

Mary Webb



*Armour
Wherein
He Trusted*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Armour Wherein He Trusted Being the Say of Lord Gilbert of Polrebec, afterward the Holy and Pious Abbot of Strata Florida](#)

[Over the Hills and Far Away](#)

[The Prize](#)

I

II

[The Bread House](#)

I

II

[The Name-Tree](#)

[Many Mansions](#)

[Palm](#)

['In Affection and Esteem'](#)

[Owd Blossom](#)

[Caer Cariad A Story of the Marches](#)

I

II

[Blessed are the Meek](#)

Note

Of the short stories in this volume *The Name-Tree* and *Blessed are the Meek* were published in *The English Review* and *Owd Blossom* in *Hutchinson's Magazine*. In America *The Prize* appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Caer Cariad* in *The Bookman*. The usual acknowledgments are tendered to the editors of these publications.

ArmourWhereinHeTrusted

ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED BEING THE SAY OF LORD GILBERT OF POLREBEC, AFTERWARD THE HOLY AND PIOUS ABBOT OF STRATA FLORIDA

[Table of Contents](#)

IN the forest are many voices, and no man riding under the leaves hears the same voice as his companion. For they are diverse as the steep winding paths up into Heaven-Town, to which no man can come by any other way than that his own torch shows him, though the good burgesses leaning over the battlements, picking their teeth, should shout a plain direction to him.

For though one says, 'Come thou through the brake fern, there to the left,' and another says 'No, yonder by the great yew-tree!' and a third crieth that he must go through the deep heather, yet he knows that his one only way is by the Christ-thorn gleaming above the chasm.

So in the forest a man must hear with his own ears the carol that is for him, and one will hear a very sad song, with pine-trees in it, rasping needle on needle and cone on cone, and another will hear flutes and dulcimers afar, as you hear on the white roads of holy Italy. Nor will a man well stricken in years hear the same music as a lad.

So I, riding alone in the oak woods, wending towards Powis (which as all men know is in the Marches of Wales, a savage country in part, but quieter in Scirophshire and ruled

and misruled by the Lords Marchers), a young knight in my hey-day, being then one score and three years, lusty, care-free and love-free, heard in the springing April forest on every side the voices of faeries, lively and mocking and beguiling. Not near, nor very far, but where the trees drew together, even where the mist began, they were, hovering in a cloud like midges on a summer day.

Though my eyes were keen enough, I might peer and peer, but see nought of them, not so much as a wing-tip or a gleam of flaxen hair. But in the great stillness of the day I could hear them, mourning like doves, laughing like woodpeckers, shivering into a scatter of sweet notes like painted glass in fragments, belling like frogs in the marishes.

The scurrels ran in the sparse-leaved tree-tops, red as raddle, mazed with spring. I laughed out, and the noise of it startled a herd of wild ponies feeding in the silent forest, so that they took fright, and drove across our way, and my good stallion, heady with grass, gave a grunt and was after them. So it chanced I came to Powis by a roundabout way, through a vasty grove of oaks that were hung and garlanded as for a festival with yellowing mistletoe. All was so still—still as a dewpond. The great oaken boughs were a little leafy with young red leaves, and they spread and towered in the quiet, minding them of the centuries, aye, minding them of the hour that was so still, a thousand years gone and more, when the midnight grew sudden-sweet and small flowers were where had been none, and bells spoke in the meady, golden air, and the thin echo of voices came upon the land—

‘Pax vobiscum! Christus natus est.’

The oaks called it to mind. Though storms ravened, they seemed ever at their orisons, and never did I come there but a stillness fell upon me. My good horse stopped, snuffing the air, staring, sweating, then hung his head, hearing, as I know well, beneath the sea-voices of the high boughs—

‘Christus natus est.’

I left him standing there and went softly on, over the stag-moss. All was so holy, I was glad I was dressed in my best green coat and my hat with a grey goose feather, for it was as if I went to the Easter Supper.

After a while, I saw that in the midst of the oak grove was a thicket of Christ-thorn, bravely budded. So I went into the thicket, thinking I might find an altar there. But there was no altar, only a small bower woven of wattles and decked out with bunches of early flowers—marigolds and the flowers of young hyacinthus, and the day’s eye. Small, nimble birds made claw-marks in the soft earth about it, and the merles sang as if none but faeries ever came there.

