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Orate Pro Anima

Alianor de Retteville lay on her bed and looked at Giles who was her lover. She did not speak. She had nothing to say. He did not speak either. They were not alone, for in a corner of the room an old woman sat spinning, but she was no more than the bump and purr of her wheel. It was summer, and late afternoon. The rain fell and birds were singing; they had their summer voices, loud and guttural. The rain had come unobtrusively, breaking up a long spell of drought. For leagues and leagues around it was falling on the oak woods, dripping from leaf to leaf and taking a long time, because the foliage was so thick, to reach the ground. It would be pleasurable, Alianor thought, to lie naked in the oak woods now, feeling the rain on her skin. Each drop would be a small separate pleasure. But only the pigs and a few foresters were in the woods, creatures whose skin has little sensitivity.

It is going to thunder, thought Giles, noticing how dusky the room had grown and seeing the leaden hue of the sky above the vivid green of the oak woods, a narrow picture in the window that because of the heat was unscreened. Instead of the thunder which he expected to hear a wood-dove began to croon. He closed his eyes and stretched and fell asleep again.

They were both sleeping when the old woman jumped up from her wheel and hobbled towards the bed, softly calling on them to waken. A moment later the spinning-wheel was knocked over as the door was forced open, and Brian de Retteville and his two cousins, Piers and Richard, burst in. Giles awoke and saw the old woman at the bedside holding out his sword. She proffered its blade towards him, poor old fool, and in snatching it he cut his hand.

That was the first bloodshed. Immediately the three were upon him. He fought, not to defend himself, there was no hope of that, but to die fighting and quickly.

After the first start of waking Alianor did not move. Recumbent, stiffening in the posture of her sleep, she watched her lover being butchered. What would have been the use of moving? She could not save Giles and in a little while she would be dead herself. So she stayed as she was, the braid of hair lying across her breast, her long arms and narrow hands spread out on either side as she had laid them for coolness, for the air, cooled with rain, to refresh her ribs and flanks. Even her seaweed-coloured eyes were motionless, attentively watching her lover's death.

It was this immobility which saved her life. Turning to the bedside Brian de Retteville supposed that now he would kill the woman too. But seeing her lie there, so calm, so arrogantly still, his anger was arrested by the horror a man feels at a woman's immodest individuality. He began to call his wife whore and strumpet. The impulse to kill her was overwhelmed in a flood of reviling, and only emerged later in kicks and blows.

Meanwhile the two cousins were dragging Giles's body towards the stairhead. The old woman reproached them for their unchristianity, saying in her rasping dialect that they should show pity for the dead even if they had none for the living. Looking down on the young man's bloodied face, which seemed to express an indignant and slightly supercilious astonishment, she crossed herself and began to pray. He had given her many presents and joked with her. It was a sorry thought that now for lack of a little grace of time and a priest he was almost certainly damned.

Piers and Richard were in no mood to stomach pious reproaches just then, being excited with bloodshed and embarrassed by Brian's stockishness and Alianor naked on the bed. Bundling the old woman up between them they tossed her downstairs.

'So much for you, Dame Bawd!'

There was no reply. Peering down they saw that she lay at the turn of the stair, her head wried to one side, a thin vomit trailing between her lips. She was dying, and they felt relieved, and as if the

situation had been bettered. Even if that oaf Brian could not follow the example, an example had been set.

That evening the three men got extremely drunk. The house rang with their brawls. Alianor, listlessly stirring to and fro, trying to find some attitude in which she could forget the pain of her bruises, heard the cousins telling Brian what they thought of him, and Brian shouting out that he knew how to manage his wife, it was no business of theirs.

'Since you've left the slut alive,' hiccuped Richard, 'you'll have to send her to some nunnery.'

'I'll do what I'll do,' Brian roared.

He won't do much, she thought. There will be no nunnery, for he will never part from my money. If I had the energy I could soon cuckold him again and serve him right. But remembering Giles and his love and how she had loved him, and how deeply they had embraced and how little they had spoken, it seemed to her that all possibility of love was over, that any other love she might entertain would be flawed with deliberation, and specious; and she wept silently, biting her hair to prevent herself from crying out.

Her forecast was right. Beyond some more outbursts of temper, and dismissing most of the servants, Brian did no more. Life went on in the former pattern. Brian rode out to hunt, the horns squawking through the oak woods. Within doors the long afternoons were silent as ever except for the buzz of the lazy autumn flies and the bump and purr of an old woman's spinning-wheel: only it was a different old woman, and there was no lover. By Christmas Brian had squared matters with his self-respect. If he had omitted to kill his wife it was because such a wife was not worth the trouble of killing: a sensible man does not take women so seriously. The sense of ignominy which might have fretted him he sublimated by seeing the funny side of his misadventure. With roars of laughter he entertained company by recounting how he had sneaked home to find Giles and Alianor snuggling. A rude awakening . . . God's blood, how chopfallen they had looked! At dinner, at supper, the story was repeated till in the end even the sturdiest senses of humour found it tedious.

