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The tower of Brede Abbey was a landmark for miles through the countryside and out to sea; high above the town of Brede its gilded weathercock caught the light and could flash in the bright sun.

The weathercock bore the date 1753 and had been put there by the Hartshorn family, to whom the abbey—in those days the Priory of the Canons of St. Augustine—had been given after the Reformation; it had then been the Hartshorns' private house for more than 250 years. When the nuns came they had thought it prudent not to take the weathercock down. "Brede wouldn't have tolerated a Catholic nunnery here in 1837," Dame Ursula Crompton told the novices. "We had to disguise ourselves." The cross was below, a stone cross interlaced with thorns—and it had known thorns; it had been thrown down, erected again, and stood now high over the entrance to the church; it was said to be nearly a thousand years old; certainly its stone was weathered, but, though the wind from the marshes blew fiercely against it and rain beat in the winter gales that struck the heights of Brede so violently, the cross stayed unmoved, sturdily aloft, while the weathercock whirled and thrummed as the wind took it. Dame Ursula had pleasure in underlining the moral, but then Dame Ursula always underlined.

The townspeople were used to nuns now. The extern sisters, who acted as liaisons between the enclosure and the outside world, were a familiar sight in their black and white, carrying their baskets as they did the abbey's frugal shopping. Brede Abbey had accounts at the butcher and grocer as any family had; the local garage serviced the abbey car, which Sister Renata drove; workmen from Brede had been inside the enclosure, and anyone was free to come through the drive gates, ring the front-door bell, which had a true monastic clang, and ask for an interview with one of the nuns; few of the townspeople came, though the mayor made a formal call once a year; the abbey's visitors, and there were many, usually came from further afield, from London or elsewhere in Britain, from the Continent or far overseas, some of them famous people. The guesthouse, over the old gatehouse, was nearly always full.

From the air it would seem that it was the abbey that had space, the old town below that was enclosed; steep and narrow streets ran between the ancient battlements, and the houses were huddled, roof below roof, windows and eaves jutting, so that they almost touched; garden yards were overlooked by other garden yards, while the abbey stood in a demesne of park, orchard, farm, and garden. Its walls had been heightened since the nuns came, trees planted that had grown tall; now it was only from the tower that one could look into the town, though at night a glow came up from the lights, seeming from inside the enclosure to give the abbey walls a nimbus.

The traffic made a continual hum, too, heard in the house but not in the park that stretched away inland toward the open fields; it was a quiet hum because the town was quiet and old-fashioned; besides, no car or lorry could be driven quickly through its narrow cobbled streets. The sparrow voices of children, when they were let out of school, were heard, too, but the only sound that came from the abbey was dropped into the town by bells measuring, not the hours of time as did the parish-church clock, but the liturgical hours from Lauds to Compline; the bells rang the Angelus, the call to chapter, and the abbey news of entrances and exits, sometimes of death. There was a small bell, St. John, almost tinkling by contrast; it hung in the long cloister and summoned the nuns to the refectory. The bells of the abbey, the chimes of the parish-church clock, coming across each other, each underlining the other, gave a curious sense of time outside time, of peace, and the only quarrel the town had with the abbey now was that the nuns would feed tramps.

A winding stone stair led up to the tower, going through the belfry about the bell tribune where the hanging bell ropes had different-colored tags. Though the bells were numbered, they had names. "Dame Ursula says they are *baptized,*" said Sister Cecily. Dame Clare, the zelatrix, Dame Ursula's assistant, was more exact. "There is a ceremony in the pontifical that is called baptizing the bells; it is, rather, a consecration," but to Cecily they seemed personalities. Well, they are the abbey's voice, but she did not say it aloud; already she suspected that this Dame Clare, so cool and collected, thought her, the new postulant Sister Cecily, whimsical; but the bells were the abbey's voice, and its daughters knew the meaning of every change and tone, from the high D of Felicity to the deep tone of the six-hundred-pound weight of Mary Major; when this was rung, it made the whole tower vibrate.