‘It is a witchen-house,’ I said. ‘I shall be put in a spell.’ And even as I spoke, one looked from the small window of the bower, and behold! it was my love. I knew it was my love, though I had never seen her afore, and I was bewildered, standing like an oaf, looking upon her under the leaves. I mused on her long, struck, as the heron is when he sees his mate imaged in the water. She seemed not troubled at all, to have a great fellow standing there, and by this I was sure she was a faery, since they know not fear.

‘Alas!’ I said, ‘I am a man doomed, for I love a faery, an Ill Person.’

Then on a sudden she laughed, high and brisk, yet with a sound of rain going in the trees. And she rose up and came stooping from the low door, and stooping looked up at me from under her forehead with its clumps of pleated golden hair on this side and on that side. So looking up while yet her chin nestled against the sheepskin of her coat, her face, that was pointed like one of the Small People’s faces, seemed even more pointed, like some forest creature—a scurrel, say, or a fox-babe or a vole. Then she straightened and stood like a wand, solemn, as one offended. And she said—

‘Sir, I am no Ill Person. I am my Lady Powis’s new waiting-woman out of Wales, where are no tall tousle-haired gentlemen that stare upon a maid in her bower.’

And turning aside, she seemed to be looking very carefully at the small clouds that came over the tree-tops each after other, like ptarmigan in winter. So I fell into a muse also, for it seemed that there was no other thing any lady could do so fitly as to watch the white ptarmigan in the meadows of God. And I mind this was ever her manner—to make all she did seem the only thing that could be done. For if she leaned over the battlements, or stirred simples over the hearth fire, or sewed her tapestry, it seemed to all that she could do none other thing. And if she sate at the banquet, she seemed in a shrine, as if a great boss of white roses was her chair-back. Never did I see any woman so favouring Our Lady. So a man coming on a dark night to a church with a bright painted window such as they have in

Rome, seeing the Mother of God done in lovely blues and raddles, would say 'Ah me! when was the Flower of the West in holy Italy?' For that was her name—leastways among men. Women had other names for her. But men called her ever 'Flower of the West,' and indeed she was at that time, and to me at all times, the fairest woman from Chester to the Southern Sea. Men would fight for a look and die for a smile. But that was after. On this day she was yet a very simple maid, and abashed.

So when we had stood a little while thus, I said—

'If you are no Ill Person, look on me, not on the ptarmigan of heaven. They are not fain of you.'

'Be you, sir?' she said.

And when I answered nothing, for the hoost that love gave, she came nigher and held out her little arms, long like an angel's, and asked again—

'Be you?'

But I said nothing, for she ever put a silence on me, so that I felt my heart brasting with a mort of words—yet not one would come. Words were never good serfs to me. They would stand at gaze, like wild ponies on the mountains, and just when I thought I had tamed one, away it would go with a toss of its mane and leave me all wildered. So my mother would call me the Silent Man and said I was like him that was wiled away by a light in the northern sky, and came where enchanted colours ruled the dark, and was so mazed that he fell into a dream and stood there, freezing, winter by winter, till he was all one great icicle. Mislaking the thought of this, I fought with my words, but never till this latter end and sunset of my days have they come at call. Now God

sends them, that I may tell in proper fashion all the changes and chances He led me through. Even the long words now, and the Latin words, are biddable. Yet I think the best words tell not much of Him, nor of us, nor of the green, sappy pine forests and nesses of ermine-breasted birds, and rufous bitches suckling their young in dim places, and God speaking in the thunder, moving a mountain yonder, a pyatt here, calling on the seas.

