

Cantator:

A LEGEND OF RYE TOWN RETOLD

BY MAUD STEPNEY RAWSON

I
WHEN Rye, of the Romney Marshes, bore her seal of the three lions and the three galleys proudly, as one limb of the great body of the Cinque Ports, and in the days before the French brought shame to her, or the great arm of the Eastward Drift, sweeping up the Channel, choked her harbor with shingle and mud, so that the sea drew back sulkily on its haunches—in those days there stood upon the landward slope of the sea fortress a holy house, within a holy garden. The patronage of St. Augustine was both its plea for existence and all its dignity. As the sea submerged the lands for two-thirds of the year, so did the penury of the brethren mostly drown their importance.

Poorer grew the Austin Brothers, and older, and their number dwindled till it was left almost solely to a youth dwelling among them, whose name was Cantator, to tend the garden and lead the prayers and make the ointments. Cantator's origin no one knew, for he had come once on a night of autumn storm across the hills from Canterbury with letters of secret value, and (so it was whispered) was detained by old Friar Thomas for reasons never told to the rest of the brethren.

So the youth with the heart of snow went hither and thither, and because of his heavenly voice, which burst forth as he worked, even the most morose of his companions agreed that "Cantator the Singer" must be his name.

Something strange and outlandish there was about him that kept him apart from his fellows, but he was the first to humble himself, to carry and fetch, to hew and wash and scour, to do all the things which, outside the walls, only a scullion or a kitchen-girl would do. He was strong, and his hair lay in a close fringe on his nape—a fringe that strove

to curl,—while his eyes were the color that I have heard described as "blue of Normandy." Study and meditation painted his face the color of ivory, with lofty brows, and sweet lines of patience about the mouth. But when he had been chopping logs of old ship-wood for the fire, or carving blocks of Caen stone—for he had great skill of finger—the glow of high blood was in his face, and his hood lay back in careless folds of veritable secular defiance, showing the glory of his youth and manhood.

His fame grew, for he taught himself the lore of all masters of music, from Guido of Arezzo downwards, and hung lovingly over the writings of Franco of Cologne, who lived for counterpoint. And there were the songs also of Adam de la Halle, the Trouvère, in a book which Cantator brought with him from his childhood's days. These things stifled all the worldly sounds that drifted to him over the walls, and he knew not what happened to the right or the left of him, while he sang as he worked, and in the dead of night listened to the plash of summer waves at the base of the rock.

Early in the year old Brother Thomas fell mortally sick, and the number of the company being already reduced to four, the hard work of the little hermitage fell upon Cantator. It was very sweet to escape in the evening from the close cell of the fevered man to the garden. In the thick ivy, white-breasted swifts had come to live. In the elm-trees there were always a twittering and nesting, and in the plat of fruit trees there was a drifting roof of pink and white snow.

Here, one day at sundown, Cantator lifted his arms to the sweetness of it all. The sky was very clear as he gazed into it, and for that day of April it was so warm that the sun seemed to have chased the color from the great roof above him.

"Arise," murmured Cantator—"arise, Morning Star of Love and Truth, and end this night, that even a wretch, such as I, may know. . . ."

A shining bolt, it seemed, came as the answer, a dazzling sphere of gold, of which the lovely light shone to his very heart and blessed his sight, so that everything showed more soft, more bright, more holy than before. It had touched him; it had brushed his face. Yet, trembling with the consciousness of a miracle, he dared not at first verify it. He closed his eyes, uttered supreme thanksgiving, ere he gazed. There it lay in the orchard shadows—lay even as it had fallen, with a soft decision, like a ready windfall, though it was not yet apple-time. He stooped for it, and found it very light and soft. It flashed as he turned it over and over, for it was cased in tinsel cloth, such as the French wove for robes of state. Evidently it was the plaything of some rich man's child, and the ecstasy in his heart shrivelled painfully as he discovered in the bolt nothing but a corruptible symbol of earth. The rosary of his thoughts was rudely broken. He seized a knife and began to prune the pear shoots of the tree on the wall nearest to him in a kind of forlorn desperation. Suddenly there came the sound of a girl's laugh, and then low chiding whispers.

"Is any one there?" asked a saucy voice on the other side of the wall.

"I—Cantator," he answered, and his knife fell.

