

SAINT MARGARET CLITHEROW

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IN THE year 1574 there was living at No. 36 The Shambles, York, the young wife of a butcher. Her name was Margaret Clitherow, and in very many respects she was like hundreds of other tradesmen's wives. True, she was of quite outstanding beauty but, that apart, there was very little about Mrs Clitherow to mark her out from her neighbours at a casual glance. She was a good mother, rather on the strict side with her children and servants, but, for all that, witty and sociable, popular with her neighbours and with the customers who came for their meat to her husband's shop. An able business woman, she was nevertheless noted for her fair dealing both in the shop when she sold retail and with the other butchers of the town for whom her husband, John Clitherow, acted as wholesaler. She had now been married just three years and there is no indication that they had not been years full of happiness for the young wife and mother, and for her family.

Margaret fitted perfectly into the colourful life of the noisy, busy street in which she lived. Even today the Shambles retains a great deal of its old-world character. Four hundred years ago, it must have reflected in miniature the many-sided, forceful, robust life of the country as a whole. For the Elizabethan age was, in many ways, one of the most brilliant in our history: yet behind the glittering facade it presents to the student of literature, music and the arts of display—and we should never forget this—there lurked always the grim spectre of bloody religious persecution carried on with a fiendish cruelty unsurpassed in the annals of any European country. The age of Shakespeare was also the age of Richard Topcliffe, master torturer and lecherous sadist, of Walsingham, the arch-spy, and of a host of vicious almost sub-human agents whom they directed. To use an all too familiar modern parallel, we might describe the late sixteenth century as the 'fascist' period of English history, and indeed there is more than a superficial resemblance between the Germany of Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler and the country ruled over by Elizabeth. The brilliant sunshine of the national achievement has led many historians to neglect the darker shadows of Elizabethan policy, but the shadows were there and they were to fall across many otherwise happy English homes. One of those homes was to be that of Margaret Clitherow.

The future martyr was born about the year 1553, the daughter of a prosperous wax chandler, Thomas Middleton, who was a citizen of York and lived in the Davygate. In that year, Queen Mary Tudor was beginning her work of reuniting England to the Holy See, healing the schism first created by her father, Henry VIII. Five years only were given her for the task. The vast majority of the English people, during the years when Margaret was growing up, were Catholic in name at least; but many of them were prepared to accept a change of religion as coming with a change in the government of the country.

The Nation Spiritually Asleep

Lack of proper instruction seems to have been at the root of the trouble. They just did not understand what being a Catholic involved, because their parents before them had not understood. There were, it is true, notable exceptions; in parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, in Northumberland and in the Bishopric of Durham, and in isolated 'pockets' elsewhere, there did exist a more virile Catholic life, whilst in a few years' time Oxford University was to supply leaders of first-rate quality. But, on the whole, even granting that there had not been any large-scale deliberate abandoning of Catholic doctrine, the English nation was spiritually asleep in that generation upon which the first challenges came.

There were some for whom religion had become a pure formality, or at best an incoherent tangle of popular but un-theological and unessential devotions. There was, for example, still reverence for the Mass because it was traditional, but there was no widespread understanding of it as a Sacrifice at which the parishioners assisted. The Elevation, for instance, was given a much greater prominence than was the Consecration which preceded it. There is reason to believe, from such popular books of devotion as survive, that at Mass a position had almost been reached in which the priest carried on his devotions at one end of the church, while the more devout of his parishioners went on with theirs at the other!

Margaret's parents, then, belonged to a generation which—it needs to be said—had on the whole derived little fruit

from the example of a St Thomas More or that of the heroic Carthusians who defied Henry VIII. The diocese of Rochester, again, had a saint for its bishop: *not one of his clergy so far as we know, followed Fisher!* Mary Tudor, as we have said, was allowed but five years to re-establish England as a Catholic country. Small wonder that she failed.

The 'New Religion'

Margaret Middleton was only about five when Queen Mary died and the religious settlement of her successor Elizabeth swept away Catholicism in favour of a State Church in which Papal authority was once more repudiated and the Mass forbidden. Yet, impermanent as had been the results of Mary's work, on the whole, the restoration of Catholicism had at least stiffened the backs of the higher clergy. Only one bishop could be found—Kitchin of Llandaff—who would acquiesce in Elizabeth's Church settlement. There had been only one bishop who resisted Henry VIII.

