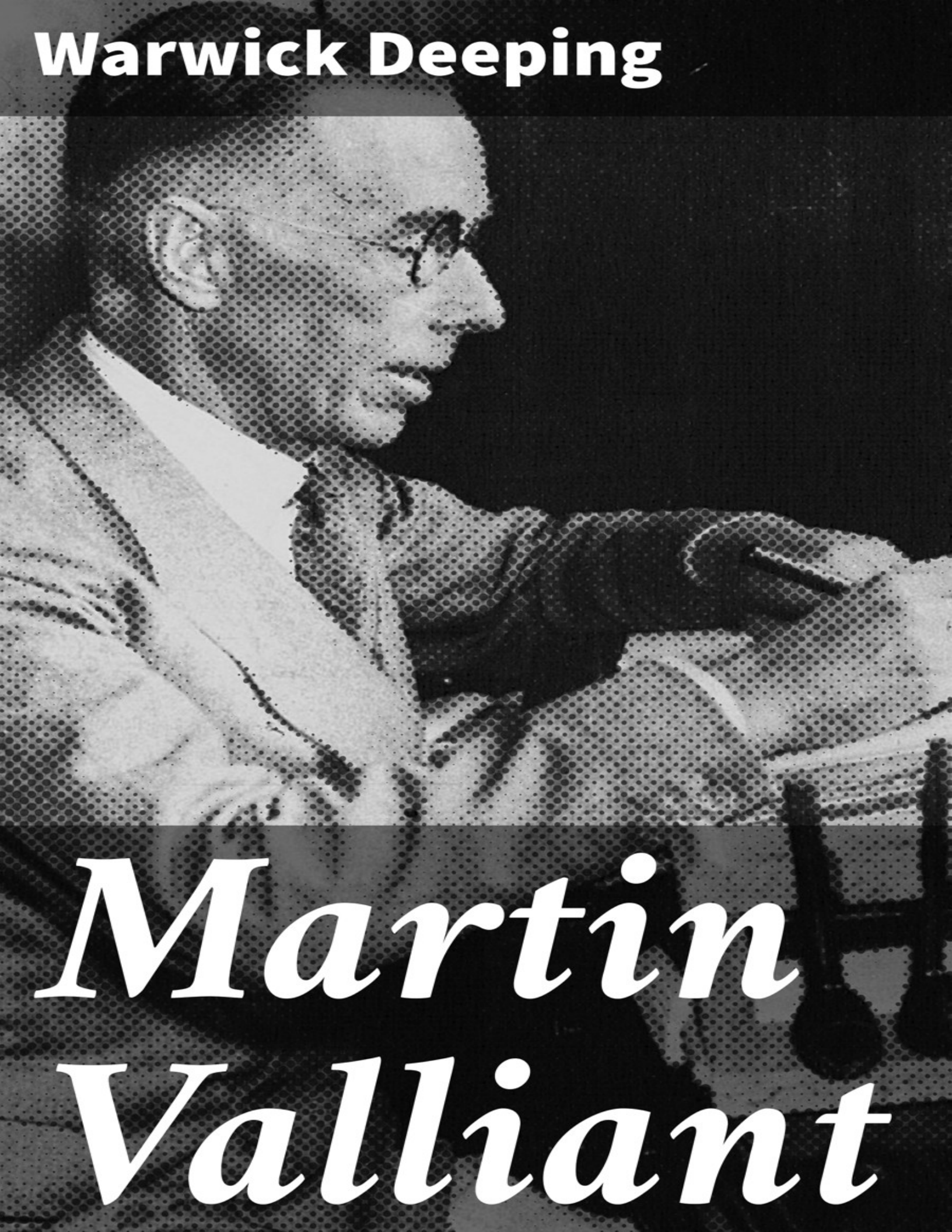
Warwick Deeping



Martin Valliant

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Chapter I

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Brother Geraint pulled his black cowl forward over his head, and stepped out into the porch. Some one thrust the door to behind him, and there was the sound of an oak bar being dropped into the slots.

A full moon stared at Brother Geraint over the top of a thorn hedge. He stood there for a while in the deep shadow, licking his lips, and listening.

Somewhere down the valley a dog was baying the moon, a little trickle of discord running through the supreme silence of the night. Brother Geraint tucked his hands into his sleeves, grinned at the moon, and started down the path with his shadow following at his heels. He loitered a moment at the gate, glancing back over his shoulder at the house that blinked never a light at him, but stood solid and black and silent in the thick of a smother of apple trees.