There was a consultation, and uncontrollable laughter from some one. Then a soft "Hush!" a gentle cough, and a new voice, dignified and delicate, addressed him.

"We pray you, Cantator, to give us our ball, which has dropped by hazard into your garden."

"Send a serving-man, sister, to the door of the refectory and he shall have it," he answered, all unconscious that he was moved by no sense of etiquette, but only honest curiosity to see the livery of the servant who obeyed this fair voice.

"Nay, throw it over," ejaculated the saucier voice. The tartness in it made him blush for his stupidity.

"Wait, sister," he called, and ran to the ball. "Whither shall I throw?" he asked, once more blind to the fact that to

throw at random would have sent him back sooner to his pruning.

"Climb and we will tell thee," commanded the impatient tones again.

Cantator might easily have heard the mistress slap the maid had he not been so goaded by the sharpness and the imperiousness of the speaker. All anger was foreign to him. He climbed quickly to make amends. His eyes were clear, his gaze swept over the daisy-strewn sward that flowed from the foot of the wall to the house of oaken beams which stood between him and the Land Gate at the northern point of the fortress. He saw that the house was of good new wood, stoutly roofed and enwalled and latticed. He still clasped the ball in his amazement, and looked inquiry at the two girls who waited there, the maid in exaggerated confusion, the mistress grave and shy. The lady wore a petticoat of bloom velvet. Her hair was a river of gold, for in her sport she had let fall her net of pearls. She held out her kirtle for the ball and curtsied. Into the velvet lap he flung it, and climbed down again.

II

The days went by in a procession as of merchant princes scattering largesse. April flung her last store of opals upon the two gardens, the pleasure of the maid, the orchard, and upon the heaven above them. May followed, less fluttering and self-conscious, with freer gait and treasure of stronger hue, deeper violets and red hawthorn like rubies. Then June, with a steady pace and a swelling song, passed, hanging honors, chained orders of eglantine and woodbine, upon all shoulders. The morns were glorious, but not sweeter than the noons and evenings. Old Brother Thomas had gone, and now that the youth had recovered from his first encounter with Death, he loved the garden more and his cell less. For in the garden, it seemed, the promise of the Fuller Life grazed him more closely. He tended the roses and herbs more constantly. Moreover, he sang more than before, and when he played his little organ he left the windows on the side of the garden towards the Land Gate and the beautiful house of gables open wide. How could he know that under the wall there walked a lady

in a gray petticoat whose little bodice rose and fell with thoughts which could only be echoed by the morning greeting of the larks of the meadow-lands of Sussex? How could he guess that she stood obstinately at bay when her father, the Mayor, Master Marshe, scolded her for the idle hours she spent in contemplation when other women were hawking or dancing, or receiving gallantries? Some things Cantator did, indeed, hear, such as the noise of a banquet given by Master Marshe to Master William Diggys, of Wittersham, to whom the Mayor desired to give his daughter in marriage. But his eyes could not behold the face of the lady who drew herself up proud and cold when, at the banquet, the would-be bridegroom, his small eyes full of wine and greed, his cruel mouth hidden by his black scrub of beard, and his gorgeous doublet hanging on him like a churl's smock, tried to kiss her. For a moment she had stood so, as if daring him to brave the flame of her eyes, and then she had passed slowly out in a dead silence.

As she stepped out of the house into the breath of the June lilies and found her way to the grass walk beneath the wall by the pale lamps of the tall evening-primroses which fringed the paths, she stopped her ears, so that the low wine-songs of the men in the hall should not drown in her memory the sweeter music that she heard so often. When she unstopped her ears this music came to her over the wall. Hitherto it had soothed and refreshed her. Now it seemed to bring her deeper sorrow, to strengthen her helplessness. The tears rained down her face and her kirtle; she spoke without knowing it. Her cry, "Forbear, forbear, the song is too sweet. It kills!" pierced the drum of music which cloaked Cantator the Singer. He listened.

"Would I were dead, nevertheless," said the delicate voice again.

He wondered. Then he began to sing again—a song which bade all love one another.

"There is a kind of love which begets hate, Cantator," cried the lady, bitterly.

He crept to the wall. "Take courage, sister," he called, softly; "help will come."

