

FRUIT OF ADVERSITY¹

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LAST year the 24th of August fell on a Sunday. A plaintive convert coming away from High Mass that morning was heard to wonder whether the Church commemorated any saint on November 5th. He was told that in the English Calendar the day, occurring in the octave of All Saints, is appointed for the honouring of such relics as any parish church might possess: elsewhere it is sometimes observed as the Feast of the seventh-century Abbess of Chelles and sometimes as that of St Zachary. These facts were of course not what the enquirer really sought. His had been an oblique request for information about the Catholic retrospect on Gunpowder Plot. A full, probably an exhaustive answer to this demand has been given by Father Anstruther in his monograph *The Vaux of Harrowden*.

Beginning with the fifteenth-century Northamptonshire lawyers, father and six sons who all married money, Father Anstruther follows the history of the Vaux family and their collaterals the Treshams, through prosperity to affluence; through knighthood to baronage; through recusancy to ruin; through martyrdom to 1829 and the re-establishment of their title in 1835.

That the family survived the Armageddon of the Popish plot is, says Father Anstruther, partly due to the fact that in Northamptonshire there remained scarcely any Catholics to persecute.

In his introduction to this book Mr D. B. Wyndham Lewis observes: 'doubtless to the average reader the chapters on Gunpowder Plot are the most absorbing'. Absorbing these remarkable chapters certainly are, but that inconsequent figment the average reader is often attracted by more frivolous stuff. Long before he reaches the triangular lodge at Rushton, or the room over the church at Stoke Dry, or the house of Mr Young, dwelling at the sign of the Bell in Daventry, this reader's attention has been enthralled by such sumptuary lines as:

And Sir Nicholas Vaux wore a gown of purple velvet, pight with pieces of gold, so thick and massy that it was valued, in gold, besides the silk and fur, a thousand pounds.

This was at the marriage of Henry VIII with Katherine of Aragon, when Dame Elizabeth Vaux was lady-in-waiting to the bride and the king himself ordered vestments to be embroidered with his own and the Queen's emblems and given to Sir John Arundell for his church at Wardour, where they are worn to this day.

It is odd, after the record of such gorgeous outfitting, to find the young king, on a visit to Harrowden, 'making his customary offering at Mass, namely 6s. 8d.'

¹ *Vaux of Harrowden: A Recusant Family*. By Godfrey Anstruther, o.p. (R. H. Johns: Newport, Mon.; 25s.)

Presently the king's youngest sister Mary has to be escorted to France for her marriage with Louis XII. Sir Nicholas Vaux was one of her retinue. 'He believed', writes Father Anstruther, 'in travelling with the dignity befitting his rank and the occasion, and his idea of what was becoming was 40 horses in his train and all with scarlet cloths.'

So, for a season, the story goes on through a lavishment of gold that might have taxed Midas himself. Sir Nicholas Vaux adds to his lands; buys very young wards (four of these children were sent down from Northumberland in hampers) and cherishes them for the sake of the incomes these minors cannot claim till they come of age. He appears as an authentic character in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*; is made a baron; dies a fortnight later leaving by will his wife's best gown to one church, her second and third to two other churches and all his own gold and silver suits to the rest of the churches in his gift. His son, the second Lord Vaux, continued to keep the king's favour after the fall of Wolsey and escaped Thomas Cromwell's depredations. When his aunt, Lady Guildford, died at Blackfriars, she left him '£20 and my book of French with my hanging tapestry that hath his arms, and the carpet of woolwork that hath my arms in the midst'.

Up to this point the story has been lightened by this glitter of detail, but with the king's divorce the tale loses its frivolity and the Treshams begin to share the scene with their Harrowden cousins. Elizabeth succeeds Henry on the throne; the crime of recusancy is invented, and on Friday, April 13, 1576, Papist and Protestant brawl together in Kettering market and Sir Thomas Tresham becomes the central figure of the tale. The story of his ride on the eve of the Feast of the Annunciation in 1603 through Dunstable, up the Watling Street to Northampton and on to Kettering—stopping at each place to proclaim King James the First of England, reads like a press version of a longer, more tragic *How they carried the good news to Ghent*. Elizabeth was dead; James was no enemy to his mother's religion; the inscription '*post tenebras lux*' over the porch of a house that had sheltered Edmund Campion and Henry Garnet was now to be a promise fulfilled.

Two years later the tide of disillusionment washed the Powder Plot up the Thames to Westminster.

The bitterness of that disillusionment had been distilled from the brew of a persecution almost as silly as it was virulent. Extracting from actual police records details which make them live, as he has made the ornaments of dress give life to his tales of the first Lord Vaux and his family, our author saps deep of horrors and compels the fascinated reader to drink with him. At first the draughts are not too heavy. There is the tale of an old man who was denounced as the secret maker of beads for rosaries. Because he was allowed to work in an outhouse on a Mrs Bentley's estates

he was known as 'Mrs Bentley's chicken'. The official tale of the 'chicken-hunt' is quite fantastic in its statement of cause and consequences, its idiotic aim and gross procedure.

