

F.A. Gasquet. English Monastic Life. Methuen & Co. London, 1904.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE NUNS OF MEDLÆVAL ENGLAND

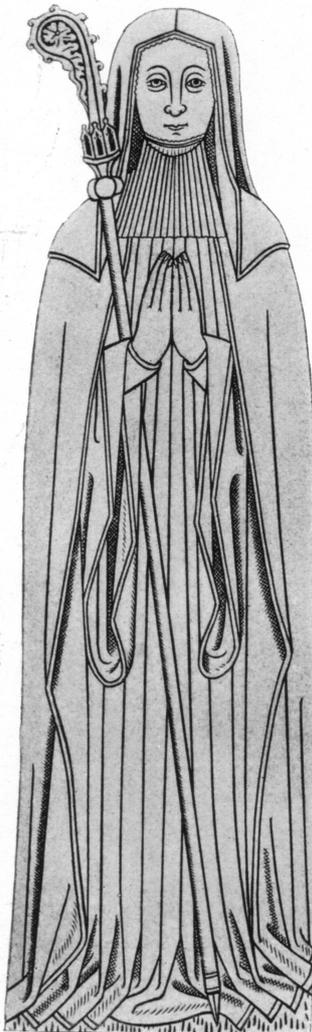
No account of English monastic life would be complete without some special reference to the nuns and nunneries. It is, it may be first observed in passing, altogether wrong to apply the word "convent" exclusively to houses of nuns, as is so frequently done in these days. The title "convent" as well as that of "monastery" and "abbey" was applicable to any house of either monks or nuns, and the exclusive use of the word for a religious house of women is, indeed, of quite modern origin.

It is fortunate that our information in regard to the inner life of the nuns in pre-Reformation England is so scanty. Beyond the delightful picture we get of the social life of the nuns of Kington in Old Jacques' recollections, as recorded by John Aubrey, and the charming portrait of the prioress who

"Was so charitable and so pitous. . .
and al was conscience and tender herte,"

in Chaucer's tales, there is but little information to be obtained about the nuns of England ; of the simple, hard, yet happy lives they led in their cloistered homes, and of the ample charity they dispensed to all in their immediate neighborhood.

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ELIZABETH HARVEY
ABBESS OF ELSTOW

Illustration: Elizabeth Harvey Abbess of Elstow

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Of course, so far as the usual forms, manners, and customs of cloister life are concerned, what has been already said of the monastic method of life generally, applies to nuns, with certain necessary reservations, as well as to monks and canons. It will be useful, however, to furnish the reader with some account of certain special features of female religious life. One of the most charming medieval picture of that life is given in an account of the abbesses of the Benedictine nunnery of Wherwell, in Hampshire. It records the unblemished life and good deeds of the

abbess Euphemia, who ruled the house from A.D. 1226 to 1257, and is translated from the chartulary of the abbey by the Rev. C. Cox in the second volume of the *Victoria History of the County of Hampshire*. The account is too delightful not to be given in full.

“On the 6th day of the Kalends of May, in the year of grace 1257, died the blessed mother abbess, Euphemia, most worthy to be remembered, who, buy our affection and good fellowship, and with divine sanction, succeeded the late abbess Maud of sweet memory. It is, therefore, most fitting that we should always perpetuate the memory, in our special prayers and suffrages, of one who ever worked for the glory of God, and for the weal of both our souls and bodies. For she increased the number of the lord’s handmaids in this monastery from forty to eighty, to the exaltation of the worship of God. To her sisters, both in health and sickness, she administered the necessaries of life with piety, prudence, care, and honesty. She also increased the sum allowed for garments by 12*d.* each. The example of her holy conversation and charity, in conjunction with her pious exhortations and regular discipline, cause each one to know how, in the words of the Apostle, to possess her vessel in sanctification and honour. She also, with maternal piety and careful forethought, built, for the use of both sick and sound, a new and large infirmary away from

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the main buildings, and in conjunction with it a dormitory with the necessary offices. Beneath the infirmary she constructed a watercourse, through which a stream flowed with sufficient force to carry of all refuse that might corrupt the air.

“Moreover she built there a place set apart for the refreshment of the soul, namely a chapel of the Blessed Virgin, which was erected outside the cloister behind the infirmary. With the chapel she enclosed a large space, which was adorned on the north side with pleasant vines and trees. On the other side, by the river-bank, she built offices for various uses, a space being left in the centre where the nuns are able from time to time to enjoy the pure air. In these and in other numberless ways, the blessed mother Euphemia provided for the worship of God and the welfare of the sisters. But notwithstanding all this, she also conducted herself with regard to exterior affairs, that she seemed to have the spirit of a man rather than of a woman. The court of the abbey-mansion, owing to the useless mass of squalid outbuildings, and the propinquity of the kitchen to the granary and old hall, was in much danger of fire ; whilst the confined area and the amount of animal refuse was a cause of offence to both the feet and nostrils of those who had occasion to pass through. The mother Euphemia, realizing that the Lord had called her to the rule of the abbey at Wherwell, not that she might live there at ease, but that she might, with due care and dispatch, uproot and destroy and dissipate all that was noxious, and establish and erect that which would be useful, demolished the whole of these buildings, leveled the court, and erected a new hall of suitable size and height. She also built a new mill, some distance from the hall, and constructed it with great care in order that more work than formerly might be done therein for the service of the house. She surrounded the court with a wall and the necessary buildings, and round it she made gardens and vineyards and shrubberies in places that were formerly useless and barren,

and which now became both serviceable and pleasant. The manor-house of Middleton, which occupied a dry situation and

