men, under the captaincy of Bolle, advanced and invested the Abbey, setting their camp in Blossholme village. Cicely, who would not be left behind, came with them and once more took up her quarters in the Priory, which on a formal summons opened its gates to her, its only guard, the deaf gardener, surrendering at discretion. He was set to work as a camp servant, and never in his life did he labour so hard before, since Emlyn, who owed him many a grudge, saw to it that he did not lack for tasks that were mean and heavy.

Now that day Thomas and others spied out the Abbey and returned shaking their heads, for without cannon--and as yet they had none--the great building of hewn stone seemed almost impregnable. At but one spot indeed was attack possible, from the back where once stood the dormers and farm steadings which Emlyn had egged on Thomas to burn. These had been built up to the inner edge of the moat, making, as it were, part of the Abbey wall, but the fierce fire had so cracked and crumbled their masonry that several rods of it had fallen forward into the water.

For purposes of defence the gap this formed was now closed by a double palisade of stout stakes, filled in with faggots, the charred beams of the old buildings and other rubbish. Yet to carry this palisade, protected as it was by the broad and deep moat and commanded from the windows and the corner tower, was more than they dared try, since if it could be done at all it would certainly cost them very many lives. One thing they had learned, however, from the monk Basil and others, that in the Abbey there was but small store of food to feed so many: three days' supply, said Basil, and none put it at over four.

That evening, then, they held another council, at which it was determined to starve the place out and only attempt an onslaught if their spies reported to them that the rebels were marching to its relief.

"But," urged Cicely, "then my lord and Jeffrey Stokes will starve also,"

whereon they went away sadly, saying there was no choice, seeing that they were but two men and the lives of many lay at stake.

The siege began, just such a siege as Cicely had suffered at Cranwell Towers. The first day the garrison of the Abbey scoffed at them from the walls. The second day they scoffed no longer, noting that the force of the besiegers increased, which it did hourly. The third day suddenly they let down the drawbridge and poured out on to it as though for a sortie, but when they perceived the scores of Bolle's men waiting bow in hand and arrow on string, changed their minds and drew the bridge up again.

"They grow hungry and desperate," said the shrewd Jacob. "Soon we shall have some message from them."

He was right, since just before sunset a postern gate was opened and a man, holding a white flag above his head, was seen swimming across the moat. He scrambled out on the farther side, shook himself like a dog, and advanced slowly to where Bolle and the women stood upon the Abbey green out of arrow-shot from the walls. Indeed, Cicely, who was weak with dread and wretchedness, leaned against the oaken stake that had never been removed, to which once she was tied to be burned for witchcraft.

"Who is that man?" said Emlyn to her.

Cicely scanned the gaunt, bearded figure who walked haltingly like one that is sick.

"I know not--yes, yes, he puts me in mind of Jeffrey Stokes!"

"Jeffrey it is and no other," said Emlyn, nodding her head. "Now what news does he bear, I wonder?"

Cicely made no reply, only clung to her stake and waited, with just such a heart as once she had waited there while the Abbey cook blew up his brands to fire her faggots. Jeffrey was opposite to her now; his sunken eyes fell upon her, and at the sight his bearded chin dropped, making his face look even more long and hollow than it had before.

"Ah!" he said, speaking to himself, "many wars and journeyings, months in an infidel galley, three days with not enough food to feed a rat and a bath in November water! Well, such things, to say nothing of a worse, turn men's brains. Yet to think that I should live to see a daylight ghost in homely Blossholme, who never met with one before."

Still staring he shook the water from his beard, then added, "Lay-brother or Captain Thomas Bolle, whichever you may be now-a-days, if you're not a ghost also, give me a quart of strong ale and a loaf of bread, for I'm empty as a gutted herring, and floating heavenward, so to speak, who would stick upon this scurvy earth."

"Jeffrey, Jeffrey," broke in Cicely, "what news of your master? Emlyn, tell him that we still live. He does not understand."

