



The "Lily of the Mohawks," Kateri Tekakwitha, whose cause for beatification is nearing completion

BACK in the year 1656 the Christian world was slowly accustoming itself to a new Pope—Alexander VII. Corneille and Racine and Molière and Calderon were writing the popular entertainment of the day. Milton and Dryden were busy with politics, as well as poetry. Murillo and Velasquez were painting numerous lovely ladies. The Commonwealth in England had given place to a protectorate, under Oliver Cromwell, and the rumble of impending political change was already being felt in France, as well as in England.

While all these things were going on, an unknown Indian woman gave birth to a daughter in the dark woods of northern New York State. She was an Algonquin from Canada, captured but recently in a Mohawk raid on the Quebec village of Three Rivers. Rather unexpectedly, her Mohawk chief did not make her his slave but married her and brought her southward to his own village of Ossernenon. No doubt this captive girl was young and pretty, and skilled

in domestic crafts as well. At any rate, the husband set her up as his wife and did not seem to mind that she had accepted the "Prayer" and had embraced Christianity under the influence of the Jesuit missionaries in Canada. At the birth of his daughter he was quite happy, and when he presently became father to a boy, he was even better pleased. He gave a great feast at Ossernenon, where he was a chief. He loaded his wife with trinkets. Neighbors rejoiced with him, and life was good.

For the next four years there was little to interrupt the usual routine at Ossernenon. Then, quite suddenly, in the year 1660, something happened which meant suffering, death, disfigurement to all of the 400 people who lived at Ossernenon. It meant that the dreaded smallpox had descended on the little community, wiping out every second person. Among the victims was the proud Mohawk chief, his Christian wife, their two small children.

When the plague had run its

Iroquois

course, it was discovered that among the survivors was the little four-year-old girl, a frail creature who had managed to cheat death at the last moment. The dread disease had all but ruined her eyes, so that for the rest of her life she would find it hard to stand a bright light. Still she was alive, and was speedily adopted by an uncle and aunt who loved her and brought her up as their own. "Tekakwitha," they called the little orphan, meaning "one who moves all things before her." For the small girl, half-blinded by smallpox, had a peculiar way of stretching out her hands as she walked, and of sometimes using a stick to find her way around objects.

At the age of eight, as was the Indian custom, Tekakwitha became engaged to a boy her own age. The ceremony, with its singing, dancing, and invocation to the gods, meant little to the child, although she well knew that her foster-parents were pleased with their choice. Indian girls were of use to families only because of their ability to work and to provide sons-in-law to take care of the parents in their old age. Tekakwitha was a good and docile youngster, skilled in cooking, bead work, the dressing of skins. The fact that she had weak eyes, that she preferred to stay in the darkness of her uncle's cabin far away from the festivities of the village, had given her small hands an unusual amount of practice. Probably there was not another girl at Ossernenon who was as skilled in domestic crafts as she.

But three years later Tekakwitha upset all the happy predictions made for her. At the age of eleven, the accepted marriage time for all Indian girls, she suddenly refused to keep her engagement bond. She did not want to marry, she said. She wanted to remain single.

"Has the girl gone mad?" stormed Tekakwitha's infuriated uncle. "Is this the way she repays us for seven years of hospitality?"

In Heaven

By MARY FABYAN WINDEATT

There was a cold gleam in his wife's eyes as she reflected on the scandal about to be given the whole village. Every Indian girl married. It was the only natural and proper thing to do. That a chief's daughter should go so far as to desecrate the sacred custom . . .

"Little fool!" she muttered. "She will pay well for this!"

Tekakwitha had always liked solitude, although she was loving and eager to please her foster-parents. Now she still had her solitude, but without the previous affection from her family. Now her uncle and aunt taunted her with ingratitude, with threats of bodily harm, and saw to it that her labors in the house and in the field were doubled. Other girls of like age made spiteful remarks; children pelted her with stones; young men of the village made up a game of hide-and-seek with the young fugitive from matrimony.