Among the lower clergy who refused to accept the 'New Religion' was Mr Henry More, the Middletons' parish priest. Yet, in spite of his example, the family decided to swim with the tide, and their little daughter was brought up a Protestant. But the Protestantism of those early years of Elizabeth's reign does not seem to have been—among the ordinary folk at least—very deeply rooted. It was cheaper and easier to 'conform' and go to the Parish Church as the law demanded; nevertheless, Catholic doctrine and practice survived to an enormous extent. (There are evident traces of this in the plays of Shakespeare.) It was, therefore, not surprising that when Thomas Middleton died, he left money to the poor of York on condition that they prayed for the repose of his soul.

Margaret herself, however, was the only one of Thomas Middleton's children to be reconciled to the Church.* When she married John Clitherow in 1571 she was, like her husband, a Protestant. Why Clitherow was a Protestant is rather a puzzle. His relatives were staunch Catholics and one of his brothers became a priest. But he was a hard-headed business man and had become—if we may argue from his assessment for poor relief—one of the wealthiest men in York. He was also a social climber and a candidate for municipal honours; and in those days that meant sworn acceptance of the Queen's Supremacy over the Church. Before he married, he was already a 'bridgmaster', i.e., one of a committee of York citizens responsible for the upkeep of the bridge over the Ouse. More surprising, at first sight, is the fact that in 1572, a year after his marriage, he was one of a number of men—their modern counterpart would be 'special constables'—sworn in to assist in hunting out Catholic suspects. Why appoint to such a post a man known to be of a Catholic family? Was it that John Clitherow angled for the appointment as a means of proving his attachment to Protestant principles?

This is extremely unlikely in view of his subsequent history. He must, for example, have suspected that his wife was having Mass said in the house, and he must have known where his eldest son had gone to receive his education. Can it be that he was a rather amiable individual with no very deep religious convictions and that, at the request of the Council of the North** to appoint somebody to do this very distasteful work, his Protestant fellow citizens elected him because he was not likely to be over-zealous in doing it? In view of the great sympathy felt later in York for Margaret, this is by no means an impossible explanation. In 1574 he reached what may well have been the summit of his social ambitions. He became a Chamberlain of York, and was thus entitled to regard himself as a gentleman!

The year 1574 was the turning point for his wife also. In this year she became a Catholic. We can only surmise the reasons which made her take this decisive step at this particular moment. It certainly was not through any course of reading because, shrewd business woman though she was, Margaret Clitherow could neither read nor write. What is more likely is that, through the members of her husband's family, she came into contact with one of the Douai * *But a son of her brother Thomas apparently became a Catholic at about the age of eighteen, and some years later a priest. Gillow (Bibliographical Dictionary of the English Catholics v, 12) identifies him with the Robert Middleton who was martyred in 1601 at Lancaster.*

** *The Council of the North was erected by Henry VIII after the Catholic revolt of 1536 without any Act of Parliament. In Elizabeth's reign the Council was particularly active in hunting out opponents of the Queen's religious policy missionaries then beginning to arrive secretly in England. This is supported by the fact that her brother-in-law, William Clitherow, went to Douai College several years later, to study for the priesthood.*

The Priests from Douai

What is certain is that only two years after her conversion Margaret Clitherow was actively working with these priests from Douai. What manner of men were they? The question is relevant here, since it was work for the Faith in association with them that brought Margaret to her death.

Their story goes back to a Lancashire man, William Allen. If any man changed the history of England it was this priest! He it was who, seeing clearly that Catholicism in England was, in the first ten years of Elizabeth's reign, slowly dying, set himself to the task of renewing its life. At the close of Mary's reign, Allen, then 26 years of age, held the important post of Principal of St Mary's Hall, in the University of Oxford. For two years after the Act of 1559 that restored the Royal Supremacy he managed to retain this post. But for a Catholic of William Allen's calibre the situation had become intolerable and he resigned and went overseas to the Catholic University of Louvain. Ill health, however, forced him to return to England after a short stay.

It speaks volumes for the pitiable state into which Catholicism was fast falling that, even in his native Lancashire, he was under the necessity of rebuking certain prominent Catholics—and their number appears to have been unpleasantly large—who sought to evade the penalties of the law by publicly professing the State religion whilst practising the Catholic Faith in secret.

