

THE ANCHORHOLD

THE ANCHORHOLD

A Divine Comedy

By
ENID DINNIS

Who showeth it thee? Love.

Julian of Norwich.

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The Anchorhold: A Divine Comedy.

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For more information, contact:

www.staidanpress.com

staidanpress@gmail.com


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Chapter I

Most of the Game

IDDLEMEE, THE JONGLEUR, sat on his little wooden stool behind the high table, midway between the festal board and the buttery-hatch through which the busy servers accelerated the business of feeding my lord the baron's guests. He doubled a long blue leg over a red knee and, stooping, whispered something into the ear of Flipkin, his dog, who, like Orpheus, the lute, accompanied his master wherever he went.

Fiddlemee's was a point of vantage, albeit a humble one, for observing all that went on at the high table, which had not yet occasion to requisition the services of the jongleur; the guests were so far entertaining each other, and incidentally entertaining Fiddlemee, an inversion of the accepted order of things which tickled his fancy not a little. He had strolled round the high table with his wooden stool in his hand, his bright, impudent eyes scanning the different pairs of guests—there were perhaps thirty or forty seated at the banquet with which each day of the great tournament was brought to a close—and he had finally taken up his position near the spot where the old, very old baron with the long white beard and a long white reputation, was conversing with his partner, the Lady Editha

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de Beauville, to the envy of the sublimely beautiful young knight opposite. The shaggy old veteran had the reputation of being a bore of the first degree, but he had succeeded in engaging the entire attention of the Lady Editha, the wittiest woman of all that select assembly. She was evidently interested in what he was saying—her singularly expressive countenance reflected the mind of its owner with extraordinary vividness. The young man opposite had forgotten his own partner and was listening to what the two, or rather the one, was saying. It was a suggestive little drama to an onlooker with eyes like Fiddlemee. He stooped down and whispered to his partner. He lifted the end of the ear that had been allowed to flop by one of Flipkin's motley progenitors and remarked in a discreet undertone: "His ancient lordship, the elderly baron, is playing a brave melody on my lady's lute. 'Tis a finely strung instrument, and methinks Sir Galahad is mighty envious of the player. 'It was a gallant knight that loved a lady fair,'" he chanted softly: "but Sir Galahad will have to play a braver tune than my lord the old baron's to win the lady's hand. How now, Flipkin, doth not the onlooker see most of the game?"

The dog cocked his head. He was a curious blend. Square-chested and consequential in front, thanks to a bull ancestor, with negligible hinder quarters. Wholly and entirely consequential in his own estimation, Flipkin's imperturbable effrontery made him very kinsman of the jongleur.

The latter continued his observations as he watched the faces displayed in full profile as the lady and her partner conversed. He surveyed the arresting countenance, the features of which showed a curious independence of the canons of beauty. Like the Lady Editha's mind they went their own way, and withal produced a result with which orthodoxy could pick no quarrel, inasmuch as the end was achieved. No one ever looked upon the Lady Editha de Beauville without arriving at the joy which it is beauty's business to create.

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The old baron's discourse was evidently on some interesting topic. Fiddlemee addressed the listener, *sotto voce*. "Have a care, lady fair," quoth he, "so tender a countenance should be spared the wear and tear of telling thy soul. Methinks thy fair cheek will grow sunburnt from within. So bright a light shines there, dear lady, that soothly thy fair cheek must already be befreckled on the inside!"

Young Sir Aleric's eyes were likewise fixed upon the listener, whose listening possessed so vital and vivid a property. "Sh-ush!" Fiddlemee mouthed at the baron. "Not so loud, not so loud! I want to hear the lady listen. Now, I wager thee, Flipkin," he went on, lifting the dog's ear, "that the baron tells the tale of King Richard offering himself to the insurgents as their leader after they had slain poor Wat, who had slain the archbishop. The lady, so sayeth my good grandmother Rumour, hath great ideas about the people's well-being—she hath freed all her villeins since she became lady of the manor. My lord the baron will be telling her that he was with the King, that many years ago, for he is mighty proud of it, is the baron, albeit that King Richard (God rest his soul) did but strike an attitude, or so they say who have not truck with our good Mother Charity."

Flipkin was frankly bored with the confidence. He flicked his ear, which tickled, and kept his pink-rimmed eye—the one without a patch round it—fixed upon the figure of my lord baron, the host of the occasion, who from time to time cast a sweetmeat in the direction of his mad jongleur. These Fiddlemee caught deftly and divided into two equal parts with scrupulous exactitude, one for Flipkin and one for himself. The punctiliousness of the division sometimes tried Flipkin's patience. His master was not pernickety as a rule.

There came a lull in the buzz of conversation. Others beside Sir Aleric had ceased from their own chatter and were listening to what the old baron was saying to the Lady Editha, or rather to what she was saying to him, for she had got a word in at last, it seemed.

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Her blue eyes were shining like stars, and there was a delicate pink flush mantling her cheek. The Lady Editha's voice was low-pitched and vibrant, one heard it the better for its very gentleness. It contained a very decisive quality. The de Beauvilles were a clan who knew their own minds, and who enjoyed that privilege exclusively, for the world never quite knew to reckon what a de Beauville might not do next.