And so for another ten years they lived together, Brian countering all suggestions that he should take the cross in defence of the Holy Sepulchre by the plea that he must stay at home to keep an eye on Alianor's virtue; and he would recount again the tale of that summer afternoon to anyone unwary enough not to get away in time. In summer the woods were green, and full of flies and deep shadows, and the wolves lived quietly, the she-wolves bringing on their cubs from the teat to rabbits and badgers. In winter they gathered into packs and ravaged the open country night after night. In snowy seasons their large footprints showed how they moved in companies, where the scouts had gone out from the main pack, and how cunningly they had skirted the wolf-traps; or the blurring of footprints told how a carcass had been dragged back to the outskirts of the wood where it could be eaten in privacy. All night their voices rose and fell, sharpening into quarrels like the voices of men. So time went on, every year a little more draggingly, as though time itself were growing middle-aged. Alianor bore two more children, both girls. Then it was time to find a bride for Gilbert, the eldest son. Aged ten, she came to live with her new parents. She was a high-bred hoyden, wealthy, frank, hating all music except the sound of the horn – a daughter-in-law after Brian's own heart. Once again Alianor was with child, and unwontedly timid, oppressed by the girl's hearty, careless curiosity and pebble gaze. And in this childbed she died, having given birth to a large dead boy.

What followed astonished everyone – perhaps even Brian himself, who had become the astonishment. Whether it was he dreaded Alianor's ghost, or whether in some dull crevice of his heart he still loved the woman who had once dishonoured and always despised him, or whether her death released him from the bondage of feeling and acting like a dolt, no one could say; but suddenly he was a different man. Alianor's funeral was a nine days' wonder. She lay unburied for a fortnight while the preparations were heaped up; and because there were few serfs on the manor, for he had cleared away two hamlets in order to have more room for his wild boars, he sent a general invitation through the countryside for all beggars, scholars, jugglers, and broken men to come and share in the funeral

feast and receive alms and new clothes in her memory. He commissioned the best craftsmen in England to carve her tomb, and sat beside the effigist as he worked, telling him that the nose must be a trifle narrower, the left eyebrow a hair's breadth higher than the right, while he watched for the likeness to emerge as sharply as in better days he had watched outside a thicket.

Meanwhile Alianor's body, in a lead coffin, waited till it could be transferred to the nunnery which he intended to found in commemoration of her soul. For months on end his intercourse was with bishops and lawyers, and through the long negotiations his hunter's patience was inexhaustible and no detail escaped him. He chose to have a priory of the Benedictine order. All Alianor's fortune he gave to its endowment, and made a will leaving it half his own property, though Gilbert and Adela and Adela's relations complained furiously and threatened alternately to bring a law-suit or to write to the Pope. The site chosen was a manor called Oby. Oby had been part of Alianor's dowry, and in the early days of their marriage they had often lived there, for it was good hawking country along the Waxle Stream; but as his taste in hunting turned to larger quarries the manor house had fallen into neglect and now only the shell of it remained, housing several families of serfs and countless bats. Now this shell was made weatherproof, whitewashed within and partitioned into dormitories and chambers. A chapel was constructed and a bell hung in the squat belfry, the barns were re-roofed and the moat was cleaned. The dedication was made to Our Lady and Saint Leonard, patron of prisoners, and the choice of this saint was perhaps a little acknowledgement towards those acquaintances who had urged Brian de Retteville to take the cross, since several of them had actually done so and still awaited ransom. The nuns arrived, bright as a flock of magpies, and into their keeping he gave his two younger daughters; and then, when everything was finished, he went back to his oak woods and his hunting, and died in 1170.

The Waxle Stream flowed north–east through a poor country of marsh and moorland: a muddy reluctant stream, full of loops and turnings, and constantly revising its course, for the general lie of

the land imposed no restraint on its vagaries. In some places it had hollowed for itself long pools where the current seemed to have ceased altogether, in others it skulked through acres of rushes and spongy moss. Every second year or so it spread itself into a flood. When the flood-water went down, the Waxle Stream had changed some part of its course and the former channel was filled up with a false brilliant herbage that had little or no nourishment in it.

Such a stream makes a very contentious boundary; and if the land had been of more value one generation or another of Alianor's ancestors might have set their men to embanking. But their manor of Oby was a small part of their possessions and lying far away from any other de Bazingham property, so nothing was done. The only indication of man's will to thwart nature was the high earthen causeway running to the town of Waxelby on the coast. This was made long before the first de Bazingham came into England. It was called the Hog Trail, and people said that long ago all the hogs of Oby, and of Lintoft on the further side of Oby Fen, had been driven along the trail to Waxelby for slaughtering because in those days men were so foolish that they took their hogs to the salt instead of fetching the salt to the hogs. Whoever made the Hog Trail, and for whatever purpose, it was well made and still serviceable, though the willows, that had rooted in the ditches and grown to huge trees and split and rooted again, had weakened the earthworks and sooner or later would pull them down. When the floods were out the Hog Trail was the only way to get from Oby to Waxelby: a bitter nine miles, with the wind from the sea beating over the floods like a skater. But in summer, when Brian de Retteville came to the manor for some hawking and to remind his bailiff that if the Martinmas beef were to be worth eating the beasts should now be fattening, the place was well enough: he, at any rate, had liked it. When he chose to found his nunnery there it did not occur to him that nuns live in a place all the year round, and must feed through the hungry half of the year as well as through the plentiful half. There was land, and water, and a population of serfs, not many but enough; there were buildings and outbuildings, a fish-pond, an excellent dovecot. What more could women, holy women, desire?

Negotiations with the house in France which was to supply his first batch of nuns enlarged his notions of what holy women desire. The abbess, a notable woman of business, sent him a long list of requirements, including a boat; for the title deeds of the manor, expressing Oby's condition in the more watery past, used the term *insula*. Even after assurances that the manor was on the mainland she extracted a great deal more from him than he had thought to give: yearly loads of timber, carriage free, from his oak woods; half the profit of one of his mills to cover the purchase of wine; a yearly consignment of dressed fox-skins, to make coverlets; a good relic; books for the altar and for account-keeping; the complete furniture for the convent priest's chamber over the gate-house and the tolls of a bridge over the Nene to pay for his upkeep and salary; a litter; tin porringers with lids to them; and a ring for the prioress.