Already a plan was forming in Allen's mind. William Cecil, Elizabeth's chief minister, was a shrewd man who realized to the full the dangers of provoking resistance to the 'New Religion'. Catholicism in England, shut off by his legal manoeuvres from all possibility of those acts its life demanded, could be allowed to die a natural death—and events seemed to be playing right into Cecil's hands. In the first ten years of Elizabeth's reign, in the situation that was so largely of Cecil's devising, a listless fatalism seems to have come upon the English Catholics. The heiress-presumptive to the English throne, Mary Queen of Scots, was a Catholic; and since the principle that a ruler had the right to determine the official faith of his subjects was coming to be held pretty widely throughout Europe, what was more natural than that people badly instructed in their faith should passively await their deliverance at the hands of a Catholic sovereign?

Cecil had, however, no intention of ever suffering a Catholic sovereign on the English throne: even before the last despairing gesture of the Rising of the North in 1569 he had laid his plans for thwarting a Catholic succession. But William Allen had also been making plans. He saw clearly that what his co-religionists most needed was priests, priests to instruct them, to administer the sacraments to them, to advise them in their difficulties, and, above all, priests to continue offering the Sacrifice of the Mass. These priests were to be missionary priests, well educated and specially trained to confute the often subtle arguments of the heretics. Cecil had thought that he had only to wait until, in the course of time, the priests ordained or reconciled to the Church before Elizabeth's accession—Queen Mary's priests, as they were called—died out to see English Catholicism die out with them. Allen was to confound such forecasts utterly.

William Allen's Plan

He returned to the Low Countries in 1565 and shortly afterwards was ordained priest, and then, with the help of a number of Englishmen, exiles like himself for conscience' sake, he began active preparations for the establishment of a Catholic Seminary at Douai in Flanders for the training of priests who would work secretly in England for the conservation and spread of the Catholic Faith.

These priests began to arrive in England in 1574 and almost immediately their influence was felt. By 1580 there were a hundred of them at work in the country. Considering the difficulties of their task, they were extremely well organized, meeting the intricate Elizabethan secret service for the suppression of the Catholic Faith with a resistance movement that was no less skilfully planned. Of all the forces employed by the Counter Reformation in England, these Douai priests easily hold pride of place. Their methods were to travel from place to place in disguise, to offer Mass, administer the sacraments of the Church and to preach the Faith, not only to those devout Catholics who had never abandoned it and whose homes provided them with their Mass centres, but also to those who had made a show of conforming to the State religion and to non-Catholics. And the measure of their success with the latter is the extreme ferocity of the laws now passed by the Government for their extermination, laws which reached the utmost

limit of savagery in the terrible Act of 1585.

This made it an offence, punishable with the death of a traitor, for any priest to remain in the country, and an offence, punishable by hanging, for whoever sheltered or aided a priest. Most of the Elizabethan martyrs suffered in the eighteen years that followed this Act of 1585; one hundred and forty-six of them in all were executed, and of this number one hundred and twenty-three were convicted under the Act of 1585. For the Government was seriously alarmed at the success of the Catholic reply, especially because, after 1580, the efforts of the Douai priests were reinforced by those of the Society of Jesus and because there was abundant evidence that both secular priests and Jesuits were receiving help from a considerable body of lay people, some of them (like Margaret Clitherow herself) recent converts to Catholicism. Of those brought to their death by the Act of 1585, twenty-seven were lay people; among them was Mrs Clitherow.

It was on March 14th, 1586, that Margaret was put on trial, her precise offence being 'that she had harboured and maintained Jesuits and Seminary priests, traitors to the Queen's majesty and her laws and that she had heard Mass and such like'.

Margaret's Work for the Faith

What are the facts behind this charge? Our earliest clue to Margaret's activities comes ten years previously, just two years after her conversion. Her name is found in a list of recusants who were in prison in 1576. A recusant was one who refused to take part in heretical worship, and that seems to have been, in the eyes of the law, the sum total of offences provable against her at that period; Margaret, well aware that she was being watched, took precautions. Nor could subsequent arrests in the ten years that followed reveal anything which might bring her before the law on the capital charge. Yet it is obvious from the account given of her spiritual adviser, Mr John Mush, one of the Douai priests whom she helped, that for years her house was one of the chief Mass centres in York.