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was close to a public thoroughfare, and was further disfigured by old and crumbling buildings, she moved to another site, where she erected permanent buildings, new and strong, on the bank of the river, together with farmhouses. She also set to work in the same way at Tufton, in order that the buildings of both the manor-houses in that neighbourhood might be of greater service, and safer against the danger of fire. These and other innumerable works, our good superior Euphemia performed for the advantage of the house, but she was none the less zealous in the works of charity, gladly and freely exercising hospitality, so that she and her daughters might find favour with One Whom Lot and Abraham and others have pleased by the grace of hospitality. Moreover, because she greatly loved to honour duly the House of God and the place where His glory dwells, she adorned the church with crosses, reliquaries, precious stones, vestments, and books. And because the bell-tower above the dormitory fell down through decay one night, about the hour of Matins, when by an obvious miracle from heaven, though the nuns were at that moment in the dormitory, some in bed and some in prayer before their beds, all escaped not only death but even any bodily injury, she caused another bell-tower of worked stone to be erected, conformable to the fair appearance of the church and the rest of the buildings, of commanding height, and of exquisite workmanship. But as she advanced in years, towards the end of her life, there was imminent danger of the complete collapse of the presbytery of the church ; by the advice of skilled builders, she caused the presbytery to be taken down to the last stone of the foundations ; and because the ground was found to be undermined and unsafe, she caused the damp soil to be dug out to a depth of twelve feet till firm and dry ground was found ; when, having invoked the grace of the Holy Spirit, with prayers and tears she laid with her own hands the first stone of the foundations. Moreover she rejoiced to have found favour with God, so that before her last days were ended she saw this work that she had begun brought to its desired end. Thus she, who had devoted herself when amongst us to the service of His house and the

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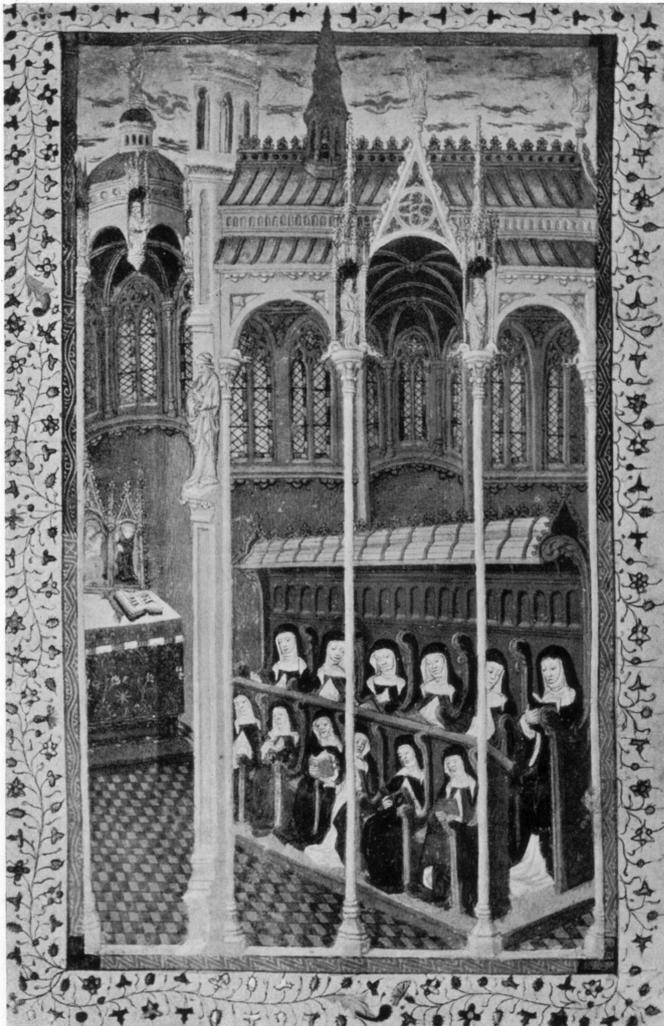
habitation for His glory, found the due reward for her merits with our Lord Jesus Christ, though the prayers and merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the blessed apostles SS. Peter and Paul, in whose honour, at the instigation of the abbess Euphemia, this church was dedicated, who with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever liveth and reigneth God through all the ages of eternity. Amen.”

Of the life, social and religious, led by the nuns of England, something may be learnt from the few scattered account-books that have survived the general destruction of documents in the sixteenth century. The following sketch is founded upon one such paper-book of accounts now in the public Record Office. It was printed privately some few years ago, and is here reproduced as affording, in the judgment of some, a not uninteresting glimpse into the cloister

life and work led in the nunneries in the early days of the fifteenth century. The accounts were kept in a small book by a nun called Dame Petronilla.