The man at the gate nodded his head gloatingly.

“Peace be with you.”

He gave a self-pleased, triumphant snuffle, swung the gate open, glanced up and down the path that crossed the meadows, and then turned homewards through the moonlight.

In Orchard Valley the dew lay like silver samite on the grass, and the boughs of the apple trees were white as snow. Between the willows the Rondel river ran toward the sea, sleek and still and glassy, save where it thundered over the weir beside the prior’s mill. The bell-tower of Paradise

cut the northern sky into two steel-bright halves. Over yonder beyond the river the Forest held up a cloak of mystery across the west. Its great beech trees were glimmering into green splendor and lifting a thousand crowded domes against the brilliance of the moon.

Brother Geraint had no care for any of these things. He swung along toward Paradise like a dog returning from an adventure, his fat chin showing white under his cowl, his arms folded across his chest. The cluster of hovels and cottages that stretched between the river and the priory gate was discreetly dark and silent, with no Peeping Tom to watch the devout figure moving between the hedges and under the orchard trees. Paradise slept peacefully in its valley, and left the ordering of things spiritual to St. Benedict.

The priory, lying there in the midst of the smooth meadows, looked white and chaste and very beautiful. The night was so still that even the aspen trees that sheltered it on the north would not have fluttered their leaves had the month been June. The gold weathercock at the top of the flèche glittered in the moonlight. The bell-tower, with its four pinnacles, seemed up among the stars. Sanctity, calm, devout splendor! And yet the gargoyles ranged below the battlements of the gate opened their black mouths with a suggestion of obscene and gloating laughter. It was as though they hailed Brother Geraint as a boon comrade, a human hungry creature with wanton eyes and scoffing lips:

“Ho, you sly sinner! Hallo, you dog!”

The black holes in the stone masks up above mouthed at him in silent exultation.

Brother Geraint did not make his entry by the great gate. There was a door in the precinct wall that opened into the kitchen court, and this door served. The monk passed along the slope under the infirmary, and so into the cloisters. He had taken off his shoes, and went noiselessly on his stockinged feet.

Suddenly he paused like a big, black, listening bird, his head on one side. For some one was chanting in the priory church. Geraint knew the voice, and his teeth showed in the dark slit of his mouth.

“Brre—pious bastard!”

Hate gleamed under his black cowl. He crept noiselessly up the steps that led to the doorway, and along the transept, and craning his head around the pillar of the chancel arch, looked up into the choir. The great window was lit by the moon, its tracery dead black in a sheet of silver. The light shone on the lower half of Brother Geraint’s face, but his eyes were in the shadow.

A man was kneeling in one of the choir stalls, a young man with his hood turned back and his hair shining like golden wire. He knelt very straight and erect, his head thrown back, his arms folded over his chest. He had ceased his chanting, and his eyes seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

There was a grotesque and ferocious sneer on Brother Geraint’s face. Then his lips moved silently. He was speaking to his own heart.

“How bold the whelp is before God! A bladder of lard hung up in a shop could not look more innocent. Innocent! Damnation! This bit of green pork needs curing.”

He nodded his head significantly at the man in the choir, and crept back out of the church. In going from the cloisters toward the prior's house he met a little old fellow carrying a leather bottle, and walking with his head thrust forward as though he were in a hurry.

"God's speed, brother."

They stood close together under the wall, leering at each other in the darkness.

"Is the prior abed yet?"

The little man held up the bottle.

"I have just been filling his jack for him."

"Empty, is it?"

"Try, brother."

Geraint took the bottle and drank.

"Burgundy."

He licked his lips.

"Ale is all very well, Holt, but a stomachful of this red stuff is good after a night of prayer."

The little man sniggered, and nodded his head.

"Warms up the blood again. Ssst—listen to that young dog yelping."

They could hear Brother Martin chanting in the choir. Geraint's hand shot out and gripped the cellarer's shoulder.

"Assuredly you love him, friend Holt. Why, the young man is a saint; he brings us glory and reputation."

"Stuffed glory and geese!"

Holt mouthed and jiggered like an angry ape.

"It was a bad day for us when old Valliant renounced the devil and dedicated his bastard to God. Why, the young hound is getting too big for his kennel."

“Even preaches against the leather jack, my friend!”

“Aye, more than that. Sniffing at older men’s heels, hunting them when they go a-hunting.”

Geraint laughed.