Because of the secrecy which naturally surrounded the movements of the persecuted clergy, it is hard to arrive at any estimate of the number of priests Margaret helped in various ways. We do know that quite a large number of priests were at work in the York district. According to Mush, Margaret, whenever possible, liked to have some priest in the house so that she could begin her day with Mass, and he seems to imply that this was fairly frequent. There is a saying of hers which he quotes, which incidentally reveals the quality of Margaret's faith

'There is a war and a trial in God's Church and therefore if I cannot do my duty without peril and dangers, yet by God's grace I will not be slacker for them. If God's priests dare venture themselves to my house, I will never refuse them.' Furthermore, it was apparently quite common for her to receive Holy Communion twice a week, and we can infer from the detailed account of her spirituality which her director has left that she consulted him fairly regularly. But after all, perhaps the best testimony to Margaret's activities is that of Hurleston, one of the members of the Council of the North most actively concerned in her prosecution. According to him, Margaret Clitherow's work for the Faith marked her out as 'the only woman in the North parts.'

Her House is Searched

What actually induced the Council of the North to begin proceedings against her in 1586 was the fact that two years earlier she had broken the law in a manner which was almost bound to come to light sooner or later. She had sent her eldest son abroad to Douai College, there to complete his education and to study for the priesthood.

What did John Clitherow, her husband, think about such a decisive step as this? As already noticed, he is, throughout Margaret's story, a puzzling and—if truth be told—rather unheroic figure. For his own safety, he had been kept in the dark as much as possible regarding the use being made of his house. Yet he must surely have suspected something; more especially as Margaret not only used the house as a Mass centre, but maintained there a Catholic schoolmaster, a Mr Stapleton, to teach her own children, and also those of her Catholic neighbours. In itself this was a most serious offence, for, according to the law, not even a Protestant might teach unless he had publicly taken the oath of the Queen's Supremacy in matters of religion and had been specially licensed as a teacher by the bishop. All this points to the conclusion that, although the summons in 1586 to appear before the Council of the North must have been a shock to John Clitherow, it could hardly have come as a complete surprise.

While he was out of the house, endeavouring to explain to the representatives of the Council sitting in York Castle the reasons for his son's absence, the sheriffs arrived to search his house. As it happened, there was then a priest—possibly Mr Mush himself—in the house, for despite the imminent danger, Mass had actually been offered that very morning. It speaks well, however, for Margaret's careful planning for such emergencies, that the priest escaped (probably through the house next door) without his presence being so much as suspected. It is possible that part of the plan of escape was that the schoolmaster should cover the retreat of the priest and if necessary divert the hunters from their principal quarry.

At all events, this was what Stapleton actually did. He must have been warned at the same time as the priest, but remained in his schoolroom upstairs with his pupils. Margaret and her maids were detained downstairs, while the upper parts of the house were searched. One of the searchers burst into the schoolroom, saw Stapleton and assumed he had cornered a priest. Slamming the door to prevent the supposed priest's escape, he called for help, but the interval was quite sufficient to enable the intrepid schoolmaster to make his own getaway—tradition says, through a window. Only the schoolchildren remained to confront the pursuivants. Yet here was to be the vulnerable point in all Mrs Clitherow's stratagems.

Her own children, in all probability, would not be easily intimidated by threats. Margaret had brought them up the hard way, and their subsequent history proves how much of her own indomitable spirit she had instilled into them. Nor can we well believe that their schoolfellows from the Shambles area would be easily scared. But there was one boy present, a foreigner from Flanders, who had not been in England for very long and who was so obviously terrified out of his wits by the raid that the pursuivants selected him as the most likely to yield to threats. Fear of a beating induced him to betray the carefully-guarded secrets of the Mass House.

Vestments, Mass breads and all the other appurtenances of the altar were quickly discovered—proof positive at last of Margaret Clitherow's activities as a harbourer of priests. Nothing further was required. She and her servants were arrested on the spot. That was the last the Clitherow children saw of their mother; yet she had trained them well! Despite repeated attempts to make them do so—attempts which included, on more than one occasion, brutal ill-usage—no child of Margaret Clitherow's ever abandoned the Catholic Faith. Henry and William became priests, while Anne became a nun. No more fitting tribute to an heroic martyr mother can well be conceived.

Following her arrest, Margaret was, the same day, taken before the Council. For at least seven hours they badgered and browbeat her, but all to no effect. Not merely was she unafraid; she was positively happy! If her questioners hoped—and it is rather to their credit than the reverse if they did—that she would break down, admit her guilt; and by making a recantation, enable them to spare her life, they were sadly disappointed. Her whole attitude, in fact, infuriated them. Even the news of her husband's arrest did not shake her, and all the discomfited authorities could do was to order her committal to York Castle, where she was confined in a cell apart from her husband.