Her family name (of was it that of her birthplace?) was Dunwich, and in keeping her accounts she had as assistant and auditor another nun, Dame Katherine Midleton. Their convent was Grace Dieu in Leicestershire – the only religious house of Augustinian nuns in England. The scanty but picturesque ruins of their old convent may still be see not far from the present Cistercian Abbey of Mount St. Bernard, and quite near to Grace Dieu Manor-house, the home of Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle. The convent was founded in Charnwood Forest by Lady Rohesia de Verdon in the middle of the thirteenth century, and it is said that the boundary of the garden, made by th sisters to resemble that of Gethsemane, may yet be traced with a little trouble. Wordsworth wrote several

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BENEDICTINE NUNS IN CHOIR

Illustration: Benedictine Nuns in Choir

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of his poems in the immediate neighbourhood, and thus describes the situation of the old nunnery as seen, or rather *not* seen, from Cole Orton some few miles away:—

“Beneath yon eastern ridge, the craggy bound
Rugged and high of Charnwood’s forest ground
Stand yet, but, stranger, hidden from thy view,
The ivied ruins of forlorn Grace Dieu.”

Our guide-books, of course, ascribe the destruction of the convent in 1539 to the fact of serious complaints having been made of certain irregularities on the part of the inmates. Most people nowadays know how to estimate these “complaints” at their right value, proceeding as they did from the Visitors of Henry VIII., who having been sent for the purpose of finding evidence of irregularities to justify the intended spoliation, of course found them. In the special case of this convent of Grace Dieu we have subsequently the direct testimony of the country gentlemen of Leicestershire, that the fifteen nuns following the rule of St. Austin then inmates of the establishment, and whose good name had been so vilely traduced by the king’s emissaries, were all “of good and virtuous conversation and living,” and that their presence in the wilds of Charwood Forest was a blessing to the neighbourhood.

We are, however, concerned with the convent of Grace Dieu in much earlier days : very nearly a century and a half before its final destruction in 1539. Dame Petronilla and Dame Katherine kept their accounts of the establishment in this old paper-book “from the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first year of King Henry V.,” for four years : that is, from 1414 to 1418. The volume in question, though simple

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enough in its style of book-keeping, presents in reality the general accounts of the house. Probably Dame Petronilla would have opened her eyes very wide indeed at the present system of elaborate checks and counter-checks devised to exercise the brains and possibly the patience of modern cellarers, and “double entry” and such-like mysteries would probably have seemed to her a useless expenditure of time and nerve-power, and hardly consistent with the religious simplicity which ascetic writers had taught her to cultivate. Her style is simplicity itself : so much received for such a thing, ordinary or extraordinary : so much spent, and on what ; that is all.

In one point, however, this careful nun does not hesitate to take a considerable amount of trouble. What would a cellarer say to-day, where he or she asked to give the ages of all the livestock under their care ! Dame Petronilla would have been quite able to do so at any moment, for from time to time she enters, not indeed the birthdays of the cattle and pigs, but their ages. In

1415, for example, which by the way was the ever-memorable year of Agincourt, this is her “tally” ; of all the pigs in the keeping of the herd, Nicholas Swon (or should it be Swine?)

“5 boars, *i.e.*—two aged three years, two aged two, and one aged one ; ten sows, *i.e.*—nine at three years, and one aged one ; forty-one small pigs of a year, and thirty of six months old ; ten full grown pigs, and ten *porcelli lactantes sub matribus* of suckling pigs.”

Pork, it is clear, must have been one of the chief articles of food for the nuns and their retainers, since there are frequent notices of pigs transferred from the farm to the larder, ; on two occasions during the four

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years, Dame Petronilla chronicles the death of a good many of the convent pigs from disease. Their stock of cattle appears somewhat large at first sight, till it is realized that with one thing and another there were a good many mouths to feed in this establishment. Thus in one year we find a list of 32 cows, “three of which had not calved ; three bulls, 16 steers, 22 heifers and eight bull calves.” Besides this there were 27 yoke-oxen under the care of their driver, and 29 calves, one of which on the account-day is noted as having, since the making of the list, gone to the cook to furnish forth the conventual dinner. At this same time Henry Smyth, the outdoor bailiff, gives in the account of Henry, the shepherd, which shows that that he had 103 ewes and 52 lambs under his pastoral charge.

The revenue of the convent consisted chiefly of the rent of lands and buildings and the sale of produce, timber, and such-like. Thus we have the rent of a farm at Belton put down as £21 17s. 9d., this being the largest item in the receipts, and indeed a very large item in those days from any farm rent. From another parcel of land, besides the rent, one year Dame Petronilla and her assistant, Dame Katherine Middleton, account for the price of sixteen quarters of lime at 9¾d. the quarter. Roger Dan, the miller, pays a rent of £5 13s. 4d. for the mill at Belton, and at the same time there is another receipt for “half a hundred merkefish and twelve stone of cheese.” Besides these and other similar sums which are entered under the heading of “ordinary,” we find such “extraordinary” receipts as £3 for twenty-four ash trees, and a few shillings for the skins of lambs that had been used in the kitchen. Another year we see that 100 kids were

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sold at 2s. each, and that there was a sale of hurdles and faggots about Shrovetide. Thirty stone of wool was purchased at one time by one Thomas Hunte, a neighbour, who, by the way, had his two daughters evidently at school in the convent ; once there was a sale of fish from the mill down at Belton, and it brought into the nuns exchequer over £6.