“We’ll find a cure for that. He shall be one of us before Abbot Hilary comes poking his holy nose into Paradise. Why, the young fool is green as grass, but there must be some of old Valliant’s blood in him.”

“The blood of Simon Zelotes.”

“We shall see, Holt; we shall see.”

The prior’s parlor was a noble room carried upon arches, its three windows looking out on the prior’s garden and the fruit trees of the orchard. A roofed staircase, the roof carried by carved stone balustrades, led up to the vestibule. Geraint, still carrying his shoes, went up the stairway with the briskness of a man who did not vex his soul with ceremonious deliberations. Nor did he trouble to rap on the prior’s door, but thrust it open and walked in.

An old man was sitting in an oak chair before the fire, his paunch making a very visible outline, his feet cocked up so that their soles caught the blaze. His lower lip hung querulously. His bold, high forehead glistened in the fire-light, and his rather protuberant blue eyes had a bemused, dull look.

He turned, glanced at Brother Geraint, and grunted.

“So you are not abed.”

“No, I am here—as you see.”

“Shut the door, brother. What a man it is for draughts and windy adventures!”

Geraint closed the door, and throwing back his cowl, pulled a stool up to the fire. He was a lusty, lean, big-jawed creature, as unlike Prior Globulus as an eagle is unlike a fat farmyard cock. His eyes were restless and very shrewd. The backs of his hands were covered with black hair, and one guessed that his chest was like the chest of an ape. He had a trick of moistening his lower lip with his tongue, a big red lip that jutted out like the spout of a jug.

“It is passing cold, sir, when a man has to walk without his shoes.”

He thrust his gray-stockinged feet close to the fire.

“You observe, sir, I am a careful man. Our young house-dog is awake.”

He watched Prior Globulus with shrewd, sidelong attention; but the old man lay inert in his chair and blinked at the fire.

“Brother Martin is very careful for our reputation, sir. He has become the thorn in our mortal flesh. It is notorious that he eschews wine, fasts like a saint, and has no eyes or ears for anything that is carnal—save, sir, when he discovers such frailties in others.”

The prior turned on Geraint with peevish impatience.

“A pest on the fellow; he is no more than a vexatious fool. Let him be, brother.”

Geraint leaned forward and spread his hands before the fire.

“Brother Martin is no fool, sir; I am beginning to believe that the fellow is very sly. He watches and says but little, yet there is a something in those eyes of his. He lives like a fanatic, while we, sir, are but mortal men.”

He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

“As you know, sir, it was mooted that Abbot Hilary has his eyes on Paradise. Some one whispered shame of us, and Abbot Hilary is the devil.”

Prior Globulus sat up straight in his chair, his face full of querulous anger and dismay.

“Foul lies, brother.”

“Foul lies, sir.”

Geraint’s voice was ironical. His eyes met the older man’s, and Prior Globulus could not meet the look.

“Well, well,” and he grinned peevishly. “What does your wisdom say, my brother?”

Geraint edged his stool a little closer.

“Brother Martin must be taught to be mortal,” he said; “he must become one of us.”

“And how shall that befall?”

“I will tell you, sir. Is not the fellow old Valliant’s son—old Valliant whose blood was like Spanish wine? Brother Martin is a young man, and the spring is here.”

They talked together for a long while before the fire, their heads almost touching, their eyes watching the flames playing in the throat of the chimney.

Chapter II

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White mist filled the valley, for there was no wind moving, and the night had been very still. The moon had sunk into the Forest, but though the sun had not yet climbed over the edge of the day a faint yellow radiance showed in the east. As for the birds, they had begun their piping, and the whole valley was filled with a mysterious exultation.

Into this world of white mist and of song walked Brother Martin, old Roger Valliant's son—old Valliant, the soldier of fortune who had fought for pay under all manner of kings and captains, and had come back to take his peace in England with an iron box full of silver and gold. Old Valliant was dead, with the flavor of sundry rude romances still clinging to his memory, for even when his hair was gray he had caught the eyes of the women. Then in his later years a sudden devoutness had fallen upon him; there had been a toddling boy in his house and no mother to care for the child. Old Valliant had made great efforts to escape the devil; that was what his neighbors had said of him. At all events, he had left the child and his money to the monks of Paradise, and had made a most comely and tranquil end.