"There is no one to help," she said. Then her words came out in a rapid

stream. Cantator saw the scene in the banquetting-hall, he beheld the bridegroom-elect, rich of garb and low of birth, his stunted legs, his hoarse, guttural voice, his clumsy seat on horseback. A divine rage came upon the youth.

"What is your name, sister?" he asked.

"Amanda. My mother called me so. But the name is turned to a reproach, for there is no love in the world nor any one that I can love."

"The name is like a song," he answered. The note of his own voice sent warm thrills through him. "I go now to pray for you," he added, "and I know—Amanda—that, so long as you have courage, the answer will come."

"I have courage enough."

"Then God will be with you."

"And with you—until—"

"Until the time—"

"Yes—the time?"

He did not hear the inquiring note in the words, for he moved away in sudden misgiving. Yet the very grass of the orchard enmeshed his feet and held him. He stepped backward.

"And—Amanda—"

The "yes" was so low that, to make sure it was not the brushing of one lily against another, he spoke again:

"Amanda—!"

"Yes—"

"I think it were well—Amanda—if—"

"If—Cantator?"

"If—Amanda!" His lips hung on the name.

"Yes, yes—?"

"Nay, nay, it is nothing—Amanda."

He turned then and strode resolutely away.

Many watches did he keep that night as he lay on his stone shelf, while his brain was like a playhouse lit with the torches of love and sorrow, under the glare of which danced a strange tumult of persons out of the world at which he had glanced. In the afternoon of the next day he stood at the little grated window of the dispensary gazing blankly in front of him. The lay Brother, a new institution, since age overwhelmed Cantator's decrepit comrades, had left the door into the High Street open. Thus the youth chanced upon a gap of color and dazzling movement. The Mayor of

Rye had called a Guestling or Brotherhood that day, and the great personages he had summoned rode in state after their council. In slow stately file they rode, and the people walked with them in groups, children scattering flowers, citizens and fishermen with their wives in their festival clothes, tanners and smiths, innholders and herring-curers, mariners and cordwainers, and here and there a tender girl clinging to the arm of a bronzed boy.

Cantator closed the door and put the shutter over the window before he turned into the garden. The babel and noise seemed sacrilegious. He put away his sculpturing-tools: he went to his organ, and he set himself to construct a most complex song. But the diamond-shaped notes in his book fell together in confused heaps. He closed his eyes, bewildered, and touched the keys at random. Yet, for all he could do, there hammered in his head two lines from a song of Normandy which he must have heard with the lute in his babyhood. It floated up to his lips; it escaped them; and as he buried his face in his hands for shame the refrain knocked imperiously at his brain and struggled in his throat:

Belle amie, ne doute point
Ton amant est ta douleur.

He went to his cell, took pen and brush and wrote in a leather-bound vellum scrip, making scrolls and floreal and finials that were like red tendrils and fruit and flowers. But his heart was a furnace.

III

All day he moved in an ecstasy, with such a light on his face that his fellows wondered. The Trouvère's warning had lost its sinister ring; indeed, he did not remember more than the dear words at the beginning—"Belle Amie! Belle Amie!" He whispered it once, but to himself it seemed that he shouted it with brazen throat. He looked up stealthily from the board at which he ate his thin soup at night. The meal over, Cantator went out. It was not a disordered fancy that led him to detect the rustle of a robe beyond the orchard wall.

"My sister!" he ventured.

"Cantator!" floated back to him.

His heart was a battering-ram under

his cassock; fear and joy in him leaped forth to the joy and grief in her voice.

"How is it—sister—Amanda?"

"Very ill; the need is sore."

"Tell me all of it," he commanded.

"In two days I must wed Diggys."

"Heaven forbids it."

"How shall I know that?" she sobbed.

"Because I shall help you."

"But how, dear brother?"

"I will lead you far away."

"You dare not; it is death to you."

"I dare all."

"You cut your life in two. You shall not."

"I go to live. You are my life, and there is Normandy for love and life. Love is rich there and life is true."

A long-drawn sob was the answer.

