

Jocelin's Penance

Then he paused—"What if I only looked into her chamber to see if all is well? What harm can rise from just one look? Surely sin is in intention!" Jocelin gave neither conscience nor reason time to argue the point—softly, he crossed to the low doorway leading to Robese's room—and entered. A faint light from the brazier flooded the little chamber. A toilet table stood in the centre of the room, the fire-light glancing on the brass and silver furnishings. By its side on a stool held in a silken heap, Robese's clothing. Jocelin touched it. It seemed as if from the contact with her sweet body, quicker he moved now, more softly, his slender, black-robed figure fitting through the shadowy room like some dark phantom of the night. It hovered for a moment round the curtained couch, and then it paused, and with trembling hand Jocelin drew the curtain toward him, her head tilted backward, and her lips parted softly, and the red firelight played caressingly over her white neck and bosom; her glistening hair streaming all about her on the rich satin pillows, just as he had fancied it a moment since. One rounded limb was half disclosed, and lay white as marble against its rich, dark background; the taper foot tinted to rose beneath; the oval nails like burnished ivory. Jocelin's heart stood still, and then gave a great bound, as if it would leap from his bosom. The hot blood rushed to his head; his breath came fast as he stood gazing; forgetful of everything save that one throbbing, panting, white beauty; and he held that warm, white beauty; to crush it close to him; to drink its sweetness, and never let it go! With a low, inarticulate cry he leaned forward and clasped Robese in his arms, fastening his burning lips upon hers, and feasting on their dewy sweetness.

In the dark opening of the Gate chamber a figure paused a moment, and the leering face and ferret eyes of Brother Walter peered in as some dire fiend would gaze upon a scene in Paradise. Then it disappeared quickly as it had come, like a dream flitting through a sleeper's brain. Jocelin, passion mad, bent his head to kiss further toil of the sweet prisoner's lips, as she awoke with a cry of terror which brought him to his senses. Then with one wild look of despair, and a faltering plea for pardon, Jocelin released her and fled from the room; on, on through corridor, down the stairway and outside Bradford, through colonnades, up terraces, in the cold moonlight through dark vaulted halls, until he reached his cell, where he fell upon his palisade, face downward, moaning in an agony of shame, and clutching at the straw.

The nocturnal bell sounded, but he did not heed its call. Later he rose and slipped his robe from him, with plying fingers of light his face, contorted in an agony of prayer, and his blood-streaked back and sides, as he knelt before his crucifix, crying, "Peccavimus! Peccavimus!" wailing with unfeeling hand the blood-stained scourge.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Alas for Jocelin! When that morning dawned on which he had proposed to make such a valiant stroke for liberty, it found him exhausted by his vigil, and the cruel flagellation to which he had subjected himself, too languid to do aught save lie upon his straw, and follow the same round his mind had been traversing all the long, long night. What was his intent? What were his desires? What were Robese's thoughts of so gross an insult? How would it all end? Was that poor, self-accusing creature asked himself over and over. As to the latter question, he little recked how near was his answering for Jocelin thought, as do all young and untutored souls in sorrow's shadow, when Anguish brings all her furies to scourge dying hope and joy, that this present woe could have no bitter aftermath. But naught in this world is superlative, save death, and even that can hardly be called so, as there lies something beyond it. So while this wretched man asked himself "What will be the result?" Brother Walter, early cloaked with the Abbot, was bringing about a speedy ending.

Walter the Medicus was not wicked, yet his was one of those distorted natures in which curiosity, distrust and envy lurked like toads beneath a stone, only waiting the hand of opportunity to uncover them. Thus it was with the firm consciousness of good faith he told the Abbot all he had suspected, and what he had seen in Robese's chamber, though the fact that Jocelin was handsome, popular, skilled in the arts, and favored by the Abbot may have colored the recital.

Samson heard him in silence; his firm jaw set like a trap of steel, but though his piercing eyes searched the informer's face, as if he would penetrate the shriveled soul of him, he could detect no deceit therein, and was forced to think what it tore his heart-strings to believe.

"It shall be sifted," said he at length, "thoroughly, and at once. Go bid the Prior assemble all the brethren in the Chapter house, and straightway I'll come hither. Mind ye, I say all," he repeated impressively, as Walter departed, his voice slightly trembling, for he could not bear to mention Jocelin's name; for him, Abbot Samson loved best of all his household, and often thought, "Had it been permitted that I should have a son, he would have been like this."

Left alone, the Abbot paced the cloister, tugging at his grizzled beard, frowning and muttering as he moved, and after a few moments passed into the offertory, where on his knees before the shrine he prayed for guidance to do firmly and justly what was to be done; especially pleading for power

to restrain the anger and indignation surging in his heart against this untoward offender. Yet, however much the ermined of soul love those of meander mood, they can never quite do this messenger returned, above the temptations with which they are beset, they are unable to sympathize with weakness.