Brother Martin was three-and-twenty, and the tallest man in Orchard Valley. The women whispered that it was a pity that such a man should be a monk and take his state so seriously. There was a tinge of red in his hair; his blue eyes looked at life with a bold mildness; men said that he was built more finely than his father, and old Valliant had been a mighty man-at-arms. Yet Brother Martin often had the look of a dreamer, though his flesh was so rich and admirable in

its youth. He loved the forest, he loved the soft meadows and the orchards, the path beside the river where the willows trailed their branches in the water, his stall in the choir, the mill where the wheel thundered. The children could not let him be when he walked through the village. As for the white pigeons in the priory dovecot, they would perch on his hands and shoulders. And yet there was a mild severity about the man, a clear-sighted and unfoolish chastity that brooked no meanness. He was awake even though he could dream. He had had his wrestling matches with the devil.

Brother Martin went down to the river that May morning, stripped himself, piled his clothes on the trunk of a fallen pollard willow, and took his swim. He let himself drift within ten yards of the weir, and then struck back against the swiftly gliding water. There had been heavy rains on the Forest ridge, and the Rondel was running fast—so fast that Martin had to fight hard to make headway against the stream. The youth in him had challenged the river; it was a favorite trick of his to let himself be carried close to the weir and then to fight back against the suck of the water.

And a woman was watching him. She had been standing all the while under a willow, leaning her body against the trunk of the tree, her gray cloak and hood part of the grayness of the dawn. Nothing could be seen of her face save the white curve of her chin. She kept absolutely still, so still that Martin did not notice her.

The Rondel river gave Martin a fair fight that morning. All his litheness and his strength were needed in the tussle; he conquered the river by inches, and drew away very slowly

from the thundering weir. The woman hidden behind the willow leaned forward and watched him.

The sun had risen, a great yellow circle, when Martin reached the spot where he had left his clothes. The mist was rising, and long yellow slants of light struck the water and lined the scalloped ripples with gold. The water was very black under the near bank, and as Martin climbed out, holding to the trailing branches of a willow, he saw the dew-wet meadows shining like a sheet of silver. The birds were still exulting. The sunlight struck his dripping body and made it gleam like the body of a god.

Martin had frocked himself and was knotting his girdle when he heard the woman speak.

“Oh, Mother Mary, but I thought death had you!” She threw herself on her knees and seized one of his hands in both of hers. “The saints be thanked, holy father; but we in Paradise would be wrath with you for thinking so little of us.”

Martin stared at her, and in his astonishment he suffered her to keep a hold upon his hand. Her hood had fallen back, and showed her ripe, audacious face, and her black-brown eyes that were full of a seeming innocence. Her hair was the color of polished bronze, and her teeth very white behind her soft, red lips.

“What are you doing here, child?”

He was austere, yet gentle, and strangely unembarrassed. The girl was a ward of Widow Greensleeve’s, of Cherry Acre.

She made a show of confusion.

“I was out to gather herbs, holy father—herbs that must have the dew on them—and I saw you struggling in the river—and was afraid.”

He smiled at her, and withdrew his hand.

“I thank you for your fear, child.”

“Sir, you are so well loved in the valley.”

She stood up, smoothing her gown, and looking shyly at the grass.

“You are not angry with me, Father Martin?”

“How should I be angry?”

“In truth, but my fear for you ran away with me.”

She gave him a quick and eloquent flash of the eyes, and turned to go.

“I must gather my herbs, holy father.”

“Peace be with you,” he said simply.

Martin went on his way, as though nothing singular had happened. The girl loitered under the willows, looking back at him with mischievous curiosity. He was very innocent, but somehow she liked him none the less for that.

“Maybe it is very pleasant to be so saintly,” she said; “yet he is a fine figure of a man. I wonder how long it will be before Father Satan comes stalking across the meadows.”

Kate Succory made a pretense of searching for herbs, so ordering her steps that she found herself on the path that led to the house at Cherry Acre. The path ran between high hawthorn hedges that sheltered the orchards, and since the hedges were in green leaf, the way was like a narrow winding alley between high walls. She did not hurry herself, and presently she heard some one following her along the path.

“Good-morrow, Kate.”

She halted and turned a mock-demure face.

“Good-morrow, holy father.”

Geraint was grinning under his cowl.

“You are up betimes, sweeting.”

She walked on with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I have been gathering herbs, and I have the cow to milk.”

“Excellent maid. And nothing wonderful has happened to you?”

“Oh, I have fallen in love with some one,” she said tartly; “it is a girl’s business to fall in love.”

Geraint sniggered.

“I commend such humanity.”

“It is not with you, holy father. Do not flatter yourself as to that.”