So life went on, as the eleven-year-old girl passed from childhood to adolescence. She knew she was the laughing-stock of the village, and only sometimes did a little happiness fill her heart when she crept close to the building where a small group of captured Christian Indians were holding a prayer service among themselves. The Mohawks allowed these captives to continue the Christian customs which they had learned from the Jesuit missionaries in Canada. Often the child wished she knew more about the "Prayer." What did the strange songs mean that the Prayer Indians chanted on certain days? What were the crosses, the pictures, the strings of beads they held in their hands? But she was too shy to ask questions.

It was illness that finally brought Tekakwitha her chance to converse with the missionary. One day, while gathering berries in the woods, she had tripped and fallen over a hidden tree root, severely injuring her foot. For some days she was confined to her uncle's cabin, and it was here that

Above: Pupils of St. Francis Xavier Mission school are direct descendants of the Mohawk tribe. A graduating class pictured with Rev. Real Lalonde, S.J., pastor. Right: One of Canada's famed pilgrimage spots—the tomb of Kateri Tekakwitha in Quebec

Father James de Lamberville, the resident missionary, found her when he came to call on the chief. The latter was not at home at the time and nineteen-year-old Tekakwitha would have fled from the spot when she spied the missionary, except that she could not stand on her foot.

The Jesuit was a man of wide experience. He saw Tekakwitha was frightened, and with a gentleness and a courtesy that the girl had not known in a long time, he began to ask her questions. Gradually the young invalid responded. She gained courage and before long had asked the supremely important question: *What is the Prayer?* Father de Lamberville answered this as well as he could, amazed at Tekakwitha's intelligence and her ability to grasp the significance of sin, of grace, of Baptism. Certainly this shy, quiet girl was unlike any other Indian he had ever known.

When the missionary inquired of his faithful group of Prayer Indians, (who numbered about eighty in the community,) what they thought of Tekakwitha, he was greatly impressed at their answers. Tekakwitha was a good girl, said the Prayer Indians; she worked long and hard for her uncle and aunt; she never frequented the pagan revels of her people or indulged in the debauchery

attendant on the torture of captives; she had suffered for many years because of her refusal to marry. Was she worthy of Baptism? Indeed she was.

Tekakwitha had indeed asked to be admitted to the Prayer, and the missionary, after a little thought, agreed to baptize her. More than that. The long period of probation, which the too-general infidelity of the Indian race had made necessary, would be set aside. Not for Tekakwitha the two or three years of waiting for the saving waters. Instead, there would be but a few months. On Easter Sunday Tekakwitha would become a true child of God, with a new name. Catherine she would be called from now on, or Kateri, in her native tongue.

And so it was done. But Father de Lamberville soon realized that Kateri



was to suffer intensely because of her new-found Faith. Now that she had become a Christian, the severity of her aunt and uncle increased. They were displeased that she had left the gods of her people. She was a bad, ungrateful girl and a disgrace to those who had befriended her.

"Kateri," said the missionary one day, "would you like to go away to a town where everyone is a Christian? Where no one will make fun of you because you love the true God?"

Kateri's dark eyes were bright. She knew her friend was referring to the Happy Hunting Ground in Canada, to which so many Christian Indians had gone during the past years. At the St. Francis Xavier mission, near Montreal, it was said, men and women lived happily together without war or persecution.

"I should like to go," she said simply. "Is it permitted?"

The priest nodded. He would be sorry to lose this neophyte, but it was not fair to keep her where her health was being slowly ruined by the unjust treatment of her people. Thus, one bright autumn day in the year 1676, Kateri found herself saying farewell to the scenes of her girlhood. Three Christians had come down from Montreal and they would see that she escaped from her people and found refuge with other Christians in Canada. Through the dark woods of the Iroquois country the four plunged, hiding from the scouts which Kateri's infuriated uncle had sent after her. Across the silver surface of Lake Champlain glided the little canoe, past sites in Northern New York which are now vacation centers for thousands of Americans. The trip, by stream and portage, lasted seven days, and then finally the city of Montreal came into view. Kateri's eyes shone with expectation as she clutched the letter of introduction which Father de Lamberville had given her for the priest at the mission. In part it read:

"We are sending you a treasure which you will soon appreciate. Take good care of her."

