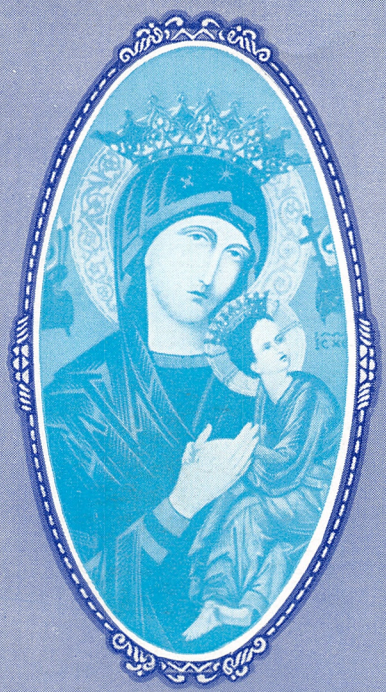

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Lily of the Mohawks

KATERI TEKAKWITHA

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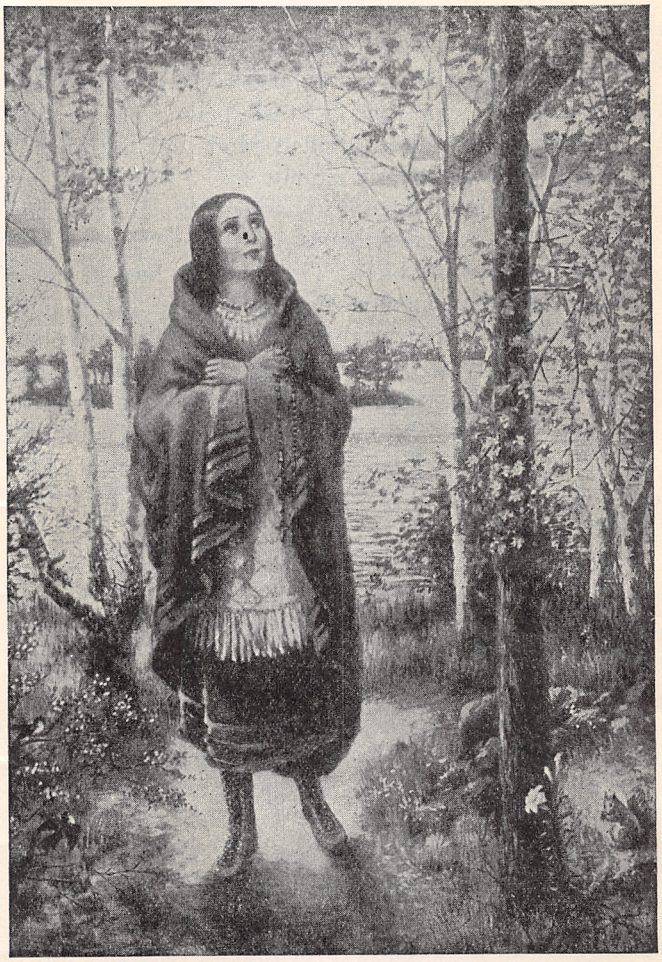
MARY FABYAN WINDEATT



IN the year 1656 Oliver Cromwell rode ceremoniously through the streets of London, hearing himself acclaimed as Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland, and smugly complacent that he had read the latest work of John Milton. In France, a kindly-eyed youngster named John Baptist de la Salle wondered why poor children had no chance to go to school, to learn to read and write. Hidden in her monastery at Paray-le-Monial, Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque, a humble Visitation nun, prayed that some day all the world might come to know the love of the Sacred Heart. But none of these ever guessed that in the same year that found them living, breathing and aspiring to great things, history was being made in an obscure little Indian village in what is now Auriesville, N.Y.

The history in question had to do with the birth of a daughter to a captive Algonquin woman who had married her Mohawk master. Unfortunately there was no priest to baptize the little newcomer, and it was not customary for Christian Indians to perform the ceremony themselves. There were some eighty of these latter in the village, captives from their native town in Canada—Three Rivers—but they were not oppressed by their Mohawk overlords. They lived quietly among their four hundred pagan neighbors, encouraged one another in the practise of the Faith, and reasoned that some day the Black Robe would come again among them. Some day there would be Baptisms and the Holy Sacrifice once more.