The stair came out on a flat roof that had a parapet on which tall Philippa could rest her arms and look far out, over the marshes and the river winding through them, to the faint far line of silver that was the sea. I shall never see the sea

again. That thought always came to her up here on the tower: “I shall never see the sea.” She whispered it aloud. The silence the nuns kept most of the day for concentration and quiet sometimes made Philippa long to use her tongue, even to herself. But then I’m still new, as religious life goes, not quite four years old, new but with the dragging disadvantage of old habits. “I shall never see the sea,” but Philippa said it with content. Four years had gone since she had made her solitary journey across the marshes, four years except for two months and a few days. If all went well, she, Sister Philippa, would make her Solemn Profession next summer, take her vows for life in this house of Brede.

Philippa had discovered the tower in her second week at Brede, when Burnell, the abbey’s handyman, had sprained a muscle in his leg, leaving it stiff, and Dame Ursula had called on her strong young novices and juniors to do some of his tasks: chopping wood and carrying it in for the common room’s great fire, carrying kitchen swill for the pigs, cleaning out the deep litter of the hen houses for old Sister Gabrielle, the poultry keeper. Philippa, neither young nor strong, had volunteered to go up and sweep the leaves out of the church-tower gutter. “Very well, if you have a head for heights,” said Dame Ursula. Philippa had, and, as a reward, had discovered the high platform, where I can get away, she would have said. After only two weeks she had wanted to get away. “I can imagine you living with ninety men,” Richard had told her, “but not with ninety women.” Yes, it’s somewhere I can breathe, Philippa had thought of the tower, and, in spite of Richard, breathe before going on.

From where she stood now, she could look down on her abbey—it had become “her” abbey—look over its precincts, over the buildings, the outer and inner gardens and park to the farm outside the walls. The Hartshorns had pulled down most of the old priory, though they had left the L made by the refectory and library wings above the cloister that had been paced by those Augustinian Canons of long ago. The cloister, called the long cloister, was of stone, beautifully arched, its gray weathered, while the new cloisters that ran round the other side of the garth, as the inner court was called, were of red brick, with glazed windows—Lady Abbess shuddered every time she saw them. Another grief to her were the Victorian additions to the church in the sanctuary and extern chapel. “Abomination of mottled marble,” she said. The choir itself was exquisite, part of the Augustinians’ old church, with pointed stone arches and delicate tracery that matched the chapter house; the Hartshorns had kept that intact but used it for breeding pigeons. “Pigeons in a chapter house!” said Dame Ursula. “I rescued it from worse than pigeons,” the abbess had said, “from what our nuns did there when they got some money! They lined it with pitch pine and put in a plaster

ceiling!" It was Abbess Hester who had restored it, uncovering the delicate arches that met at the apex of the roof. "All that beautiful stone," said Abbess Hester, glorying.

The buildings held spaciousness in refectory, libraries, workshops, though the cells in their long rows on the first and second floors were narrow. Across the outer garden a glimpse of the dower house, used as the novitiate now, showed among its trees, and, dominating the whole, the church with its tower on which Philippa stood.

The abbey was hushed this afternoon in a hush deeper even than its normal quiet; though the nuns went about their work and the bells were rung at the appointed time and the chant of voices came, as always, from the church, the hush was there, a hush of waiting. The parlors were closed. "No visiting today," said Sister Renata when she answered the front door. She and the other extern sisters went softly in and out, but they did not go into the town, where the news had spread. "The abbess is dying; Lady Abbess of Brede."

This was the community recreation hour, but, looking down, Philippa could see only two figures instead of the many, habited in black and white and as alike as penguins, that would usually at this time have been gathered in the park or on the paths or pacing together in the cloisters. The prioress and senior nuns were keeping vigil in the abbess's rooms, the others had withdrawn, some to their cells, most to their stalls in choir, to pray while they waited—Philippa, still renegade, seemed to pray best up here—but the life of the monastery had to go on, and Dame Ursula had as usual sent her novitiate to the tasks they undertook in the afternoons for the community: gardening, helping the printers in the packing room, sewing, or taking messages to relieve Dame Domitilla, whose office as portress was arduous. The two small figures below were silently mulching the rose beds.