Even so, the nuns arriving to take possession felt that they had come a long way to worsen their lot They saw their new home at its best, for it was midsummer, and under the enormous vault of sky their manor, perched on the little rise of ground which gave the place its old name and half-circled by a loop of the Waxle Stream, looked like one of those maps into which the draughtsman has put every detail and coloured the whole to resemble life. The river was blue, the fields were striped in the colours of cultivation and fallow, there was a small mill, a large barn, a brewhouse, a fish-pond, also blue, and the house itself, a scramble of low buildings newly roofed with reed thatch, with a small chapel to one side of it and to the other a large dovecot, banded with black-faced flints. Further along the ridge were the huts and sheds of the hamlet. To the east there was a belt of trees, warped and stunted by the wind from the sea.

Everything was poorer, smaller, clumsier than they had expected. The rooms were dark and poky, and seemed thrown together at random. Food had to be carried across the yard, for there was no covered way between the kitchen and the refectory. They must take their exercise out of doors or not at all, for there were no cloisters. Even their newly built chapel – they had been told it was newly built – was a squat, cramped building with a

disproportionately large west door, a low roof supported by stumpy pillars, and a floor two foot below ground level (it was, in fact, a reach-me-down conversion of what had been the dungeon and cattle-hold of the original manor house). Like all people of bad taste, Brian de Retteville had saved on the structure in order to spend on the fittings. Altar, screen, stalls, canopies, were highly ornate and bright with paint and gilding. As for the one bell, it was so clumsy that it took two women to sound it. .

With dubious hearts they sang their *Te Deum*.

A good convent should have no history. Its life is hid with Christ who is above. History is of the world, costly and deadly, and the events it records are usually deplorable: the year when the roof caught fire, the year of the summer flood which swept away the haystacks and drowned the bailiff, the year when the cattle were stolen, the year when the king laid the great impost for the Scotch wars and timber for five years had to be felled to pay it, the year of the pestilence, the year when Dame Dionysia had a baby by the bishop's clerk. Yet the events of history carry a certain exhilaration with them. Decisions are made, money is spent, strangers arrive, familiar characters appear in a new light, transfigured with unexpected goodness or badness. Few calamities fall on a religious house which are not at some time or other looked back upon with wistful regret. 'In such an out-of-the-way place as this anything might happen,' said the first sacrist of Oby, staring at the listless horizon towards which the sun was descending like a lump of red-hot iron. 'Anything or nothing,' replied the first prioress. It seemed to her that Brian de Retteville's choice of site had been unrealistically too close to the mind of Saint Benedict – since it was a nunnery he had founded. Men with their inexhaustible interest in themselves may do well enough in a wilderness, but the shallower egoism of women demands some nourishment from the outer world, and preferably in the form of danger or disaster. While appeasing grumbles and expostulations, she realised that the inconveniences of the new house were in fact providential, and that when they were remedied (and for the good name of her order she must strive to remedy them) her nuns, exercising themselves dry-footed and eating meals

which had not been spoiled between the kitchen and the table, would complain much more, and with better reason; since they would then be able to give an undivided attention to the mortifying tranquillity of their lives.

As things turned out, the providential inconveniences of her house lasted longer than she did. With a manor abounding in reeds and supplied with a sufficiency of timber one might think it an easy matter to make a covered way between kitchen and refectory and some makeshift sort of cloister. But the wood was not seasoned, the reeds were not cut or were not dried, the labour was not available, the time of year was not suitable: in short, the newcomers were unwelcome. The families which had been turned out of the manor house when it was made over for the nuns were, of course, related to all the other families on the manor; and the evicted were scarcely more resentful than those into whose hovels they packed on the plea of cousinship and Christian charity. Under an absentee lord and a careless bailiff the manor serfs had achieved a kind of scrambling devil-take-the-hindmost independence. Though the new state of things included fresh livestock, repairs to roofs and carts and ploughs, and all the advantageous pickings which flow from an occupied manor, the Oby serfs unanimously disapproved of the nuns, a pack of foreigners who had come to feed on them, a gaggle of silly women, more tyrannical than any de Bazinghams or de Rettevilles, and ignorant into the bargain. The de Bazinghams had at least known better than to plant fig trees. To this enmity was added, after Brian de Retteville's death, the enmity of Gilbert and Adela, who suffered as sharply as any of the evicted serfs from the pangs of dispossession. Brian's legacy to the convent was indisputably legal and spiritually meritorious; but this did not prevent them from holding on to it as long as they could and wrangling over every piecemeal transfer. Neither did this prevent the convent's mother-house in France becoming increasingly unsympathetic towards an offshoot whose revenues on paper now warranted filial offerings rather than these perpetual begging-letters. Meanwhile the first prioress had died of a fever and her successor was that same hopeful sacrist who had thought that anything might happen,

and still preserved the same illusion (it was she who enfranchised two families, the Figgs and the Torkles, in order to raise enough money to build a new gallows). In 1183, twenty years after its foundation, the convent of Oby was in such a state of confusion and indebtedness that the bishop of the diocese began to talk of dissolving it. Then Richenda de Foley interposed her strong secular arm. Richenda was Alianor's younger sister, a widow and a seasoned harridan, who having quarrelled her way through all her nearer relations had now worked down to quarrelling with Gilbert and Adela. What love is to some women and needlework to more, litigation was to Richenda. Gilbert and Adela were withholding Brian's legacy, were they, and imperilling the soul's welfare of a beloved sister and, for the nonce, a beloved brother-in-law? She would hunt the last farthing out of them; and in addition she would shame them by finding other and better patrons for the house, and better dowered and more creditable nuns than Gilbert's two wretched sisters. In order to conduct these operations she settled herself in the nunnery, where at that time there was room and to spare for boarders. She brought several servants, a great deal of household furniture, three dogs, one of the Magdalen's tears in a bottle, and twelve chests stuffed with law-papers and inventories. She also brought a great deal of method and efficiency. For the first time the manorial dues were properly enforced, and the serfs, working as they had not worked for years, became almost reconciled to the convent, since one of the old family, who in shrewdness and obstinacy might almost be one of themselves, had taken it under her wing.

