

The Sisterhood – Curse of Abbot Hewitt

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Prologue

1 - May Day, 1536

Father Hewitt stood in the great archway that was the main entrance to the abbey. The heavy, iron-studded wooden gates had been opened a little earlier, and now, with his belly full of breakfast and the weariness of the previous evening driven from his bones, his humour and spirit were completely restored.

Adding to his contentment was the fact that it was May Day, and that the village of Holton – of which the Father was inordinately proud, was a kaleidoscope of colour. Everything from horses to horseshoes had been decorated in all manner of bunting. Even the pigs in a nearby sty had received a good scrubbing.

Situated on a rise, the abbey commanded a spectacular view of the countryside, of the hamlets and cottages and gently grazing sheep, of the spectacular Thornley Forest and its many waterways in the distance, where a man could catch a trout for his supper as easily as he could snare a rabbit.

“If we had prayed for a month,” said Father Eastgate, blinking slightly as he emerged from the shadows of the abbey into the daylight, “I don’t think we could have been granted better weather. It’s on days like these that God allows us to forget our troubles and see only the good in the world,” and as though to emphasise the point, a young girl aged about ten, her hair woven with wild flowers, bounded up to them.

“Father Hewitt,” she said excitedly, “Lexy has been delivered of her puppies and papa said I could keep one. Would you bless it for me?”

“Another litter? Goodness me, that terrier of yours should be declared a manufacturer.”

The girl looked puzzled. Nevertheless, she held out a ball of silky black fur. Father Hewitt closed his eyes, muttered a reverent 'bless you', and touched the dog with his weather-beaten hand.

The animal evinced a pitiful whine. Father Hewitt stroked the tiny head. "I think you should return it to its mother. It's far too young to be weened as yet."

"Yes, Father," said the girl as she skipped away. "Thank you."

Father Eastgate chuckled. "The dog will die of love before starvation."

Father Hewitt cast his eyes skywards. Such was his countenance that his next words might have been a prayer. "Would that we all die that way."

The monks stood quietly for a moment or two, and then Father Eastgate's expression changed from contentment to disapproval. "But that kind of love will never be sanctioned." He pointed to a young couple behind a makeshift pie stall who, clearly thinking themselves out of sight, were kissing and fondling each other.

"Oh, don't be so severe, it's just high-jinks," said Hewitt mildly, but as he turned his gaze away from the canoodling couple, he added silently, 'and Lord knows we'll all need plenty of them before too long'.

In the early 1530's, Henry VIII had instituted a series of acts and measures to reform the religiosity. There were numerous reasons for this, but in the minds of the people they boiled down to two. Firstly, that some denominations attracted more loyalty and devotion than the Crown, which Henry's massive ego and stomach could not digest. Secondly, with their extensive lands and constant stream of tides and tributes, many churches were exceedingly rich, and Henry wanted money to pay for his seemingly unquenchable 'on again off again' war with France.

The ecclesiastics, although pledging allegiance to the King, had vowed to adhere to Papal supremacy, and to restore religious establishments and lands to their hitherto ejected possessors. But, the more the churches balked at the reforms, the more Henry had

tightened his grip, so that in time, the prolific desecration of sacred structures, the destruction of shrines and images long venerated, the ejection of ecclesiastics renowned for their hospitality, piety, and learning, had done much to unsettle the country.

The examining commissioners, headed by the hated Thomas Cromwell, were treated with barely disguised contempt, especially in the North, where skirmishes and attacks on Royalist troops and sympathisers were not uncommon.

"By the way," said Father Eastgate, "a messenger brought some news last night while you were out. Except for a list of certain men, the King will pardon all insurgents provided they desist at once."

"How generous of him," said Hewitt sarcastically. "And did he say anything about reparation? No, of course he didn't, and I don't need divine intervention to know whose name heads the list."

Father Eastgate grunted. "And I doubt mine is near the bottom, nor that of Father Haydock either."

"The King is an unrelenting tyrant. None of his supposed terms are acceptable, and he knows it. Look at these people. Is not our abbey smitten with poverty because of Royal greed? Have not the homeless, whom we once fed and sheltered, gone away hungry and without rest? Have not the sick, whom we would have attended, died miserable deaths in fields and hedgerows?"

