

‘Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For

Adam was first formed; then Eve.’

First Letter of Paul to Timothy.

1.

October 1324

‘Amen,’ mumbles Hawys at last, for what must be at least the millionth time that month. She makes the sign of the cross and clambers to her feet, her knees numb but also in agony after two hours of prayer on the cold stone floor.

Wanting to avoid the inevitable reproach from her mother, she resists the strong urge to rub them and instead takes a deep breath in through her nose and tries to imagine the pain as something fabulously holy flooding her body. *Like St Sebastian. Pinned to his tree by arrows. Suffering but resilient; defiant in his martyrdom...*

‘Hawys!’ her mother is hissing at her. ‘Thank Friar Aldous for his blessing.’

Her cheeks flush at the rebuke. They always do.

‘Thank you, Father,’ she mutters, looking at the floor.

‘Now go,’ says the friar, pointing at the chapel door with a hand hairy as an ape’s. ‘And sin no more.’

‘Amen,’ says her mother, crossing herself extravagantly and sighing her signature sigh of long-suffering despair, ‘We can only hope.’

‘Safe travels, My Lady.’ The friar rearranges his grubby surplice. Hawys suspects he wears a hair shirt underneath. He looks the type for private agonies. ‘You go into dangerous country. May The Lord go with you.’

And then, without looking back, he’s gone, and Hawys and her mother are alone again: scant evidence of the Lord’s companionship between them.

*

The bright blue promise of the morning has waned into an afternoon of dark, lowering skies with heavy storm clouds rumbling in across the far hills. Dropping her chin deeper into the warmth of her fur and biting at her lip, Hawys squints through the mizzle at the landscape. Somewhere, in the cold rain beyond the unfamiliar horizon, lies the House of Flint, and her dread of it is increasing as the miles between them diminish. Close to two weeks of bone-rattling travel, broken only by relentless prayer, have worn her once robust constitution to a wretched listlessness. Any lingering vitality she had when they had arrived in the lively town of Corbridge had melted away as soon as their tired little retinue crossed the old Roman wall, and they pressed ever on into the wild, unpopulated hinterlands of Northumbria. Any sense of belonging to a wider world had evaporated as soon as they entered the border lands. Even her view

out of the tiny window had shrunk, and was now partially obscured by the mounted guardsmen riding beside them in a noticeably tighter formation. She might catch the occasional glimpse of bleak-looking moorland and stumpy wind-blown trees, but for miles there has been no sign of human life; not even the broken-down dry-stone walls she's grown used to seeing since they arrived in the North. *No people. No. This is empty land*, she thinks.

She struggles to understand why anyone would want to fight over so desolate a place but is learning that men will fight over pretty much anything. Even this bleak-looking region gives rise to frequent skirmishes and battles between Barons and Earls, the Scots, the Welsh, the English, and everyone in between. Men and Land. It's a tale as old as Adam, played out across the world it seems, and now in this, her sixteenth year, it's also part of Hawys' story. *If it wasn't for men and land, I wouldn't be here*. Or so she's concluded. Yes, she recognises that some punishment is deserved. After all, she can be in no doubt of her guilt. She has transgressed, she knows. The Church confirms it, and her mother and father have been unrelenting in their condemnation of her behaviour. *But surely there will be a last-minute reprieve, for what is the point of faith if it doesn't deliver redemption? Surely, they won't go through with their threat and banish her, their only daughter, to this dangerous and barren outpost, hundreds of miles from home, from family, from friends?*

The carriage lurches heavily as a wheel hits a boulder on the track.

Without thinking, Hawys puts out her hands to stop herself falling forwards into

her mother's lap and, for a few seconds, her chilled fingers grasp the older woman's knees through the heavy fabric of her skirts. Despite the swaying of the vehicle and the brevity of the moment, she feels her mother flinch beneath her touch. She withdraws her hands and sits back in her seat.

