

misery more clearly. Before we can see the stars of divine truth we have to learn to walk bravely in the night of faith. The spiritual eye is purified by temptations against faith and hope and humility; exterior trials and mortifications are sent by God himself who knows, as no one else can, the depths that have to be reached by the purifying fire. Tauler says that the Holy Spirit creates a great emptiness in the depths of the soul where there still cling remains of pride and selfishness. This emptiness is a healing and it increases the soul's capacity to receive. (2nd sermon for Pentecost.)

The purifying light of the Gift of Understanding seems to darken the mind because the spiritual soul is being introduced into the region of divine mysteries which are obscurity to the mind; for the soul, in this life, must always live by faith, and unless the Gift of Wisdom is also influencing the soul there is no sweetness but only cloud and suffering. For the Light Inaccessible where God dwells is darkness to the weak powers of the soul which is now living above the ordinary power of reasoning, and therefore as it were paralysed, yet conscious of the divine influence working through this Gift. The lower powers of the soul, i.e., those which depend on reasoning for knowledge, are obscured, while the higher powers, i.e., the purely spiritual intellect and will are enlightened and, by this obscure light, united to God.

Faith unites the soul directly to God, the Gift of Understanding works always in the realm of faith; its light does not remove the obscurity of faith, but the union is experimental.

M A R G E R Y K E M P E

H E R D A Y S A N D O U R S

BY

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RECORDS and diaries of individuals, especially of such as this creature' Margery, reveal both highlights and shadows, black chaos on either side of the mountains of youth. In this long-forgotten book of Margery Kempe the slightest innuendo, the merest agitation, the unbalanced phrase, the flicker of surprise each in its own allusive manner betrays some chosen subject for human enquiry and scholarship above all others and sweeter in the discovery than the gums and vineyards of Engaddi. Like Christina Mirabilis—the surprising character who lived two centuries before Margery—this burgher's wife has been called the 'Astounding'. The Philosopher's happy phrase *admiratio est delectationis causa* may then be our invitation to share the medieval experiences of one whose delights were found in the homesteads, and

on the pilgrim paths of the crumbling later Middle Ages when the youthful bloom of the thirteenth century was wellnigh a memory and the modern decay already growing.

The apogee of the Middle Ages was fast vanishing when Margery entered history. Margery was born at Lynn about 1373 in a period of fierce political rivalries, tortuous religious problems and fast-growing agrarian discontent, all flowing from the tragedy of epidemic sickness in 1315 and 1316, when the Black Death laid low all classes and all ages throughout the land from Melcombe Regis in Dorsetshire to York in 1349 and thence to Scotland and Ireland in the following year. Within the hearts of men the spiritual forces of the ages of faith grew stronger and more virile in face of the necessary social and political rebuilding, and the foundations of our catholic western culture were strengthened and revitalised by the sight of the Flageleants from Flanders who marched through the London streets calling the citizens to penance and prayer. The mysticism of earlier days gave way to a healthy asceticism which proved a counter attraction to the moral decay inevitable in time of national disaster. Hence materialism and the promised social millennium were not the evils that they later became when Renaissance dilettantism had lightheartedly scorned penance and reparation.

All these influences were deep below the surface. To all appearances life was still hard and perilous, and the chronicles of the death of Edward III, when Margery was only four, record nonchalantly 'unprofitable things continued long after'. The reign of Richard II, the Londoners' King, is the reign of revolt and dissatisfaction. The burdens of villeinage and the periodic poll-tax depressed and angered the masses and revolt flared up throughout the country. In Blackheath there were forces of armed insurgents under Wat Tyler and the 'Mad Priest' John Ball, and also in Essex and the East Anglian ports of Yarmouth and Lynn, where the Flemish who had once called London to penance had now become too-successful merchants. The men of the eastern counties began their systematic persecution and mass murder of the hated foreigners. Against such a background of penance and persecution, of spiritual insecurity and social chaos the baby mind of Margery remained occupied with the toys and trinkets of her father's house. Her dream days were enlivened by the brawls in the narrow streets, though her nights were calm and still.