In 1194 a wandering scholar, very old and shrill, came begging for a meal. As he sat munching his bread and a salt herring he talked to the wicket-nun about the properties of numbers, and of how Abbot Joachim, analysing the arithmetic of the prophecies, had discovered that the end of the world was at hand. He himself expected much of the year 1221, a date whose two halves each added up to three. In such a year, he said, one might look for the reign of Antichrist to be fulfilled, or else it might betoken the coming of the kingdom of the Holy Ghost, as the number six expressed a completion of two-thirds of the Trinity. Something, at any rate,

he said, might be expected. Under his arm he carried a monochord. To make himself clearer to the nuns (for several of them had gathered to pity the old man, so wise and so witless) he explained to them about the Proportion of Diapason, the perfect concord which is at once concord and unity, and showed them how, by placing the bridge of the monochord so as to divide the string into a ratio of one and two, the string will sound the interval of the octave. Thus, he mumbled, was the nature of the Godhead perceptible to Pythagoras, a heathen; for it lies latent in all things. He sat on a bench in the sun, but overhead the wind howled, tormenting the willows along the Hog Trail and clawing the thatch, and the nuns could scarcely hear his demonstration of how the Godhead sounded to Pythagoras. It was really no loss, for his hand, shaking with cold and palsy, had failed to place the bridge correctly, and the diapason of the Trinity was out of tune. Then, brushing the crumbs out of his beard and plucking a sprig of young wormwood to stick behind his ear, he sang a lovesong to entertain the ladies and went on his way towards Lintoft. The lovesong had a pretty, catchy tune: for some days every nun and novice was humming it. Then Dame Cecilia began to have fits and to prophesy. This infuriated Richenda de Foley, to whom any talk of the end of the world after she had worked so hard and successfully to put the convent on a good footing for the next century seemed rank ingratitude. But the itch is not more contagious than illuminations, and throughout that summer Oby resounded with excited voices describing flaming bulls, he-goats of enormous size floating above the lectern, apparitions of the founder and shooting pains. In a fury of slighted good intentions and outraged common sense Richenda de Foley packed up and went away, but as she was generous as well as authoritarian she left a great deal of household stuff and provisions behind her. The community, after one universal gasp at finding itself unclasped from that strong and all-arranging hand, settled down to enjoy an unregulated prosperity and comfort; and prosperity and comfort wielding their usual effect, the spirit of prophecy flickered out, and by the close of the year they were looking for nothing more remarkable than improvements to the fish-pond.

In 1208 came the Interdict.

In 1223 lightning set fire to the granary.

In 1257 the old reed and timber cloisters fell to bits in a gale. It was decided that the masons who came to build the new should also build on a proper chapter-house. When it was half-built a spring rose under it. Rather than throw money away, the head mason suggested, why not finish the new building as a dovecot, a wet floor being no inconvenience to doves, and convert the old dovecot, so solid and weatherproof, into a chapter-house? This suggestion, too hastily accepted, led to discomfort all round. The pigeons refused to settle in their new house. Some flew away for good, the others remained in the lower half of the old dovecot, whose upper storey, remodelled with large windows and stone benches, made a very unpersuasive place of assembly. However, the arrangement was allowed as a temporary expedient, and as such it became permanent.

In 1270 there were disastrous floods, and this happened again seven years later. In 1283 hornets built in the brewhouse roof and the cellaress was stung in the lip and died. In 1297 the convent's bailiff was taken in the act of carnality with a cow. Both he and the cow were duly executed for the crime, but this was not enough to avert the wrath of heaven. That autumn and for three autumns following there was a murrain among the cattle. After the murrain came a famine and the bondwomen of the manor broke through the reed fence into the orchard where the nuns were at recreation and mobbed them, snatching at their wimples and jeering at such plump white breasts and idle teats. For this a fine was laid on the hamlet, and the last remnants of the *pax Richenda* broke down. Tithes and dues were paid grudgingly or not at all, and going along the cloisters to sing the night office the nuns would strain their ears for the footsteps of marauders or the crackle of a fired thatch.

In 1332 a nun broke her vows and left the convent for a lover. Misfortunes always go in threes, was the comment of the prioress: they might expect two more to play the same game. But after a second apostacy there was a painful Visitation by the bishop, when the prioress was deposed and Dame Emily the novice-mistress, a better disciplinarian, nominated to be her successor. Unfortunately

Dame Emily was unpopular, being both arrogant and censorious. Dreading the rule of such a prioress the nuns refused to elect her and chose instead, out of bravado, Dame Isabella Sutthery, the youngest and silliest nun among them. The young and silly can become great tyrants. Dame Isabella proved fanatically harsh and suspicious, scourging the old nuns till they fainted for anguish and inventing such unforeseeable misdemeanours that no one could steer clear of offending. The convent waited, languishing, for the next Visitation, when each nun in her private interview with the bishop could make her report. But though the bishop came and heard, he was still nursing his wrath about their rejection of Dame Emily whom he had nominated, and though Dame Emily herself was the greatest sufferer under Prioress Isabella he answered every plea for a fresh election by saying that the convent having chosen must abide by its choice. It was not till 1345, when Prioress Isabella choked on a plum-stone, that peace and quiet returned, followed by four ambling years of having no history, save for a plague of caterpillars.

