

DAME ELINOR'S ATONEMENT

It was a fair spring evening, with the buds bursting into leaves and the birds singing their merriest lays as Gilbert Sheldon left York and trudged southward five years before he had left his home in the shadow of Mostyn Castle to try his fortune in the Low Countries. Fate had not been kind to him, and he was coming back as poor as he had gone forth. For all that his heart was merry as he tramped along. Should he not again see his old mother and Lord Mostyn, his old master? The latter might make a harmless jest concerning the wealth he had gone to win, and won not, but he would give him a welcome none the less, sincere of that, and his mother—how glad she would be to see him again!

He tramped onward still singing, but after a time his song ceased. The face of the country was changed in some indescribable way. Beside that grove of firs had stood the farm-house of one John Poulton, whose daughter's marriage to a rotund butcher had perhaps been the cause of young Sheldon's fit of wandering. But no trace of the farm-house was to be seen. The ground that had been occupied by two or three cottages was also bare, and Gilbert walked on in bewilderment till he came to a place where four roads met. On that spot was a gibbet but lately erected, and Gilbert recoiled as the ill-omened and gruesome object met his sight.

He stood gazing at it so intently that the sound of approaching footsteps failed to rouse him from the wonderment into which he had fallen, and the newcomer, a slight wiry man of perhaps fifty years of age, had time to recognise him before Gilbert moved his glance to him.

'Ha, Master Culcheth! How fares the world with thee?'

Master Culcheth shook his head and pointed to the gibbet.

'Is there need to ask the question, thank you, Gilbert Sheldon?'

'Aye, is there, of a truth. Since I left the neighbourhood I have heard naught of what went on in it.'

'Then thou wert blessed of a surety. Hast thou not heard of the changes that are made in England?'

'Marry, and so I have! I've heard it said that one Thomas Cromwell has made the king Pope in England. But what of that?'

'We have Cromwell to thank for all,' Culcheth made answer in bitter tones, 'for the plundering of the monasteries, for the reduction of the Sacraments, for the ruin of our country, for the death of Fisher and More.'

'But what hast thou, good Master Culcheth, to do with Mostyn?' Gilbert asked. 'The folk of Mostyn would not change the faith Christ left them at a layman's bidding even though the layman be King of England.'

'Nay, they would not, and for that have they suffered,' Master Culcheth made answer. 'The north was true to the old faith, and rose in arms when the monks were hounded from their abbeys, but fair words and lying words disbanded the army of the north, and then Cromwell struck. The Abbots of Whalley, of Woburn, and Sawley went to the gallows, others died at Tyburn with the brave Percy. Lady Bulmer was burnt at the stake and Lord Mostyn was hanged at his own castle gate.'

'Lord Mostyn hanged?' Gilbert gasped. 'To him that was the worst of the tidings Master Culcheth narrated.'

'Aye, hanged. He was one of the first of the northern lords to rise in arms.'

'Well?'

'Come to yonder hill top,' Master Culcheth said, and Gilbert obeyed him. From the summit of the hill, a large tract of country was visible, and the returned wanderer gave a cry as he looked round. Mostyn Castle that he last saw a strong and stately edifice, was a pile of blackened ruins. 'It was Richard Caryl's work,' Master Culcheth explained after a pause. 'He had command of a troop of horse, and by his orders Mostyn Castle was burned, and its lord and his bravest retainers left dead. Caryl came by stealth when no fear was in our hearts, and did carry out his master's treacherous plan.'

'Were all killed—all in the castle?' the horror-stricken Gilbert demanded.

'Nay, not all. Am I not still alive? But not through the renegade Caryl's good-will. I was left for dead just outside the castle but albeit my wound proved a bad one, I saw Richard Caryl and his men ride off with those they had taken prisoners.'

'They took prisoners?'

'The priests that ministered to us—later they were put to death because they would not admit the king to be the head of the Church—the scullions and kitchen

wenches. Father Finchey was placed among the others with his hands bound. I saw Caryl's ruffians strike him with their spears as they marched away. At the foot of the hill on which the castle was built Caryl paused and looked back. I saw his outstretched hand, and heard his peering laughter.'

'And young Piers Mostyn?'

'He escaped by God's grace. Lady Mostyn had taken him with her to visit her dying mother.'

'Where may the young lord be?'

Master Culcheth shook his head.

'I know not. Lady Mostyn's kindred were driven from their home later, and I heard that she died of grief. It was said also that the child was carried over seas by a faithful servant to be brought up in France.'

'He may come back,' Gilbert said.

'And prithe to what? A ruined house and an attainted name. Why, Caryl carried away the gold and silver that Lady Mostyn brought as dowry to her husband. Aye, and her jewels too.'

There was silence for a time. The former servitor of the Mostyns was inwardly repeating a prayer for the souls of his dead master and mistress, whilst Gilbert Sheldon was meditating on the news he had listened to. Suddenly he asked:

'Knowst thou aught of my mother?'

'Thy mother? Anne Sheldon sleeps in the old burying ground. She saw not the things I have spoken of,' Master Culcheth answered.

'Then I shall journey no further this way,' Gilbert Sheldon said slowly. 'I'll e'en haste back to York.'

'And then?' Master Culcheth inquired.

'Wheresoe'er fortune leads me.'

'Leave this land, then lad, it is accursed,' and Gilbert stared at the elder man's vehemence.

'And thou?' he asked. 'Why hidest thou here?'

'Because my old mother lives, and I may not go.'

'Well, fare ye well, Master Culcheth,' Gilbert said and turned away.

It was a spring morning many years after that on which Gilbert Sheldon had heard of the religious changes in England. Henry Tudor and his son were both dead, and Mary Tudor reigned as Queen of a country reconciled to Rome. The old ecclesiastical order had been restored, and in north and south, in east and west, men prayed as their fathers had prayed, and Master Culcheth looked but little older for all the years that had gone by as he watched two women, one young and fair, one old and feeble, take the road that led to the ruined castle of Mostyn. They had arrived at the country inn three days before, and though its master had put many inquiries to both, he had learned but little of them.

As they approached him, Master Culcheth gave them a courteous good-day, and the younger showed a willingness to enter into conversation with him. Master Culcheth was nothing loth and was soon giving her and her companion the benefit of all the information concerning the district which he possessed.

'Hast thou chanced to meet Dame Elinor?' he asked.

The younger woman shook her head, and answered by a question.

'Who may Dame Elinor be?'

'That I know not. We only know her by that name. She came here years since, and has given her time, advice, and money free to all,' Master Culcheth said.

'Is she young?' his questioner asked.

'Nay, but she carries herself well. She is skilled as any beech. In the evil days now passed away she was ever ready to sacrifice herself and her own comfort for the faith of old.'

'Hast the woman any kinsfolk?' the young stranger asked.

'None. She lives unattended and lonely, though she is a lady without doubt, and of abundant means,' Master Culcheth said, and after a few more words, both women resumed their walk.

They had gone but a short distance when the younger saw a woman seated on a large stone amid the grass that grew on a little hillock. Her face was turned from them and she wore a dark grey cloak with the hood drawn over her head.

'It is Dame Elinor, of whom we have heard, I doubt not,' the young woman said to her companion, and she laid her hand on her arm. 'Look, Margery, I feel sure that is Dame Elinor.'

The elder woman looked as directed, but wit'out much interest.

'Aye, it may be,' she said indifferently.

'I should like to speak to her Margery.'

'Do so if thou wilt, mistress mine, and I shall wait thy return here. My old limbs will be glad of the rest.'

The speaker looked around her till she espied the trunk of a fallen tree, and on it she seated herself while the younger woman crossed to where Dame Elinor