Margaret in Prison

She remained alone in this cell for the best part of two days, but on Saturday, March 12th, she was joined by a friend, Mrs Anne Tesh, who was likewise accused of harbouring priests and whose character in many ways resembles that of Margaret herself. It is, in fact, possible that she had had something to do with Margaret's own conversion to the Church, but, at all events, her own utterly fearless Catholicism, her outspokenness and her gaiety made her an ideal prison companion. It is quite probable that they were placed together deliberately in order that their conversation might be listened to and further evidence gleaned thereby of the activities of the 'resistance movement' in which both were so prominent. If this were so, the Council were again disappointed; the two friends were in the best of spirits and kept up such a continual round of merriment—making a joke, for instance, of the very inconveniences of their cell—that Margaret at length thought that they were becoming altogether too boisterous and were losing some of the merit of their imprisonment!

After a few days John Clitherow was brought to her cell for what was to be their last meeting. This was no concession to humane feelings on the part of the authorities, but part of a scheme to secure evidence, for the interview took place in the presence of the jailer. That this is no fanciful supposition is clear from the rumours that the Council of the North were at pains to encourage in the town.

The story was put about that Mrs Clitherow had been arrested on the charge of harbouring two priests in particular, Francis Ingleby and John Mush. Ingleby was already in prison, but as a suspect only, for no definite evidence against him was as yet forthcoming, while Mush, although still at large, was very much a 'wanted' man. There was, so far as can be gathered, nothing known to the authorities to connect either priest with the Mass centre in the Shambles, but no doubt the object with which the rumours were spread was to surprise some unwary friend of Mrs Clitherow into an unguarded statement that would definitely connect one or the other, or even both, with her. It must be remembered that both the technique of espionage and the distortion of evidence had reached a very developed stage indeed in the practice of Elizabethan government and so Margaret was deliberately kept informed of these rumours in a vain attempt to trap her into some admission. She was, however, too intelligent to be caught by such subterfuges.

Nor was the terror of the gallows more successful. When she was told that her indictment was to be according to the terrible new statute of 1585, she laughed in the messenger's face and offered him a fig as a reward for his good news! This was no passing piece of bravado. On the following Monday, while she awaited the summons to her trial, she was joking with Mrs Tesh and said to her: "Yet before I go, I will make all my brethren and sisters on the other side of the hall merry": and looking forth of the window towards them—they were five and thirty and might easily behold her from thence—she made a pair of gallows on her fingers and pleasantly laughed at them.'

For the thought of the gallows was nothing new to Margaret! For some years she had been making frequent pilgrimages by night to the Knavesmire, where stood the gallows on which the martyrs of York suffered, and so impressed was she by the holiness of the place, hallowed as it was by the blood of her fellow Catholics, that she always performed these pilgrimages barefoot. Often she would become so absorbed in her devotions that the little band of friends who accompanied her had to drag her away when the approaching dawn made a longer stay dangerous.

The joke about the gallows was, then, no piece of half-hysterical defiance: Margaret Clitherow could, like other heroic souls of her generation, see far beyond the terrible physical agonies suffered by the martyrs; horrible as was the execution, with all its revolting and degrading circumstances, it was yet the means by which the martyr made his greatest and most powerful appeal to God to deal favourably with the cause for which he had striven in his lifetime. Margaret's real Gethsemane was the realization that, for many of her fellow countrymen—even for her own husband—the example of the martyrs seemed to hold little profit. 'It grieveth' my heart,' she said of her husband, 'that he should so heinously offend God by slandering Catholics and the Catholic Church, whereby I fear me he shall more hardly come to God's grace and be a member of His Church.' Here we touch upon one of the most profound of all the mysteries of divine grace. Margaret asked of God her husband's conversion to the Catholic Faith. On her part she would—and did—offer everything that it was possible for her to offer. A true wife, an ideal mother, devoted to works of charity—she was a great visitor of prisons, and did much to alleviate the desperate material and spiritual needs of the poor Catholic prisoners—assiduous in the performance of many acts of personal penance, neither the example she gave him nor even her martyrdom availed to convert John Clitherow!