In 1349 the Black Death came to Oby.

When Prioress Isabella first began to gasp and turn blue Dame Alicia de Foley framed a vow to Saint Leonard, patron of the convent and of all prisoners, that if their tyrant should die of her plum-stone a spire, beautiful as art and money could make it, should be added to their squat chapel. In her mind's eye it soared up, the glory of the countryside, and she was so absorbed in contemplation that Prioress Isabella's eyes were lolling on her cheeks before Dame Alicia remembered to add to the saint that she would also undertake to pray daily throughout the time of the spire's building for the repose of Isabella's soul.

Persuading the rest of the convent to support her in this vow, working on her relations in the world to contribute towards the expenses, manipulating the bishop into expressing approval (his approval was not really necessary but after the business of Prioress Isabella no one at Oby was going to risk slighting a bishop), arranging for the supply of building materials and making a contract with a band of travelling masons took three years – though her election

as prioress enabled her to do all these things more easily. She had been praying for the repose of Isabella's soul for just under a twelvemonth, and the spire, after several false starts and buttressings of the existing tower which was to be its base, was beginning to rise, when at the news that the pestilence had reached Waxelby the masons with one accord scrambled off the scaffolding and went away.

It had been pleasant to kneel on alone after the end of mass, hearing the noise of her spire growing: the whine of the pulleys, the scrape of trowels, the jar as stone after stone was set in its place, the songs and outdoor voices of the masons. But now there was no sound except the March winds hoo-hooing through the gaps, and the thought that the second part of her vow could still be kept was cold comfort. Besides, could she be sure even of that? The pestilence might stop her mouth. Already her treasuress was making it difficult for her to find much time for praying. In the leanest time of year the convent had to be victualled and provided as though to stand a siege. There was wood, meat, meal, fish, oil, spices, candles, serge, wool, and linen to get in, wine and honey, and medicines in case the sickness penetrated their defences. There was fodder for the beasts to be thought of, vinegar for fumigations, charcoal for braziers, and the roof of the infirmary to be re-thatched. The running of the household must be looked into and tightened up, and dues still owing must be got in, and somehow she must increase the convent's stock of ready money, for in times of calamity people will do nothing unless they are paid on the nail for it. Then, too, there was the problem of how best to prepare for the assaults of the poor and needy: these would troop to the wicket, crying out for food, for medicine, for old rags for their sores: they would bring the pestilence to the very gate, and yet they could not be denied, Christ's poor and the plague's pursuivants. Her musing was interrupted by the sound of horses being halted outside the gate-house and a fluster of unfamiliar voices. William de Stoke, whose daughter was a novice in the house, had sent to fetch the girl away, having heard that the pestilence was already at Oby. He had sent a large retinue of servants, and all of them were hungry and required feeding.

While the de Stoke people ate they talked. Though there had been pestilences often enough there had never been, they said, such a pestilence as this. It travelled faster than a horse, it swooped like a falcon, and those whom it seized on were so suddenly corrupted that the victims, still alive and howling in anguish, stank like the dead. The short dusky daylight and the miry roads and the swollen rivers were no impediment to it, as to other travellers. All across Europe it had come, and now it would traverse England, and nothing could stop it, wherever there were men living it would seek them out, and turn back, as a wolf does, to snap at the man it had passed by.

The roads were filled with people fleeing before it. The riders cursed at the travellers on foot, and lashed at them to make way. A fine litter had gone by, said one of the men, and he had asked who was inside it: it was an old Counsellor, one of the retinue answered, and for a long time he had been dying with a slow death that fed on his vitals; but even so, he wished to preserve the live death within him from that other death. Lepers broke out of their hospitals and crutched themselves along with the rest, and people scarcely feared them. Townsfolk who all their lives had lived in comfort now ran to the forests and fed on snails and acorns and rabbits, tearing them apart and eating them raw; but the Black Death was in the forest, too, and the outlaws lay dead beside the ashes of their fires. There had never been such a press of men going to the ports to take ship for the wars in France: for it was better to die in battle than to die of the Black Death. But in the ports and in the crammed holds of the ships the Black Death found them and killed them before they could be killed by their fellow-men.

Wherever they went, another voice broke in, they would find this new Death waiting for them. Better to stay at home than be at so much trouble to go in search of him. For if you went to another town you heard the bells tolling, and saw the kites gathering, and smelled the stink coming from the burial-pits; and if you went afield, the same stink crossed your path, the ploughman lay rotting under a bush and the plough stood near by, with the spring grass growing up around it as though this year were the same as other

years. People were fools, he said, to go in search of a death which would come in search of them. Better to stay under your own roof. Yet that was dismal, too, to sit waiting with your hands dangling between your knees, not daring to pull off your shirt or handle yourself for fear of seeing the tokens come out on your flesh: sometimes like spots, sometimes gatherings as big as plums, but always black because of the poisoned blood within. There was no comfort or pleasure in neighbourliness now: friends scarcely dared look each other in the face, for fear of seeing there the look of death or the look of one who looks on it. Death drove the best bargain at the market, drank deepest at the tavern, walked in processions, married the bride at the church door. The priest said his *Ite missa est* and already his lips were parched and blackening. The server's *Deo gracias* slid between teeth that chattered with fear. The congregation hurried away, silent, each man staring before him.