And I think my good father was in agreement with me in this, for when mother chid me for my quietness, he would say 'What ails the lad? Would you have him glib as a Norman?' And mother sighed, for she was of Norman blood, and came over with the ladies of King William (may God rest him) and was wed with my father a little while after. For when he saw her he was filled with a fury to have her, as his manner was all through life. Knowing well what liked him, he would have it, whether it was a collop or a lady. He would set his heart on one piece of roast, and woe to the servant who brought any other. And he would suddenly cry out for a manchet or a bowl of mead, and if it tarried he would knock the lad down and be done with him. I speak this, not to bring my father into your ill graces, who read this say of mine, but because it is truth, and I must speak truth or nothing. Especially must I say this because in a measure I inherited this suddenness from my father, so that delay always fretted me, and a nay-word drove me mad. This was a great temptation to me, and gave Satan much power, so if it had not been for my Friend, even the Lord Christ, being ever with me even in my curst youth, I should maybe have killed a man every day. But he was continually near—in the

tourney and in the house, in the hour when I took Nesta (that was my love's name) to be my wife, and in the hour when I met my enemy upon the battlements. Times, I could feel as it were a touch on my shoulder. Times, He would look upon me as He did upon Peter (God rest him) and I would fall upon my knees and weep. But other times, though He beguiled me with all the winning kindness of His heart, I would not hearken. So children break their maumets of clay and trample on their crusts of bread in evil rage, and sob a long while after, to think that now they have no crust and no maumet. So we, when we kill and hate and are given to lust and know not rightly what is ours and what is another's, when we smite our beloveds and fling away the Bread of Heaven, must sob a long while in the evening. And He will say 'Hush now, sleep awhile and forget that you hunger. I give you not back the bread you threw to the wolf-dogs, nor the maumet you broke. I take not the weal from your love's face nor bid the varlet you killed to arise and walk. I cannot because I will not, seeing I give you leave to walk with me knowing good and evil and taking your own choice. Another time, let you hearken to me, brother.' O, His kindness cut me to the heart! I would vow to lead the life of the holiest monk, with no devil in it, nor even a foul word. And then I would see a fair face or fall into a brawl or swill mead like a hog, and all the repenting to do over again.

And when your heart and your longings are like a great river flowing strongly, and all dammed up because you have no words, there must come a day when all is carried away, even the banks.

So now, as I looked upon my love's face like alabaster, or rather like the soft petal of some thick fragrant flower, as if she said, 'I am white, but I am also warm,' the thick blood was pounding like galloping horses in my ears, that were hot and burning as my face was and my hands that twitched and sweated. I could see under the sheepskin her robe of silk, that did not hide her as the smocks of the sewing-women and my mother's heavy homespun woollens hid them, but betrayed her to me, seeming to melt away and leave her at my mercy with her small, smooth shoulders sloping like a gracious hillside, and her two breasts round as bowls under the silk, and her lissom body, small as some slim bird until it came to the thigh, and there sweetly rounded. I pray God He will pardon all such talk, for I must tell it, or none can know how things came to pass nor why I was as I was, nor what temptation Satan kept for Nesta. For, though he tempts all women, he has snares for such as Helen of Troy Town which he will not waste on many. And Nesta was of Helen's breed. I suppose she drave more men to madness and damnation than any woman in our country this many a year. Yet not Nesta only, but the wild earth of which she was made, red rock and roaring waters, the desires of many hearts a long while dead, bright wine in foaming cups, and blood precious as wine, and fierce hurting kisses and the influences of the stars. She was born, her mother said, under the influence of Mars, and for such a woman that is as bad as it well can be, for it means that she will have a deal to do with men. Some women, such as my Aunt Gudrun, would take no harm of this and might be born under the influence of all the stars in heaven yet nothing

come of it. I am sure that if my aunt had been the only woman in a castle full of men she would have been safe. Those her face did not affright her tongue would. Yet it is an ill thing in me to jest upon the poor soul, with God now this long while, so I hope and pray, though ever and anon fearing it may be otherwise, for she was a very curst woman.

But Nesta was not thus. Men would be about her like bees, with their askings and their brawlings. She would be pale and weary from the burning of their eyes as a traveller too long in the sun of midsummer. She would have no rest of them till she was an old woman—if she ever won through to old age. I had knowledge of all this as I stood with her in the thicket of Christ-thorn, and I bowed my head as a beast before the butcher. When I looked on her, it filled me with wonder to see the whiteness of her alabaster turned rosy, as the tips of the day's eye. For I have looked on many saints and angels done in alabaster, yet never one of them turned all to rose like this one. But I knew it had pleased God to make a miracle. I desired to give her some great gift, but when I cudgelled my brain for a gift, behold, everything of time, and my living and dying, were less than one of the leaves of the wood-sorrel beneath her foot. And after a little longer it became such a hunger in me to give her something that I could not bear it, but tore open my wallet and took from it my charm which was a small flat bottle of Roman glass, of dim, sad-coloured blue, lapped in samite, containing seven tears of Christus. Now you will say, 'How came you, a poor nobody of a young knight, with seven of God's own tears, when the mighty and the rich would give