"Amanda, listen!" he entreated in a fire of impatience. He could not hear her answer; he pressed in his distress against the wall. He was sure that it throbbed between them. He pressed closer and closer. The mortar crumbled. A stone was loose. Hardly knowing what he did, he plucked at it. It fell out, dragging lesser ones with it. The sight inflamed him. Like one half possessed he groped and pulled and plucked amain. When he put his strong shoulder against the weak spot and pushed with all his might he heard a long loose rattle of stones and dust on the other side, and then a panting, sobbing breath. He thrust once more at the tottering corners with superhuman force. One last thud of stones on turf, and through a space as large as a man's two hands he saw Amanda's eyes, blue-ringed and dewy. He put out his hand and gently pulled her by her wimple close to the gap. As he did so he smiled, and the moonlight touched their young heads. Joy came back to her eyes. He put out one hand boldly, drew her face to him, and held the little chin so that he should not lose a fragment of her head and neck.

"Do you trust me?" he said, lowering his face to her.

"Always, Cantator." Her lips were parted. They flowered up to him. But for the moment he put strong control over himself.

"Is there a wharf where boats are?"

"Yes; by the Strand Gate, which leads to the land, to the Kentish hills and the Sussex woods."



HE SANG AS HE CARVED BLOCKS OF CAEN STONE

"Neither hills nor woods for us, but only water. It leaves no footmark."

She put out her free hand and laid it shyly on his breast.

"It is our compact, Amanda," he whispered; "therefore have a boat in readiness at the Strand Gate to-morrow night an hour before moonrise. There I will come to you, for Heaven has given you to my hand to love and cherish—if you so will?"

"In your songs I have lived, Cantator; in your heart I would rest unto death."

"The word is 'Belle Amie,'" he whispered. She repeated it after him. He kissed her hands.

When he had watched her safely into her house he put the larger stones stealthily back. The gracious ivy curtain fell over the secret.

IV

So glorious a day had never been born for Rye. The fishing-barques put out to sea with masters and men; the gossips foregathered near the Bocharry; in the court-house the buzzing of flies begot somnolence and made the dispensation of justice a tardy matter. Under the thick tufts of mulberry-trees good folk sat in their gardens, or slept for happy weariness, and pretty bare feet of boys and girls dabbled at low tide in the rocky pools below the Badding's Gate. The very watch at the postern there smiled genially through the veil of heat towards hostile France.

After sundown a slight wind came, and over Winchelsea a cloud floated and gathered others. Rain fell in soft large drops and then desisted. In a starless silence Cantator stepped into the world. His hands were empty; he took nothing with him. On his hand was a ring by which those in Normandy would know him and hail him.

Like a long russet shadow he passed down the alley and along the bank of the Conduit, stopping when his head showed above the low embattlemented wall that fringed it on the land side. Just before he reached the Strand Gate he swung himself over it, dropped on to the slope of muddy shingle, and crept quickly to the spot where the sea-wall which girded the base of the rock sprang sheer from the water. Under this, it might be for some three hundred feet, were, at inter-

vals, semicircular openings or cavelets of a size in which a boat might lie. He looked down as he crept, and saw by his tiny lantern the glimmer of a woman's hand on a prow that was scarcely visible beyond the mouth of one of the little arches.

"Belle Amie!"

"Bel Ami!"

Noiselessly the prow emerged, and Cantator dropped into the skiff. The man who sat at the oars gave a vigorous push with both his hands to the arched stone roof above them, and in answer to Amanda's question Cantator pointed across the bay to Winchelsea. The rower took swift long strokes; they shot forward, a black trail on inky waters, into the murk of the night. White wave-crests which they could not see curled voraciously about them; the manes of sea-horses, racing madly by, flicked their cheeks; the wet wind and salt stiffened the apparel of the fugitives. She saw that he wore beneath his cloak a gaberdine of brave stuff like that of a French knight.

They made but little way, though ere-long Cantator took an oar and pulled behind the silent boatman.

It was fully an hour before the moon flickered through the driving clouds, fitfully and fearfully lighting up the Udymer bay and the woodlands of Brede. And still they toiled and drifted farther from land.

"A current draws us to sea," cried the lady.

Cantator looked behind him and saw Rye aglare in the lightning. He looked before him and knew the dread in Amanda's eyes. The rower pointed to the menacing seas and shook his head.

"We cannot round the Fairlye point to-night," Cantator whispered to the lady. "Is there a safe landing till the storm is past?" he asked.

