

THE MARTYRS' FRIENDS

The Work of the Laity

BY

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THE apostolate of the Missionary Priests would have been impossible without the heroic co-operation of the lay Catholics. As in the early Church, the faith lived in the houses of the faithful. No less than eighty laymen and women—a quarter of the whole—find a place in the calendar of the martyrs. But there were many who suffered a slow martyrdom in prison, under conditions inconceivable to us, and whose sufferings have received scant recognition. The names of ten layfolk who died in prison are among the *Dilati* (those whose causes have been postponed through lack of evidence), but this list is woefully incomplete. There were many others who spent most of their lives in prison, but were let out to die. Richard Wenster, the Yorkshire schoolmaster, and Francis Tregian were there for more than thirty years. Thomas Pound, after a similar ordeal, was sentenced in his old age to lose his ears for protesting against the martyrdom of Laurence Bailey in 1604. The sentence was commuted, but he had his ears nailed to the pillory in London and Lancaster. Roland Jenks the printer was sentenced to be nailed to the pillory by his ears and to release himself by cutting them off with his own hand. Yet none of these are martyrs properly so-called.

Perhaps the best way to bring home to us the sufferings of the lay Catholics is to follow the fortunes of a single family, with the proviso that such an account, far from being exceptional, could be matched from almost any county in England.

The Bellamys lived at Uxenden Hall in the parish of Harrow-on-the-Hill. They owned a second house at Preston in the same parish, a 'garden house' in the Barbican, and another at Kentish Town 'near Pancras church by Holborn Fields'. In September 1581, when Edmund Campion lay in the Tower, broken with torture, awaiting his trial and martyrdom, the celebrated Douai professor, Richard Bristow, having contracted consumption, returned to seek a cure in his native air. It was a dangerous time

to give shelter to a priest, especially to one whose famous *Motives* had so incensed the government, but Bristow was received at Uxenden Hall. His native air was unavailing. He died in the house of Jerome Bellamy on October 14th and was secretly buried in Harrow church by another priest. Jerome's wife was Catherine, daughter of William Page, also of Harrow, a recusant who was to spend many years in prison and a relative of Francis Page, S.J., who was martyred in 1602. Jerome died before 1586 and his widow ran the house at Uxenden. Her eldest son Richard lived at Preston, and her second son Robert at Kentish Town. It was in this last-named house that William Thompson, alias Blackburn, was captured while saying Mass in January 1586, and he was martyred on April 20th. Robert Bellamy was sent to Newgate.

In August 1586 four of the conspirators in the Babington Plot were hidden for three days at Uxenden, and when the search grew too hot they removed to Richard's house at Preston, where they were captured. For this 'crime' Catherine was sentenced to death, but died in the Tower before the sentence could be carried out; her son Jerome was executed on September 21st with the conspirators, and another son (probably Bartholomew) was tortured to death in the Tower. There had been two priests at Uxenden at the time of the search, Fr Davies the chaplain and Fr Thomas Holford, but they managed to escape. In the following year, however, Holford was captured in Cheshire and brought up to London by two pursuivants. They spent the night at an inn in Holborn, where the pursuivants dined well but not wisely. At five the next morning Holford got up, pulled a yellow stocking on one leg and a white boot on the other and strode up and down the room. The pursuivants awoke out of a drunken slumber, eyed this strange spectacle and dropped to sleep again. Holford slipped quietly out of the inn, raced down Holborn hill, where he was taken for a madman, and reached Gray's Inn Fields. Here he removed his motley, and made his way barefooted over very rough country to Uxenden, arriving late at night having eaten nothing. 'His feet were galled with gravel stones', writes the chaplain there, Fr Davies, 'and his legs all scratched with briars and thorns (for he dared not keep to the highway), so that the blood flowed in some places. The gentleman and mistress of the house caused a bath of sweet herbs to be made, and their two daughters washed and bathed his legs and feet, after which he

went to bed.' Next year he was captured again and martyred at Clerkenwell on August 28th, 1588.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, Richard's brother Robert was languishing in Newgate. In the summer of 1586 an exile named George Stoker, who had lived for twenty years in France as a servant of the earl of Westmoreland, came over to fetch the earl's daughter. He was arrested and sent to the Tower and six months later, in February 1587, removed to Newgate. By then there was another recusant in Newgate, Thomas Heath of Fulham, who had better tell the story himself, as he told it in a letter to his brother-in-law, Anthony Standen:

'I thought it my part to make you acquainted with my misfortunes, which have happened by the cruelty of our English heretics, who, hunting me and my wife your sister from place to place and not permitting us to rest long anywhere quietly, at length spying their opportunity, in my absence, by the aid and assistance of Sir John Bowes, brake up my doors and put my wife into such a fear that within five days after she departed this world. After which they assessed all my goods for the Queen and laid wait for me, and not long after by great misfortune apprehended me. After divers examinations touching the Queen of Scots, the gentlemen that were executed for her cause [i.e. Babington and the other thirteen], and lastly touching the coming of the Spanish army, I was committed by warrant of seven of the council to Newgate, from whence I should have been carried to be condemned and after executed. But Mr Stoker, Mr Bellamy and myself joining together found means to break out of prison the Wednesday before the sessions which was on Friday following, which was but one week before Candlemas last part [1589].'

