

at his robe and opened his eyes to see Elenor laughing up at him. She jumped from one foot to the other, hair uncombed, nose and cheeks red from running in the early morning. She helped the priest pry his clawed hands from the rope and dragged him out into the sunshine.

"Look!" She pointed. On one side of the valley, wending down from the hills, came a procession of people in gray, their heads covered. Wisps of mournful song floated across the fields.

"Welcome, you dismal Doomsdayers!" Elenor shouted through cupped hands. "Sun's up!" She pointed at the eastern sky and danced a jig. Father Gregory hoped Friar Paul and the penitents were too far away to notice as Elenor, singing loudly, tucked her arm through his and tried to drag him into a dance. His ears were still ringing and he felt altogether dizzy.

"Quiet, child! Don't mock them," he said sharply, collapsing on the stone bench that ran along the outside wall of the church. Elenor flopped beside him, leaned against the old gray stones, and gazed out across the valley. One of the figures in the hayfield stirred and rolled over. A man clad only in a rust-colored shirt crawled to the ditch and retched. The sound carried in the still air.

Elenor smiled; then a shadow crossed her face. "Are those my choices out there, Father? Join some

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brute in a haystack, or else become a nun and"—she rolled her eyes heavenward—"look to the world beyond?"

A glance at Father Gregory made her quickly add, "Oh, sorry, I love the Church, Father. I do. But suppose I went into a nunnery and the nuns were Doomsdayers, like Friar Paul? Dread, guilt, and *miserere* for my whole life. . . ."

"I'm not offended," said the priest. "You'd rather drink new wine like that fellow down there, dance jigs, bear hordes of children to play with you in the hay—"

Elenor heaved a great sigh, cutting him short.

"The children, yes, I'd like to have children," she said slowly. "But the getting of them, Father, I fear as much as I fear the quietness of the Church." These words were said humbly, like her confessions, which Father Gregory had been hearing since she was a small child. The priest spoke carefully.

"You are betrothed to Thornham's Thomas, who is no brute as I remember him. True, he has been gone for eight years, and may have changed, but as a lad he was—lively, but kind."

"He locked me in the henhouse. I screamed until my eyes were popping out, Father, and between every scream I could hear him and his friends laughing at me."

"He used to tease you because it embarrassed

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