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## MEDIEVAL NUNNERIES.

BY H. P. PALMER, M.A., Author of "The Bad Abbot of Evesham and other Medieval Studies."

If we were to form our mental image of medieval nuns from Chaucer's pleasant picture of the Prioress, we should pronounce them to have been charming ladies. Madame Eglantine is in every way a delightful personage. What would we not give to hear her "sing the service divine entuned in her nose fully semely?" What a treat to watch her delicate manners at table and to notice how careful she is not to "wet her fingers in her sauce deep" and how "full semely after her meat she reaches"! At such times indeed the Prioress is radiant, "full pleasant and amiable of port," with a winsome smile, a quiet wit and a courtly grace which attract everyone. Kind she is and piteous. Verily the little dogs which she feeds on roast meat, wastel bread and bread and milk find in her a kind and indulgent mistress. Madame Eglantine must have been everywhere a welcome guest, fulfilling as she does the motto on her brooch "Love conquers all."

Chaucer's picture was probably sketched from life and doubtless in medieval England there were many nuns of this high and gracious quality—ladies who would have shone in society, but who preferred to adorn the cloister. Unhappily there were also some who were by nature unfitted for conventional life and objected to being "cribbed, cabined and confined" by a tight discipline. Some also there were, as will be seen, who brought shame and disgrace upon their profession.

Certain of the English nunneries, such as those of Shaftesbury and Amesbury, were extremely wealthy. Abbeys and Priories like these were usually of Saxon foundation and were distinctly aristocratic institutions. Fuller tells us that if the Abbot of Glastonbury could have married the Abbess of Shaftesbury, their heir would have possessed more land than the King of England. At Shaftesbury, the first Abbess was a daughter of King Alfred, and, in the time of Henry I, the convent owned land enough to find seven Knights for the service of the Crown. Edward I sent his daughter Mary to be a nun at Amesbury. Here too, at the close of her life, his mother Eleanor assumed the veil. She became a somewhat impossible nun, at least so Matthew Paris tells us, and tinted conventional life with a little personal colouring. She ended her eventful life as one of the sisters. Mary de Blois, a daughter of King Stephen, was Abbess of Romsey for some time.

But, if there were nunneries of wealth and influence, so, at the other end of the scale, there were many extremely poor and struggling communities. Thus, at Blackborough in Yorkshire, the annual income of one house in the time of Edward I was only forty-five pounds, out of which little sum forty-two persons were maintained.

We find other nunneries with annual incomes as low as nineteen and twelve pounds. It is clear, even with the necessary allowance for the enhanced value of money, that the nuns in these poverty-stricken institutions must have found it difficult to subsist and must often have been fed on the bread of affliction and on the water of affliction. Not unfrequently such convents shrank to the smallest proportions—just a sister or two—and their buildings became ruinous.

Normally the nuns were daughters of good families in the neighbourhood of their convents, and it was no easy matter to obtain admission even into the smaller houses. The Priory of Polstoe in the diocese of Exeter gently but firmly refused the request of Philippa, Queen of Edward III, to admit a lady whom she desired to send as a sister “wearing a secular habit.” The convent pleaded the extreme poverty of their house in excuse of their refusal.

Most of the greater convents, for example those of Romsey and St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, possessed schools for “maid” children; in fact the nunneries seem to have been the girls’ schools of the Middle Ages. Thus, Matilda, daughter of the King of Scotland, and afterwards the wife of Henry I, was educated at Romsey Abbey under the Abbess Christina, daughter of Edmund Ironside. In spite of her aunt’s “sharp blows and detestable taunts,” on emerging from the school to the throne, she bore with her a good knowledge of the Latin of the period, which she wrote with facility.

Fair Rosamund, the beautiful daughter of Lord Clifford, is believed to have been educated within the walls of Cannington Priory in Somerset. This poor girl, who became the mistress of Henry II, died when comparatively young and was buried in the church of Godstow nunnery. Faithful to her memory, her royal lover placed over her remains a sumptuous tomb “covered with a pall of silk and surrounded by ever-burning tapers.”