Four years passed, and the Indian girl who had been born in 1656 grew up alongside Catholic and pagan children. Her father, one of the leaders of the Mohawk village, treated her kindly, likewise the little brother who had followed her into the world. Both youngsters remained unnamed, for among the Mohawks and Algonquins children had no names until they grew up and did something indicative of their character. Doubtless the pious Algonquin mother told her little son and daughter tales of the Catholic religion, of the brave Black Robe who brought the Holy Spirit with him when he visited the Indian settlements, of how some day he

would come again and baptize all the children born since his last visit.

BUT the year 1660 put an end to the good mother's influence, for then a dread plague of smallpox swept through the village and took its ghastly toll. When it was over, almost every home had lost some loved one. The still unnamed little Indian maid of four summers was bereft of father, mother and brother in one swift blow. The smallpox had struck at her, too, but had merely affected her eyes. Half-blind and unable to stand bright sunlight, the little orphan groped her way about the decimated Mohawk village with the aid of a stick. "Tekakwitha", they began to call her, or "one who moves all before her," and she was adopted by a kindly pagan uncle and aunt, who took her into their cabin and brought her up as their own child.

Tekakwitha grew up in her village, known then as Ossernenon, with the other children who had been orphaned by the plague of 1660. With the death of her mother, the Christian influence about the child had been removed. Yet she often watched the remaining Christian captives at their prayers, and wondered about their God. No Black Robe had visited Ossernenon in years, but Christianity was kept alive in the wilderness by these faithful few.

One thing Tekakwitha liked about the Prayer Indians, as the Christians were called, and this was their abstention from the pagan orgies that attended the torture of captives. The Prayer Indians remained away from all brutal festivities. They never engaged in vice or drunken brawls. They were sober and industrious, and something about them attracted the growing girl. Often she would slip away from her uncle's smoke-filled cabin to watch them at their prayers, to notice their rosaries and crucifixes, to listen to their hymn singing. There was a strange fascination about these people but Tekakwitha never made friends with them. Her affliction made her shy, and she asked few questions concerning them of her uncle or aunts.

In 1667 the Jesuit Black Robes returned to Tekakwitha's village, but the eleven year old girl never spoke even to them of her growing interest in the Christian faith. She was a retiring little soul and because of her poor eyesight spent most of the time inside her darkened cabin. Here her deft fingers were generally busy with some work, for she had long ago learned how to prepare and dress the skins of animals, to make moccasins, to do bead work and to cook. Soon she would marry a young brave, and repay her relatives for all the years they had looked after her.

BUT on the day set for Tekakwitha's engagement ceremony, a strange thing happened. Her future husband, a boy her own age, had come to her uncle's cabin, together with his own relatives. Food was prepared and all was in readiness for Tekakwitha to go through her part of the ceremony by offering her young brave some food.

"No!" cried the Indian maiden suddenly. "I cannot do it! I do not want to marry—ever!" And she ran from her uncle's cabin and fled into the dark forest behind the village.

Such an action was unforgivable. Who had ever heard of an Indian girl refusing to marry? The young brave and his relatives stalked off in high dudgeon. They had been deeply insulted. Tekakwitha's uncle and aunts were speechless. What had ever come into the child's head? Was she not always docile, shy, affectionate?

When the eleven year old girl returned home, she had to face a storm of abuse. She had committed the unpardonable sin of not accepting as husband one who would provide for her uncle and aunt in their old age. Presently she was ostracized completely, not only by her relatives but by the whole village. Rumors concerning her reputation circulated freely and everyone scoffed at the foolish girl who had run away from the only accepted career an Indian woman could have.