The mention of Thomas Hunte’s daughters may be supplemented by evidence in these accounts of other children being under the care of the “White Ladies” of Grace Dieu. Thomas Hunte appears to have paid at the rate of 17s. 4d. for each of his two children, but as it is expressly stated that it was for their food only, probably their education was thrown in without consideration. Lady Beaumont also had a daughter in the convent, for whom she and her lord

undertook to pay £2 13s. 4d. a year ; but when Dame Petronilla last made up her accounts, or rather in the last account we have from her pen, the good nuns got only £2. Lord Beaumont, however, was evidently too great a personage to be reminded of the missing 13s. 4d., and the convent authorities evidently desired to stand well in his favour. They fed him well, for instance, when he came to see his child ; for on one occasion Dame Petronilla gives some of the expenses of his entertainment. These included, besides 1½d. for “1 shoulder le molton,” and 8d. for two lambs, an almost unique payment of two fowls for the nobleman’s table. This slight glimpse of the relations between the convent and the neighbouring gentry, in regard to the education of their children, affords a corroboration of one of the laments made at the general dissolution, that their destruction was a terrible thing for those who had hitherto made

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use of them of this purpose. According to Robert Aske, the leader of the Pilgrimage of Grace, one of the reasons why the Yorkshire people strongly resented their overthrow, was because “in nunneries their daughters were brought up in virtue.”

Another practice revealed by these old accounts was that of t people coming to stop at the convent for the celebration of some of the greater feasts. Thus for one “All Saints’ Day,” Mary de Ecton, Joan Villiers, and the two daughters of Robert Neville were lodged and entertained by the nuns. These visitors eventually made and offering for the hospitality shown them ; as, for instance, on this very occasion each of the Neville ladies paid 5s. and Joan Villiers 6s. 8d. The last-named lady was at Grace Dieu no less than four several times in the year 1418, and each time left behind a similar offering. At another time Giles Jurdon paid 7s. for the board of his daughter during the week of Pentecost, when she probably came to visit her sister, who, known as Dame Elizabeth, was a nun in the convent. Roger Roby also, who was apparently the father of Dame Alice, was entertained by the nuns twice in the year 1416, and gave an alms of 6s. 8d. at one visit and 13s. 4d. at the other.

It may be of interest to give a list of the nuns at this time living in Grace Dieu. They were fourteen in number, exclusive of the prioress, and their names were:—

Dame Margaret Kempston, prioress.
Dame Alice Mortimer, sub-prioress.
Dame Margaret Twyford.
Dame Philippa Jake.
Dame Alice Dunwhich.
Dame Katherine Midleton.

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Dame Anne de Norton.
Dame Alice Roby.
Dame Margery Witham.
Dame Katherine Pounce.
Dame Alice Prestwold.
Dame Elizabeth Jurdon (originally put 3rd).
Dame Petronilla Dunwich (originally put 5th).

Dame Elizabeth Hakulthorp.
Dame Alice Powtrelle or Pouncstrell

The spiritual needs of this community were, of course, ministered to by a chaplain. He is generally called "Sir William," but on one occasion he appears as "Sir William Granger, or [of?] Norwich." He was paid 38s. 4d. a year as his stipend, and this was to include 6d. as the price of a pair of gloves. On certain occasions, as on greater feasts, Sir William had other clerical help, such as that of "Henry the Chaplain," and the "Parson of Hatherun." It is not uninteresting to notice that the nuns' little present for the services of these reverend gentlemen was, it would seem, delicately handed to them in purses purchased for the purpose. They had also the ministrations of an "extraordinary" confessor, a certain Friar William Young, and to him was given 1s. 8d. for the expenses of his journey each time he came to the convent. Something additional was, of course, bestowed on him when, as in 1418, he remained to help in the Holy-Week services. At times, not very frequently, "my Lady," the prioress, entertained the clergy at a little simple banquet; she did not merely provide for them, for that, of course, the convent always did with true hospitality; but she dined with them. Dame Petronilla does not say, when they "dined with my Lady," but

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when "my Lady dined with them," as, for example, when she notes on the Sunday within the octave of our Lady's Assumption in the year 1416: "a sucking-pig for the table of my Lady, because to-day she dined with the Vicar."

It may be mentioned that Dame Petronilla and her assistant Dame Katherine made up their accounts from Sunday to Sunday, as far as expenses are concerned, so that in running through the pages it is possible to form some idea of how these good medieval nuns lived. I do not think that the most captious critic could charge them with feasting on the "fat of the land," or with much indulgence in the luxuries even of those primitive days. There is one peculiarity, however, in these otherwise excellent accounts, which rather interferes with a full knowledge of the commissariat at Grace Dieu. The sisters did not think it necessary to enter among the payments the value of the farm and garden produce they consumed, beyond the cost of sowing and gathering into their barns. However, we know that they must have eaten bread and made use of the exceedingly few vegetables and pot-herbs that were then grown in the gardens of England, so we may take these as additional to the "food stuffs" shown in the accounts as paid for. A few examples will be sufficient to give the reader an insight into the general catering at Grace Dieu early in the fifteenth century. These are the first entries among the expenses written by Dame Petronilla when she commenced her duties as "Treasurer," as she calls herself in one place, after the Feast of the Purification, 1414.