"Mark my words, if the rapacious designs of the King and his henchmen are allowed to continue, poverty will not be confined simply to the Church. We are being plundered under the guise of reform to fill the King's coffers, and though I do not necessarily wish it, it will be the Crown that suffers more in the end."

"And with my Lord of Leeds, our so-called protector, in accord with the King's purpose, what hope have we?"

"Very little I'm afraid."

"Perhaps we should ask Einyon Dymock to intercede on our behalf. He claims to have the answers."

"Einyon Dymock?" Father Hewitt was momentarily puzzled. He prided himself on knowing every family within his parish. However, such was royal inflexibility, that demands on the abbey's

meagre resources had been steadily increasing, and as a consequence, the prelate had had little time to acquaint himself with recent arrivals in the area. "Ah, you mean our so-called warlock. He who allegedly has a witch for a wife."

"The very same, though I concede that his wife, Bess, is too young and pretty to be a witch."

"I have not had an opportunity to speak to either. What manner of man is Dymock?"

"A paradox. His appearance matches his reputation, and yet he is very intelligent, skilled in the use of herbs and potions, and can speak and write well when he chooses. I have approached him several times about his unchristened child, but he is reluctant to have it baptised, though his wife is eager enough."

He had sounded rather disappointed, as though he'd lost a threepenny bit and only found a farthing. Father Hewitt touched his arm. "Don't be disheartened. I'll make it a point to speak to him."

"No sooner said than done. He's over there."

A tall slim man with brown hair turning to grey, was standing near a small open fire on which a peddler was frying sausages. Watching the proceedings and licking his lips, was a large black dog of indeterminate breed.

The alleged warlock turned his head, saw the monks looking at him, and with the dog at his heels, approached. He was closely followed by two men of middle age. The first, Cuthbert Durham, was a broad-shouldered forester, with a healthy complexion and curling brown hair. He was wearing a Lincoln-green tunic and had an eagle feather in his soft felt hat. As this was a festive occasion, he was not carrying his usual implements of axe and bow. Even so, the bone-handled hunting knife thrust into his girdle was exceptionally sharp. The second man, Hal McNab, was in leather jerkin and cambric shirt, a drinking horn slung around his shoulders.

"Good morning, Fathers," said Einyon. "A most pleasant day for a fair."

"It is indeed," responded the abbot genially.

"Pity it will be thy last." Einyon had spoken so matter-of-factly that he might have been discussing the price of wheat. But rather than being annoyed by the man's impudence, Father Hewitt was bemused.

"Oh? How so?"

"Because your destruction approaches."

The abbot looked around. "Unless you're counting wenches, I see no army."

Einyon shrugged. "Mock as you will, but the King will have the last laugh on you and all your kind."

"Heathen!" cried Father Eastgate angrily. "Be gone or..." but his words were lost in a sudden commotion.

Without care for man, woman, or beast, a large troop of horsemen had cantered into the throng. Tables were overturned, food was sent flying, and the people scattered like ants. Terrified out of her wits, the little girl with the flowers in her hair stood frozen to the spot. She was dragged to safety just in time, but not before she dropped the puppy. The girl screamed as the horsemen came to a stop, the tiny creature obscured in a forest of legs and hooves.

Father Hewitt stared at the now pulpy mass on the ground. His eyes were blazing as he walked towards the leading horseman. In the interim, Hal McNab had never taken his eyes off Einyon Dymock, whose lips were moving as if in silent prayer. Then, as his own black dog began to follow the abbot, there was a sudden infestation of toads.

In the chaos that followed, nobody except Hal saw the dog prepare to attack. A moment later the animal fell dead, a knife buried in its neck. Hal ran forward, retrieved his weapon, and took off. Incandescent with rage, Einyon whirled around to espy the culprit, but both Hal and Cuthbert were already gone.

Unaware of what had taken place behind him, Father Hewitt glared at the leading horseman. "Sir Henry Stoddard! May you be damned for the damage you have wrought this day."

"Dammed?" Stoddard laughed and turned to the horseman beside him. "You hear that, Master Faulkner? He wears the garb of a priest and so naturally we should fear his wrath."