Margaret's care for the souls of others reveals her truly apostolic spirit: at her trial she was to give, in a totally unexpected way, the greatest proof of all this abounding charity. On Monday, March 14th, she faced her judges in the York Guild Hall. So eager was the Council of the North that she should not be acquitted that several members of it sat on the Bench with Rhodes and Clinch, the ordinary Assize judges. The reason for this was that it was well known beforehand that any sentence on Mrs Clitherow would be unpopular in York and there was just the possibility that the judges would be influenced by popular feeling. It was a tribute to Margaret Clitherow's popularity in York that she had not been betrayed by any of her Protestant neighbours: furthermore, although York was well known to the Council as a stronghold of the underground Catholic movement, but for the discovery of the Mass requisites and the secret hiding place for the priest in her house in the Shambles, it was possible that no evidence against Margaret would have been forthcoming for a long time, if at all. Clinch himself was to say that the whole of the case against her depended on the evidence of one child. All the more reason then, from the point of view of the Council, that there should be no last-minute hitch in the proceedings. There might never be such an opportunity again.

Her Trial

A crowded Guild Hall reflected the interest with which the whole city of York was following the case. When, the indictment having been read, Clinch asked the formal question: 'Margaret Clitherow, are you guilty of this indictment or not?' her reply was enigmatical: 'I know of no offence whereof I should confess myself guilty'. Upon Clinch instancing that she had 'harboured and maintained Jesuits and priests, enemies of Her Majesty', Margaret replied that she had never harboured or maintained traitors. This was of course a stock reply with loyal Catholics, and was not taken seriously, for Clinch, taking for granted her plea of 'Not Guilty', went on to a second formal question: 'How will you be tried?' The usual reply (and quite obviously that expected from the prisoner in this case) was: 'By God and the Country', i.e., by a jury of her fellow citizens. Instead she astonished (and puzzled) the court by her quiet reply: 'Having made no offence, I need no trial'. Nor would she budge from this position, to the manifest annoyance of Clinch. The most they could get from her was: 'If you say I have offended and must be tried, I will be tried by none but God and your own consciences'.

Clearly other means would have to be used, and the next stage of the proceedings, considering that the setting was a court of law, was positively ludicrous. The Mass requisites which were found in her secret room in the Shambles were brought into court and 'two low fellows', donning the vestments, began to burlesque the Elevation at Mass, saying, as they held up the altar breads, 'Behold thy Gods in whom thou believest'. Margaret was mockingly asked to say how she liked the vestments, a taunt to which she made answer, 'I like them well, if they were on the backs of those that know how to use them in God's honour as they were made.'

Equally futile was the attempt to make her confess that she had been guilty of idolatry. Clinch asked her: 'In whom believe you?' and received the obvious reply: 'I believe in God'. 'In what God?' queried Clinch. The reply he received soon put an end to this stratagem: 'I believe in God the Father, in God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; in these Three Persons I fully believe, and that by the passion, death and merits of Christ Jesus I must be saved'. 'You say well' was the only reply Clinch could make!

Again the attempt was made to get her to submit herself to the judgment of a jury, so that the trial could proceed. Clinch assured her that the only evidence against her was that of the Flemish boy: she had no reason, therefore, to fear a jury, but if she refused to be so tried (since in any case she must be brought before the judgment of the law) she would be 'guilty and accessory' of her own death. An utterly absurd argument which convinced nobody; it was not likely to shake the confidence of a woman such as Mrs Clitherow! Nor could she be induced to implicate her husband, for she insisted that he had no share in what she had been doing.

Finally, Clinch, his patience exhausted, made a last attempt to induce her to plead. If she remained obstinate, the law reserved for her an extremely painful death. 'God's will be done', replied Margaret with a smile, 'I think I may suffer any death for this good cause.' Clinch and his companion justice, Rhodes (an extremely coarse individual who appears to have harboured some resentment against Margaret because her trial demonstrated how completely the justices were under the control of the Council of the North), were beside themselves with rage. So was Hurleston, who from the Bench watched the case for the Council. He so far forgot his position as to shout out in the court: 'It is not for religion that thou harbourest priests, but for harlotries'. The Council seized on this quite gratuitous and foul slander and circulated it round York as if it had appeared in evidence.

Why did Margaret Clitherow refuse to plead and undergo the normal procedure of a trial by jury? When all the circumstances of the case are considered, there can be only one answer. She wished to save as many people as possible_ from the guilt of sharing in her death.* To begin with, there was always the possibility that her own children might be forced to give evidence against her. It was possible, too, that witnesses might be suborned and, in all likelihood, perjure themselves at the instigation of the Council; in any case she did not wish a jury of her own Protestant fellow citizens of York to share with the judges, however indirectly, the responsibility for her death. But the alternative to pleading was indeed terrible!