She tossed her head, and walked daintily, swinging her shoulders. And Geraint looked at her brown neck, and opened and shut his hairy hands.

“Perhaps Dame Greensleeve will give me a cup of hot milk?” he said.

“Oh, to be sure.”

And she began to whistle like a boy.

Brother Martin was a mile away, brushing his feet through the dew of the upland meadows. He had crossed the footbridge at the mill, and spoken a few words with Gregory, the miller, who had thrust a shock of sandy hair out of an upper window. Rising like a black mound on the edge of the Forest purlieus stood a grove of yews, and it was toward these yews that Martin’s footsteps tended.

The yews were very ancient, with huge red-black trunks and dense green spires crowded together against the blue. No grass grew under them, for the great trees starved all other growth and cheated it of sunlight. A path cut its way through the solemn gloom, but the yew boughs met overhead.

And yet there was life in the midst of this black wood, life that was grotesque and piteous. The path broadened to a spacious glade, and in the glade stood a little rude stone house thatched with heather. The dwellers here labored with their hands, for a great part of the glade was cultivated, and about the house itself were borders of herbs, roses, and flowering plants. A couple of goats were browsing outside the wattle fence that closed in the garden, and a blue pigeon strutted and cooed to its mate on the roof ridge of the house.

Martin stopped at the swinging hurdle that served as a gate. A man was hoeing between the rows of broad beans, an old man to judge by the stoop of his shoulders and the slow and careful way he used the hoe. He wore a coarse white smock with a hood to it; a kind of linen mask covered his face.

“You are working early, Master Christopher.”

The man turned and straightened himself with curious deliberation. There was something ghastly about that white mask of his with its two black slits for eye-holes. He looked more like a piece of mummery than a man, a grotesque figure in some rustic play.

He lifted up a cracked voice and shouted:

“Giles, Peter—Brother Martin is at the gate.”

Two be-cowled and masked creatures came out of the house. All three were so alike and so much of a size that a stranger would not have told one from the other. They formed themselves into a kind of procession, and shuffling to the gate, knelt down on a patch of grass inside it.

Martin’s voice was very gentle.

“Shall I chant the Mass, brothers?”

The three lepers looked at him like lost souls gazing at Christ.

“The Lord be merciful to us and cast His blessing upon you,” said one of them.

So Martin chanted the Mass.

The three bowed their heads before him, as though it gave them joy to listen to the sound of his voice, for Martin chanted like a priest and a soldier and a woman all in one. He had no fear of these poor creatures, did not shrink from them and hold aloof. When he brought them the Sacrament he did not pass God’s body through a hole in the wall. The birds had ceased their singing, and the world was very still, and Martin’s voice went up to heaven with a strong and valiant tenderness.

When he had ended the Mass the three lepers got up off their knees and began to talk like children.

“Can you smell my gillyflowers, Brother Martin?”

“The speckled hen has hatched out twelve chicks.”

“You should see what Peter has been making; three maple cups all polished like glass.”

“If the Lord keeps the frosts away there will be a power of fruit on the trees.”

Martin opened the gate and walked into the garden, and the three followed him as though he had come straight out of heaven. No other living soul ever came nearer than the place where the path entered the yew wood. Alms were left there, and such goods as the lepers could buy. But Brother Martin had no fear of the horror that had fallen on them, and had such a fear shown itself he would have crushed it out of his heart. And so he had to see and smell Christopher's gillyflowers, handle the speckled hen's chicks, and admire the maple cups that Peter had made. Nature was beautiful and clean even though she had cast a foul blight upon these three poor creatures. They hung upon Martin's words, watched him with a kind of timid devotion. God walked with them in that lonely place when Brother Martin came from Paradise and through the wood of yews.

Meanwhile, Brother Geraint had followed Kate Succory to Widow Greensleeve's house in Cherry Acre, where the maze of high hedges and orchard trees hid his black frock completely. The girl had gone a-milking, and Brother Geraint had certain things to say to the widow. He sat on a settle in the kitchen, and she moved to and fro before him, a big breeze of a woman, plump, voluble, very rosy, with roguish eyes and an incipient double chin. She laughed a great deal, nodded her head at him, and snapped her fingers, for she and Brother Geraint understood each other.

"Kate will dance to that tune. Bless me, she'll need no persuading."

Geraint spoke very solemnly.

“If she can cure the young man of his self-righteousness she shall be well remembered by us all. See to it, dame.”

The widow curtsied, making a capacious lap.

“Your servant, holy father.”