‘Sorry, Mother.’

It's all she seems to say these days.

Steel-mouthed and pale-eyed, her mother says nothing, but turns to look out of the window. She doesn't have to. Hawys is, by now, well acquainted with her silence and its myriad meanings. In a matter of months, the mother she'd known – benign, smiling and occasionally even loving – has retreated, leaving behind this icy stranger, emanating disgust or disappointment with every look or word. Hawys sees that her mother wishes she *were* a stranger to her; that this repugnant, ill-tempered whelp of hers could be drowned like a cat in a bag and she would be spared the shame.

The Shame.

Which shrouds Hawys more heavily than a sodden cloak.

The Shame.

A little word, but one that carries such potency, and is carrying her now towards a destination which promises little but misery. Up until recently, the threat of the House of Flint had been just that; a threat. Nothing more than a story; a means by which to frighten her into compliance. She had always

considered it a myth, a tale to make naughty girls behave. Even her own brothers had teased her about it.

‘You’re going to The House of Flint!’ Osric had crowed through the door of the cellar with undisguised glee when their mother had locked her in on the day of her betrothal party. ‘The Lady’s going to get you! She’ll beat you and starve you and you’ll end up a sad, mad old nun. Wrinkled and lonely and ugly, shut away in the Wild North. Your life is as good as over, sister!’

How she had railed at him, calling him every name she could think of as she pummelled the door with her fists. *Osric. Would she really never see him again, much as she had hated him at that moment?*

She turns to look out of the little window. The cold, rain-heavy air chills her and she fights against another flow of tears, knowing how they aggravate her mother even more, if that’s possible. *Will she leave her there? Really? Could she do such a thing? Most likely she’s just trying to frighten her into obedience, and they’ll turn round and return home; she chastened, her mother vindicated.* But even as she has the thought, Hawys knows that her mother is not given to elaborate gestures. Unlike herself.

A heavy feeling, like cold water, is rising up from her feet towards her heart, and Hawys wonders bleakly whether it is actually possible to drown in your own fear.

2.

Hours later they come to a halt within the walled outer courtyard of Flint House. As the horses stamp and blow, the guards dismount, and the coachmen set about unloading the luggage. The door of the carriage opens with a rush of cold air and Godfrey Lamas pokes his head inside to speak to Hawys' mother. His face is pinched under his wool cap, a drip of clear liquid clinging to the end of his battered, puce-coloured nose.

‘We’re here, Madam. Later than hoped for, but the road was worse than expected.’

In the patch of dying twilight between Lamas' body and the door of the carriage Hawys can just make out the ground, muddy and wet with wind-ruffled puddles turning to ink as the day fades. Wood smoke and cooking smells gust in the wintery air and Hawys' stomach growls. She claps a hand over her belly as her mother begins to exit the carriage with some difficulty. The hours of travelling over unmade roads and in rough weather has taken its toll on them all. Lamas helps her mother step down from the carriage and then turns to Hawys.

‘Give me your hand, Miss. It’s a bit of a jump.’

But Hawys spurns his assistance, rejoicing in being able to move at last. She springs down to the ground, hoiking up her long, thick skirts to avoid the mud into which she splashes. After the motion of the carriage, the ground

seems to heave and pitch like the deck of a ship at sea, and hilariously she stumbles like a drunk for a moment as she tries to find her balance.

‘For goodness’ sake, Hawys!’ scolds her mother. ‘Try and behave like a lady just for once, will you?’

The familiar hot flash of indignation rises in her chest, but she squashes it under her ribs before it can burst out of her.

‘I’m sorry, Mother.’

‘Bring the boxes, Lamas,’ her mother commands, wrapping her fur about her and setting off across the courtyard towards the small group of nuns now beating against the wind in their direction. ‘Hawys, come.’