Faulkner looked at the sky and parodied praying. "God forgive me." He held up a bejewelled gloved hand. "Ah, but I forget, my Lord of Leeds hath declared that he is to be tried as a traitor. Mayhap he is no longer a priest."

"And deservedly so," cried Stoddard. "Seize him!" Two halberdiers, their hands sheathed in chain-mail gloves, jumped from their horses and advanced, and amidst loud protestations which quickly changed to cries of horror, punched the defenceless abbot to the ground.

II – Death, and More Death

It was three months later, and a pall of gloom had settled over Holton, a circumstance seemingly reflected throughout the realm. A week after Fathers' Hewitt, Eastgate, and Haydock had been conveyed to Leeds Castle for examination, Queen Ann Boleyn had been arrested for treason and adultery. After what amounted to a 'show trial', her five allwere executed on Tower Hill on the 17th of May, and the Queen herself, four days later inside the Tower on the green. Shortly thereafter, rumours of witchcraft began to circulate.

Catherine of Aragon, the King's first wife, who had died in January, had been buried at Peterborough Cathedral. At the moment Ann's head was struck from her body, all the tapers and candles surrounding the former Queen's tomb went out.

It was also alleged, predominantly by those who had plotted Ann's downfall, that she was the possessor of a sixth finger, in the form of a second little finger on her right hand, and that she had used witchcraft to ensnare the King.

But any propaganda value that could have been exploited from these circumstances, especially the justification for beheading a Queen, was shattered by the King himself, for barely two weeks after Anne's ignominious death, he married Jane Seymour.

Changes had also taken place inside the abbey, and like the royal game of musical thrones, not for the better. The abbey had been stripped and ransacked. Many of the statues perched on the parapets had been desecrated, while the flower and vegetable gardens, once so lovingly tended to by the monks, were little more than tangled weeds. In addition, Stoddard's troops, who had been left behind to guard the abbey, had raided the cellars, and one night in drunken reverie, had made a mighty bonfire of the library. Many valuable books and parchments had been destroyed, as were several outbuildings and most of the main church. Altogether, it was a poor prize for the King.

Hal McNab and Cuthbert Durham were two of the many villagers who were watching the approaching procession. Father Hewitt and his co-accused were returning to Holton to be executed. The outcome of their examination and trial, to be 'hung by the neck until thee be dead', had more or less been a foregone conclusion, though they had been spared the ignominy of being 'drawn & quartered'. Father Hewitt had begged that they be allowed to die within the confines of the abbey. The Earl of Leeds had agreed to the request, not caring where the punishment was inflicted. Moreover, he had handed the responsibility to Sir Henry Stoddard, who to judge from the way his eyes had gleamed at the time, relished the task.

"The filthy swine," said Cuthbert bitterly, glaring at Henry Stoddard with hate-filled eyes. The comment was well-founded, for shortly after the arrest of the priests, the forester's license to cut and sell wood from the great Thornley Forest, had been revoked in favour of a royalist sympathiser. Deprived of his livelihood and with little money for food, his once healthy complexion was now rather sallow, and his hitherto admired physique had lost much of its tone.

"I tried to leave some beer at the main gate for the abbots," said Hal, "but one of the guards knocked me on the head with his pike and said that I'd hang with the others if I didn't go away."

Cuthbert balled his hands into fists. "That we should be ruled by such a King, and nobody dare say a word against him. We can't stand by and see the Fathers hanged like dogs. Surely we can do something."

"Only if you want to spill your own worthless blood," said a voice from behind. Hal and Cuthbert whirled around. Einyon Dymock grinned at them malevolently and then walked away.

"And he deserves a dagger as well," said Hal. "Not only has he become very friendly with Stoddard, but when I saw what he did the other night..." He paused, crossed himself, and spit on the ground.

"What did he do?"

"I went out to try and snare a rabbit for me dinner, and happened to glance through the rear door of his house, which was wide open. He was surrounded by hags, who were sticking pins into a small doll. When they'd finished, he banged his staff on the floor and a big black man emerged from the shadows. I never seen skin that colour before, and damn me if my blood didn't freeze when he said that the child would be sacrificed at the next meeting.