"For two Sundays after the Purification purchased two small pigs price 6d. For house food during the time of Lent, £3 6s. 8d.

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For seventy hard dried fish for the same time, 11s. 6d. A calf bought for the convent for Quinquagesima Sunday (Shrovetide) 9d. Four small pigs for the same day, 9d. Beef

brought for the same day, 20*d.* Mustard bought at Ashby, 1*d.* Cheese bought on Friday in Sexagesima week, 5*d.* Thomas Fene for 2 quarters of red-herrings for Lent, 12*d.* Nicholas Swon (the swineherd, as the reader may remember), 2*d.* for catching two small pike at the sluice.”

The Lenten arrangements for feeding the natural man and woman from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday in those hardy and robust days are, even to think of, enough to turn our refined and educated stomachs. Eggs, to a certain limited extent, no doubt there good religious had ; although, on the principle before explained, we do not find them mentioned, except as included in their natural producer, the domestic hen. But beyond this, during all this penitential time, the staple food, here as everywhere throughout England, was salted and dried fish. Conger, green fish, ling, and codling stockfish, wealing or whiting, and mackerel are among those named in Russell’s *Book of Nurture* as the usual Lenten food. How tired the mouth of even the most ascetic religious must have got of the taste of salt fish, however, much it was disguised with mustard sauce, or, as on great festivals, “baken, dressed, and dished with white sugar” ! No wonder the rising generation in those primitive times were warned by Russell to look carefully upon what they ate for fear they might light on some unsavoury morsel ; and “of all manner salt fish,” he says, “look ye pare away the pele (skin) before beginning upon it.” No wonder that after six weeks of salt herring, stock fish, and such-like, our ancestors in the cloisters could look forward

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to the time-honoured Easter-day joke of “the devil on horseback,” or a split red-herring riding as a jockey on the back of a duck, perpetrated by the convent cook.

Lent, however, is naturally not a fair sample of the food supplied to the Grace Dieu nuns, so let us take the page of expenses for Easter week. Here it is:—

“A stall-fed ox, 16*s.* 1 pig from the farm. 3 small pigs, price 14*d.* 1 calf, price 2*s.* Almonds and rais (raisins), 12*d.*, and for Friday 150 fresh herrings and a stockfish (i.e.cod), 2*s.*”

The almonds and raisins were a great luxury to the good sisters, and only on a few other occasions during the four years of Dame Petronilla’s housekeeping does this extraordinary expense occur ! We cannot help thinking, too, with what pleasure the nuns must have welcomed the change of fish diet on the Friday in Easter week. Two shillings was in those days a great sum to pay for any article of food, but the fresh sea fish must have been scarce enough in Charnwood Forest before the days of railroads. “White herring fresh, if it be seaward and newly caught, with the roe white and tender,” says an old authority, “is toothsome food” ; and the *Book of Nurture* tells “the cook” how best to prepare it for this master’s eating.

“The white herring by the bak a brode ye splat him sure,
Both roe and bones voided, then may your lord endure to eat merily with mustard.”

We need not linger further over the food supplied to the sisters. One week was very much like another, and the changes were few and far between. It is not often that the accounts

show such expenses as “paid to the wife of James the miller for Twelve Chickens for the table, 12*d.*” – spring chickens, too, they must have been for they were

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eaten on Low Sunday. One All Saints' Day, by the way, the nuns had four geese, for which the price paid was 3*d.* each ; and one Christmas Day their table was supplied from the farm with nine fowls, and we are told they had seven at their dinner, the other two being reserved to furnish forth their suppers. Pork, beef, veal, and fish : these were the ordinary dishes supplied. Mutton, curiously, though not altogether rare, does not appear very frequently in their menu, and lamb is named as a dish at only one of my lady prioress's little banquets ; although the receipt for “lamb-skins sold from the kitchen” shows that it was not altogether unknown to the common table. Probably these nuns were “good housewives” in the best sense, and preferred to get all they could out of their flocks in the shape of wool, etc., rather than eat tender, but tasteless and immature mutton.

It should be remembered that in the commissariat of Grace Dieu was evidently included the feeding of the retainers of the convent, as well as that of the nuns. These domestics were many, and were fed certainly as well, and sometimes apparently better than were the ladies themselves. The names of two-and-twenty men-servants and eight women who were retainers of the convent, and their wages, or “rewards” as they were called, are preserved in the account book. They vary very considerably, from 25*s.* 8*d.* paid to one Henry Smith, to 2*s.* 6*d.* bestowed on “Hirdeman” ; and among the women the difference ranges from 22*s.* 6*d.* paid to Isabel Botelor, to 1*s.* 8*d.* to Matilda Gerrard. Henry Smith, named above, seems to have been a sort of factotum, a real treasure and excellent servant. He is called bailiff in one place, and was no doubt of a higher standing than most

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of the others. Whatever there was to be done, inside or outside the house, it is evident that no one but Henry Smith could see to it properly.