Hawys does as she’s told, wide eyes drinking in the darkening scene around her, the rooks cawing and circling overhead as they head off to roost. All around and in front of them a great stone building looms, silver and grey in the dusk; more castle than convent, the high walls topped with crenellations. What windows there are, are tiny, like arrow slits. There is nothing welcoming about it, despite a glow of torches at a huge wooden door, open and black like the mouth of some monstrous leviathan, and which seems to be sucking them towards it.

A tall, slender woman of middle age, wearing the grey robes and white headdress of a nun, is coming towards them, battling against the gale.

‘My Lady LeFray,’ she says, her voice raised above the wind. ‘Welcome to Flint House. I am Sister Matilda, the Prioress here.’

Hawys skulks behind her mother, afraid to look upon the nun's face in case it shows disgust. But the nun barely glances at her, so solicitous is she towards her mother, the song of a Scots accent smoothing the apology.

‘I am sorry we were not here to meet you at once. We were not sure if we would see you tonight after your expected hour of arrival passed.’

‘My drivers underestimated the conditions of the roads,’ her mother replies in her sharp, contemptuous tone. ‘I had imagined some degree of upkeep on the well-travelled routes at least. It seems I was wrong to do so.’

‘It is a matter of argument between the landowners and a constant source of discomfort to travellers. I can only sympathise.’

Hawys' mother gives a curt nod in response, her brusqueness making Hawys blush - a constant betrayal of her inner self that she longs to grow out of or at least learn to master.

‘Come inside out of the weather,’ says Sister Matilda. ‘And let's see if we can't assuage your suffering with some hot food and warm mead in front of the fire. Our honey is widely praised for its sweet and medicinal properties.’

But Hawys' mother is already marching inside as if she owns the place. Hawys ventures an apologetic smile at The Prioress, but she has turned away and, in a flapping of fabric, is herself disappearing into the great dark doorway of the house.

If there's a moment to make a run for it, it's now!

The thought instantly sends Hawys' heart racing, and she looks around to see if it's possible. But Lamas is almost on top of her, the luggage upon his shoulders, a gappy grin on his stupid-looking face. He thrusts his beery mug towards her ear, wheezing as he laughs.

'Dream on, Miss. You'd freeze to death at best, be torn apart by wolves at worst – and plenty of other things in between.'

'And wouldn't you be pleased either way, Lamas?' She tries to keep the tremor out of her voice.

'Not as pleased as your mother, I dare say,' he chuckles in return.

Hawys gives him what she hopes is a withering look, but she knows he's right. She would stand no chance in such a remote and desolate place, especially after nightfall and with only her penknife to defend herself. Defeated, she turns and follows the small procession into the house, her stomach rumbling again as the smell of cooked meat wafts towards her. It's been hours since they've eaten and days since they had anything hot, and her empty belly growls at the thought of a nice fat chicken thigh or even a piece of warm bread. Behind her she can hear Lamas licking his lips in anticipation, so she hurries on ahead of him to escape the repellent sound. The doorway leads into a large and icy hall, empty except for sconces on the walls where some greasy candles burn. A couple of hard-backed chairs that have seen better days seem tiny in the enormous space. The floor, like the walls, is of cold, grey stone and the ceiling is so high that it

fades away into darkness. To her left a stone staircase runs up beside the wall, disappearing into the murky gloom.

‘All the comforts of home, eh?’ says Lamas over her shoulder. ‘Bet you wish you'd been a good girl now, don't you?’

Hawys moves away from him, but she feels a weakening in her fortitude and a little ripple of panic begins to rise in her. *Don't let them see your fear*, she says to herself; an incantation that has served her adequately enough over recent months, but which now feels insubstantial against the overload of unfamiliar terrors that threaten her. Her resolve had been her one true protection in the face of the mental and physical pressures applied to make her comply but now, in the face of something new, she fears it won't be enough. The faster she applies mortar to the cracks in her inner walls of defence, the faster bricks are falling further along the course, and she fears she lacks the resources within her to stop the inevitable collapse.