* *Lingard (History of England, 4th ed., London, 1838, p 452) States that she refused to plead guilty, because she knew that no sufficient proof could be brought against her, or not guilty, because she deemed such a plea equivalent to a falsehood!*

The Terrible " Peine Forte et Dure "

At the present day, as all know, a person who has been indicted must stand his trial before a jury of twelve who deliver a verdict based on the facts of the case. But in 1586 an indicted person was not so tried unless he consented to this form of trial. The consent, however, could be and on occasion was extorted from him by torture and thus his trial made possible. If when asked, 'How will you be tried?' he refused to answer, 'By God and my country', he was pressed under heavy weights until he either answered or died. This was the terrible *peine forte et dure*.

Did Margaret understand the precise penalty to which Clinch alluded in his efforts to make her place her case before a jury? It is doubtful whether at this stage of the proceedings she did. Clinch seems to have been of the opinion that she had not fully understood him in court, for he had her taken back to prison, not indeed to the cell in the Castle which she had shared with Mrs Tesh, but to a smaller and rougher prison built on a bridge spanning the Ouse. That night she received an unexpected visitor, a preacher named Wigginton, who urged her—but in vain—either to change her religion or to plead before a jury; perhaps he was sent by the timorous Clinch. We have no means of knowing now why he came, but on the following day he was to electrify the court by a dramatic intervention.

On Tuesday, March 5th, at eight in the morning, Margaret Clitherow faced her accusers for the last time. 'How say you yet?' asked Clinch. 'Yester-night we passed you over without judgment, which we might then have pronounced against you if we would: we did it not, hoping that you would be something conformable, and put yourself to the country, otherwise you must needs have the law. We see nothing why you should refuse; here be but small witness against you, and the country will consider your case.'

But Margaret was not to be taken in by Clinch's deceptive smoothness of speech and was ready with her reply: 'Indeed, I think you have no witness against me but children, which with an apple and a rod you may make to say what you will'. Again she refused to take her case before a jury and engaged in a spirited dialogue with the judges as to whether Catholic priests were 'virtuous men, sent to save our souls or contemptible traitors to their country'. The court was in an uproar and it was at this moment that Clinch again warned her of the horrible fate that awaited her if she continued to refuse to plead.

Her Sentence

Suddenly there was an interruption and above the babel of voices rose that of the preacher Wigginton. 'My Lord, take heed of what you do', he shouted. ' You sit here to do justice: this woman's case is touching life and death: you ought not, either by God's law or man's, to judge her to die upon the slender witness of a boy; nor unless you have two or three sufficient men of very good credit to give evidence against her.' 'I may do it by law', replied Clinch. 'By what law?' countered Wigginton. He could, in the circumstances of 1586, have asked no more vital question and Clinch's defiant reply, 'By the Queen's law', drew from him the telling rejoinder, 'That may well be, but you cannot do it by God's law'. The thrust went right home: alone of those on the bench, Clinch seems to have been troubled in conscience and he renewed his endeavours to make the prisoner plead.

But Rhodes was less impressionable, and, before his angry 'Why stand we here all day about this naughty, wilful woman?' his brother judge capitulated so far as to pass sentence conditionally. 'Margaret Clitherow, if you will not put yourself to the country, this must be your judgment: you must return from whence you came, and there in the lowest part of the prison be stripped naked, laid down, your back upon the ground, and as much weight laid upon you as you are able to bear, and so to continue three days without meat or drink, except a little barley bread and puddle water, and the third day to be pressed to death, your hands and feet tied to posts, and a sharp stone under your back.'

This frightful sentence left Margaret completely unmoved. Her only comment was: 'If this judgment be according to your conscience, I pray God to send you a better judgment before Him. I thank God heartily for this.' To Clinch's urging that it was still possible to save her life, if only she would listen to reason and take her case before a jury, she replied that she was well aware of what she was doing, and as for the suggestion that she was needlessly throwing away her life, when she had a husband and children to care for, all they could draw from her was: 'I would to God that my husband and children might suffer with me for so good a cause'. When John Clitherow heard of his wife's sentence, 'he fared like a man out of his wits, and wept so violently that blood gushed out of his nose in great quantity, and said, "Alas, will they kill my wife? Let them take all I have and save her, for she is the best wife in all England,

and the best Catholic also." After her sentence, during the ten days that elapsed before her execution, Margaret was confined in the old prison on the bridge over the Ouse. Her husband was, however, released, but ordered to leave the city for some days. She herself was continually pestered by Protestant ministers, sent by the Council.