But the foot-loose have the best of it, the prioress said to herself, hearing all this talk beyond the window. Better to be one of those masons and run into the jaws of death than to sit behind walls and wait for the Black Death to enter. When the little girl was brought in to make her farewells she said to the child, as desperately as to a grown woman: 'Remember to pray for us here at Oby.' The child burst into tears and clung to her skirts, saying she was afraid. 'Afraid of what, my child?' – 'Afraid of the horses.'

Early in April the pestilence was in Lintoft. It broke out in the miller's house, and immediately the miller of Oby went off with his family and belongings, none knew whither. His departure was no hardship to the peasants: for many years households had dodged the manorial mill-dues, grinding their corn in their private hand-mills; but it was a blow to the convent, and though Dame Blanch, who as cellaress ruled over kitchen and storeroom, said jauntily that when they could no longer make bread they must eat frumenty and be thankful for it, many saints and Christian garrisons had thanked God for a handful of parched grain, the other ladies muttered about starvation and the weakness of their teeth. Presently more people in the hamlet began to flit away and another novice was removed by her parents. At each new departure the nuns drew closer together,

whispering in corners and hunching up their shoulders as though a cold wind blew in on them, as though they bodily felt the cold breath of rumour, the many stories now current of how the Black Death had dealt with other religious houses. It crept in, and laid a finger on one person; and his sickness spread through the community like fire through a faggot until the smell of death was stronger than the smell of the boiled meat in the kitchen or the incense in the quire. For a while the Rule held out, the imperilled lives were lived to measure, the dark figures shuffled into quire and out again. There were no straying glances, no one spoke to his neighbour: never had the ordinance of silence and self-immurement been better obeyed. But at last the Rule itself faltered, and sagged, and was lost, and the altar was only greeted by desperate visitors, solitary figures grovelling in silence or perhaps suddenly thrusting out a frantic shriek for mercy.

In one house, every monk had died. In another, every monk but one. And that was the worst – that desolate figure on whom the brand of life was scored like an inversion of the brand of death.

If it were I, the prioress thought – if I were left alive and alone under my unfinished spire . . . Overcome by her imagination she forced herself to go and sit in the parlour, where the nuns were telling each other that this pestilence was unlike any other, for it killed men rather than women.

The first two to sicken were Dame Emily and a novice, and they died on the same day. That evening Sir Peter Crowe, the convent priest, walked uninvited into the prioress's chamber, where she sat with the treasuress, Dame Helen, and Dame Blanch the cellaress, talking calmly (as one does when all hope is gone) about the quality of some vermilion paint, newly bought for an illuminated book of hours which had been commissioned by Piers de Retteville, descendant in the sixth generation of Gilbert and Adela.

'I am leaving you,' he said.

Her first thought, that he was running away from the pestilence, could not be sustained in the face of his bleak self-assurance. He must have gone out of his mind. He had always been sombre and given to austerities.

'I shall set out tomorrow, as soon as it is light. I am going to Waxelby.'

'To Waxelby?'

It was on the tip of Dame Blanch's tongue to say that they did not need any more dried fish. She blushed, thinking how nearly she had said it, while Sir Peter spoke of how heavy the plague was at Waxelby. Since it had declared itself there two rectors had died, the second only ten days after his predecessor. Most of the friars were sick, of the two chantry priests one had gone mad, the other had run away. And the common people were dying unattended.

'You are going to shrive them? It is a most Christian intention – but we here may be dying also. Will you leave us to die unshriven?'

'You must find someone else.'

The prioress stared at her hands. She had never found it easy to brook bad manners.

'I think you should have consulted us before deciding. Like you, we are sorry for the poor people at Waxelby. But in your anxiety about their souls . . .'

'It is not their souls I am thinking of!' he exclaimed. 'I am thinking of the faith. I can't stay idling here while heresy is spreading faster than the pestilence. Do you know what they are doing at Waxelby? – yes, and all over England! Do you realise what they are doing?'

'Dying without the aid of the Church. But how is that a heresy?'

'They are confessing to each other! Yes, and shriving each other, too, I'll be bound.'

'I hope not.'

'It's bound to follow. Give presumption an inch and it will take an ell. Hodge confesses to Madge and Madge gives Hodge absolution. What is let loose on us, I say?'

'But if there is no priest confession may be made to a secular – for instance in battle. My father once received a confession on the battlefield from another knight, and if he had not heard it a great wrong would have remained without amendment.'

Dame Blanch drew herself up and looked round sternly. It was her pride that she came of a warrior family.

Drawing his hand over his chops Sir Peter assumed an air of patience, and began to expound in easy language the doctrine of the sacraments, of the sacramental virtue which sets the priest apart from the ruck of the world. Pedantic fool! thought the prioress, saying courteously: 'Of course. Undoubtedly. How clearly you put it.'

'We shall miss your explanations,' added Dame Helen with sturdy malice.

'God knows,' cried he, 'I say this without arrogance. Humility is inherent in the priestly office, what can be more humbling than to know that the sacramental work is efficacious without regard of him who performs it? In the hands of the vilest priest, a fornicator, a blasphemer, a sodomite, the sacrament is as much sacramental as in the hands of a saint. But the distinction must be kept. And if the saint were a layman his administration of the sacrament would be void.'

'Surely a saint would know that?' Dame Helen said.

His fingers twitched in his wrath.

'All this is beside the point. The point at issue is . . .'

'Whether you go to Waxelby.'

'No. That is decided. The point at issue is whether we are to leave Holy Church undefended while heresy stalks the land. Yes, and when even a pastoral crook is raised against her, when a bishop himself, a bishop! . . .'

In a horrified whisper he told them how the Bishop of Bath and Wells had written allowing that those at the point of death might confess to a lay person if no priest were available.

