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Valiant Maiden of the Mohawks

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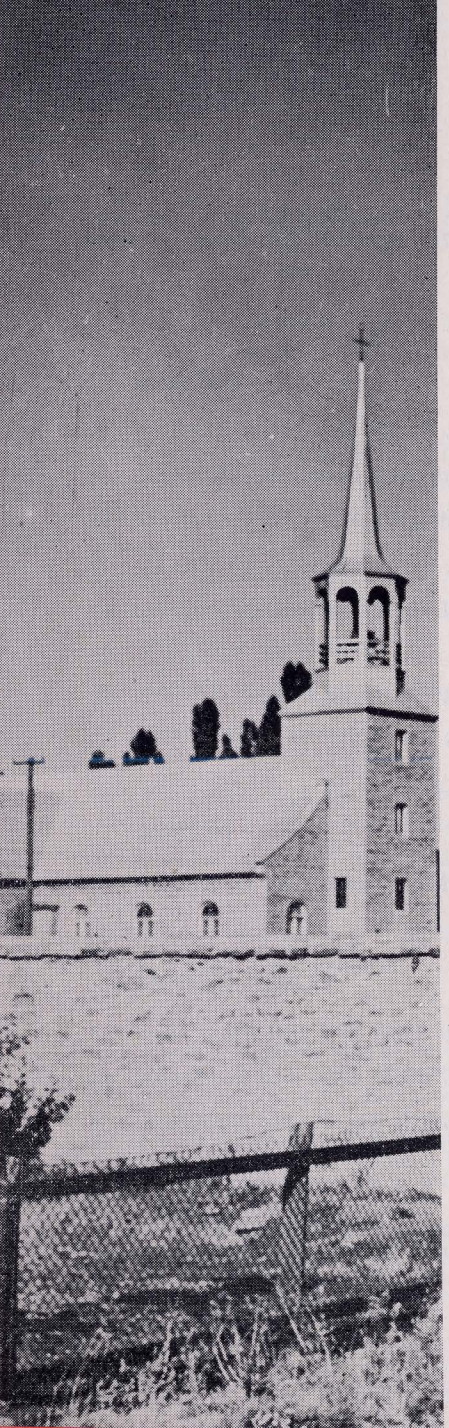

Valiant Maiden OF THE MOHAWKS

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO an Algonquin mother was happy. Until her papoose was born she had been sad and homesick in the pagan land of the Mohawks. She had lived among the French in Canada, was a devout Christian; but when the Mohawks, fiercest of Iroquis tribes, conquered the Algonquins, she was brought a captive to Ossernenon, now Auriesville, New York. Her marriage with the Mohawk chief rescued her, but she suffered in surroundings where no Blackrobe lived, where the custom of torturing enemies to death and feeding upon their flesh still prevailed. In this village where ten years earlier the Jesuit, Father Isaac Joques, had been martyred, Tekakwitha was born.

When the child was four years old, both parents died in an epidemic of smallpox and she herself was left scarred and half blind by the disease. Her childless uncle adopted her and she was brought up by two aunts, in utterly pagan surroundings. With this unfavorable beginning one questions how a Mohawk girl could possibly enter upon a path by which she would remain for three centuries an outstanding example of pure and holy living. Orphaned, handicapped, lonely, what were the factors that shaped her into the personality she became? What were the natural means God used to work His miracle of grace?

It is a challenging study, but if we observe closely, we can see in these apparent disadvantages stepping-stones to the ultimate purpose of her life. Her injured

The life story of Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha by Marie Cecilia BUEHRLE

300 years ago, Kateri was born at Auriesville, N.Y. (our cover). She died 24 years later at Caughnawaga, Canada, pictured here.

eyes made it impossible for her to romp and play in the sunshine like other children, and even as she grew older she could never go out without a shawl over her head to protect her from the light. She was not pretty, and being unaware of the charm of her gentle manners, she felt herself inferior, happily escaping the vanity of the Indian girls who loved to adorn themselves and spend the hours in idle chatter. Shy as she was she inevitably lived in a life apart, and having no companionship of her own age, she had to adapt herself as best she could to an adult and an alien atmosphere.

She made the adjustment by a complete and self-sacrificing service to those with whom she lived, an attitude of which her aunts readily took advantage, especially since she was quick in intelligence and skilful in all the arts of the squaw. Nevertheless her real life grew in solitude and her thoughts were serious beyond her years. This situation was the more difficult since living conditions were not conducive to privacy. Unlike other Indians, the Iroquois constructed long-houses that accommodated four or five families, each with its own hearth-fire and a compartment where its members cooked, ate, worked, and slept. An opening in the roof served both as window and smoke vent, which made the lodges dark and dirty. Life within them was extremely close, and any deviation from the common pattern was necessarily open to criticism and ridicule. We cannot therefore conceive of Tekakwitha's childhood and youth as happy. Her days were burdened with hard work and she did not escape the terrors and the aftermath of war.

As usual with the Indians, the Mohawks frequently moved their villages, and Tekakwitha's final home before her flight to Canada was on a plateau on the north side of the Mohawk River at the limits of the present town of Fonda, New York. It was during this period that her relatives decided that it was time for her to marry. With this idea we come to grips with something strange but fundamental in Tekakwitha's nature. Among the Mohawks it was a disgrace not to marry. For a girl not to desire marriage was beyond their understanding. According to the

Miss Marie Cecilia Buehrle has published a number of books, among them Kateri of the Mohawks, Saint Maria Goretti *and* Out of Many Waters. *She wrote this article for us in Rome where she is presently doing research work for another book.*

custom of the tribe the husband became part of the wife's household. From a social standpoint, therefore, it was Tekakwitha's duty to bring an added provider for her aging uncle and aunts into the home, and yet she had an aversion to marriage so strong that neither her own insecurity nor her awareness of duty had power to overcome it.