The man nodded and pointed to a creek. There, by straining against wind and tide, they arrived, and Cantator signed to the rower to return to Rye on foot and leave the boat beached.

Like sea-birds the two crouched, boy and girl, under the lee of the down where the rock overhung them. The floor of their chamber was dry sand, still warm, when you burrowed into it, from the heat of the midsummer noon.

Soon he spread his cloak on the sand.

She slept there in rich forgetfulness, in childlike trust. But he looked at her and wondered and loved, and wondered and looked again, sleepless and full of thanksgiving as the storm died and the tide ebbed out and the rain-spout travelled on, leaving only a thin fringe of light rain.

V

Cantator left his lady lying on the cloak and went to the mouth of their cliff bower. He looked stealthily about him, and went to the spot where the skiff was beached. No boat was there. The storm had wrenched at it, the hungry sea had dragged it foot by foot into its lap. Across the marsh he saw the slumbering roof of the oratory of the Black Friars at Winchelsea. He knew no shelter would be there for Amanda and himself. She could not walk to Hastings; she could not live without food till they reached the port, nor could she harbor so near home without disguise. The rain fell softly. But for sore perplexity it would have been music to him, this gentle silver sigh of light drops upon the marsh-grass. But now—!

A long muffled note came with it. It was surely no hunting morning this, and at such a season? Again it came, longer, more hollow, more distinct. He listened impatiently. The plover startled, wheeled overhead, the faint lapping noise of a chapel bell insisted, a shrill cock could be just distinguished. Again he heard the hollow boom. No horn rang a note so sinister, so monotonous. Inspiration came as the sounds grew. In the gray light he saw nothing, for Rye lay cold and dim—but he understood, and became in that moment a man of ice. To the rear of him he could see deep, long flowering rushes and underwood. There was water, deep it might be. He lifted the lady in his arms and strode for the spot. He found a tiny island of reeds in the centre. Wading to his neck and then swimming, he reached it while she clung to him.

"Where is it we go?" she asked, still half drowned in her sleep.

"Only to find a better resting-place," he answered, and dried her feet in his hands. The sun was shining faintly now. The mists rolling seawards showed a thin trail of men and horses coming round the bay from Rye.

Then Cantator prayed as only men in his case pray, without words, without hope, without fear. For in extremity there is neither hope nor fear, but only blindness. Through the reeds at last he saw the thing that froze his tongue—the three gaunt, wide-mouthed hounds, with their noses to the storm-sodden earth, urged forward with cries by the men who rode, among whom was a fellow with a blackish beard and shrivelled legs and long flat feet. Closer they came, the dogs goaded by the men, but running without clue. They halted—and then Cantator thought that they returned to Rye, and held his breath with wild hope. But the deep note broke out afresh, and again he heard the hoofs and cries—and knew that the creek was reached by the sudden clamor of the bloodhounds.

At the margin of the mere the dogs stopped howling.

"A boat! a boat!" cried one.

"The fools have drowned themselves!" raged a stout man on a white horse.

A smile flitted over the face of Diggys. "Whist! Let us see if the love-birds have not found a reed nest," he laughed.

Long ere the hot breath of the hounds was upon his lady's cheek Cantator had risen. Straight and firmly he aimed, and his stilet was crimson as the first dog sank with a yelp. But the second and third were upon him, snapping and growling. A woman's cry curdled the blood of those who listened, Diggys laughing back in answer as he plunged forward on his horse into the mere. Those on the bank watched the encounter curiously.

"Good-morrow to you, brother! A fair summer rain this. I thank you for shielding my bride."

Cantator had swerved and struck swiftly back. There was a cry of hope from the lady; for Diggys, still in the saddle, reeled and fell forward on the pommel, while his horse stumbled. But the success was but a flash in the pan, for others came behind.

As Cantator, springing back to guard his lady, flung his right arm about her, Diggys righted himself, and, swerving aside, cut off the arm at the elbow. Then his adversary saw nothing but the little black-bearded face, heard nothing but the thick, coarse voice flinging insults at Amanda. His bleeding stump Cantator



A STRANGE PROCESSION MET THE EYES OF CURIOUS RYE THAT DAY

never heeded. At his full height he stood and challenged the rider, and with his left arm cut upon Diggys's face such a slit that he died like a man for whom the world is a huge jest. And when his enemy fell at his feet, Cantator knew that the end of love and revenge was fulfilled. As he sank at her feet he felt his lady's breath on his lips, and smiled as he swooned.