Kateri thought the St. Francis Xavier Mission almost heaven. Here were hundreds of Indians of every tribe, of every age, united in the common bond of faith and with no wars or petty jealousies to disrupt their lives. Mass was offered every day; prayers were said at frequent intervals by everyone in the Mission;

persecution was unknown. Rapidly the young stranger made friends with several pious women, and her joy knew no bounds when she was allowed to make her First Communion at Christmas time. She had only been a Christian for about eight months but the priests at the Mission set aside the rule that kept an Indian convert from receiving the Holy Eucharist for a year or more after Baptism.

Each winter it was the custom for all able-bodied residents of the Mission to go off on the hunt. Men and women alike spread out over the frozen St. Lawrence and ranged the silent woods in search of elk, beaver, bear, fox, otter, and seal. Kateri went along with the others but was unhappy at being away from Mass and the Sacraments. Frequently she excused herself from her companions and slipped off into the snowy forest to pray.

KATERI's frail health was no deterrent to the most extreme mortification, and people were soon aware of her uncommon sanctity. They strove to kneel near this young girl in the chapel, and when they heard that she had made a vow of chastity, a thing hitherto unknown among their people, their admiration increased. Other girls and women sought to follow in Kateri's footsteps, and for a while there was even talk of Kateri and a few companions entering upon conventual life on Heron Island. Here, amid the rushing waters of the St. Lawrence, it would be possible to lead a more perfect life of prayer and reparation. But the plan was eventually abandoned and Kateri's connection with the religious life confined to periodic visits to the nuns of the Hôtel-Dieu at Montreal.

Kateri spent but four years in her Canadian Paradise, and passed away (presumably from tuberculosis) on April 17, 1680. Immediately everyone in the settlement felt that a saint had left them. The dead girl's crucifix, mat, blanket, rosary, and other belongings were regarded as relics. Scores of Indians came from other settlements to visit her grave. The French, priests and seculars, came also to her last resting place. The Governor of Canada claimed he had been cured of a throat ailment after praying to Kateri. The *curé* of the parish at Lachine, Pierre Remy, re-

covered from deafness and declared that there were no more invalids in his parish, since earth from Kateri's grave, mingled with a little water, healed all diseases. A canon of the Cathedral church in Quebec, (the brother of Blessed Claude de la Colombière, director of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque), was cured of a slow fever.

"Canada also has her Genevieve," declared the Bishop of Quebec, who was most impressed by the story of Kateri's holy life.

The twenty-four-year-old Indian girl was buried at the St. Francis Xavier Mission.

In the years following Kateri's death, the Mission was moved to several different locations. At the present time it is located at Caughnawaga, Que., a short distance from Montreal, the spot finally chosen by the Jesuits in 1719. It is one of the famed pilgrimage spots in Canada, for the story of Kateri Tekakwitha, "The Lily of the Mohawks," whose Cause for Beatification is almost nearing completion, has brought thousands of tourists across the border.

It is a mistake to look for Kateri's grave at Caughnawaga. Her bones, discolored with the passing of nearly three centuries, are kept in a glass-topped casket in the mission church. All about are relics of another day, when the New World was still new and France was undisputed owner of Canada. Here are priceless gifts that crossed the ocean from the court of King Louis XIV—a hand-carved altar, a silver monstrance, antique candlesticks, sanctuary lamp, crucifixes, paintings. Birds sing outside the historic gray stone church. A brisk breeze blows off the swiftly flowing St. Lawrence.

Visible in the distance is Montreal, its population of one million people making it Canada's largest city. A wartime atmosphere is prevalent here, the streets filled with youths in the uniform of the Royal Air Force, the Army, the Navy. But Caughnawaga still breathes the spirit of another day. Little Iroquois learn of God and His Commandments from gentle, black-robed nuns. They learn, too, of the girl who is making their little settlement famous—who came, long ago, to their Jesuit mission, and is the only Indian ever to have been declared Venerable by the Church. No wonder they are proud of her!