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THE LILY OF THE MOHAWKS

Kateri Tekakwitha

1656 — 1680

That part of America which is now the State of New York was inhabited in the seventeenth century by a group of five Indian tribes: the Onondagas, Senecas, Cayugas, Oneidas, and Mohawks. The American settlers called them "The League of the Five Nations," and the French nicknamed them the "Iroquois." But these five tribes called their confederation "The People of the Long-House," for they were proud of the fact that they did not live in mere wigwams like the other Indian peoples of North America, but in more stable dwellings. The "long-houses" were low bark huts or sheds, a hundred to a hundred and fifty feet in length, sprawling along the ground like stranded whales. They were divided into family "compartments," with a common fire for each group of four. The fires were built on the central corridor that ran the length of the hut, and the stinging pine-wood smoke escaped as best it could through holes in the roof. Evidently there was no privacy; indeed, there is reason to think that the Indians had not so much as the idea of privacy.

The name of the Iroquois has always been connected with savage cruelty, with a delight in barbaric torture. But the Indians' motive for torturing their captives has been almost universally misunderstood. The Iroquois were not more brutalized than other tribes; they were, for instance, kind to the aged and cared for them, whereas other Indian tribes would kill those that hampered their freedom of movement. Why, then, did the Iroquois torture their captives so fiendishly? In order to placate their war-god, Areskoi, and to gain his favour: to this god they offered not only the ceremonial torturing of their captives but also their own accidental or self-inflicted pains. But the Iroquois

ritual cruelty, saved to some extent from mere savagery by its sacrificial intent, degenerated into sheer animality when the Indians got hold of spirits, "fire-water." The French used to give useful articles to the Indians in exchange for furs; the Dutch Calvinists and the English Protestants, to capture the trade, offered them cheap spirits, and the French, to save their commercial enterprises, at times reluctantly did the same. An Indian would do anything for that "fire-water," and it swept him into a mad orgy of rioting and indiscriminate destruction. For three or four days anarchy reigned in the village that had received a supply of spirits; no one was safe, anything might be smashed or burned. And still worse than these outbursts of drunken violence, the most shameful vice, bold, flagrant and in no way disguised, was found everywhere.

It was in such surroundings as these that there grew up a girl whose name was to become a household word in Canada, a girl whose pure maidenhood was to win her such titles as "The Genéviève of New France," the "Good Catherine," "The Lily of the Mohawks." This girl was called by the Indians "Tekakwitha," the name she received in baptism was Kateri, or Catherine. In the year 1656, ten years after the Mohawks had tortured and killed St. Isaac Jogues and several other Jesuit missionaries, and very near the place where Jogues won his martyr's crown, Catherine Tekakwitha was born to a pagan Mohawk brave and a Christian Algonquin. Before she was old enough to be instructed in the Faith, even before she had been baptized, the child lost both mother and father in an epidemic of smallpox. The disease spared her life, but left her, delicate and orphaned, to grow up in the household of her uncle in a pagan village on the south bank of the Mohawk River. When Catherine was ten years old a passing Jesuit missionary told her about the one true God, the God of the French and the Mohawk, the God of enemy and friend, the God of all men. Apparently he had no time to instruct and baptize her. With only this little knowledge of true religion she was to grow to womanhood in the midst of pagan corruption. Yet in some dim way, almost blindly but with wonderful determination, she not only strove after such Christian virtues as patience and fortitude, but aspired to the

high ideal of Christian virginity. She was nagged by the women and bullied by the young men; but she would not marry.

At last her uncle and aunts decided that they had had enough of this nonsense, and they arranged a marriage. Everything was concluded except the final ceremony in which a girl, by offering the young man some corn-cakes, gives her consent to the union. Then, on a certain evening, they told Catherine to dress in her best. She did so, thinking that guests were coming, and then sat by the fire, waiting. Suddenly a well-dressed young Indian entered and sat down beside her. The aunts ordered Catherine to give him some corn-cakes. Like a flash she understood. She was participating in her own marriage: only the final symbol of consent was wanting! Her cheeks flushed with indignation at the meanness of the trick, she rose to her feet, and in a moment was gone out into the night, into the cornfields where they could not find her. The aunts made Catherine pay for their humiliation, but her gentle patience won back their affection and at length they left her in peace to follow her own way.