'But whom shall we confess to?' asked Dame Blanch. 'For while you are giving absolutions at Waxelby we shall be dying unconfessed and unshriven.'

'That is a secondary consideration. How often must I tell you that I am not concerned with individuals? What matters the ease of a few souls more or less when the faith itself is in danger? It is no longer a matter of who dies shriven or unshriven, comforted or comfortless. What is at stake is whether the Church is to keep her hold over the souls of her children. Think of the future, or try to.

Consider the frightful possibility – an England where men and women will die, will die quite calmly, without the assistance of the Church!'

They considered it, moved by his eloquence. Such a future was hard to imagine. It seemed to them that Sir Peter would do better to trust in God and remain at Oby. But they saw it would be useless to say so.

Their silence appealed to him. Presently he began to speak on a milder note, saying how deplorable it was that though God's providence sent these catastrophes upon mankind, mankind was not, as a rule, any the better for them. Then, asking for their prayers, he said farewell.

The convent and its manor lay in the parish of Wivelham. The rector of Wivelham was a young man of good family. He had celebrated one mass in his parish church, looking round with horror on the gaunt grey building in the flat, tow-coloured landscape, and then returned to Westminster. His curate, elderly and decrepit, was not likely to have much time to spare for Oby. A mass a week was as much as they might expect of him; and to supply that he must travel seven miles fasting and seven miles back, or wade the short cut through the marshes. A messenger now sent to him returned with the news that he was sick with an ague. As soon as he could get about he would come to them.

The graves were dug for Dame Emily and the novice; and the prioress told Jesse Figg, the bailiff, that he had better send up a man from the village to dig other graves in readiness. 'They can always be filled up if they are not needed,' she said. The bailiff assured her she need not worry on that score, the graves would soon fill; he added that it would be more satisfactory to dig a large pit, the more so as he could not promise to supply labour for long. After the first two graves had been smoothed over life crept on as usual for a few days. The messenger again returned with word that the curate's ague was abating, that he hoped to come early next week. He did not come, and another nun sickened.

'Sir Peter might just as well have stayed. He would have found plenty to do,' remarked Dame Susanna, the infirmaress. She spoke

to a nun called Matilda de Stapleton, who was helping her to powder dried lizards and centaury roots. Presently they began to discuss the convent's latest difficulty, shortage of labour. Being a poor convent Oby could never keep its servants for long and having the village at its door it had come to depend on day-workers. Now these came no longer, the kitchen was reduced to old Mabel and poor Ursula, who was more afraid of what the world could do to her than of any pestilence. Milk was carried as far as the threshold, wood was thrown down in the outer yard, and once some compassionate person left a dozen fowls there, but the rats spoiled them. To Dame Matilda this desertion seemed like revolt. Dame Susanna saw it as lack of Christian charity and so was more philosophic. She pointed out that though the Black Death kept away their servants it also kept away beggars. It was some days now since any poor traveller had troubled them for a dole.

2

The Tuft of Wormwood

(April 1349–July 1351)

Nowhere does news travel faster than among vagrants. For miles around every wandering beggar knew that the pestilence was among the nuns of Oby. If Ralph Kello had not got drunk he would have known it too. Not that he had drunk either well or deeply; but being cold and hungry the liquor had mounted to his head, and he had spoken so cantankerously that the company at the alehouse let him depart unwarned, thinking, as they watched him stagger off in the moonlight he mistook for morning, that if a clerk took the sickness it would be one proud beggar the less and a seat by the fire the more.

It had been very bad beer, and after walking a few miles he was sick. During the last mile he had seemed to age with every step, his features growing pinched, his jaw drooping, his eyes sinking into his head. Now, even more rapidly than he had aged, he grew young again. The rabbits coming out to feed in the sunrise looked scarcely more innocent and candid than he. Hunger, and another hour's walking, smudged out this glory and by the time he reached Oby he looked his true age, which was thirty-five.

Seeing the unfinished spire he crossed himself and greeted the Virgin, partly in thankfulness that a meal was in sight, partly in thankfulness that this time the pestilence had not got him; for till the vomit had risen in his throat, tasting so unmistakably of sour beer, he had believed himself stricken.

There were some faggots of small wood lying before the gatehouse. He stepped over them and knocked. A party of crows flew

up from the roof and one by one returned and settled again; but no one answered. He knocked once more. He noticed a tuft of wormwood growing near by, and he broke off a shoot and began to snuff at it – for his head ached violently. A weasel reared up from the grass and studied him.

At length there was a creaking overhead. A window had opened and an old nun was looking down on him.

'A breakfast, my good man? Yes, if you are not afraid of us. We have the pestilence here.'

His impulse was to run for his life. But self-esteem compelled him to muster up a few words of compassion.

'Yes, we are all shut up here, like knights in a castle. The enemy has broken in, but we aren't overcome yet.'

Later he was to find Dame Blanch's military fantasies as tedious as everyone else did. But now the contrast between the warlike words and the piping voice touched his heart; and looking up (for after her first speech he had stood with head hanging) it seemed to him that the old nun had a face of singular goodness and honesty. She for her part saw a large, raw-boned man with a hooked nose and thick lips; and discerned, as she said later, unmistakable traits of a noble character. He heard himself asking if he could help them. It was a relief to learn that the help required was to carry a message to Wivelham.

To the curate there, if you will. Beg him to come to us, if only to say one mass. Our priest has left us, for ten days now we have had neither mass nor shriving.'

'My daughter, I am a priest.'