The succeeding years were very hard for Tekakwitha, for her relatives went out of their way to ply her with heavy tasks. Often she crept away from her uncle's cabin, with its smouldering camp fire, to visit the building which the Black Robe had made into a chapel for his Christian charges. Here she saw pictures and statues which had come from far-away France. Here, at Christmas, was a strange and beautiful object known as a crib. But still Tekakwitha did not ask for permission to join the Christian ranks. Not even when new Black Robes came to replace the resident chaplain did she speak. Silently she bore the insults, the hard tasks which had become her lot ever since her refusal to marry.

One day in 1675, when she was nineteen years old, Tekakwitha stumbled against a tree and hurt her leg. The injury was a painful one and so she retired to her cabin to rest. She was still there when the resident Black Robe, Father James de Lamberville, looked in the open door. The missionary had come to call on Tekakwitha's uncle, an important chieftain in the village, but when he saw the young girl he changed his mind. Presently he stepped inside and for the first time Tekakwitha found herself face to face with a Black Robe. If she had been feeling well, doubtless

she would have slipped away when she saw the missionary in the doorway, but now she could not excuse herself. She must sit and talk with him.

The experience was simpler than she had thought, and presently she had told the priest of her great and secret interest in religion.

"I should like to be a Christian," she announced simply. "What must I do?"

THE Jesuit was much impressed with Tekakwitha's evident sincerity, as well as her intelligence. But it was not the policy of Indian missionaries to admit candidates to Baptism too easily. Their faith must be tried first, and the good priest lost no time in pointing out to Tekakwitha that her conversion might mean a great deal of suffering.

"Your uncle will never approve," he said warningly. "He is already angry that so many of the Prayer Indians have left his village to go to Canada."

"The Prayer Indians left so that they might live in a Christian village," answered Tekakwitha. "I, too, would leave everything for this beautiful religion."

Father de Lamberville contented himself with promising the young aspirant to consider her case. Later, when he asked his Christians what they thought of Tekakwitha, the girl "who moved all before her," he heard only the highest praise. The Christians knew all about Tekakwitha, her troubles at home, her poor eyesight.

"She is a good girl," they said. "She has nothing to do with the pagan festivals, or the tortures."

Satisfied as to Tekakwitha's virtues, Father de Lamberville undertook to instruct the neophyte in the Catholic faith, and on Easter Sunday of 1676 admitted her to Baptism, giving her the name of Catherine, or "Kateri", in her own language.

Kateri, now twenty years old, soon became a martyr of the most heroic sort. Her uncles and aunts had despised her for years. Now that she had become a Christian, they were even more hard-hearted. The young braves of the settlement tried to impugn her chastity. Children ran after her, throwing stones and mud. It became a semi-official duty to punish the girl who had so forgotten her duty as to refuse to marry the brave her uncle had picked out for her. Father de Lamberville watched the constancy of his new charge with marvelling eyes, but he felt that Kateri was having too much hardship. If only she could escape from her uncongenial surroundings! If only she could go, as others before her, to the Christian village of La Prairie near Montreal, some seven days distant by stream and portage!

"We must try to get you away," he said one day. "There is a Happy Hunting Ground in Canada where you can practise your new religion in peace. You will make many friends there, who will watch over you and make you happy."

Kateri smiled. She would do whatever the Black Robe said. She would stay at Ossernenon and bear the hard lot which had been hers for so many years. Or she would dare the hazardous flight into Canada, through trackless woods and up perilous streams. It did not matter what became of her, now that she was a child of God.

It was in the fall of 1677 that Kateri set off, by dead of night, for the Christian village on the St. Lawrence. With her were two native guides and she bore a letter of introduction to the Black Robe in charge of the Indian settlement. In part this read:

> "Kateri Tekakwitha is going to live at the Sault. Will you kindly undertake to direct her? You will soon know what a treasure we have sent you. Guard it well! May it profit in your hands, for the glory of God and the salvation of a soul that is certainly very dear to Him."

ALTHOUGH Kateri's uncle was incensed by her secret flight and sent out men to intercept her, the escape was successful and soon she was installed in her new home. La Prairie was a thriving Indian community, in sight of the city of Montreal, where almost everyone was imbued with the highest Christian principles. No longer the bloodshed, persecution and debauchery that had characterized life among the pagan Mohawks. Here there was Christian brotherhood everywhere. Each morning the entire village assembled at Mass. Each night there were prayers in common. When she was permitted to make her First Communion the following Christmas, instead of having to wait the customary two or three years, Kateri's happiness was complete. There was nothing more to be desired.