Cuthbert stiffened. "Child? Did they mean Bess's daughter?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. His acquaintanceship with the child and its mother was far more intimate than her husband would have liked.

But Hal's attention was back on the procession. "Look, there's Father Hewitt. God preserve us, look at his face! He looks like a corpse already."

Such was the crowd near the abbey that the procession was forced to stop, and though seated and bound to a rail of a cart, Father Hewitt took the opportunity to deliver a benediction.

"Bless you my children. I wish I could spare you the sight of what is to come."

"Don't worry, Father," said Hal robustly, "we'll save you."

"Nay, lad, I implore you to desist. It will avail thee nothing. The enemy is too strong, and there's been too much blood shed already."

Henry Stoddard, who had been at the head of the procession, whirled his horse around, and escorted by four halberdiers, rode up to the group. "Durham, McNab, move away from the traitors or you also will be arrested."

"No man shall lay hands on me!" Cuthbert stood defiantly. Then, as the guards made to move forward, he punched one in the face and grabbed his pike. "Keep back or I swear I'll run you through. I am no traitor."

"Put down thy weapon, Cuthbert," said Father Hewitt quietly. "I know thee are no traitor, even if these sons of Satan do not."

Einyon Dymock pushed his way to the front and bowed to Stoddard. "My lord, allow me to disarm him."

"A challenge?" said the Squire musingly. He looked at Cuthbert. "Do you accept?"

"If anyone deserves to kiss the pike, it's him!" Then, seeing that Einyon was unarmed, Cuthbert gave the weapon to Hal. "It shall never be said that Cuthbert Durham fought unfairly. Now, touch me if thy dare!"

The fight was over in seconds. With almost superhuman quickness, Einyon sprang forward and grabbed the forester by the throat, and although Cuthbert was no slouch, it soon became apparent that he was waning. Hal McNab, fearful that his friend would be strangled to death, poked the wizard with the pike.

Even on his deathbed many years later, Hal could not state with certainty whether the combatants had shifted position, or his aim had been untrue. In either event, instead of discouraging the wizard, the pike sank into Cuthbert's left side.

As Cuthbert collapsed on the ground, Einyon sprang aside, his clothes sprayed with blood. With an anguished cry, Hal fell to his knees and desperately tried to staunch his friend's wound. He was dragged away by the soldiers just as a pretty young woman with a babe in her arms, advanced on Einyon.

"What have you done?" she demanded of her husband.

"Nothing. The fool challenged me and was hurt with a pike."

Still holding the child, Bess Dymock knelt beside the inert man and examined the wound. There were tears in her eyes as she wiped her bloody hand on the child's blanket. "You can save him. I know you can. He does not deserve to die like this."

None-to-gently, Einyon hauled his wife to her feet. "What is your interest in the traitor?" he demanded. "Is he your lover?"

Bess looked at him narrowly. His quick temper and impulsiveness had cost them dearly in the past, and she was not about to let it happen again. "Take care, Einyon. People are already talking about you. Better be known for a healer than a devil."

Cuthbert opened his eyes. "Leave me be. I would rather die than seek thy intervention."

Bess knelt beside him again, her voice soft and imploring. "Listen to me, thou wilt not die if Einyon tends thy wound."

"Never! I know what he is. Where's Hal?"

Hal was now sporting a cut lip courtesy of the soldiers. He wiped away the blood and grasped his dying friend's hand. "I am here. Tell me what thou wilt."

Cuthbert's breathing was rapid and shallow. "Do not let him touch me," he begged. "Farewell my friend. I pray God to keep you."

"Enough!" shouted Stoddard, turning his horse towards the abbey again. "I will not tarry with traitors."

Einyon grabbed his wife and child and hurried away. Hal watched their retreat through tear-filled eyes. "You will die, Einyon Dymock. As God is my witness, you will die."

III – The Malediction

As the procession resumed its sombre journey, Father Hewitt gazed at the fields and meadows, the rich forest teeming with life, the river which dissected the tranquil landscape like a silver snake, and knew he would never see them again. He saw several of his brethren who were now in disguise, their rough brown habits, for safety's sake, having been replaced by common clothing. Children and adults alike were weeping as the cart trundled past, whilst many others fell to their