"But," she was saying, "the prince was not as good as his word. It was indeed a grand thing that he essayed, but he stopped short at the idea. He was a coward if he were not in sooth a hypocrite." At the latter word my lady's blue eyes flashed. The two words, coward and hypocrite, were as flint and steel that produced fire.

"Nay, nay, dear lady," the old baron responded, "that is the hard judgment of youth. The prince was in sooth confronted with the idea and he fell in love with it. He would verily have pursued it but circumstances were against him, and he lacked the strength to overcome them."

The lady meditated. "Had he accomplished it," she said, "had he indeed led forth that army of the weak and misled to freedom it would have been a finer victory than Agincourt." She paused, and her eyes flashed starlight upon the listening assembly, or so it seemed to Sir Aleric whose own were wide open at the amazing dictum.

"Have a care, have a care, fair lady," Fiddlemee entreated. "So much shining will fade the colour of thine eyes. Prithee, remember that thou art a lady and not a lanthorn!"

The surrounding guests sat and absorbed this latest ebullition of the de Beauville peculiarity exhibited in the heiress. The very calmness of her voice, of its low vibrant tones, held them spell-bound. Each forgot his or her allotted companion and listened.

Sir Aleric felt the hot blood mount into his brow. His rival in the tourney lists, the only one left between him and victory, was seated near their host, next to His Reverence the King's chaplain.

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He and Sir Gervase would settle the question of supremacy tomorrow in the final encounter, and afterwards the victor would offer his guerdon to the Queen of Beauty. There, in very sooth, she sat, opposite to him, a vision of delectation, of beauty too elusive for analysis. No painter could catch that something that flickered over the faulty features and gave them a charm that was verily beauty itself. Beyond he could see the thin, shrewd face of Fiddlemee, the mad jongleur, with his sharp brown eyes, regarding the scene; his dog Flipkin's head was thrust out between his ridiculous knees. The old baron's eye had likewise kindled. "Yea, in sooth," he said, "there are finer victories to be won than Agincourt, but who are there that would win them? The prince saw his vision, so do many others, but no man hath the power to make it good."

"But the vision remains," the lady said, "others may make it good. Thy prince was a poltroon. He was given his vision and his lance remained at rest." Her lips tightened. There was a dreadful sternness now in her shining eyes. It sat with a strange incongruity on the curiously delicate face.

"Did'st thou ever see a flower frown?" Fiddlemee enquired of Flipkin. "Tell me, what dost thou think became of the bluebell that was inhabited by a martial spirit? Lady, lady," he went on, shaking his head at the speaker, "thou wilt grow old. Never was thy fair face made for such wear and tear of thought. Heaven send thee no visions, for soothly thou wouldst ride out full tilt, and maybe disarrange thy fair locks."

The silence was tense. The high table had been bewitched. The heiress of the de Beauvilles sat there, a figure almost as transparent as the diaphanous head-gear in whose folds it was framed. Her eyes had become like unto the sapphires in the fillet which held the shimmering drapery in place. The room held no such rare picture amongst all its gaily dressed assembly. The banality of the prevailing type of beauty—a type that befittingly paraded itself in costumes that had been specially designed for the occasion, was thrown into pitiless

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relief by the woman who by her scornful independence of the fashion had achieved that most to be envied of charms—uncommonness. A charming woman, reigning in splendid isolation. The eyes as well as the ears of many would-be queens of beauty were turned in her direction. Youthful, witty, unwed, and the richest woman in the county, Lady Editha was not unused to attracting attention. She proceeded to carry her point calmly. “King Richard’s vision lay in front of everyone possessing feudal power. The poor who suffered wrong still looked for a leader, if it were not King Richard it would be Wat, the sacrilegious murderer of God’s priest.”

My lord, the president of the feast, being a man of tact and discretion, became alarmed at the turn the conversation was taking. It savoured of Lollardry, and his reverence the Chaplain Royal was his guest. He called to Fiddlemee. “Come, now, thou rascal, and sing us a song. A cheery song of doughty deeds to suit our mood.”

“Something braver than Agincourt,” an ironical voice suggested. It was the voice of Sir Gervase, the world-champion at the joust, Sir Aleric’s remaining rival.

Fiddlemee sprang up and mounted into his place. He glanced at the Lady Editha. They were acquainted, for she had taken much notice of Flipkin. He rested Orpheus on one knee—the red one—and began:

Rag and Tag and Bobtail, shouting of its wrong—
What a pretty mob tale for a minstrel’s song!
Rag and Tag and Bobtail, Rag—Tag—Bobtail led,
He must be a true king who would be their head.

Rag was erst a swineherd, Tag was erst a clown,
That would be a fine herd to escort a crown!
Bobtail was a jongleur out to earn a meal—
Each a pretty bungler with the soldier’s steel.

England’s gallant bowmen schooled to act as one—
Picked to face the foeman, every mother’s son,

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Fashioned of the breed that follows where it's led,
Fiddlemee could lead that standing on his head!