And then she fell a-laughing in a sly, shrewd way.

“God be merciful to us, my friend; yet I do believe that it is more pleasant to live with sinners than with saints. The over-pious man rides the poor ass to death. Now you—my friend——”

She laughed so that her bosom shook.

“We would all confess to Brother Geraint. I know the kind of penance that you would set me, good sir.”

Geraint got up and kissed her, and her brown eyes challenged his.

“Leave it to me,” she said; “I will physic the young man for you.”

Chapter III

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Martin had gone down the valley to watch the woodmen felling oaks in the Prior's Wood when old Holt rode out on a mule in search of him. He found Martin stripped like the men and working with them, for he loved laboring with his hands.

"Brother Martin—Brother Martin!"

Old Holt squeaked at him imperiously.

"Brother Martin, a word with you."

Martin passed the felling ax that he had been swinging to one of the men, and crossed over to Father Holt.

"The prior has been asking for you. Get you back at once. Brother Jude has been taken sick, and is lying in the infirmary."

Martin glanced up at old Holt's wrinkled, crab-apple of a face.

"Who has gone to the Black Moor in Jude's place?"

"I did not ride here to gossip, brother. See to it that you make haste home."

Martin let old Holt's testiness fly over his shoulders, and went and put on his black frock. The cellarer pushed his mule deeper into the wood where the men were barking one of the fallen trees, and Martin left him there and started alone for Paradise. The great oaks were just coming into leaf, the golden buds opening against the blue of the sky. The young bracken fronds were uncurling themselves from the brown tangle of last year's growth, and here and there masses of wild hyacinth made pools of blue. The gorse had begun to burn with a lessened splendor, but the broom had taken fire, and waved its yellow torches everywhere.

Martin found Prior Globulus in his parlor, sitting by a window with a book in his lap. The prior had been dozing; his eyes looked misty and dull.

“You have sent for me, sir.”

“Come you here, Brother Martin. Assuredly—I have been asleep. Yes—I remember. Brother Jude has been taken sick. He rode in two hours ago, with a sharp fever. I have chosen you to take his place, my son.”

His dull eyes watched Martin’s face.

“The chapel on the Black Moor must have a priest. There are people, my son, who would not pardon us if we left that altar unserved even for a day. Get you a mule and ride there. To-morrow I will send two pack mules with food and wine and new altar cloths and vestments. No cell of ours shall be served in niggardly fashion. And remember, my son, that it is part of our trust to serve all wayfarers with bread and wine, should they ask for bread and wine. Holy St. Florence so ordered it before she died. And there is the little hostelry where wayfarers may lodge themselves for the night. All these matters will be in your keeping.”

He groped in a gypsire that lay on the window seat.

“Here is the key of the chapel, Brother Martin. Now speed you, and bear my blessing.”

Martin kissed the ring on the old man’s hand, and went forth to take up his trust.

The Forest was the great lord of all those parts. From Gawdy Town, by the sea, to Merlin Water it stretched ten leagues or more, a green, rolling wilderness, very mysterious and very beautiful. There were castles, little towns and villages hidden in it, and a stranger might never

have known of them but for the sound of their bells. In the north the Great Ridge bounded the Forest like a huge vallum, and on one of the chalk hills stood Troy Castle, its towers gray against the northern sky. Gawdy Town, where the Rondel river reached the sea, held itself in no small esteem. It was a free town, boasted its own mayor and jurats, appointed its own port reeve, sent out its own ships, and hoarded much rich merchandise in its storehouses and cellars.

The day had an April waywardness when Martin mounted his mule and set out for the Black Moor. Masses of cloud moved across the sky, some of them trailing rain showers from the edges, and letting in wet floods of sunlight when they had passed. The Forest was just breaking into leaf; the birch trees had clothed themselves; so had the hazels; the beeches were greener than the oaks, whose domes varied from yellow to bronze; the ash buds were still black, promising a good season. The wild cherries were in flower. The hollies glistened after the rain, and the warm, wet smell of the earth was the smell of spring.

Not till Martin reached Heron Hill did the Forest show itself to him in all its mystery. The Black Moor hung like a thunder-cloud ahead of him, splashed to the south with sunlight after the passing of a shower. He could see the sea, covered with purple shadows and patches of gold. Below him, and stretching for miles, the wet green of the woods lost itself in a blue gray haze, with the Rondel river a silver streak in the valleys. Here and there a wood of yews or firs made a blackness in the thick of the lighter foliage. Martin saw deer moving along the edge of Mogry Heath. Larks

were in the air, and the green woodpecker laughed in the woods.