The three vows taken by nuns at the solemn service of their consecration by the Bishop were those of due obedience, voluntary poverty and “clean chastity.” Their habit and clothing, in the language of Spofford, Bishop of Hereford, was not to be “inordinate,” but “formed after religion in sadness (darkness of colour) and wideness.” Long trains “in mantles and kirtles” were forbidden by the Bishop and we hear elsewhere that long hair was not allowed. The nuns, when walking, were expected to assume a pensive demeanour and to go on their way with downcast head and eyes unconscious of the passers-by.

In the Brigittine monastery of Shene, and doubtless elsewhere, there was an elaborate system of signs during the silence at meals. The act of eating was represented by placing the right thumb and two forefingers joined on the mouth. Fish was appropriately depicted by wagging the hand displayed sideways in the manner of the tail of a fish. Mustard was deliciously signified by holding the nose on the upper part of the right fist and rubbing it.

Immediately after Mass, commonly celebrated before nine, a meeting of the Superior and all her nuns was held in the Chapter-

house. It was there that faults were revealed and penalties imposed. Such penalties might consist, in the case of minor offences, of abstinence from flesh for a definite period or a threefold repetition of the Psalter, but it even extended to the personal discipline of five strokes on the bare shoulders for more serious offences.

All business of importance was discussed in the Chapter-house. After this meeting the nuns proceeded to the performance of their daily duties. One or more of them attended to the cleaning and the adornment of the church, the burnishing of the sacred vessels and the folding and repairing of the vestments and coverings. Others taught in the school or instructed any pupils entrusted to the care of the convent. The Chantress and her assistants practised for the services. The Cellarress saw to the supplies for the kitchen and gave directions to the servants. The Fratress was responsible for the orderly disposition of the meals. The Infirmarian tended the sick, while the Almoneress distributed the food and clothing which were given to the poor. It is obvious that there was more specialisation in the greater houses than in the smaller, and that in the latter nuns had often to discharge widely different duties. There was always scope for the work of nuns where they were able and willing; the trouble came when they were neither the one nor the other.

Convent rule provided that, except in cases of illness, the meals could be taken only in the frater or refectory. This rule, like so many others, was frequently broken and the bishops in their visitations and injunctions were never weary of ordering its careful observance.

The work of the domestic department was often increased by the presence of ladies as paying guests for a few months or more, with the approval of the Bishop. These ladies were often attended by their "waiting-women" or maids. The privilege of taking in boarders was sometimes abused and led to trouble and scandal. We find notable cases in the Somerset nunneries. In all of them the Bishop, whose consent probably had not been asked, vigorously intervened and ordered "the burdensome retinue of boarders and their servants to be ejected." The sale of corrodies was a great temptation to a convent in want of ready money. A corody was a grant for life of board and lodging within the convent walls, or, less usually, the privilege of obtaining rations from the buttery or kitchen. Thus it often happened that for a small immediate relief a convent was burdened for many years with the maintenance of boarders who seemed immortal. Corrodies by law and custom could be bestowed only on consent of the bishop or other recognised authority, but we find frequent references to breaches of this rule. Thus the Dean of St. Paul's, Patron of the convent of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, complained of the illicit sale of corrodies as "hurting the house and as the cause of the dilapidation of the goods of the said house."

The nuns were not wholly cloistered from the world—it was by no means for them just stone walls and iron bars, but they were

often permitted to walk abroad and even to pay short visits to their friends.

This privilege was fenced in with many restrictions, often more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Bishop Spofford, for example, warns the convent of Limebrook that for the future no sister must leave the monastery without the permission of the Prioress, nor must she go unless accompanied by another nun. Sisters, says the Bishop, must not visit towns to see "common walks, fêtes, spectacles and other worldly vanities" nor must they sleep out at night, except in the houses of their fathers and mothers.

The Bishop further enjoined that the Prioress and all the sisters when "at home" should always sleep in the dortoir or dormitory. There they should be found at their rest "at eight of the clock" and "lying in their beds clothed in their smocks girded." Curtains over the beds were not permitted. This retirement to rest took place after the service of Compline and no "secular" woman was allowed to enter the house after the knolling of the Compline bell. The nuns, however, were not "bound in slumber's chain" during the whole night, for, at midnight, they rose for the service of Matins. When that office was completed, they went back to bed. It was a charge against the Sub-Prioress of Cannington that she had absented herself from Matins and other canonical hours and had encouraged other sisters to commit the same breach of convent rules.