He must be a monarch, he must be a man,
Who would Rag, Tag, Bobtail weld into a clan.
With a heart to draw them into battle line—
With a soul to awe them with a heavenly sign.

Rag forgetting Rag's wrong—Tag forgetting Tag,
Though his wee world wags wrong following a flag.
Bobtail out for something bigger than his bray—
Agincourt's a glum thing 'gainst that doughty Day!

The singer paused and crossed his blue leg over the red one. "Now, a song for the ladies," he said, and broke into the following:

Maiden, maiden, sigh a wee,
Flitting sighs nor long enduring
Speedful are to lover-luring.

 If so be,

Maiden, maiden, sigh a wee.

Maiden, maiden, weep a wee,
Tears nor yet too strongly salted
Move the heart where words defaulted

 If so be,

Maiden, maiden, weep a wee.

Lady, lady, think no thought!
Brows bewrinkled lie in waiting
On the art of meditating
 Rightly taught,
Beauty even would be shrinking
From the wear and tear of winking.

Lady fair beware of thinking—
Lady, lady, think no thought!

The baron turned to his august neighbour, the royal chaplain from Windsor, who was to preach at High Mass on Sunday at the termination of the tournament. "'Tis a quaint fellow that," he observed.

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“He maketh up his songs on the spur of the moment, both rhymes and tunes. A curious trick he hath, and methinks not a common one.” The good baron had suffered many qualms during the past recital and felt that Fiddlemee’s song might need an apology to the prosperous cleric, for was not the spirit of Lollardry in the air? “The fellow is as mad as a march hare,” he went on. “That maketh him passing droll. I have no need to bemuse him with wine to get merriment out of him; in sooth he refuses to take it in case, he saith, being already mad it should make him rational. A queer, quaint fellow. He practises his religion like a monk. I have no fear for his loyalty to Holy Church.”

The chaplain seemed interested. “Where didst thou pick him up?” he asked.

“On the roadside,” the other replied. “He told me he was the King’s jongleur—a most audacious lie, as I afterwards found out, but the poor fellow evidently regards it as a pleasantry. ’Tis a joke without a point as I can see, but he sticks to it. I put him in the stocks when I first found it to be false, but after all it is part of the poor fellow’s craziness that makes him amusing, so I hold him not to blame that he persisteth in it.”

The prelate smiled. He was inwardly tickled at the thought of the rather pompous baron being in mighty good conceit of himself at having secured an ex-royal domestic for his retinue.

He chuckled at the story of the jongleur’s craziness with great affability.

“Suppose,” he said, “thou introduce the King’s jongleur to the King’s chaplain.”

The baron called to Fiddlemee. The latter approached and dropped humbly on to one knee. Flipkin set his head jauntily on one side and invited the cleric to toss him something from his plate.

“So I hear that thou wert the King’s jongleur once upon a time,” the Chaplain Royal said. “I have no recollection of meeting thee at Court.”

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Fiddlemee was ready with his answer.

“The King’s jongleur,” quoth he, “is ever at the King’s elbow. Thy Reverence may not have climbed so high.”

“In sooth thou hast impudence enough for thy trade,” the other remarked, good humouredly.

“Impudence is part of my duties,” Fiddlemee answered gravely, “just as sanctity is part of Thy Reverence’s. Did I behave respectfully to Thy Reverence, my master the baron would have me whipped. Unlike Thy Reverence I am permitted to be sanctified only when I am at play.”

His Reverence grinned widely. He had a humorous twist of his own, and was a sportsman to boot for all his holy calling. He enjoyed this passage of wits with the mad jongleur.

“Then in thy playtime,” he retorted, “I presume that thou makest sermons? Come now, Sir Jongleur, thou hast a handy wit. Make me a sermon to preach when I lack a handy one of my own making—in thy recreation time.”

Fiddlemee bowed. “Thou hast great wisdom, reverend father,” he said, “in entrusting the task to a jongleur and not to a holy clerk, for thou wilt thus be safe, in very sooth, from detection, for didst thou preach a discourse of my making, and did the world get abuzz with its fine theology, and poor Fiddlemee lay claim to its authorship, folks would but say, ‘Beshrew me, but the mad jongleur is madder than ever!’”

The cleric had been handling one of the sugarplums in the dish before him. Flipkin, watching the suggestive action, grew restive and gave a short, sharp bark to recall His Reverence to the point, as it appeared from Flipkin’s mental angle. “Thy dog and thou art well matched,” he observed, laughing, as he flung the sugarplum in Flipkin’s direction.

Fiddlemee dropped on to his knee. “Thy blessing, holy father,” he said. “The feast is over, they are calling on thee to say the grace. It is my play hour arrived. I pray thee bless the King’s jongleur.”

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The other hesitated a moment. Then he raised his hand and gave the jongleur his blessing. Flipkin sat with his lip curled up crunching his sweetmeat between his white teeth. From the high table there came the clatter and clang of tongues and jostling cups. "Play well," His Reverence said, for he was a holy man none less than a sportsman.