"Oh, you still live, do you?" he added slowly. "So the fire could not burn you after all, or Emlyn either. Well, then, there's hope for every one, and perhaps hunger and Abbot Maldon's knives cannot kill Christopher Harflete."

"He lives, then, and is well?"

"He lives and is as well as a man may be after a three days' fast in a black dungeon that is somewhat damp. Here's a writing on the matter for the captain of this company," and, taking a letter from the folds of the white flag in which it had been fastened, he handed it to Bolle, who, as he could not read, passed it on to Jacob Smith. Just then a lad brought the ale for which Jeffrey had asked, and with it a platter of cold meat and bread, on which he fell like a famished hound, drinking in great gulps and devouring the food almost without chewing it.

"By the saints, you are starved, Jeffrey," said a yeoman who stood by.

"Come with me and shift those wet clothes of yours, or you will take harm," and he led him off, still eating, to a tent that stood near by.

Meanwhile, Jacob, having studied the letter with bent and anxious brows, read it aloud. It ran thus--

"To the Captain of the King's men, from Clement, Abbot of Blossholme.

"By what warrant I know not you besiege us here, threatening this Abbey and its Religious with fire and sword. I am told that Cicely Foterell is your leader. Say, then, to that escaped witch that I hold the man she calls her husband, and who is the father of her base-born child, a prisoner. Unless this night she disperses her troop and sends me a writing signed and witnessed, promising indemnity on behalf of the King for me and those with me for all that we may have done against him and his laws, or privately against her, and freedom to go where we will without pursuit or hindrance or loss of land or chattels, know that to-morrow at the dawn we put to death Christopher Harflete, Knight, in punishment of the murders and other crimes that he has committed against us, and in proof thereof his body shall be hung from the Abbey tower. If otherwise we will leave him unharmed here where you shall find him after we have gone. For the rest, ask his servant, Jeffrey Stokes, whom we send to you with this letter.

"Clement, Abbot."

Jacob finished reading and a silence fell upon all who listened.

"Let us go to some private place and consider this matter," said Emlyn.

"Nay," broke in Cicely, "it is I, who in my lord's absence, hold the King's commission and I will be heard. Thomas Bolle, first send a man under flag to the Abbot, saying, that if aught of harm befalls Sir Christopher Harflete I'll put every living soul within the Abbey walls to death by sword or rope, and stand answerable for it to the King. Set it in writing, Master Smith, and send with it copy of the King's commission for my warrant. At once, let it be done at once."

So they went to a cottage near by, which Bolle used as a guard-house, where this stern message was written down, copied out fair, signed by Cicely and by Bolle, as captain, with Jacob Smith for witness. This paper, together with a copy of the King's commissions, Cicely with her own hand gave to a bold and trusty man, charged to ask an answer, who departed, carrying the white flag and wearing a steel shirt beneath his doublet, for fear of treachery.

When he had gone they sent for Jeffrey, who arrived clad in dry garments and still eating, for his hunger was that of a wolf.

"Tell us all," said Cicely.

"It will be a long story if I begin at the beginning, Lady. When your worshipful father, Sir John, and I rode away from Shefton on the day of his murder----"

"Nay, nay," interrupted Cicely, "that may stand, we have no time. My

lord and you escaped from Lincoln, did you not, and, as we saw, were taken in the forest?"

"Aye, Lady. Some tricksy spirit called out with your voice and he heard and pulled rein, and so they came on to us and overwhelmed us, though without hurt as it chanced. Then they brought us to the Abbey and thrust us into that accursed dungeon, where, save for a little bread and water, we have starved for three days in the dark. That is all the tale."

"How, then, did you come out, Jeffrey?"