their wealth for one?’ I will tell you then that my mother, in her youth, was acquaint with Peter the Hermit, a very holy man that would do great things one day, I was sure, leading all the world to Galilee, calling them on through the groves of white oleanders, even to Gethsemane, and preaching to them so straitly that the very birds should come down out of the trees and confess their small sins; and kings be upon the ground all night, weeping; and in the morning, seeing from Heaven’s wall that all peoples and nations and languages are here, in great expectancy, Christus Himself would come through the white oleanders and the world would suddenly crackle like broken ice, and Christus and the oleanders and all we poor creatures suddenly be in heaven. And partly this has come, though as yet only a part of the world has gone to Galilee, but the end is not yet. And those flowers that are to be translated with us all are not yet budded.

Now this Peter had a kindness for my mother, and when he had been for the first time to Jerusalem he brought her these tears in a scallop-shell. And she, fearing they would be drunk up by the air, put them into the blue flask from Virocon where the Romans lived, and gave it to me to keep me safe in Time and Eternity.

So I held out my seven tears of Christ to Nesta with a shaking hand, and she took them, smiling very graciously upon me.

‘What is this little bottle?’ she asked me, and I told her.

‘Oh, it is magic,’ she said. ‘I am afeard. My mother has magic. She is of Merlin’s line.’

'It is no magic,' I answered. 'It is to save you from all spells and witchen wiles for ever and ever.'

'But how came it that they could get as many as seven tears for one hermit,' she said, 'when there be so many hermits and also great Earls and Princes and Kings that would be fain of them?'

I answered her—

'It is because He wept so many tears. Can you wonder, in a world such as this? You mind how when He saw the young lord carried to burial that was his mother's only son, it says, "Jesus wept." And when you mind how many mothers are thus, and lovers parted, friends betrayed, and fair things trampled, you know that He must have wept a deal. When He turned and looked upon Peter, and when He said, "Hast thou been so long time with me and yet hast not known me, Philip?" I think there were tears in His eyne.'

'Will this little bottle,' she asked, with an anxious look, 'bring tears to me? I am afeard of it. I will bury it here among the wood-sorrel and make a mound of white stones and plant an acorn. And the tears will be at rest then. I greatly fear if I keep them they will bring me to some strait pass, and maybe I shall end a nun—and I would not be a nun,' she said, with those lips that were red as the fruit of the cranberry, and that voice of sweetest balm, 'I would not be a nun for a king's ransom! No! Why I should be scourged every day, for I do wrong as easy as I breathe, and whereas now the Lady Powis only whips me if she has the toothache or if her lord has clouted her, in nuns' housen you are beaten for the glory of God and without consideration of the toothache.'

I was filled with rage to think of her being beaten. It was like scourging a butterfly or defacing a statue of a queen.

'It is as God wills, what you are,' I said. 'We are His that made us. We follow His sweet piping up hill and down the cwms. If you are to come to nuns' housen and be beaten sore, it will only be because it is His will and wish. And you will stand higher in Heaven for it. But if you keep the little tears of Christ in your bosom, all will be well, in dark days or sunny.'

So she put the tear-bottle into her gown, and I thought how close it must be pressed between those white round breasts, and I was filled with a madness of lust to rest where the little bottle was. But Christ kept me.

'Lady,' I said, 'it is time to be going. Will you ride along with me, for I go to Powis also?'

She clapped her hands at that, for then and always she loved ease. So I whistled my horse and he came at a canter through the glades, nuzzling to my leather coat. He was the best horse ever I had, and came in direct line from the Conqueror's favourite.

We went at a gentle pace through the glade, where the running wind came not, save in the topmost twigs, where the green, quiet turf was all so still, spelled long ago and the key of the charm forgotten till Eternity.

'It likes me, this place,' said Nesta, with a grave look that made her face like a babe's.

'Why does it like you?' I questioned, but she would not say. Only she said:

'Holy. It be holy.'