Besides their wages, these retainers of the Augustinian dames had their cottages and clothes looked to for them by the convent bursar. Thus before the autumn work of cleaning the land and sowing the winter corn commences, we find a report of “twenty-four pairs of shoes” given out, which are charged to the convent account at 2*s.* 8½*d.*—not the pair, but the dozen. This sum would appear, perhaps, ridiculous small, even for those days, had we not some reason to think that the leather for making them was provided to the local cobbler from the convent store ; for on one occasion Dame Petronilla notes that she paid 8*d.* for tanning (*pro albacione*) the skin of a horse, bought of Robert Harston. Another present from the nuns to their workpeople in view of these autumn works, the cost of which appears in these accounts, was a pair of gloves to each of the thirty men and women about to be engaged in the weeding and ditching and hedging ; as for their clothes, these were all made on the premises from the raw material. This on one year we read :—

“Paid for the spinning of six score (bundles) of linen flax, 5*s.* ; paid for weaving the three score ells of linen cloth from the same, 3*s.* 4*d.* ; paid for woofing and warping three-and-twenty ells of woollen cloth, 6*s.* 2*d.* ; paid for dyeing twenty-seven ells of cloth blood red,

at 4*d.* the ell, 7*s.* 8*d.* ; paid for spinning woollen cloth for ordinary livery, 11*d.*” ; and so on.

All this evidently was for the clothes of the entire establishment, including the men and women who worked on the

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farm, and in the laundry, the kitchen, and the bakehouse, etc.

Curiously, as it seems to us perhaps now, each of the nuns had a maximum allowance of 6*s.* 8*d.* a year for clothes. It taught them, no doubt to look after the articles of their dress with care and thrift, better than if the white woollen tunic, scapular and veil, woven from the produce of their own flock of sheep, and the still whiter linen wimple spun from the flax and made into good sound cloth by their own hands, or at least under their own direction, were to appear to drop from the hand of Providence without reference to cost. One or two curious entries seem to show that friends sometimes gave the annual sum allowed for the clothing of some of the nuns. Thus one year William Roby paid “for the clothes of his relation, Dame Agnes Roby” ; and at another time Margaret Roby brought the 6*s.* 8*d.* for the same purpose when she came on a visit. One interesting item of knowledge about the work of the nuns is conveyed in a brief entry of receipt. It is clear that these ladies were good needlewomen, and their work must have been exceptionally excellent, seeing that a cope was purchased from them by a neighbouring rector for £10.

The indication that these accounts give us of the farming operations of the Grace Dieu nuns is sufficient to make us wish that Dame Petronilla had been a little more explicit ; still we are grateful for what we learn about the crops, and their sowing, and weeding, and gathering, the stacking of the wheat, the oats, and peas, and the threshing out of the grain. Thus the wages of Adam Baxter and his wife, and the wife of Robert Hartston for weeding thirty acres of barley are set down. Each of these, by the way,

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had a pair of gloves given them before they were set to the task, and the entire work cost the convent 10*s.* 3*d.* Three men beyond the usual farm staff were ordinarily employed in cutting the grass, and in making and stacking the hay. In the general harvesting, men and women were employed in the fields ; and, be it remarked, their labour was paid for at the same rate. What are called the autumn works—the harvesting and the subsequent cleaning of the ground—seem to have lasted about seven or eight weeks, and were begun soon after the feast of the Assumption of our Blessed Lady. It is curious, and not uninteresting, to find that the Irish came over for the harvesting in Leicestershire in the fifteenth century as they do now ; thus we have Mathew Irishman and Isabel Irish named, together with Edward Welshman, as engaged in the fields of Grace Dieu in 1415. Altogether, the cost of the extra labour in the autumn works amounted to nearly £10, a large sum indeed in those days.

Besides payments of extra money for the harvesting and regular work, some indication of the kindly way in which the good nuns recognized the services of their dependents on special occasions appears in these accounts. In the lambing season for instance, Henry, the shepherd, was given 2*d.* “for his good service and care of the sheep.” And John Stapulford received the

same sum “for looking after the labs before their weaning,” whilst John Warren for “fold-hurdling” was rewarded with 1s. ; and to make another instance of a somewhat different kind, the convent bailiff at Kirby, one Richard Marston, was given a purse, as a sign that the nuns appreciated his care of their property. One chance entry shows that when the sheep were being sheared, the labourers were given extra meat for

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their meals, since Dame Petronilla gives 16*d.* for a calf to feed them specially, on a day when evidently she and her sisters in religion were eating fish in the convent refectory.