A strange procession met the eyes of curious Rye that day. Amanda lay across her father's horse, with floating hair and stained kirtle, in the midst of horsemen and footmen; and in the rear, tied to Diggys's empty stirrup, trailed Cantator, his head falling now this way, now that, with the deadly sickness of his wounds, and the whip-cuts of his captors across his face and back. Those who watched were frozen to silence during the passage of the cortège, and afterwards crept to their homes.

Early in the morning of the next day Amanda awoke, moaning, from her trance. She was in her own chamber. In the distance there was the tick-tack of trowel and pick. Its steady, rhythmical note soothed her deliciously. She moved drowsily and pillowed her hand on her cheek. "What o'clock is it?" she asked. "Nay, do not curtain the window. The light gladdens me."

The serving-woman turned away from the window, sobbing tearlessly as her mistress walked to the casement.

"What is the building there?" she asked. "There is John Rootes, the master-mason, and my father, and—ah!"

Turning, she fled as she shrieked down the stair, her long bedgown floating while she sped wild-eyed across the garden to the friary wall. The men there fell back at sight of her. Within a cavity built out from the wall and facing the window of his love stood Cantator, chained

upright. His eyes were closed; his lips moved rapidly.

"Bel Ami!" she cried. "It is I, Bel Ami. Do you not know me, Cantator?"

Into his one last look of love the boy put the passion and sacrifice of a lifetime. "My arms," he said, "are maimed and chained; I cannot hold you, my heart; I cannot bend my head. But I suffer for you, and I wait. Farewell."

The girl sprang forward and threw her slight arms about his knees, and again sprang up to kiss his wounds and his battered face. But strong hands held her back as the masons moved forward to their work.

While stone rose upon stone and shut out the gaping onlookers, Cantator seemed to lose himself once more in the garden. And now he did not walk alone, but with a girl whose head was crowned with roses, and she sang and gathered his lilies. His voice burst forth; all the songs of Provence and Normandy could not contain his ecstasy; then, in some strange way, hymns mingled with them, and he felt the bird-song of the girl melt into his, so that they mingled in one great chant of thanksgiving for the beauty of the world, for the splendor of the morning, the graces of the night, the love of men and women. Higher rose the song, till it drowned the noise of the trowel and hammer, and the master-mason's face grew ashy while he worked. As a seal was set upon the last stone the girl fell to the ground laughing.

Some say she died there, picking at the wall with her little, fine hands, and others that she lived on in the house of her father by the Land Gate of Rye for many years, and that while she walked alone, a spectre of a woman in torn clothes, she sang a French love-ditty, to which a voice answered her from the lane by the wall, always with the same refrain: "Ton amant est ta douleur."



Portrait of Sarah Bache

SARAH, the only daughter of Benjamin Franklin, inherited her father's force of character and sound sense. She visited England with her father, and at once captivated Hoppner, then entering upon his brilliant career as a fashionable portrait-painter, under the protection of the Prince of Wales. Hoppner urged her to sit to him for this portrait, and when it was completed, presented it to her as a mark of esteem. Dr. Franklin allowed his daughter to accept the gift from Hoppner, but in order to make return, gave the painter a commission to paint the portrait of her English husband, Richard Bache.

The vigorous personality and fresh color of Mrs. Bache appealed to the painter, whose portraits always show a strong sense of color, though the treatment of the white scarf and head-dress, while simple and broad, lacks the fluency to be found in some of his later portraits. White is seen to be the dominant note of the portrait, relieved against a dark background, and this white in its handling is mellow and pleasing.

The portrait of Mrs. Bache has remained a family possession ever since it was painted until last year, when it was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum for the Catharine Wolf Collection from the income of the fund left for the purpose of making additions to this collection.

Mr. Wolf has worthily translated the qualities of the original, and while we miss the color of the painter, he has shown us the delight which the painter felt in his work—which, after all, is the very soul and essence of art.

W. STANTON HOWARD



PORTRAIT OF SARAH BACHE BY HOPPNER

Engraved on Wood by Henry Wolf from the original Painting