Margery's birthplace was the seaport town of Lynn in Norfolk, through which passed the merry-making groups of pilgrims bound for Walsingham, 'England's Maryland'. Five times had her father, John Burnham, been Mayor of this important borough, and the Mayor's daughter gazed from the house of this prominent and respected citizen upon the entrancing sight of noisy, bustling, pious

hordes. And so she must have become filled with an undying thirst for travel. Until her death, about 1440, the town life of her native Lynn was uppermost in her memory, and she herself was, everywhere in the world, a microcosm of Lynn's variegated life. When her life had really begun, Margery's vivid activities and manly adventures were dutifully recorded incident by incident. But till 1936 Margery was a nonentity. While the history of mysticism gave her a passing mention (not without some misgiving as to her respectability), literature glibly remarked that she had written one small book now snugly included among the genuine treasures of a Cambridge library, and one other, now completely lost. The student had to be content with the tiny quarto of eight pages printed about 1501 by Wynkyn de Worde. This consists of gleanings 'taken out of the booke of Margerie Kempe of Lynn'. Twenty years later these extracts were reprinted with some slight variations by H. Pepwell. Owing to the unfortunate loss of the original book, Margery was to be found only in the works of Tanner, Ames and Graesse, and these formed the sources for the little contained in the Dictionary of National Biography. The extracts of 1501 are in the form of a dialogue between Margery and our Lord.

Dibdin notes it in his *Typographical Antiquities*, and after giving us the title page of this short treatise 'emprynted in Flete-Strete by Wynkyn de Worde', makes an observation shared by the authors we have just mentioned. 'The following short extract, in modernised orthography, may serve to show to what an inflamed pitch of enthusiastic rapture and gross absurdity some of the devotional treatises of this period were wrought'. The passage quoted is no doubt a little too ardent in expression to be fully appreciated by the Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin. The offending sentence reads: 'She desired many times that her head might be smitten off with an axe upon a block, for the love of our Lord Jesus'. The phrase is, admittedly, somewhat romantic and characteristic of an 'exaltée' piety, but hardly 'curious'! Dibdin's judgment has failed to appreciate the lover's desire to show externally what is so deeply felt in the heart. The criterion of criticism should have been the *Canticle of Canticles*, not the musty books in the library of the Roxburghe Club. And then the discovery of the whole book has shown us quite a different character. Everything is now beginning to fall into its proper relation with the whole; a vast canvas has now swallowed up the microscopic detail. In the Library of Lieutenant Colonel W. Butler-Bowden's house at Plessington Old Hall, Lancashire, there was unearthed a new Margery, scarcely hinted at in the meagre dialogue of the University Library at Cambridge. At the Victoria and Albert Museum Miss Hope Emily Allen identified it as the last *Book of Margery Kempe*. The original manuscript begun in 1436 by the priest, who knew 'a man dwelling in Dewchland' who

first wrote the book in what 'was neither good English nor Dewch, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters were', contained a leaf added to the first quire before the proem was written. This leaf would not have been added within the bound complete first quire which was discovered. Finally the paper, probably made in Holland about 1440, confirms the evidence that we have not the original manuscript but a very early copy made by the priest whose failing eyesight peered from behind a pair of spectacles at this 'short treatise of a creature set in great pomp and pride of the world, who later was drawn to our Lord by great poverty, sickness, shames and great reproofs in many divers countries and places, of which tribulations some shall be shewn hereafter, not in the order which they befell, but as the creature could have mind of them when they were written'. This book came into the possession of W. Butler-Bowden through the Carthusian Priory of Mountgrace, near Northallerton, which was founded in 1397 (when Margery was twenty-four). In the history of medieval writing this Charterhouse plays no mean part, since a monk of this community, Nicholas Love, was the author of *The Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesus Christ*, an adaptation from the *Meditationes Vitæ Christi* of pseudo-Bonaventure.

Margery's diary or book of confessions is now the seed-ground of fierce controversy and widely divergent thought. No mystical treatise had hitherto been produced to the accompaniment of heavy groans and sweet tears. This is the first of its kind, and withal a complete autobiography in a sturdy prose, a travel book of vivid eye-witness accounts and personal impressions, an outstanding historical document and a masterpiece of literary excellence.

When Margery was twenty years of age a newly elected burgess of the town, John Kempe, was attracted by the charms of this fair young daughter of John Burnham. Her high-spirited character and dashing manner were everywhere known and caused the usual jealousy and suspicion. Even after their marriage that same year, 1393, Margery continued in her carefree way of living, and her own description of the girl who captured the heart of John, 'ever having tenderness and compassion for her', is that of a young character, gay and naturally self-assertive. 'She wore gold pipes on her head, and her hoods, with the tippetts, were slashed. Her cloaks also were slashed, so that they should be the more staring to men's sight, and herself the more worshipped. She delighted in the fine clothes becoming to a Mayor's daughter and the wife of a burgess, and had little but contempt for the slanderers who sprang up wherever she appeared. Domestic details of her home-life can be supplied from such sources as the Paston Letters and 'The Household Book of Dame Alice de Bryene', 1412-1413. Colourful clothes and a gallant air were not merely the fashion

but, far more, the joyous overflow of a boisterous age. It was, at least in Margery at this time, the outcome of innocence and youthful attraction subtly blended with the inevitable desire to attract friends to admire and suspicious gossipers to be kept in suspense. Her counterpart among the bright young set of her day is the exquisite fop described by the contemporary poet, Gower:

More jolif than the brid in Maie,
He maketh him ever fresh and gaie,
And doth all his array disguise,
So that of him the newe guise
Of lusty folke all other take.

After giving birth to her first child (thirteen other children were yet to rise up and bless this 'joyful mother of children'), there appeared to Margery in vision 'Our Merciful Lord Jesus Christ . . . in the likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous and most amiable than ever might be seen with man's eyes, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside'. From that moment her illness vanished and she took food herself. During this vision the young mother of twenty was gently reproved with the loving reproach, 'Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, and I never forsook thee?' This appealing invitation to greater things received little response, since after this she acted 'wisely and soberly enough save she knew not verily the call of our Lord'. But youth is not the age for wisdom and sobriety, and even her husband's anxious request for reform caused a violent reaction. John Kempe was concerned about his position and reputation, while Margery cared little for either provided she be 'worshipped by the people'. It is difficult to put into words the essence of her attractive friendliness, youthful grace and genuine nobility. She is always within sight and never in our grasp. Margery has been psycho-analysed by a Free Churchman as well as by Catholics, by the lawyer as well as by the historian; she is now an inflamed mystic, now a morbid neurotic, now filled with the loftiest aspirations, now seemingly petty. She has been held up as an example of the good catholic laywoman, so well acquainted with the facts and details of doctrine and imbued with the very *res et virtus* of her religion. But this would apply to many a burgher's wife, and especially to her anchorite contemporary Dame Julian of Norwich, with whom Margery had much 'holy dalliance by communing in the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ the many days that they were together'. Her catholicity seems to have all the vigour and tenacity of a Grand Inquisitor. With vigour and tenacity does this valiant woman make her curt replies to Bishop Repingdon of Lincoln, for whom she had had to wait three weeks. Besides obtaining her request she received an alms of 26 shillings and eightpence; also, without the least hesitation she attempts to reform

the household of the aristocratic Archbishop Arundel of Canterbury. After having obtained from His Grace written permission for weekly communion she told him of the great oaths and reckless words used by his squires, yeomen and clerks. Sitting with her in the garden of Lambeth Palace, 'full benignly and meekly he suffered her to speak her intent, and gave her a fair answer, she supposing it would then be better. And so their dalliance continued till stars appeared in the firmament. Then she took her leave, and her husband also'. The scene reminds us of a later event when this garden was visited by another valiant woman, Mary Ward, whom the then Archbishop of Canterbury called 'the Great Evil' who was more harmful than half-a-dozen Jesuits. For a wager she entered the palace walls, passed the gardener and scratched her name with a diamond ring upon the window-pane.

But Margery had her frivolities, too, and for this reason her book is all the more honest and not a chronicle of a sad would-be saint. The secret of her character is rather a certain generosity and manliness which seemed independent of religion, family circumstances or other external influence. It was this 'no half-measure' disposition which gave her acts that intensity and singleness of purpose so often associated with characters in medieval history. Mistress Kempe even went so far as to start a business on her own and despised the prudent warnings of her slightly older husband. Henceforth she would support herself 'for pure covetousness and to maintain her pride'. In this age of 'belly cheer' she hired workmen for her own mill and brewery. For nearly four years Margery was one of the well-known brewers in Lynn, and her management was stern and successful until mysterious happenings in the ale-yard and rumours of approaching disasters so ashamed her 'good servants that no one would work for her'. Her horse-mill also proved a failure and on Corpus Christi Eve her last workman left the mill in disgust. Margery now became the centre of attention. The gossips were happy seeing 'that neither man nor beast would serve the said creature', while the wise men saw in all this failure the merciful providence of God withdrawing Margery from 'the pride and vanity of the wretched world'. The prelude to this first conversion was a vision of Paradise and her sorrow for past sin was accompanied with such sensible joy that from this time we may date her life-long watchword, 'it is fully merry in heaven'. Her joy and pride in the merry life of heaven scandalised her neighbours, who were suspicious of this sudden amendment of so much pomp and worldly circumstance, and consequently even the talk of her chastity and bodily penances and lengthy vigils became matter for ridicule and contempt.