Quietly, without concern, she was sitting by the fire one evening while her family awaited the arrival of guests. They had bidden her to dress in her best attire, but this had happened frequently when visitors were expected. Suddenly the bearskin curtain opened and a handsome young brave accompanied by his relatives entered, came over to where Tekakwitha was sitting, and took his place beside her. Without giving her time to think, her aunt ordered her to present the bowl of sagamite. In a flash she knew. This was the Mohawk marriage rite, and if she obeyed, the man would become her accepted husband. Everyone looked at her expectantly. With one quick movement she was up, and had fled from the long-house.

Her aunts pursued and caught her. They tried to force her back but she resisted. She would not return, she said, until the brave had gone. They scolded, they coaxed, then dragged her between them toward the cabin. The guests had left. A storm of fury was turned loose upon her, and life was not pleasant for Tekakwitha in the days that followed. She was in disgrace. They worked her like a slave, but her patience held firm. They made further attempts to force suitors upon her. Every time she outwitted them, on one occasion hiding behind a case of Indian corn so that they did not find her. Finally her endurance and unchanging amiability won the silent battle and they treated her kindly again.

Meanwhile a settlement of Catholic Indians was growing on the banks of the St. Lawrence. Though Tekakwitha's village of Gandawagué now had its chapel and a resident Jesuit, many Indian converts went to Canada to be able to practice their faith unmolested. Among them was Anastasia, a Catholic of long standing, who had known and loved Tekakwitha's mother. It was a sad parting for the girl, but as yet she gave no sign of wanting to become a Christian. Whether or not her uncle's antagonism was responsible for this, we do not know.

In 1675, however, another Blackrobe, Father de Lamberville, came to the village. One day while making his round of visits to the old and the sick, when the others were in the

fields, he passed the chief's longhouse. There was no reason for him to stop. The chief would never have tolerated his presence, but he had not gone many steps when something unaccountable made him halt, turn back, and draw aside the curtain. From the darkness within he heard a cry of joy: "Father!" And the pagan girl, whom he had often seen, came limping to meet him. Tekakwitha had injured her foot with a hoe and was unable to go to the field that day.

The moment had come. In silence the Faith of her mother had grown within her and clamored for expression at last. She had not dared to speak before. Father de Lamberville felt that he had found a soul upon whom God had great designs. He began at once to instruct her and found her amazingly responsive and ready. Kateri on her part felt that a light had dawned. To all her inner striving an answer had come and the pent-up forces within her found an object upon which to expend themselves. She who was so inferior, so unattractive, had found Love at last, supreme, compelling, worthy of any sacrifice, a love that could fill her, fashion her, comfort her. She spent the winter preparing for baptism and on Easter morning, April 18th, with the birds of the forest singing and the growing things in bud, she was baptized and received her Christian name of Kateri, the Indian for Catharine.

Strangely enough her family made no objection, but it was not long before faultfinding began, and later, persecution. She was given no food on Sunday, for not going to work in the fields. On her way to church the children threw stones at her, men either drunk or pretending to be, staggered across her path. Once an infuriated brave, perhaps a rejected suitor, came into the cabin and threatened to kill her with his tomahawk. Worst of all, she was horribly slandered by her aunt and life in the cabin became unbearable.

This brought Father de Lamberville to the decision that she must go to Canada as soon as possible, a step which the opposition of her uncle had hitherto prevented. The opportunity came however when some visiting Indians arrived from the St. Lawrence. She fled with them, making a marvelous escape from her uncle who, as soon as he learned of her departure, went in furious pursuit but by some extraordinary intervention turned back when he had almost overtaken her. She reached Caughnawaga and the Mission of St. Francis Xavier safely and was welcomed by Anastasia in whose cabin she found a home.

On Christmas morning, 1677, she received her First Holy Communion. After that, her life is the uninterrupted story of a girl with engaging human qualities carrying the love of God as such a strong white light within her that with unbelievable rapidity, she rose to the heights of perfection. We see her in her simple village life of work, prayer, acts of charity. We see her at hunting season in the woods where there was no chapel, making a cross from a tree on the bank of a stream, a shrine in a snowbound solitude to which she withdrew as to a little island of peace and prayer. Her love drove her also to the penances that saints have sought, and her strong, Indian nature contributed to their severity.

Finally on March 25th, 1679, she reached the summit of her destiny. Blindly her natural aversion to marriage had led to this supernatural culmination and on the feast of Our Lady's Annunciation, she sealed her dedication by a public vow of virginity. We of a later age may find it difficult to realize what this meant in a Mohawk pattern of life. Culture in its Stone Age and a vow of virginity! It was unprecedented; but Kateri has become the living testimony that the grace of God can penetrate any environment, that a stricken pagan child can grow into a superb woman bearing within her the seed of sanctity.

Kateri was destined to teach the Indians the supernatural meaning of virginity. After her, other virgins would be "brought to the King" and even the primitive fervor of those early Christians at Caughnawaga would rise to new heights because she had dwelt among them. She had not long to live. Her frail body, never strong, was exhausted when she was barely twenty-four. At three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon of Holy Week, April 17th, 1680, with the Indians reverently about her, joyously she died.

A quarter of an hour later, to the wonderment of everyone who saw it, her face changed. Disfigurement, which had served its lifelong purpose, vanished, and she was beautiful to look upon. "I will love you in heaven. I will pray for you. I will assist you," she had said to the friend closest to her in the moments of her dying, and after her death she strewed her favors with generous hand. She has not changed in the years that have passed over the earth since her going. Now, after three centuries, it is still the acceptable time, and it remains with this generation to invoke her trustfully, insistently, for the favors that will make it possible for the Church to call her Blessed.

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