The sun was low in the west when the mule plodded up the sandy track that led over the Black Moor. The gorse had lost its freshness, but the yellow broom and the white of the stunted thorns lightened the heavy green of the heather. The chapelry stood on the top-most swell of the moor, marked by a big oak wayside cross, its heather-thatched roofs clustering close together like sheep in a pen. There were a chapel, a priest’s cell, a little guest-house, a stable, a small lodge or barn, and a stack of fagots standing together in a grassy space. Father Jude was a homely soul, a man of the soil; he had fought with the sour soil, made a small garden, and hedged it with thorns, though the apple trees that he had planted were all blown one way and looked stunted and grotesque. He had cut and stacked bracken for litter, and there was a small haystack in the hollow over the hill.

Martin stabled the mule, carried his saddle-bags into the cell, and took stock of his new home. He went first to the little chapel, unlocked the door, and saw that the holy vessels were safe in the aumbry beside the altar, and that no one had been tampering with the iron-bound alms-box that was fastened to the wall close to the holy water stoup. The chapel pleased him with its stone walls and the rough forest-hewn timber in its roof. He knelt down in front of the altar and prayed that in his lonely place he might not be found wanting.

There was the mule to be watered and fed, and Martin saw to the beast before he thought of his own supper.

Father Jude’s larder suggested to him that hunger was an excellent necessity. He found a stale loaf of bread, a big earthen jar full of salted meat, half a bowl of herrings, a pot of honey, a paper of spices, and the remains of a rabbit pie. Obviously Father Jude had been something of a cook, and Martin stared reflectively at the brick oven in the corner of the cell. Cooking was an art that he had not studied, but on the top of the Black Moor a man had a chance of completing a thoroughly practical education. For instance, there was the question of bread. How much yeast went to how much flour, and how long had the loaves to be left in the oven? Martin saw that life was full of housewifely problems. A man’s body might be more importunate than his soul.

When he had made a meal and washed his hollywood cup and platter, he found that dusk was falling over the Forest like a purple veil. The wayside cross spread its black arms against a saffron afterglow. The world was very peaceful and very still, and a heavy dew was falling.

Martin went and sat at the foot of the cross, leaning his broad back against the massive post. His face grew dim in the dusk, and a kind of a sadness descended on him. There were times when a strange unrest stirred in him, when he yearned for something—he knew not what. The beauty of the earth, the wet scent of the woods, the singing of birds filled him with a vague emotion that was near to pain. It was like the spring stirring in his blood while a wind still blew keenly out of the north.

But Martin Valliant’s faith was very simple as yet, and crowned with a tender severity.

“The Devil goeth about cunningly to tempt men.”

His thoughts wandered back to Paradise, and set him frowning. He was not so young as not to know that all was not well with the world down yonder.

“Our Lord was tempted in the wilderness.”

He stared up at the stars, and then watched the yellow face of the moon rise over Heron Hill.

“It is good for a man to be alone, to keep watch and to know his own heart. God does nothing blindly. When we are alone we are both very weak and very strong. There are voices that speak in the wilderness.”

He felt comforted, and a great calm descended on him. Those taunting lights had died out of the western sky; the beauty of the earth no longer looked slantwise at him like a young girl whose eyes are tender and whose breasts are the breasts of a woman.

The pallet bed in the cell had a mattress of sacking filled with straw. It served Martin well enough. He slept soundly and without dreams.

But at Paradise Geraint had gone a-prowling through the orchards. He loitered outside Widow Greensleeve’s gate till some one came out with smothered laughter and spoke to him under the apple boughs.

“The pan is on the fire, dame. Brother Martin has gone to the Black Moor.”

“And the fat is ready for frying, my master.”

“A few pinches of spice—eh!”

“And a pretty dish fit for a king.”

Chapter IV

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A tall ship, the Rose, came footing it toward Gawdy Town with a wash of foam at her bluff bows, and the green seas lifting her poop. Gawdy Town was very proud of the Rose, for she was fit to be a king's ship, and to carry an admiral's flag if needs be. Her towering poop and forecastle had their walls pierced for guns, and their little turrets loopholed for archers, and all her top gear was painted to match her name. She carried three masts and a fine spread of canvas, and Master Hamden, her captain, loved to come into port with streamers flying and all the gilding of her vanes and bulwarks shining like gold.