From now on the young convert's life was marked with a singular devotion. She scorned all suggestion of marriage, even to a Christian brave, and declared that she would spend the rest of her life in doing penance for her sins, for the sins of her pagan people. On March 25, 1679, she made a vow of perpetual virginity, something most unusual even among Christian Indians of good life. Her austerities assumed such proportions that her director was forced to intervene, particularly as a number of others at La Prairie had started to imitate her.

"You must not do too much or your health will suffer," he cautioned, but Tekakwitha found it hard to understand why one should not make sacrifices, if one had sinned. There were no half measures with her. It was all, or nothing.

But in the hunting season of 1680, the young convert took seriously ill. Most of the village was away and a few devoted women cared for the girl and did what they could to make her comfortable. When it was announced that her recovery was impossible, that she was dying, consternation reigned everywhere. Even alive, Kateri was looked upon as a saint. Her mat, blanket and crucifix were considered sacred objects.

"Do not die, Kateri!" begged the little group of weeping women and children. "Do not leave us now!"

But Kateri Tekakwitha did not hear. On April 17, the Wednesday in Holy Week, she clasped her crucifix, cried out "My Jesus, I love You!" and quietly passed away. Twenty-four years on earth had been sufficient for one Indian girl to reach her measure of perfection.

Three hundred years have now passed and it is expected that some time during 1940 "The Lily of the Mohawks" will be declared Venerable. Interest in her Cause has grown with the years. The shrine at Auriesville, N.Y., where she spent the first twenty years of her life, has become a place of pilgrimage, and her grave at Caughnawaga, Que., (where once stood the Christian settlement of La Prairie), is equally famous. This summer thousands of Catholics and non-Catholics will visit these two historic sites and muse upon the little Indian girl whose hidden virtues have since made her great.

Exit Princess!

AND ENTER—?

MARCIA HARRIS

WHEN John caught sight of her she was standing on the back platform of the car, wedged in between homeward-bound working men, and standing on tiptoe in an effort to get her ticket into the box.

Pacific Street! How did Valerie come to be boarding a Hastings East car there at this time of day? Valerie didn't belong on Pacific Street. She belonged up in the Area, the University Area. John knew that, because just six years ago he had been delivering groceries to her back door.

He had been seventeen, then—a tall, gawky youth with pink cheeks and dark hair that would wave in spite of all the glycerine he plastered on it. Valerie had been—but she still was, she hadn't changed a bit—a princess. Surely she was born to be a princess; so dainty, so delicately boned, so white-skinned. And that light gold hair, shining smooth. John had made her a princess in his heart—a lovely Dresden china one, to be set up on a stand high above him; to be admired and served, but from a distance.

Not that she was snobbish. In fact, she was quite friendly. When they met on the street, as they often did, she would wave gaily and call:

"Hello, John! How's night school?"

And he would answer solemnly:

"Oh, it's all right, I guess."

Those first few months, of course, he hadn't had much sense of values. He hadn't just realized the distance between them.

There was that unforgettable Wednesday afternoon at Spanish Banks. He had been walking along the sands, drinking in the sunshine and dreaming a little. And then suddenly there was his dream coming towards him. They walked on together, talking. About their young hopes, their ambitions; about the wonderful way the wet sand was patterned just at the water's edge; the colour of the mountains, the rhythm of the waves; how John had seen a seal out there once; how it must be funny to be a seal—cold in spite of the thick fur. They walked so far that the tide crept up behind them and cut them off. They had to climb up the steep bank to the road, and the earth started to slide under them. It was a little frightening, really, but exciting too. He had to pull the princess up by her hand. Unbelievably smooth, it was, smooth and small and beautiful.

A MONTH later, when he was eighteen, John lost his job at the store. He lost it because to keep him on would have meant paying the minimum wage, and the management found it cheaper to hire a younger boy. That was the year Valerie registered as a