The privilege of leaving the walls of the convent was frequently abused. Archbishop Peckham, after a visitation in 1283, expressed his vexation that the nuns of Romsey Abbey ate and drank in the houses of lay folk and secular priests in the town and forbade this practice. At a much later date it was alleged against the same abbey that the sisters went into the town and frequented taverns without permission. So, too, the Prioress of Minchin Barrow was charged with running about the country without reasonable cause to the shame of her religion and the damage of the house. The sisters of Ilchester were accused by their Bishop of wandering about and entering the houses of people of doubtful character "to the manifest peril of their own souls."

Yet it could not be said of all nuns that their spiritual state was safe even when apparently they were sealed within the walls of their convent. The wolf was at the door and would enter if he could. How otherwise are we able to interpret the constant and reiterated injunctions by the bishops to the visitors acting for them to the Superiors to attend most carefully to "the locking of doors and the custody of the keys"?

In the case of Romsey Abbey, even the kitchen windows were at one time used for the purpose of communication with the outside world. The wife of the cook was bidden by Bishop Fox in 1507 not to carry messages between the nuns and lay persons and was also asked to prevent seculars from communicating with nuns at the windows. It was at this time that "Master Folton was personally warned by the Vicar-General that he should no way go, or send, or direct letters, messenger or sign to any of the Romsey nuns." A

similar monition was addressed to the Vicar of Romsey and two of the Chaplains received notices of dismissal. The nuns seem to have had few permitted recreations save walking and visits to friends. They were "ancillae Domini," the handmaids of the Lord, pledged to His service, whether in the sanctuary, or in the performance of good works.

Christmas and other festal days gave an opportunity of relaxations rather more exciting and exhilarating than the promenades round the garden and the occasional excursions outside the convent walls. The fact that "dancing and revelling must be utterly forbore save at Christmas and other honest times of recreation" goes to show that on certain great occasions the nuns were really suffered to enjoy themselves. Yet, even at these times, the presence of seculars was forbidden.

The nuns, as they danced together, must have thought of the distant days when "the merry bells rang round and the jocund rebecks sounded" and when they themselves were among "the youths and maidens dancing in the chequered shade." They must have contrasted those happy days with the discipline in which they were now entangled when "even laughing overmuch or out of measure dissolutely" was forbidden.

The nuns, or at all events their Superiors, were permitted to keep dogs for their recreation, as we have seen in the example of Chaucer's Prioress—one of the Abbesses of Romsey was charged with stinting her nuns to provide for her dogs and monkeys.

Pleasant living in a convent was not so easy as may be imagined. Sisters widely different in disposition and character were thrown together and disputes and quarrels often arose. An example of this unhappy state of affairs may be found in Archbishop Peckham's order that quarrelsome nuns of the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre at Canterbury must live in a dark room under the dortoir till they can live at peace with one another. Benedicta, one of the nuns, is reported to have upset the whole house by her taunts and insults.

In similar manner, Lady Alice Gorsyn, one of the nuns in Romsey Abbey, was charged in 1527 with using bad language "in her converse with the other sisters." She was ordered "to wear a tongue of red cloth under her chin for a month if this offence were repeated."

Just as in these days the prosperity of a school depends mainly on the character and on the policy of the headmaster, so also wisdom and sense in the Superior were essential to the orderly government of a convent. The nuns themselves chose their head and the result shows that they were often gravely mistaken in their choice. The instances of corrupt and inefficient Superiors are very numerous and the bishops were constrained either to depose them or to appoint sisters as coadjutors to check their vagaries. If the difficulties were financial, the Bishop frequently nominated commissioners to set the secular affairs of the house in order and perhaps prevent the bankruptcy of the institution. If the trouble were a moral one, and really grave, the Bishop appointed a visitor or visitors to punish the delinquents. It was in the smaller houses that the evils of bad