The three escaped prisoners made their way to Scotland and thence to Germany. In October 1589 Robert Bellamy set out from Cologne on pilgrimage to Rome, carrying letters of recommendation to English exiles at Milan, Florence, Bologna and Rome, including the letter just quoted. He had not gone far before he was stayed by the officials of Duke Casimir, Palgrave of the Rhine. The letters were discovered and copies were sent to England. One of the original letters, a Latin one, still survives (B. M. Lansd. 96 no. 16), and there are two copies of the others (ib. and S.P. 81/5, fol. 229). The English government requested his extradition, and we can imagine with what bitter disappointment

he returned under escort to England, to rot in the Marshalsea prison for another ten long weary years.

This was tribulation enough for one family, but the saddest trial was still to come. Richard Bellamy had two sons and three daughters. The youngest, Anne, who was probably one of those who bathed a martyr's feet, was imprisoned in the Gatehouse in 1592 for not coming to church. Here she came under the influence of that odious sadist and priest-hunter, Richard Topcliffe, who robbed her of her Faith and her virginity. He carried her off to Stanion (Northants) to the house of William Brudenell, who had married his sister, and then to his own house at Somerby (Lincs), where he married her to one of his disreputable underlings, a weaver's son named Nicholas Jones. She seems to have lost all sense of decency and stooped to the lowest crime of all: she agreed to betray her own family. She told Topcliffe of the priests who had been hidden in her father's house, and the location of all the hiding holes. Armed with this exact knowledge he visited Uxenden on June 20th 1592 and made the greatest capture of his career, the gentle Jesuit poet and martyr Robert Southwell, who was martyred on February 21st 1595. For the offence of harbouring him, Richard Bellamy and his wife were sent to the Gatehouse, his two sons to St Catherines, and his two remaining daughters, Audrey and Mary, to the Clink. The rigours of confinement to some extent broke their resistance. The parents and the sons promised to go to church and were released. The daughters, however, stood firm and though released gave no promises of conformity. In July 1594 they were visited at Uxenden by Richard Young the notorious persecutor, who found that Catherine and her two sons 'do go to church every Sunday' but would not take Communion. Her two daughters however did not go to church. They were examined also. Audrey said that 'her conscience will not give her to go to church, and (so far as she can remember) she was never at church in all her life-time, and refuseth also now to go, or to have conference'. Mary said she had not been to church these fourteen years, and was equally obstinate. The sequel was inevitable: they were immediately committed to the Gatehouse, where they are described as 'mere recusants, not dangerous'.

Later, both the parents repented of their frailty. Catherine died for her faith in the Marshalsea 'and the dead corpse was

brought to Harrow church and there buried obscurely and not according to the laws of this land or her majesty's injunctions'. In 1599 Richard was in prison again and his brother Robert was still languishing in the Marshalsea. Eventually Richard managed to cross to Flanders, where he died in abject poverty. One of the charges against him in 1599 may well serve as his epitaph.

'He hath spent all his living in relieving Jesuits and seminary priests..... Also the said Bellamy is and hath been for these twenty years and more a continual harbourer, lodger and host of recusants, their children and servants, keeping them at board, diet and lodging, so that there are few recusants in England of any account but have been succoured and lodged in his house, and neither these nor any of his own family have come to their parish church.'



A SONG OF FOUR PRIESTS

[The Song from which these stanzas are taken is found in a contemporary manuscript book of ballads in the British Museum (Add. 15225). It contains thirty-three stanzas, mostly concerned with the martyrs of the early Church. It has been printed in full by H. E. Rollins in *Old English Ballads*, p. 71. The four martyrs here commemorated are Robert Nutter of Clitheroe (Lancs.) who became a Dominican while a prisoner at Wisbech, Edward Thwinge, Thurstan Hunt and Robert Middleton, all of Yorkshire. The two first suffered 26th July, 1600; the others in March 1601, all four at Lancaster. The sheriff who attended the execution of the first pair wrote to the Earl of Salisbury: 'I do not doubt but much good will come by this little severity, as well to terrify the priests from those parts as for satisfaction of the people'. But the Song rather suggests that the effect was quite otherwise, and it shows us how the memory of the martyrs was kept alive, when it was impossible to publish any account of them.—G.A.]

A SONG OF FOURE PREISTES THAT SUFFERED DEATH AT LANCASTER

(To the tune of *Daintie come thou to me*)

O God of thy great might, strengthen our frailtie soe
Stoutlie to stand in feight, against our infernall foe.
They Campe in order standes, where many a Champion bould
In their victorious handes, eternall Triumph hould.