When Catherine was nineteen, a Jesuit, Father Jaques de Lamberville, came to stay in the Mohawk village. He instructed her, and at Easter of the following year, 1676, she was baptized. The graces of the Sacrament worked freely in her strong soul, and her spotless life became more and more a reproach to others. As a result she was persecuted, and her life, even, was threatened. It became necessary to send her to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier at Sault St. Louis, where an adopted sister was willing to give her a home. An old Iroquois brave, whose hands, thirty years before, had been stained with the blood of Fathers de Brébeuf and Lalemant, gave her an opportunity of escaping. News of her disappearance was quickly carried to the old chief, her uncle, and he hurried in pursuit; he was going "to kill someone." But the Indians from the Mission succeeded in evading him, and Catherine made in safety the two hundred and fifty mile journey to the Sault. At the Mission she found herself in a new world where, as wrote one of the missionaries, "everyone spoke constantly of God and almost every home was a school of sanctity." Catherine's soul was filled with a great

desire of Christian perfection and with her whole being she embraced the new life.

But the old difficulty arose again; her sister resolved that Catherine should marry. Catherine's sister was probably thinking mostly of the Iroquois custom by which the bridegroom becomes a member of the bride's household, so that a marriage to a good hunter means better food supplies for the young woman's family: but with great shrewdness she urged upon the girl considerations of gratitude to those who had given her a home. Catherine's feelings were deeply hurt, but hiding her pain. she gave an evasive answer. After a few days the sister returned to the attack, and Catherine then told her quite definitely that she intended never to marry. "What! my sister," exclaimed the other, "do you know what you have said? Have you ever seen or heard tell of a similar thing among Iroquois girls? Where did you get this new fancy? Do you think that **you** can do what no girl has been able to do in our country? Leave these thoughts alone, my dear sister, leave them alone. Distrust your powers and tread with others the common road." The appeal was based on truth: Catherine was indeed treading a new and higher path, a path till then untrod by any Iroquois maiden. But no pleading, and no arguments coulld make her swerve from the way that she had chosen. She would have, she said, no other spouse but Jesus Christ, for whose love she would gladly go in poverty and want all the days of her life.

That indeed was the kind of life she thus faced, for the social and economic system of the Iroquois had no place for an unmarried girl. Catherine became dependent on the charity of her friends. Her confessor, on this account, for long refused to allow her to make a vow of virginity; but at last her blameless life, so courageously mortified, so wholly given to God, forced him to approve her desire, and on the Feast of Our Lady's Annunciation, 1679, after receiving holy communion she vowed her virginity to Christ for ever, offering her vow at the hands of the Immaculate Virgin Mother to whom she now dedicated herself. Catherine seemed no longer now to belong to this world. Her soul was filled with a great joy, and she longed only for the Lord of All to come and take her to Himself.

He came, indeed, down the royal road of the Cross. Catherine's energy was wasted by a slow fever, which grew into a mortal illness, and she lay prostrate for the last two months of her life. The slightest movement caused her agonizing pain. Yet no word of impatience escaped her lips. On the Tuesday in Holy Week, 1680, she received the Viaticum. In response to her confessor, who could not but wonder that this fragile girl had spent over twenty years in an Indian village without ever tarnishing her purity of body or soul, she made it known to him that divine grace had entirely preserved her from any such stain. The next day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, she died. She was in the twenty-fourth year of her age, and the fourth after her baptism.

Both the Indians and the French soon began to invoke her spiritual aid. The answers to such prayers were many and wonderful, and her fame spread from the New World to the Old. The political changes of the eighteenth century, however, broke many bonds; Canada was lost to France, and the Society of Jesus was suppressed. Catherine's name was never quite forgotten in her own land, but our times have had the blessing of seeing a great revival of interest in this "fair flower that bloomed among the Redmen." The cause of Catherine's beatification is now progressing favourably at Rome, and we may well hope and pray that God, as one of her recent biographers has said, "will set in the full splendour of the Church's worship this woman whom we can know and love through all the intervening distances of time and space, of colour and of alien civilization, this little Indian maiden who is a perfect example of the good which lies hidden and waiting in the heart of every pagan race."