At this stage in her conversion Margery was busily mortifying herself and from a kiln nearby she obtained a hair-cloth 'such as men

dry malt on'. While denying herself bodily comfort she must have disturbed her husband John when she suggested that he too should join in this manner of life 'by abstaining from the lust of their bodies'. Like the Wife of Bath, Margery became much perplexed over the respective merits of chastity and virginity. The Wife speaks garrulously of her seven husbands and Margery longs for 'the mantle and the ring and the white clothes' of virginity. Equally insistent on their own particular views, both show a fanatical concentration and overdwelling on a subject too lofty and too richly ennobled by Christ himself to be bandied from mouth to mouth in the common ways of Norfolk or on the bridle-paths of Kent. This essential and delicate element of human psychology and morality which Margery in her youthful fervour so unremittingly and painfully attempted to control nearly unbalanced her whole life. After two years of earnest devotion the temptation to infidelity reached its greatest vehemence on the eve of the patronal feast of her parish church, St Margaret's, attached to the local Benedictine priory. During the First Vespers of the feast she was 'so laboured with the man's words' that she could not 'hear her evensong, nor say her Paternoster, or think any other good thought, but was more troubled than ever she was before'. After evensong the tempter repented and Margery 'went away all ashamed and confused in herself at seeing his stability and her own instability'.

Her anxiety and distress at her wounded pride in the service of her merry heaven were relieved on the Friday before Christmas Day, when an anchorite at the Preaching Friars offered his assistance and direction. Throughout that Christmas season Margery followed the instructions of her anchorite director, who approved of the 'high meditation and very contemplation' promised by our blessed Lord. Her prayer was always preceded by a very elaborate composition of place. She speaks to St Anne at the birth of our Lady, is with St Elizabeth at the birth of St John, and accompanies Mary to Bethlehem. She goes into exile with the Holy Family and takes with her 'a pottle of wine and honey, and spices thereto'. Even the three Kings find not merely the Child with his Mother but also 'this creature, our Lady's handmaiden, beholding all the process in contemplation, wept wondrous sore'. It is from this early conversion that she began to weep 'full plenteously and full boisterously for desire of the bliss of heaven, and because she was so long deferred therefrom'.

This sobbing and moaning was a source of scandal to many during her pilgrimages in later life, and together with her scrupulous longing for chastity and the outward insignia of virginity form the most serious objections to any obvious claim to sanctity. However, these exaggerations must be explained by the piety and devotional practices of the age. The martyrdom of daily life with its quota of petty perse-

cution and pinpricks had been exalted by spiritual writers from the earliest times. The second letter of Sulpicius Severus to Annelius formulates the theory daily practised by St Theresa of Lisieux no less than by St Martin of Tours concerning whom the Bobbio Missal tells us that 'Martin has not refused martyrdom; it is martyrdom which has refused Martin'. Gregory the Great speaks of the double martyrdom, the one in the mind alone, and the other in the mind and in active persecution at the same time. Thomas à Kempis expounded the same lesson of a twofold martyrdom in his eleventh conference to his novices. St Jerome, in letter 130 to Demetrias, associates martyrdom with the daily striving for chaste living, *habet et servata pudicitia martyrium suum*. This quasi-martyrdom was the particular theme of the medieval Irish ascetics who with their own characteristic artistry assigned the colours white and green to these two forms of the daily carrying of the Cross. Green martyrdom (*glas-martre*) was the emblem of those ascetics who practised heroic penance in the spirit and manner of the early canonical discipline as seen in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon penitentiaries. To the daily striving for purity and chastity the colour white was especially assigned. St Cyprian in his letters gives ample explanation of this white martyrdom, as also does our own Venerable Bede, who on the feast of All Saints speaks of the *coronas vel de virginitate candidas vel de passione purpureas*. Many an instance in the writings of the age could be quoted to illustrate the peculiar blend of red and white martyrdoms, of daily virginity and bloodless striving. Margery was no exception to this rule of the golden age of asceticism. Her whole life bears witness to the spiritual ideals of the time, ideals which she saw so vividly, interpreted so uncompromisingly and certainly never realised fully. 'Good Jesu, make my will Thy will, and Thy will my will, so that I may have no will but Thy will only'. This prayer is proof enough that Margery's mind was the mind of the saints, and her footsteps well planted on the royal road of the Holy Cross.