Why should they, at this stage, when seemingly they had got their wish in securing her condemnation, trouble with their prisoner any further? Because they still preferred if it could possibly be brought about, to be able to announce Margaret's abandonment of her Faith: that would be the greatest triumph of all. They could then make a great show of magnanimity, spare her life and release themselves from a very awkward situation. For she was still immensely popular in York. The lengths that they were prepared to go to discredit her can be seen in the utterly fantastic tales they circulated in York in a vain attempt to discredit her character: she had been unfaithful to her husband, she had sinned with priests, she had neglected to provide decent food for her family while she kept priests in luxury, and so forth. But there was also a secondary reason for these attempts. Margaret's friends were active on her behalf: they had hopes that if only they could reach the ear of the Queen herself, a reprieve might be secured. And as a means to obtain the necessary stay of execution, they entered on her behalf the plea that she was pregnant and therefore could not be put to death until after the birth of her child. There was, it seems, every chance of this plea succeeding, in which case all the efforts of the Council would have been in vain. As it was, it was Hurleston who finally settled Margaret's fate. He declared to Clinch: 'She is the only woman in the north parts, and if she is suffered to live there will be more of her order without any fear of law . . . Let her have law according to the judgment passed, for I will take it upon my conscience that she is not with child.'

The Last Painful Scene

We are fortunate in that Mr. Mush, Margaret's biographer, has left us a complete account of the manner in which she spent her last hours, his source of information for the most of it being a Mrs. Yoward, a Protestant, who with her husband was confined for debt in the same prison and who, if not actually present at the last painful scene, was with her during her last night. The account describes how Mrs Clitherow rose at midnight, took off her clothes and, dressing herself in the long linen robe she had specially prepared for her execution (the thought of the nakedness enjoined by the sentence worried her considerably), knelt in prayer for several hours. About three in the morning she again arose and lay down on the hearth. Margaret's ever practical mind was busying itself with the details of her death. She had already sent her hat to her husband 'in sign of her loving duty to him as to her head'; her shoes and stockings she sent to her twelve-year-old daughter Anne, 'signifying that she should serve God and follow in her steps'.

When the sheriffs came for her at eight o'clock they found her ready. The Toll Booth where she was to die was but a few yards away, but an immense crowd had gathered to see her pass. With the sheriffs were a Protestant minister, some minor officials and the four sergeants whose task it was to carry out the execution. The sergeants were so loth to undertake their duties that they hired four beggars to act in their stead. Four women and three or four workmen were also present. In the Toll Booth Margaret knelt in prayer. Led by the minister, the officials announced that they would pray with her. But on the question of prayer with heretics Margaret was adamant: 'I will not pray with you, nor shall you pray with me: neither will I say *Amen* to your prayers, nor shall you to mine'. They told her to pray for the Queen. She began to pray aloud, first for the Catholic Church, the Pope and the Cardinals, then for all Christian princes. At this there was an interruption, but she continued, 'And especially for Elizabeth, Queen of England, that God turn her to the Catholic faith, and after this mortal life she may receive the blessed joy of heaven. For I wish as much good to Her Majesty's soul as to my own.'

The last grim preparations were complete. Dressed only in the long linen robe she had made, she lay down on the floor, a sharp stone was placed under her back, a door was laid over her, her hands were tied to two stakes in the floor. She was told to ask the Queen's forgiveness and to pray for her. 'I have prayed for her', she replied. They urged her to ask her husband's forgiveness, to which she replied: 'If ever I offended him (but for my conscience), I ask him forgiveness.' They laid weights upon her, 'seven or eight hundred-weights at least'. 'Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! have mercy upon me!' were the only words the bystanders heard her utter. And in about a quarter of an hour she had gained the Martyr's Crown.

Margaret Clitherow was canonized on October 25th, 1970.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is a *Life and Martyrdom of Mrs. Margaret Clitherow* by John Mush, a Douai priest who was her spiritual director. There are two manuscript versions of this life: both have been printed. The later of the two MSS was edited by W. Nicholson in 1849, the earlier by Fr J. Morris, S.J., in 1877. Fr Morris's edition was reprinted in 1891, together with many other documents bearing on Margaret Clitherow's life and times, under the title *The Catholics of York under Elizabeth*, and has been drawn upon freely for this account.