The Rose struck her canvas and dropped her tow ropes when she was under the shelter of the high ground west of the harbor. A couple of galleys came out to tow her in, and she was berthed at the Great Wharf under the walls.

She carried merchandise and wine from Spain and Bordeaux, also a few passengers; but the passengers were of small account. Two of them, a girl and a young man, were leaning over the poop rail and watching the people on the wharf below. The young man's face was yellow as a guinea; he was dressed like a strolling player, with bunches of ribbons at his elbows and bells in his cap. The girl looked the taller of the two, perhaps because the sea had not humbled her; she wore a light blue coat edged with fur, and a gown of apple green; her green hood had white strings tied under her chin.

"Holy saints, what an adventure!"

The man straightened himself, and managed to smile.

“I never knew what cowardice was like till I got aboard a ship. My courage came out of my mouth. And now an impudent tongue and a laughing eye are necessities——”

The girl’s dark eyes were on the alert.

“There’s old Adam Rick, or am I blind?”

“Master Port Reeve—so it is! The bridge is ashore. We had best be putting our fortune to the test. Have I anything of the gay devil left about me?”

He shook himself with the air of a bird that had been moping on a perch, but the girl did not laugh; she held her head high, and seemed to take life with fierce seriousness.

They climbed down to the waist of the ship where Master Hamden stood by the gangway, talking to some of the fathers of Gawdy Town who were gathered on the wharf.

“News, sirs, what would you with news? If Crookback is still king, I have no news for you.”

“There have been rumors of landings.”

“Rumors of old wives’ petticoats!”

The man and the girl were close at his elbow, ready to leave the ship. The man carried a leather-covered casket in one hand, and a viol under his arm, while the girl carried a lute. She kept her eyes fixed on the tower of the town church; they were very dark eyes, blue almost to blackness, her skin was softly browned like the skin of a Frenchwoman, but her lips were very red. The hair under her hood was the color of charcoal. Her attitude toward her neighbors seemed one of aloofness; men might have voted her a proud, fierce-tempered wench.

Master Hamden looked at the pair with his red-lidded, angry eyes. The man nodded to him.

“Good-day, master.”

“Give you good-day, Jack Jester. Go and get some wine in you, and wash the yellow out of your skin.”

He looked slantwise at the girl as she passed him, but he did not speak to her. Had she been all that she pretended to be she would not have left old Hamden’s ship without a coarse jest of some kind.

Her brother was pushing his way toward a handsome, ruddy man in a black camlet cloak, and the man in the cloak was eying him intently.

“Sir Adam, a word with you.”

The Port Reeve appeared lost in thought. He drew a quill from his girdle, and meditated while he picked his teeth. And very much at his leisure, he chose to notice the young man with the viol.

“Where have you come from, my friend?”

“France, sir. My sister and I are poor players, makers of music.”

The Port Reeve scanned the pair with intelligent brown eyes.

“Queer that such a Jack and Jill should come out of France.”

“We were in the service of my Lord of Dunster.”

“And he sent you packing? How are you called?”

The young man answered in a low voice:

“Lambert Lovel.”

The Port Reeve’s eyelids flickered curiously.

“You would lodge in Gawdy Town?”

“If it pleases you, sir.”

“Our laws are strict against vagabonds and strollers. Well, get you in, Lovel, my lad, and your sister with you. You make no tarrying, I gather.”

“But to make a little money for the road, sir.”

“Well, try the ‘Painted Lady,’ my man. It is the merchants’ tavern.”

He gave them something very like a solemn wink, and then turned aside to talk to a sea-captain who wanted to quarrel about the port dues.

The strolling singers entered Gawdy Town by the sea-gate, and chose a winding street that went up toward the castle. Lambert carried himself with a jaunty and half-insolent air, fluttering his ribbons and making grimaces at the people in the doorways.

“Do you remember your name, sweeting?”

“Am I a fool, Gilbert!”

“God save us,” and he glanced at her impatiently, “but you have forgotten mine! Lambert Lovel, brother to Kate Lovel. Be wary; the Crookback has spies in every port.”

“Why stay in the town—at all?”

“Oh, you wild falcon! Are there not things to be done here? Are we not hungry? Besides, the Forest is seven miles away.”

“I know—but it is home.”

Her brother laughed. He was built on lighter, gayer lines than the girl; he had not her strength. A sort of adventurous vanity carried him along, and life pleased him when it was not too grim.

“Robin, sweet Robin under the greenwood tree! A pile of stones and a few burnt beams! Scramble, you brats—