"Thus, my Lady. Something over an hour ago a monk and three guards unlocked the dungeon door. While we blinked at his lantern, like owls in the sunlight, the monk said that the Abbot purposed to send me to the camp of the King's party to offer Christopher Harflete's life against the lives of all of them. He told him, Harflete, also, that he had brought ink and paper and that if he wished to save himself he would do well to write a letter praying that this offer might be accepted, since otherwise he would certainly die at dawn."

"And what said my husband?" asked Cicely, leaning forward.

"What said he? Why, he laughed in their faces and told them that first he would cut off his hand. On this they haled me out of the dungeon roughly enough, for I would have stayed there with him to the end. But as the door closed he shouted after me, 'Tell the King's officers to

burn this rats' nest and take no heed of Christopher Harflete, who desires to die!"

"Why does he desire to die?" asked Cicely again.

"Because he thinks his wife dead, Mistress, as I did, and believes that in the forest he heard her voice calling him to join her."

"Oh God! oh God!" moaned Cicely; "I shall be his death."

"Not so," answered Jeffrey. "Do you know so little of Christopher Harflete that you think he would sell the King's cause to gain his own life? Why, if you yourself came and pleaded with him he would thrust you away, saying, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'"

"I believe it, and I am proud," muttered Cicely. "If need be, let Harflete die, we'll keep his honour and our own lest he should live to curse us. Go on."

"Well, they led me to the Abbot, who gave me that letter which you have, and bade me take it and tell the case to whoever commanded here. Then he lifted up his hand and, laying it on the crucifix about his neck, swore that this was no idle threat, but that unless his terms were taken, Harflete should hang from the tower top at to-morrow's dawn, adding, though I knew not what he meant, 'I think you'll find one yonder who will listen to that reasoning.' Now he was dismissing me when a soldier

said--

"Is it wise to free this Stokes? You forget, my Lord Abbot, that he is alleged to have witnessed a certain slaying yonder in the forest and will bear evidence.' 'Aye,' answered Maldon, 'I had forgotten who in this press remembered only that no other man would be believed. Still, perhaps it would be best to choose a different messenger and to silence this fellow at once. Write down that Jeffrey Stokes, a prisoner, strove to escape and was killed by the guards in self-defence. Take him hence and let me hear no more.'

"Now my blood went cold, although I strove to look as careless as a man may on an empty stomach after three days in the dark, and cursed him prettily in Spanish to his face. Then, as they were haling me off, Brother Martin--do you remember him? he was our companion in some troubles over-seas--stepped forward out of the shadow and said, 'Of what use is it, Abbot, to stain your soul with so foul a murder? Since John Foterell died the King has many things to lay to your account, and any one of them will hang you. Should you fall into his hands, he'll not hark back to Foterell's death, if, indeed, you were to blame in that matter.'

"'You speak roughly, Brother,' answered the Abbot; 'and acts of war are not murder, though perchance afterwards you might say they were, to save your own skin, or others might. Well, if so, there's wisdom in your words. Touch not the man. Give him the letter and thrust him into the

moat to swim it. His lies can make no odds in the count against us.'

"Well, they did so, and I came here, as you saw, to find you living, and now I understand why Maldon thought that Harflete's life is worth so much," and, having done his tale, once more Jeffrey began to eat.

Cicely looked at him, they all looked at him--this gaunt, fierce man who, after many other sorrows and strivings, had spent three days in a black dungeon with the rats, fed upon water and a few fingers of black bread. Yes; with the crawling rats and another man so dear to one of them, who still sat in that horrid hole, waiting to be hung like a felon at the dawn. The silence, with only Jeffrey's munching to break it, grew painful, so that all were glad when the door opened and the messenger whom they had sent to the Abbey appeared. He was breathless, having run fast, and somewhat disturbed, perhaps because two arrows were sticking in his back, or rather in his jerkin, for the mail beneath had stopped them.

"Speak," said old Jacob Smith; "what is your answer?"

"Look behind me, master, and you will find it," replied the man. "They set a ladder across the moat and a board on that, over which a priest tripped to take my writing. I waited a while, till presently I heard a voice hail me from the gateway tower, and, looking up, saw Abbot Maldon standing there, with a face like that of a black devil.

