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***THE GATHERING
OF BROTHER
HILARIUS***

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The Gathering of Brother Hilarius

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PREFACE

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THROUGH this little book runs the road of life, the common road of men, the white highway that Hilarius watched from the monastery gate and Brother Ambrose saw nearing its end in the Jerusalem of his heart.

The book is a romance. It may be read as a romance of the Black Death and a monk with an artist's eyes; but for the author it is a romance of the Image of God. While the Divine Face is being unveiled for Hilarius in the masque that shocks and bewilders him, and the secret of sorrow and sin, of death and life and love, is told by his speechless and dying "little maid," we, if we choose, may hear again the Road mender's epilogue to the story of the man of this earth, the man of the common highway:—"Dust and ashes and a house of devils," he cries; and there comes back for answer, '*Rex concupiscet decorem tuum.*'"

PART I **THE SEED**

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CHAPTER I **BLIND EYES IN THE FOREST**

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HILARIUS stood at the Monastery gate, looking away down the smooth, well-kept road to the highway beyond. It lay quiet and serene in the June sunshine, the white way to the outer world, and not even a dust cloud on the horizon promised the approach of the train of sumpter mules laden with meats for the bellies and cloth for the backs of the good Brethren within. The Cellarer lacked wine, the drug stores in the farmery were running low; last, but not least, the Precentor had bespoke precious colours, rich gold, costly vellum, and on these the thoughts of Hilarius tarried with anxious expectation.

On his left lay the forest, home of his longing imaginings. The Monastery wall crept up one side of it, and over the top the great trees peered and beckoned with their tossing, feathery branches. Twice had Hilarius walked there, attending the Prior as he paced slowly and silently along the mossy ways, under the strong, springing pines; and the occasions were stored in his memory with the glories of St Benedict's Day and Our Lady's Festivals. Away to the right, within the great enclosure, stretched the Monastery lands,

fair to the eye, with orchard and fruitful field, teeming with glad, unhurried labour.

At a little elevation, overlooking the whole domain, rose the Priory buildings, topped by the Church, crown and heart of the place, signing the sign of the Cross over the daily life and work of the Brethren, itself the centre of that life, the object of that work, ever unfinished because love knows not how to make an end. To the monks it was a page in the history of the life of the Order, written in stone, blazoned with beauty of the world's treasure; a page on which each generation might spell out a word, perchance add a line, to the greater glory of God and St Benedict. They were always at work on it, stretching out eager hands for the rare stuffs and precious stones devout men brought from overseas, finding a place for the best of every ordered craft; their shame an uncouth line or graceless arch, their glory each completed pinnacle and fretted spire; ever restoring, enlarging, repairing, spendthrift of money and time in the service of the House of the Lord.

The sun shone hot on grey wall and green garth; the spirit of insistent peace brooded over the place. The wheeling white pigeons circling the cloister walls cried peace; the sculptured saints in their niches over the west door gave the blessing of peace; an old, blind monk crossed the garth with the hesitating gait of habit lately acquired—on his face was great peace. It rested everywhere, this peace of prayerful service, where the clang of the blacksmith's hammer smote the sound of the Office bell.

Hilarius, at the gate, questioned the road again and again for sign of the belated train. It was vexatious; the

Prior's lips would take a thinner line, for the mules were already some days overdue; and it was ill to keep the Prior waiting. The soft June wind swept the fragrance of Mary's lilies across to the lad; he turned his dreamy, blue eyes from the highway to the forest. The scent of the pinewoods rushed to meet his sudden thought. Should he, dare he, break cloister, and taste the wondrous delight of an unwall'd world? It were a sin, a grave sin, in a newly-made novice, cloister-bred. The sweet, pungent smell overpowered him; the trees beckoned with their long arms and slender fingers; the voice of the forest called, and Hilarius, answering, walked swiftly away, with bowed head and beating heart, between the sunburnt pine-boles.

At last he ventured to stop and look around him, his fair hair aflame in the sunlight, his eyes full of awe of this arched and pillared city of mystery and wonder.

It was very silent. Here and there a coney peeped out and fled, and a woodpecker toiled with sharp, effective stroke. Hilarius' eyes shone as he lifted his head and caught sight of the sunlit blue between the great, green-fringed branches: it was as if Our Lady trailed her gracious robe across the tree-tops. Then, as he bathed his thirsty soul in the great sea of light and shade, cool depths and shifting colours, the sense of his wrong-doing slipped from him, and joy replaced it—joy so great that his heart ached with it. He went on his way, singing *Lauda Syon*, his eyes following the pine-boles, and presently, coming out into an open glade, halted in amazement.