Brother Walter was too wise to tell the Prior why the chapter was to be assembled, but that astute Norman drew his own conclusions from the eloquent face of the other, and shook his head dubiously as the monks filed into the chapter room, two hundred benches on either side. Here they stood, and filled the long oaken walled, chattering like schoolboys on the probable cause of the summons, but when the Abbot entered with Robese, white and tremulous, and Mistress Mary (fresh from a stern interrogation), in floods of tears, expressive glances were exchanged, as if each would say to his fellow, "This smacks of some excitement, brother!"

Seats were placed for the two maids near the Abbot's chair. The clerk of the chapter called the roll, each monk replying, "Ad sum," until all had answered to their names. May, not all were in my Lord Abbot's own chapel. And why looks my lord so grim when Jocelin of Brakelond answers not unto his name?"

"Bring him hither," said the Abbot. His tone made them start; 'twas like the menace of distant thunder, and a hush fell over the assembly like that which presages a storm. Presently the messenger returned, followed by the delinquent. The moment he entered, Jocelin knew the worst had come; and with the last desperate courage of one who fights for his life against many foes, he drew his spare form erect and, steadying his swaying features, came forward with calm, slow tread, not to his accustomed seat, but straight to the Abbot's chair, where, with a respectful obeisance, he folded his arms and stood, waiting for the accusation. Robese crimsoned at sight of him, and clutched her tirewoman by the hand; for Mary, aroused by her cry, had reached her side on yesternight in time to see the intruder flee across the Gate chamber.

Farther and farther grew the Abbot's face, until it seemed to the frightened monks that the room was filled with gloom, while in the suppressed tones of a man who fears to trust himself, he addressed them: "My children, it is in shame and anger that I reveal to you that deadly sin hath entered these hallowed walls, and a stain fallen on the honor of our house. Woe's me, I—and I have been the indirect cause, in that I nursed a viper in my bosom." (Pointing a shaking finger at Jocelin.)

"Before God and the saints, and this chapter here assembled, I, Samson, Abbot and Lord of St. Edmundsbury, by testimony of Walter de Medicus, and Mary, tirewoman, to Robese de Cokefield, do accuse Jocelin of Brakelond, monk of the Benedictine order, affirming that he is false to the letter of his vows, hath failed in obedience and chastity; hath at night entered the chamber of our ward, Robese de Cokefield; that he was driven hence by her screams, and the arrival of her tirewoman."

The silence was unbroken; save, far back in the hall, an aged Norman whispered in his neighbor's ear, "Body of the saints, the penalty is death by living sepulchre!"

"What say'st thou, lecherous monk?" thundered the Abbot. "Betrayor of thy Lord's trust, renegade, wouldst thou ravisher; wilt not thy master, Satan, put answer in thy mouth? Speak, I command thee!"

Jocelin cast a hunted look around, such as a drowning man would cast on the vanishing earth and sky. He dared not glance at Robese, but he met the Abbot's contemptuous look with one of mournful entreaty.

"My Lord," he answered, "I do confess that I went thither, but by the wounds of Christ, I swear I meditated no evil. I love the lady, my Lord, and passion overwhelmed reason. Indeed, I meant no harm."

At this weak defence, a low hiss went up from the chapter. The Abbot still with a look of scorn, seized upon a helpless maid, half-naked in her bed; 'Sdeath, thou addest foolery to thy crime! Doth think to trick us with such a pouch-mouthed whine?" "Indeed, I meant no evil! We all were men, sirrah, before we were monks; God wot! And prone to sin as sparks fly up. O spawn of evil, seek not thus to trick us with a puny tale no school brat would believe! Come, midnight prowler, hast thou no other safe defence than this?"

"I can say no more," answered the despairing monk, flinging up his arms wildly to heaven, as if for justice there.

"Then, another can and shall, Walter de Medicus, stand forth!" So Walter stood forth and told his story, ending, by way of justification, "Indeed, methought them in the very lists of love, else would I never have told the dread tale!" But he went no further, for Samson, with eyes aflame, struck him full in the mouth with clenched fist. "Remove him, shackled, to the tower; and those nearest him right gladly obeyed."

"Foul bird which fouls its own fair nest," the Abbot thundered; "puny dunces insult a pure and virtuous maid—been wronged and shamed by this audacious break? Let me but sense such a thought in any man's mind, end by the saints, I'll flay him for to pluck it out. Thus doth sin breed sin, my sons. We'll fast till Ember day, and each do double penance to purge us from such vile contamination."

"Brethren of St. Edmund's holy shrine, I command ye each to rise as his name is called, and with prayerful consideration, answer ye. Is this Jocelin innocent or guilty?"