"Hark you, knave,' he said to me, 'get you gone to the witch, Cicely Foterell, and to the recreant monk, Bolle, whom I curse and excommunicate from the fellowship of Holy Church, and tell them to watch for the first light of dawn, for by it, somewhat high up, they'll see Christopher Harflete hanging black against the morning sky!

"On hearing this I lost my caution, and hallooed back--

"If so, ere to-morrow's nightfall you shall keep him company, every one of you, black against the evening sky, except those who go to be quartered at Tower Hill and Tyburn.' Then I ran and they shot at me, hitting once or twice, but, though old, the mail was good, and here am I, unhurt except for bruises."

A while later Cicely, Jacob Smith, Thomas Bolle, Jeffrey Stokes, and Emlyn Stower sat together taking counsel--very earnest counsel, for the case was desperate. Plan after plan was brought forward and set aside for this reason or for that, till at length they stared at each other empty.

"Emlyn," exclaimed Cicely at last, "in past days you were wont to be full of comfortable words; have you never a one in this extreme?" for all the while Emlyn had sat silent.

"Thomas," said Emlyn, looking up, "do you remember when we were children where we used to catch the big carp in the Abbey moat?"

"Aye, woman," he answered; "but what time is this for fishing stories of many years ago? As I was saying, of that tunnel underground there is no hope. Beyond the grove it is utterly caved in and blocked--I've tried it. If we had a week, perhaps----"

"Let her be," broke in Jacob; "she has something to tell us."

"And do you remember," went on Emlyn, "that you told me that there the carp were so big and fat because just at this place 'neath the drawbridge the Abbey sewer--the big Abbey sewer down which all foul things are poured--empties itself into the moat, and that therefore I would eat none of those fish, even in Lent?"

"Aye, I remember. What of it?"

"Thomas, did I hear you say that the powder you sent for had come?"

"Yes, an hour ago; six kegs, by the carrier's van, of a hundredweight each. Not so much as we hoped for, but something, though, as the cannon has not come--for the King's folk had none--it is of no use."

"A dark night, a ladder with a plank on it, a brick arched drain, two hundredweight, or better still, four of powder set beneath the gate,

a slow-match and a brave man to fire it--taken together with God's blessing, these things might do much," mused Emlyn, as though to herself.

Now at length they took her point.

"They'd be listening like a cat for a mouse," said Bolle.

"I think the wind rises," she answered; "I hear it in the trees. I think presently it will blow a gale. Also, lanterns might be shown at the back where the breach is, and men might shout there, as though preparing to attack. That would draw them off. Meanwhile Jeffrey Stokes and I would try our luck with the ladder and the kegs of powder--he to roll and I to fire when the time came, for being, as you have heard, a witch, I understand how to humour brimstone."

Ten minutes later, and their plans were fixed. Two hours later, and, in the midst of a raving gale, hidden by the pitchy darkness and the towering screen of the lifted drawbridge, Emlyn and the strong Jeffrey rolled the kegs of powder over planks laid across the moat, into the mouth of the big drain and twenty feet down it, till they lay under the gateway towers! Then, lying there in the stinking filth, they drew the spigots out of holes that they had made in them, and in their place set the slow-matches. Jeffrey struck a flint, blew the tinder to a glow, and

handed it to Emlyn.

"Now get you gone," she said; "I follow. At this job one is better than two."

A minute later she joined him on the farther bank of the moat. "Run!" she said. "Run for your life; there's death behind!"

He obeyed, but Emlyn turned and screamed, till, hearing her through the gale, all the guard hurried up the towers, flashing lanterns, to see what passed.

"STORM! STORM!" she cried. "UP WITH THE LADDERS! FOR THE KING AND HARFLETE! STORM! STORM!"

Then she too turned and fled.