A flower incarnate stood before him; stood—nay, danced in the wind. Over the sunny sward two little scarlet-clad feet

chased each other in rhythmic maze; dainty little brown hands spread the folds of the deep blue skirt; a bodice, silver-laced, served as stalk, on which balanced, lightly swaying, the flower of flowers itself. Hilarius' eyes travelled upwards and rested there. Cheeks like a sunburnt peach, lips, a scarlet bow; shimmering, tender, laughing grey eyes curtained by long curling lashes; soft tendrils of curly hair, blue black in the shadows, hiding the low level brow. A sight for gods, but not for monks; above all, not for untutored novices such as Hilarius.

His sin had found him out; it was the Devil, the lovely lady of St Benedict; he drew breath and crossed himself hastily with a murmured "*Apage Sataas!*"

The dancer stopped, conscious perhaps of a chill in the wind.

"O what a pretty boy!" she cried gaily. "Playing truant, I dare wager. Come and dance!"

Hilarius crimsoned with shame and horror. "Woman," he said, and his voice trembled somewhat, "art thou not shamed to deck thyself in this devil's guise?"

The dancer bit her lip and stamped her little red shoe angrily.

"No more devil's guise than thine own," she retorted, eyeing his semi-monastic garb with scant favour. "Can a poor maid not practise her steps in the heart of a forest, but a cloister-bred youngster must cry devil's guise?"

As she spoke her anger vanished like a summer cloud, and she broke into peal on peal of joyous laughter. "Poor lad, with thy talk of devils; hast thou never looked a maid in the eyes before?"

Shrewdly hit, mistress; never before has Hilarius looked a maid in the eyes, and now he drops his own.

“Dost thou not know it is sin to deck the body thus, and entice men’s souls to their undoing?”

“An what is the matter with my poor body, may it please you, kind sir?” she asked demurely, and stood with downcast eyes, like a scolded child.

“It is wrong to deck the body,” began Hilarius, softening at her attitude, “because, because—”

Again the merry laugh rang out.

“Because, because—nay, Father” (with a mock reverence), “methinks thy sermon is not ready; let it simmer awhile, and / will catechise. How old art thou?” She held up her small finger admonishingly.

“Seventeen,” replied Hilarius, surprised into reply.

“Art thou a monk?”

“Nay, a novice only.”

“Hast thou ever loved?”

Hilarius threw up his hands in shocked indignation, but she went on unconcerned—

“’Twas a foolish question; the answer’s writ large for any maid to read. But tell me, why art thou angry at the thought of love?”

Hilarius felt the ground slipping from under his feet.

“There is an evil love, and a holy love; it is good to love God and the Saints and the Brethren—”

“But not the sisters?” the wicked little laugh pealed out. “Poor sisters! Why, boy, the world is full of love, and not all for the Saints and the Brethren, and it is good—good—good!” She opened her arms wide. “’Tis the devil and the

monks who call it evil. Hast thou never seen the birds mate in the springtime, nor heard the nightingale sing?"

"It is well for a husband to love his wife, and a mother her child. That is love in measure, but not so high as the love we bear to God and the Saints!" quoth Hilarius sententiously, mindful of yesterday's homily in the Frater.

"But how can'st thou know that thou lovest the Saints?" the dancer persisted.

How did he know?

"How dost thou know that thou lovest thy mother?" he cried triumphantly, forgetting the reprobate nature of the catechist, and anxious only to come well out of the wordy war.

But the unexpected happened.

"Dost thou dare speak to me of my mother? *I*, love her?— I *hate* her;" and she flung herself down on the grass in a passion of weeping.

Even a master of theology is helpless before a woman's tears.

"Maid, maid," said Hilarius, in deep distress, "indeed I did not mean to vex thee;" and he came up and laid his hand on her shoulder.

So successfully can the Prince of Darkness simulate grief!

The dancer sat up and brushed away her tears; she looked fairer and more flowerlike than before, sitting on the green sward, looking up at him through shining lashes.

"There, boy, 'tis naught. How could'st thou know? But what of thine own mother?"

"I know not."

"Nay, what is this? And thy father?"