'We found Mrs Bentley in bed and after some search we found a chalice which she refused at first to open . . . wherein there was another chalice of silver, a crucifix of jet, a surplice, a Mass book and divers other vain things belonging thereto.'

Mrs Bentley's possession of these vain things cost Mr Bentley 'one thousand pounds to be paid to the Queen's use' and 'to be at Kettering, with his manservant at 6 of the clock the next morning and they two to continue as prisoners'.

Whether 'Old Man Chicken' was ever found we are not told, but Father Anstruther quotes the case as giving a fair picture of what every English Catholic had to be prepared during the reign of Good Queen Bess. They soon were prepared for much worse things.

The average reader knows all about rack and thumbscrew and the viler tortures that have always accompanied religious persecution, but he may not realise what life meant to fugitive priests shut up for days together in secret closets without ventilation or water or any outlet for drainage, until he comes to the page which tells how Henry Garnet and his companion were driven out of one such den by suffocation and the stench of their own offal. The police records further state that

'their better maintenance had been by a quill or reed through a little hole in the chimney that backed a hole into the gentlewoman's chamber and by that passage caudles, broths and warm drinks had been conveyed in unto them.'

The beads Father Anstruther has been stringing on the thread of his researches into the Harrowden story close in a circle round the bristling difficulties of the traditional version. The plot, says our author, was almost a family affair.

In this long, new and heavily documented narrative of historical fact the tall Yorkshireman—Fawkes but not a Vaux—with his dark hair, tawny beard and Spanish accomplices, hardly appears except as a cousin of a Father Cowley, once chaplain at Harrowden. Grant, Bates and Rockwood are tangled in the web that holds Tresham, Garnet, Digby and that Anne Vaux whose letters to Father Garnet written in orange-juice and 'her very own spelling' are almost the highest lights of the illumination cast on this frightening tale.

The Harrowden women who have appeared in fine raiment, or in their beds, as the wives and daughters of barons and the governesses of princes, now become heroines in their own right. Anne Vaux writing to Garnet in the Tower: 'to leve without you is not life but deathe now I see my los . . . o that I might see you'; Elizabeth Vaux, whose efforts to marry her

son Edward to Lord Suffolk's daughter form a tragi-comedy on the rim of the vortex; Eleanor Vaux flitting with her sister from town to town the better to give refuge to hunted Jesuits; collecting relics and defying search-warrants; Joyce Vaux, a Carmelite nun, friend and supporter of the Mary Ward who led four of her 'active' nuns on foot from Brussels to Rome in the winter of 1621; Elizabeth Vaux, imprisoned in the Fleet by a final persecuting gesture of Robert Cecil, and, quite wonderfully, little Frances Burroughs, who, at the age of eleven, told the invading police to put up their swords, and, when one of them threatened to stab her, countered with what Father Anstruther calls the Shakespearian retort: 'If thou dost it shall be the hottest blood that ever thou sheddest in thy life'.

The grim and vivid tapestry of these arras on the walls of English history, splendid with blood and courage, is made not only bearable to contemplate but enthralling to examine in detail by Father Anstruther's gift for characterisation and the lively thread of sardonic comment that glitters in and out of his fabric throwing highlights on the tragic panorama.

His selection of detail is sometimes made for its entertainment value. 'While we are on the subject of relics', he says on page 386 and turns the page backwards to quote from an inventory that begins with two thorns from the Crown of Thorns brought to Scotland as part of Mary Queen of Scot's dowry and one of them now at Stonyhurst; includes St Stephen's jaw-bone; an unspecified bone of St Modwen of Burton; one of Mr Robert Sodden's thumbs, and ends with twelve feather-beds.

The wistful convert will find his answer in this astonishing book. Here he may read of the long, vindictive persecution, the bitterness of hope betrayed, the nervous strain, the financial ruin, the vulgar iconoclasm that destroyed ancestral home, beautiful church, irreplaceable stained-glass windows and innocent men and bred the cumulative impulse behind the Powder Plot. He will be asked to consider the protracted *auto da fé* which had not died out when Titus Oates retired from prison and public life on a pension of £3 a week!

Our questioner can go to Mass on Guy Fawkes' day this year and remember Blessed Edmund Campion, Henry Garnet, the Treshams, the Vaux, men, women and children, and a host of their cousins and friends. One of this army is a saint, many of them were martyrs. Their reward on earth came two hundred years later when the faith they had kept was once more free and Our Lady's Dowry began that increase of which we still watch the progress. *Plures efficitur*. . . .

There are two flaws in this magnificent book: the Vaux family tree, which ought to appear intact on a single sheet, has been cut into twigs, stripped of almost all its dates and scattered here and there in an entirely unhelpful way, and the Index is incomplete, inaccurate and misleading.