A word must now be said about the necessary item in the accounts of very well-regulated religious house, “repairs.” These seem to have exercised the two bursars of Grace Dieu very considerably. The special trouble evidently began with the roof of the house. In the first year of their stewardship they had in, of course, Robert the Slater, and for some reason his bill was only partly met in that twelvemonth. All during Lent, he and his mate were at work mending holds, and making others. From the house his ministrations extended to the cloister. Then came the gutters all over the establishment, which stood in urgent need of attention, as gutters always appear to do, even in our more civilised days. Next it was found that the church must be looked to ; and before this was over, the dependants had come to the conclusion that whilst all this repairing was being done at the convent and Robert the Slater was about with his mate and his materials upon the ground, it would be a pity not to renovate their cottages. Poor Dame Petronilla must have been well-nigh distracted at the thought that Robert the Slater—who, by the way, did more than roofing, and seems to have been a jack-of-all-trades, though loose tiles were his forte—having once secured a foothold in the establishment, had come to stay. But she gave in with exemplary resignation, and the dependants had their cottages repaired, or what was the same thing, received money to pay for them. Taking one thing with another, more than £10 went in this way during the first year of the procuratorial reign of Dames Petronilla and Katherine.

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Among the workmen that haunted Grace Dieu in these days, and who, if there is any fitness in things so far as ghosts are concerned, ought to be found haunting the ruins to-day, was one called Richard Hyrenmonger. He came, we learn, from Donington, and the accounts prove that he must have had a good store of all kinds of nails, and keys, and bolts, judging by the variety he was able to produce, Under him worked John the Plumber, or rather two Johns the Plumber, senior and junior ; and, like modern plumbers are wont to do, they appear to have plagued Dame Petronilla and her assistant with their constant tinkering at the pipes and drains of the establishment. “John the senior” and “John the junior,” for example, were six days mending “le pype,” for which they were paid 3*s.* 4*d.* ; but apparently it was not properly done, for just after this, “le pype” misbehaved itself again, and Dame Petronilla had to purchase a new *brass* pipe to bring the water to the door of the refectory, and the two Johns were at work again. Of course Richard the Ironmonger always found a lot of work for himself on the farm, so that what with one thing and another, Grace Dieu must have been a very comfortable inheritance for him.

Among the miscellaneous manners and customs of the good nuns of Grace Dieu which are recalled to us in these faded papers of accounts, very few of course can find place there. One such is the yearly visit of the candle-maker to prepare the tallow dips for the dark winter

evenings. The preparation made for his coming appears in the purchase of tallow and mutton fat to be used for rush-lights and cresset-lights, which must have done hardly more than make visible the darkness of a winter evening and an early winter morning at Grace Dieu. My lady prioress apparently

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had an oil lamp of some kind, and we read of special candles for the wash-place and at the door of the refectory, etc. It is to be supposed that the nuns had some means of warming themselves during the cold winter months, for we read of a travelling tinker employed upon mending a chimney to the hall fireplace, and probably they were burning logs from out of the Charnwood somewhere or other ; but in these accounts there is no mention of fuel except on one occasion, when Richard the Ironmonger had some coal purchased for him ; but this was only that he might heat a ploughshare that had got out of shape.

Another most important matter in medieval times was the annual salting of the winter provision which took place in every establishment. On St. Martin's Day, November 11th, the medieval farmer considered seriously what was the number of this live stock, what was his store of hay, and how long the one could be kept by the other. The residue of the stock had to go into the salting-tub for the winter food of the family and dependants. So at Grace Dieu the purchase of the salt for the great operation is entered in the accounts. On one occasion also Dame Petronilla, "when a boar was killed"—whether by accident or not does not appear—had it spiced as well as salted, and it was no doubt served up on great occasion as a special delicacy in the common refectory.

The picture of the Grace Dieu nuns afforded by these accounts is that of charming, peace-loving ladies ; good practical Christian women, as all nuns should be ; taking a personal interest in the welfare of their tenants and dependants ; occupied, over and besides their conventual and religious duties, in works of genuine charity. They taught the daughters of the neighbouring gentry, and

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were not too exacting in requiring even what had been promised as the annual pension. They encouraged ladies to come and join them in celebrating the festival of the church, and out of their small means they set aside a not insignificant portion for the care and clothing of sick in their infirmary ; whilst out of their income they found not less than eight corrodies—or pensions—which cost them £7 7s. 4d., or more than five per cent. of their annual revenue. Of their work mention has already been made. They grew the wool and spun it and wove it into cloth, not only for their own garments, but also for those of their retainers ; whilst a chance entry of receipt reveals that they were indeed skilled in a high degree in ecclesiastical embroidery. That they were not guilty of "dilapidation" of their house their extensive repairs prove ; and that they cared for their lands and farm buildings must be obvious from the purchases made, and the items of expense in connection with every kind of agricultural implement. They took their burden in common ecclesiastical expenses, even contributing their quota of 3d. towards the expenses of the *Procurator cleri* of the district to Convocation. They were peace-loving, if we may judge from the absence of all law expenses, save and except one small item for an appearance at the local marshal's court, and whether even this was for themselves or for one of their tenants, and what it

was about, does not appear. As it was only *2d.*, it could not have been much to interfere with the general harmony which apparently existed in the neighbourhood. They lived, too, within their income, which was, more or less *£103 13s. 6d.* a year. It is true that in the first year, owing probably to the exceptional repairs which the nuns undertook, they went somewhat

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beyond their means. The sum was only slight, being but *£7 11s. 10½d.*, and it is pleasant to observe that “out of love of the nuns,” and “to relieve the house of anxiety,” a lady paid the deficit, making her gift *£7 12s.*