At least let it wait until my mother has left, she prays, but then the thought of her mother leaving takes hold and she forces her mind to close to it. She balls her hands into fists and takes a deep breath.

Her mother's entourage disappears through a door on the far side of the hall, through which Hawys catches a glimpse of what she imagines might be the refectory. With the promise of light and noise and heat and people her fear retreats a little but, as she heads towards it, a short, round nun slips out through

the door and closes it firmly behind her. Her face is smiling, but the smile fades as she comes closer.

‘Your mother dines alone with The Lady Abbess tonight,’ she says in a surprisingly sharp voice, catching Hawys by the elbow and turning her away from the door. ‘And, as you have missed The House’s evening meal, you will take your supper in the kitchen.’

Hawys is so hungry she doesn't care where she eats, as long as it's soon. The nun calls out to Lamas, ‘You there. Leave the baggage at the bottom of the stairs and go to the stable yard. You'll find food and a bed there.’

Lamas looks peeved at this instruction, and Hawys feels a fleeting flutter of triumph in her chest, but he does as he's told with a sniff and a grunt and dumps Hawys' things unceremoniously at the foot of the stone staircase. He tips his cap to the nun and turns on his heel without so much as a goodbye, hacking phlegm as he goes. Hard to feel sad at his departure and yet Hawys does for a moment. After all, Lamas is a familiar and soon he'll be gone. Like her mother.

‘I am Sister Clothild,’ says the nun, pronouncing it in the French style – *Cloteeld*. ‘Follow me.’ She sets off across the great flagstones like a little coracle through choppy waters, Hawys bobbing behind in her wake, trying not to let the tumult of emotions raging inside capsize her.

‘I imagine the journey was uncomfortable?’ Sister Clothild is proclaiming over her shoulder. ‘And long? About twelve days, was it? Sussex to

Northumberland, via London and York? I assume you changed horses several times?’

Hawys ventures an answer, but the nun continues, ‘I did that exact same journey myself twenty-five years ago, but I still remember every bump and turn as if it were yesterday. The longest journey of my life, of course, and the roads were considerably worse then. Here we are.’

She gestures to a tiny doorway hidden in the lee of the great staircase, which leads into a dark little corridor. A damp smell from within lingers heavily on the cold air.

‘Down the steps, straight ahead and you'll see the jakes. And wash your hands afterwards. You'll find water and soap beside the bowl on the stand. Please use it. We have a very strict code of cleanliness here at Flint House. The Lady insists.’

Hawys is about to demur but, at the mention of The Lady, she bites her tongue and shuts her mouth. She nods at Sister Clothild and follows the little passageway down to the privy. There's no door to it and the only window is a slit high in the wall. An ineffectual oil lamp smokes drearily on a shelf above the worn wooden seat. It is not a place to hang about, that's for sure, but at least the seat looks clean, so Hawys lifts her skirts and does what she can. When she is finished, she pours icy water from an earthenware jug into a bowl and picks up a rough piece of soap that smells faintly of almonds. She turns it over in her hands beneath the cold water, bubbles forming between her fingers, and is

transported for a moment back to when she was a little girl, and a time when her mother had been concerned with such things as her physical cleanliness. *How she must wish there was a means of scrubbing her child clean now, she thinks. But it would take more than a bar of almond soap to wash away the sins she's accused of. A lifetime of scrubbing could not erase the shame that threatens her mortal soul, if her mother's assertions and her own darkest fears are true; small wonder she isn't interested in her dirty fingernails anymore.* With a sigh, Hawys throws the foul water down the jakes and dries her hands on her skirt. She resolves not to think of her mother's disappointment or her own sins for at least an hour. By the door at the end of the corridor, Sister Clothild is waiting for her.

'Hands.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Hands?' Sister Clothild looks at her expectantly.