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There was a pause, then the notes of a chant rose to the dim rafters of the chapter house, gaining strength and power, as each monk, taking up the song, rose in place and stood ready to give verdict. "Qui tollis peccata mundi misere nobis!" And as the last solemn note died away, the long roll was called and one hundred and ninety-nine voices answered, one after the other, "Guilty, my Lord!"

There was the sound of a fall, a cry from Mistress Mary, and the Abbot turned to see his ward in a limp heap on the floor; the maid exclaiming, "She is dead, my sweet lady, she is dead!" It was but a swoon, and when she had been borne to the cooler air of the ante-chamber, and ministered to by the nurse, she awoke with her head on Mary's lap. An exclamation from the girl, who was eagerly listening to what went on in the chapter room, caused her to sit up, crying wildly, "What 'tis! Let me go, minion!"

"Ah, Holy Mother," cried the distracted maid, "this torture by the Rachegette till he confess his sinful intent; then punishment at the Abbot's pleasure. The cruel, cruel Lord—truly the ragged like a wolf!"

"What girl, what matter of thing is the Rachegette?"

"Wait, Madam, and I'll tell thee, List, now, Brother Tristan speaks; and truly it was the tremulous voice of the old gardener who alone of all the brethren, dared to speak a word for the renegade monk."

"Nay, I care not for him, wench! This Rachegette—it hath a fearful sound, describe it. I command thee!"

"Why, 'tis an engine which it taketh three to carry (I've been told). 'Tis fastened to a beam, and hath a sharp iron which goeth round a man's throat, so he can in no way sit, lie or sleep but he beareth the weight of the iron."

Robese drew a sobbing breath. "Mary," she demanded fiercely, "do'st believe that Jocelin came to the Gate chamber with evil intent?"

"Who can say, Madam?" answered the tirewoman. "But as our Lord Abbot says, 'man is prone to sin!'"

But Robese was not listening to this evasive answer. She was now intent on Brother Tristan, muttering as she strained her ears to catch every sound of his voice. "Joceline loves me, and he meant no evil. For my sake he will be tortured—for my sake, mayhap suffer death!"

"Within the chapter room Tristan was entering a broken plea for mercy on account of the offender's youth, and his erstwhile devotion to the Abbot's service. 'Bethink thee, Domine, on thy return from thy mission to Rome, when thou were gyved within the prison tower, the youth denied himself food, and risking punishment and broken bones, climbed the Abbey wall to succor thee!' They all expected the Abbot to break forth in invectives against this poor petitioner; but he answered kindly:

"Rest thee, old frere. Thou dost well to remind us of such past benefactions; a good deed, however small, deserves rewarding. The decrees of the Abbot, of St. Edmunds should not be variable; yet, because of this past kindness and because thou, in brotherly love, hast dared to succor the outcast, I will mix mercy with my just decree. Jocelin of Brakelond, fallen monk, brother of our household no more, when thou, by corrective torture, hast come to confess thy sin, I, Abbas Domine, do waive the penalty of living sepulchre which thy offence doth merit, and do sentence thee to life imprisonment in the Oublette. We can punish the vile body, but God alone can deal with that evil spirit which hath so perverted it. May God have mercy on thy lost and ruined soul, Amen. Remove the prisoner."

At this sentence, groans rose from the lips of many, and as Jocelin was led away old Tristan, rending his garments and beating his breast ran from the chapter room with tears raining down his cheeks, crying brokenly, "Twas I who let the Devil loose in St. Edmunds. Culpa me, culpa me! And the wondering monks exclaimed, "This dreadful happening hath turned his old brain!"

While the Abbot made his severe indictment, Jocelin stood like a statue, alike indifferent to punishment or mercy, but when the stern voice ceased and he was being led away, he seemed to waken as if from a trance, and stretched tremulous hands to the grim judge, crying with a look of

hunted fear, as he passed from sight, "Mercy, my Lord, mercy!"

'Twas then a fair, disheveled figure sped up the aisle, with tangled locks falling about a resolute young face; and Robese knelt at the Abbot's feet, echoing her lover's wailing cry—"Mercy, my Lord, mercy! Father, I will confess my fault. Torture him not, for Christ's sweet sake, for I have come to my senses, and am appointing." To Abbot Samson turned ashen, and he loosened Robese's clinging arms, and stood looking down at her, disdain, fiery anger and sorrow struggling for mastery. Then his face hardened; his brow lowered. "Remove thee, woman!" he cried; but Robese laid her cheek against his silken shoe, and the Abbot, pushing her from him with his foot, unheeding poor Mary's frantic shrieks of "It is not true, Lord Abbot; let me speak!" cried, "Remove the leman," and strode from the hall.

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