He had thought to himself: Enough to comfort them, and then be off – off before they rise from their knees and begin to ask questions. Perhaps, too, there entered into this hare-brained falsehood an element of superstition; as though by going to meet the pestilence he would insure that it would fly him. Waiting to be let in he had time enough to examine every aspect of his folly, and to quake with fear and to remember that there is no beast of worse omen than a weasel. And yet at the same time he was saying to himself: I am certainly fasting.

Weeping with gratitude, she let him in.

In the sacristy a thin short-sighted nun awaited him with an armful of clothing.

'Is this your largest chasuble?'

'Forgive me! Our sacrist died last week.'

'This one is better. Who will serve the mass?'

She pointed to a boy who stood in the doorway, picking his nose and swaying from foot to foot as he gazed at the silks and embroideries. A nun's child, no doubt: a pupil of the convent would be better disciplined and better dressed. But this was one of those little creatures which trot through a household of women like a pet animal, accepted and neglected as a matter of course. Thirty years ago on just such terms another boy had picked his nose and stared at fine raiment – only it was Fat Maggy he watched, or Janet, or Petronilla, instead of a priest. Between their quarrels they were kind, and when his mother died Petronilla replaced her just as Janet would come forward if Petronilla had gone with a client. But a little boy grows lanky and out of place in a brothel, and so, remembering his mother's ambition, the whores of the establishment clubbed together and sent him to the Canons across the way to be educated and made a clerk of.

The sacrist came forward with the stole. My first mass, he thought, kissing it. And my last. And of all my sins the deadliest, and of all the negligent idiocies I have fallen into the most idiotic. If I had not grown bald it could not have happened, for I suppose not even the shadow of death could blind these ladies to an untonsured head; but causation tunnels like a mole under the surface of our free will, and because of an attack of ringworm in Toledo I am about to say mass in an English convent where they are dying of a pestilence. And here, very probably, I shall die too. The stole settling round his neck seemed to noose him and lead him on into a new life.

A few hours later it was as a matter of course that he sat with the prioress and the older ladies of the convent telling them of his education among the Black Canons, and of his travels and studies; and falling asleep that night the priest's lodging over the gate-house seemed as familiar as an old cloak.

Long after he was abed Ursula was on her knees in the kitchen, offering up thanks to the Virgin. The glow of the embers silhouetted the cooking-pots on the hearth and lit up the curve of the boy's cheek as he lay before the fire. Now they were safe again, there was a priest in the house, and a man. Her child had served his mass, and so already he and she were linked. He would certainly take notice of the boy, and so in time become aware of the boy's mother. He would speak to her about Jackie. She would not be able to answer, but he would have spoken to her – priest and man he would have spoken to her about her child.

She was cold, and tired, and ageing, and disgraced. Three times she had left her convent for love, and twice she had crept back and lived in penance. Again a craving for love had haled her out into the world, where with a child in her belly and afterwards with the child on her back she had wandered from place to place, the creature of any man who would look at her with a certain look, speak to her in a certain voice. And then, just as before, Christ her bridegroom had waylaid her, more mastering than any man, and she had gone back, cowed, to woo him with abject repentance. This time her convent would not re-accept her: she was sentenced to live in mortification and obedience, but without the veil, and presently she was sent with her child to Oby to live there as a servant. She was a good cook and a feverishly hard worker, and the Oby ladies did not trouble her with any reproaches unless they found insects in the salad – which happened occasionally because lust and tears and wood-smoke had weakened her eyesight; and was serious because in swallowing a live insect one may swallow an evil spirit inhabiting it. Sometimes, when a fit of hysteria took her, Dame Helen would urge her to resist Satan whose bargains, as Ursula must know from experience, were so little worth the purchase; but Dame Helen's exhortations, as Ursula also knew, sprang as much from anxiety lest the convent should lose a cook as concern lest the fiend should gain a soul. This assurance that she was of some value in the world did more than any prayers and fastings to keep her safe in the convent kitchen. For the rest, they were kind enough, and tolerant to the boy; and no one suspected what she

suffered at the hands of the Oby laity – the miller's wife with her scorching tongue, the boys who threw stones at the child and scattered dung on her hair. Six years of virtue and security had almost tamed her. Then news of the pestilence came like a yelling of hounds on a renewed scent At one moment it seemed to her that she had not repented sufficiently and that death might take her before she had had leisure to win God's mercy (there had never been so much to do, even when the bishop came, as now); an hour later the thought of dying without one more taste of the sweet world drove her frantic. Then Sir Peter left; as a man of no account, but his departure created the most frightful of all voids; for the priest stands in the place of God, and when that place is left empty God steps into it, God unmitigated and implacable.

But now the strange priest was lying in the room over the gate.

She crept on her knees towards the child and began to kiss him, furiously and inattentively. Only by kissing or shrieking could she slack the strain of so much thankfulness. The child woke and struck at her with a sleepy arm.

'Don't kiss me so hard, mother. It hurts.'

'Tell me, Jackie, tell me about the new priest. What does he look like? Has he got white teeth?'

'He's got an ugly nose,' said the child. Burrowing into her lap he fell asleep again. For a long while she sat there, staring at the embers with her weak eyes, holding the hot bony immature creature that would one day in his turn become a man.

A man; but being a bastard, never a priest.

'Yes, it is a pity he is a bastard,' said the prioress, answering commendations on her server. 'As you say, he is a clever child. And what could be better than to return as a priest to the house that nurtured you? Such a priest would feel a son's care for everything about the place, he would be interested in its upkeep, see to the repairs, drive the work-people, carry out, may be, projects he had seen others begin. Such a priest,' she added, smiling, 'might even finish my spire.'

She liked Ralph Kello. He was educated, and discreet, and she was grateful to him for arriving when he did, and remaining.