Hawys holds her hands out for inspection, as she had when she was a child. The nun turns them over in her own, which are small and fat, like a chubby baby's. She nods and then she's off again, surprisingly fast for someone so short and wide, and Hawys has to skip to catch up with her.

'Baggage!' says Sister Clothild as she sweeps past Hawys' things and begins to climb the stairs. 'Follow me.'

For a moment Hawys assumes she's giving the instruction to an as yet hidden servant, but it quickly dawns on her that it's her that the nun is

addressing. She gathers up her belongings with some difficulty and follows Sister Clothild up the wide stone stairway.

‘Come, come,’ chides the nun, without looking round, and Hawys heaves her bags clumsily behind her, silently cursing the swaying backside in front of her. They ascend the huge staircase into the gloom, and with every step Hawys’ spirit dwindles as the prospect of living in this cold house, amongst these cold and childless women becomes a reality. An icy claw of anguish grips her heart so hard that she lets out a gasp, causing Sister Clothild to turn.

‘You’ll soon get used to putting the effort in,’ she says. ‘They all do.’

At the top of the stairs the nun pushes open a small door and disappears inside.

‘Come on, come on.’

Hawys follows, struggling to manoeuvre her bags through the narrow doorway, and finds herself in a large dormitory lined with narrow wooden beds. Through high windows on the right the sickly wintry twilight pools onto bare floorboards. Beside each bed is a small wooden cupboard and on one of them, towards the far end of the room, a candle shivers in the gloom. There must have been twenty beds at least, in two opposing rows, each one covered with plain woollen blankets and a single pillow. There are no signs of occupancy, no comfort or colour. The closest thing Hawys has to compare it to is the military barracks on her father’s estate, where he keeps a constant band of militiamen in readiness for any hostilities or call to arms. *Father*. It’s almost a month since

she's seen him. The ghastliness of their last encounter is something she absolutely cannot think about, especially now, and she pushes the thought of him back into the box locked deep within her, along with the other shameful thoughts and secrets that torment her in those anxious hours before the dawn.

'You'll be down here,' the nun is saying as she totters off down the central aisle between the beds until she comes to a halt beside the one with the candle. Hawys follows and thankfully dumps her things upon the bed, a dull thud suggesting that the mattress, if indeed there is one, is made of nothing more than straw, and the bed will be hard, like a rock.

'Yours is the cupboard to the right. Put what you can inside. Anything else will be considered superfluous and will be stored away in the stockroom, along with your clothes, which you should now remove.'

Hawys' face betrays her surprise at this, but Sister Clothild rattles on.

'From now on you will wear this,' she produces a thick grey woollen dress from the little cupboard, 'This,' followed by a large square of rough white linen she presumes to be a head-covering, 'And these,' a pair of heavy looking wooden clogs. 'One of your fellow postulants will come along presently and take you to the kitchen for something to eat. Make sure you're ready.'

Sister Clothild presses the garments into Hawys' hands and turns to go. As an afterthought she looks back and says, 'Welcome to The House of Flint, Hawys LeFray. You will find that if you work hard, do as you are told, and

endeavour to improve yourself then the time will go faster, and you may even grow to like it here. God willing.'

She crosses herself, nods at Hawys and exits the way they had come in. Hawys listens to her receding footsteps, then drops the clothes onto the bed and looks around her. She wonders about the occupants of the other beds, who they are and why they are here and whether they will shun her. *Were they the purest of girls, willingly seeking a life of religious servitude, or were they miserable sinners like her, being punished for their transgressions? Penitential or not, could they all be on a shared journey towards salvation? Could The Lord bring them all into His Light, in a place as dark as The House of Flint?* She shivers. She has so many questions, but any answers seem out of her reach, as always. With numb fingers Hawys removes the clothes that bind her to The Life Before until she stands in her shift, cold and white as a corpse in the weak moonlight. She picks up the heavy wool dress that she has been given and pulls it on. And so, her New Life, whatever that might be, begins.