headship were so glaring. Two prioresses of Ilchester in succession were deprived by the Bishop on the ground of their misconduct. Alice de Zerde had adopted a harsh and repellent bearing towards the sisters. Apparently caring nothing either for their happiness or the good name of the convent, she had ejected them and compelled them to beg for their bread. Alice de Chilterne, her successor, was guilty of immorality with the Chaplain and of a wasting of the goods of the house so prodigal that the sisters were again constrained to wander about the streets of Ilchester with alms-baskets. The state of affairs at Cannington Priory was even more appalling and must have startled the Bishop's commissioners who sat at the Priory in October, 1351. The revelations made on that occasion prove the complete incapacity of the Prioress, Avice de Reingers, to maintain even the semblance of discipline. It was clear that two of the nuns, Matilda Pulham and Alice Northlode, had been in the habit of admitting women of suspicious character within the convent. They had also held nightly conversations with the two chaplains in the nave of the church and in the churchyard. Alice Northlode had certainly transgressed with one of the chaplains. Both the offending nuns had been on terms far too intimate with the servants. The story revealed to the commissioners was indeed pitiful, but, bad as it was, it did not drive them to harsh or vindictive measures. The sentences passed for these violations, not only of conventional rule, but of conventional morality, will serve to show how unwarrantable are such charges against the medieval church as immurement of nuns in living tombs for unchastity. It is unfortunate that Sir Walter Scott has lent the lustre of his name to this terrible charge and even made so frightful an incident occur as late as Tudor times. We may well pass from fiction to fact with the remark that the sentences passed in the Cannington cases show the greatest consideration and allowance for human frailty and for the sins that "so easily beset." The erring nuns were sentenced to "keep the cloister" for a year and Matilda was ordered to sit last, and Alice last but one, at the services in the church and at meals.

But the revelations made at Cannington are not yet complete. There was yet a third offending nun, Johanna Tremlett by name. She too had broken a solemn vow of her profession and given birth to a child. Here again the commissioners were lenient. Johanna was sentenced to be imprisoned in a house for a year. While she was thus confined, her life was to be a mortified one and her diet spare. On three days of the week she would be supplied with bread and water only. On the four remaining days the more liberal diet of bread, soup and beer would be allowed. In a similar case at Romsey, heard by Bishop Fox's Vicar-General in 1527, the punishment of an erring nun was similar, with the serious addition of personal chastisement three times a week. If we consider the practice current in medieval times of the personal correction of ladies as revealed in the Paston letters and in Lady Jane Grey's statements at a later period, we shall be less surprised at the occasional use of such methods at the convents.

Disorder seemed indeed to have reigned supreme at Cannington. Both the prioress and the sub-prioress were convicted not indeed of immorality, but of serious breaches of the convent rules. The prioress was provided with coadjutors and the sub-prioress was condemned to be publicly rebuked by the prioress. Troubles of like nature arose at different periods in important abbeys such as those of Amesbury and Romsey, and in the cases of these two abbeys, were traceable to the bad character and influence of the abbesses. The spiritual needs of nuns were ministered to by chaplains, who were responsible for offering the daily Mass and conducting "Matins at midnight, evensong and hours in their time."

Special confessors were appointed by the bishops and were chosen not unfrequently from the ranks of the friars. These confessors were responsible for "shrieving" and "houseling" the nuns at "each principal feast of the year."

If we bear in mind that most of the nuns were consecrated at about the early age of seventeen and that their life was destitute of many human interests and girt in with numerous restrictions, we shall not be surprised that some of them "left their first love." It has been truly pointed out that a true judgment of the nunneries cannot be formed solely from the censures and admonitions of the visiting authorities, which are to be found in the episcopal registers. These registers say nothing about those nuns who were content with their position, would not change it, and were faithful to the high ideals of their profession. Such sisters must have been a benediction wherever they went and doubtless were often found. To such nuns as these the words of Gray may well be applied :

" Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;  
Along the cool sequestered vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."

We must remember these sisters as well as those who had become "like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh" if we are to form any true judgment of the medieval nunneries.

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND THE SEE OF ROME. By the Rev. C. Leopold Clarke. [192 pp.] *Protestant Truth Society.* 4s. 6d.

Anyone who wishes to examine the history of the Church of Rome within a reasonable compass could not do better than purchase this book. It is full of facts and it is reliable. If people investigated the credentials of the Church of Rome more carefully and took a general view of her policy and principles throughout her course, they would not be beguiled so easily by claims which are made with much assurance, but which fall to pieces in the light of history. Very full information is to be found in these pages and an excellent Index makes reference easy. We commend the book heartily.