Dame Petronilla and Dame Margaret ! how little they could have thought when they penned their simple accounts that they would have given much pleasurable information five hundred years after their time ! How little they could ever have dreamed of the pleasant light their jottings would have thrown on so many of their doings and their little ways ! they were kind, prudent, charitable souls, without a doubt, and if they might at times have used better ink than they did, that fault was a point of holy parsimony. And if they might have given here and there just a little more information on certain points, they are willingly forgiven and more than forgiven, for what they have left to posterity. Their souls, oft so troubled and vexed by the many cares incidental to the office of a conventual Martha, have long doubtless been in peace, and their spirits no longer vexed by Richard the “Hyrenmonger” and the two Johns, the senior and junior plumbers. What would they think, could they to-day revisit the scene of their former labours and cares? The old home they evidently loved so well is past repairing now, and not even the kindly help of that old servant and friend of the convent, Henry Smith, could avail to suggest the best way of setting about reparation.

All the larger nunneries and probably most of the smaller ones, to whatever Order they belonged, opened their doors for the education of young girls, who were frequently boarders. In fact the female portion of the

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FRANCISCAN NUNS IN CHOIR

Illustration: Franciscan Nuns in Choir

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population, the poor as well as the rich, had in the convents their only schools, nuns their only teachers, in pre-Reformation times. Chaucer, in describing the well-to-do miller of Trompington, says—

“A wyf he hadde, come of noble kyn ;
Sche was i-fostryd in a nunnery . . .
There durste no wight clepe hir but *Madame*

What for her kindred and hir nortelry
That sche had lerned in the nonnerye.”

John Aubrey, too, writes almost as an eye-witness of the Wiltshire convents that “the young maids were brought up . . . at nunneries, where they had examples of piety, and humility, and modesty, and obedience to imitate and to practise. Here they learned needlework, the art of confectionery, surgery (for anciently there were no apothecaries or surgeons—the gentlewomen did cure their poor neighbours ; their hands are now too fine), physic, writing, drawing, etc. Old Jacques could see from his house the nuns of the priory (St. Mary’s, near Kington St. Michael) come forth into the nymph-hay with their rocks and wheels to spin : and with their sewing work. He would say that he had told threescore and ten ; but of nuns there were not so many, but in all, with lay sisters and widows, old maids and young girls, there might be such a number. “This,” he concludes, “was a fine way of breeding up young women, who are led more by example than precept ; and a good retirement for widows and grave single women to a civil, virtuous, and holy life.”

In the well-known case of Nunnaminster, Winchester, there were, at the time of the suppression, twenty-six girl boarders who were reported by the local commissioners to be daughters of “lords, knights, and gentlemen.” The

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list that is set forth begins with a Plantagenet and includes Tichbornes, Poles, and Tyrrells. So, too, in the case of the Benedictines of Barking, of Kingsmead, Derby, and of Polesworth and Nuneaton, Warwickshire ; of the Cluniacs of Delapré, Northampton ; of the Cistercians of Wintney, Hants ; and of the Gilbertines of Shouldham, Norfolk, it can be established that not only were many of the nuns of good birth, but that their pupils were in the main drawn from the same class.

The Episcopal Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich for 1492 to 1532, edited by Dr. Jessop, throw some interesting light on the inner life and social working of the nunneries of East Anglia. From the names of the inmates it becomes evident that some of these houses were in the main occupied by ladies of gentle birth, such as Willoughbys, Everards, Wingfields, Jerninghams, and the like. This was especially the case with the Austin house of Campsey and the Benedictine houses of Bungay and Thetford. When Bishop Nicke visited the last of these houses in 1514, complaint was made to him by one of the ladies that the prioress was intending to admit an ignorant (*indocta*) novice, and particularly one Dorothy Sturges, who was deaf and deformed. Apparently the arguments of the objector prevailed, but poor Dorothy was, not long after, admitted to the smaller nunnery of Blackborough.

When the priory of Carrow, a favourite retreat for the religious daughters of the citizens of Norwich, was visited in 1526, several of the ladies were advanced in years. The sub-prioress, Dame Anna Marten, had been in the convent of sixty years, and two others, Dames Margaret And Katherine, had been thirty-eight years in religion. It

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is a little touching to note that almost the only complaints that reached the bishop’s ears were those of the aged sub-prioress and Dame Margaret that the pace of chanting the Office by the

sisters was too rapid, and lacking their proper pauses, and that of Dame Katherine who found the beer to small. At the next recorded visitation, six years later all these good old ladies were still at Carrow, though Dame Anna's age did not allow her to discharge the duties of sub-prioress ; but she was then (1532) in charge of the infirmary. At this time the bishop interfered, probably at the suggestion of the aged dames, to stop an accustomed Christmas game (on Holy Innocents' Day), when the youngest of the novices assumed the functions of a lady abbess, after the same fashion as a boy-bishop amongst the choir boys. The nuns of Carrow maintained a school for some of the better-class girls of the city and district, and doubtless this Christmas-tide sport was intended in the main for their delectation.



NUN ASKING PARDON OF AN ABBESS

Illustration: Nun Asking Pardon of an Abbess

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