By their short black dresses and short veils Philippa knew they were Sister Hilary, a postulant of two months' standing, and the new postulant, Sister Cecily Scallon, who had arrived only yesterday afternoon.

"It is strange," Dame Beatrice Sheridan had said when with Mother Prioress and the other councilors she had waited for Cecily at the enclosure door, "strange how often an entrance coincides with a death in the house. One comes, in faith and hope, to make her vows, as the other reaches her culmination." Or should have reached it, she could have said.

Lady Abbess Hester, old and mortally ill, was lingering—unaccountably; the inexplicable waiting had gone on now for thirty hours, all yesterday from the morning through the night, all this morning and into this windless but chill October afternoon, a day and a half, and still it seemed she could not die. "Why can't she?" The question was spreading and dismay growing through the grief, the stupor they all felt. "What is troubling Mother? Why can't she die?"

Abbesses of Brede Abbey are elected for life, and Abbess Hester Cunningham Proctor had ruled Brede for thirty-two years; she was not eighty-five, but, up to yesterday, had still been active and filled with power—sometimes too much power, her councilors felt; headstrong was the right word, but they dared not use it. The community knew that their abbess could be as willful as she was clever and charming—and lately there had been favorites, that threat to community life—but still their trust in her was infinite, and her small black eyes, so filled with humor and understanding, had still seen "everything," said the nuns, and she seemed to know by instinct what she did not see. She had grown heavy for her height, and she limped from a hip broken ten years before that had never properly set. "It was never given time," the nuns said, but, "No more oil in my bones," said the abbess. Her hands, too, shook; of that she had taken not the slightest notice.

As Dame Hester she had made her mark as a sculptor; it had been such a mark that, when she was elected abbess, her friend Sir Basil Egerton, art critic and curator at the British Museum, had written, "This is absurd. What time will you have now for your own work?" "I have no 'own' work," she had written back. "I do God's work." It would seem that God had also endowed her with a genius for friendship, warm and lasting. All her adult life, she had worked and prayed only in the abbey—"I entered at nineteen"—and yet, from its strict enclosure her influence had spread far.

"Her life is a beacon," Dame Ursula told her novices, "that sends its rays all over the world and to unexpected places, unexpected people." The abbess's friends came from every walk of life, from dukes to chimney sweeps. The cliché happened to be true, though the nuns had no inkling that the Duke of Gainsborough often came to see the abbess, or that she had a good friend, a woman chimney sweep, "who has often given me the most sane advice." Happenings in the parlors, letters, and telephone calls were, for every nun, strictly private. Some of Abbess Hester's friendships had ripened through decades—as with Sir Basil—from conversations in the parlor, where a unique mixture of wit, learning, and humor had come through the grille, from thought—and praying, the abbess would have said—and from letters. "Her letters ought to be published," said Sir Basil.

"I suppose," said Dame Maura Fitzgerald, the precentrix, "we had taken it for granted she would live forever."

"No one lives forever." Dame Ursula made her usual truism.

At first it was difficult for the nuns to understand what had happened; they only knew that yesterday morning young Sister Julian Colquhoun had gone to the abbess's room and had, of course, been admitted. "Sister Julian who can do no wrong," as Dame Veronica Fanshawe, the cellarer, said bitterly, Dame Veronica of the wistful harebell-blue eyes, whose chin trembled at the abbess's slightest reproof. Dame Anastasia, the nun telephonist who was at the switchboard next door, had heard Lady Abbess's *"Deo gratias,"* giving permission for the sister to come in, and then Sister Julian's blithe *"Benedicite,* Mother," as she shut the door. Half an hour later Sister Julian had come out and had—she said—gone straight to the church where she had said the Te Deum. "I was so happy," said Sister Julian. A few minutes later Abbess Hester had had a stroke.