

A DOMINICAN MARTYR IN HAMPSHIRE

Venerable Robert Nutter, O.P.: Martyred at Lancaster, July 26, 1600, "a man of a strong body but of a stronger soul, who rather despised than conquered death, and went before his companion (Mr. Thwing) to the gallows with as much cheerfulness and joy, as if he had been going to a feast, to the astonishment of the spectators." (Dr. Champney.)

IN the year 1579, two brothers arrived at the Douai College (Rheims) to pursue their studies for the priesthood. Their names were Robert and John Nutter, of Burnley in Lancashire.¹ After having been ordained priests, they both left France in the year 1582, in order to devote the remainder of their lives to the salvation of their fellow-countrymen in England. John Nutter was shipwrecked off the coast of Suffolk and, being discovered, arrested on suspicion of being a priest. He was imprisoned for two years in the Marshalsea and finally suffered martyrdom at Tyburn on February 12, 1584.² The other brother, Robert, appears to have landed on the Hampshire coasts for, on the report of a spy named Dodwell, he frequented the houses of the Hampshire gentry.

In those days a price was set upon the head of every seminary priest arriving upon these shores. Discovery meant death to the priest. Those who harboured the priests were liable to be charged as "abettors of treason." A high place of honour should therefore be accorded to those gentry in Hampshire who received Father Robert Nutter in their homes.

The copious State Papers relating to Papists at the Public Record Office make it possible in some measure to restore these forgotten heroes and heroines to our esteem.

Catholic priests and laymen travelling from the Continent were wont to land on the shores of Portsmouth Harbour. Porchester Castle and other small havens were in mediæval times accessible by sea, but are now disused owing to the silting up of the coastal shores. From Havant on the Sussex

¹ *Dominican Martyrs in Great Britain*, by Raymond Devas, O.P.

² *Memoirs of Missionary Priests*, by Richard Challoner.

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border to Fareham in Hampshire, there was a long line of wharves and quays, together with many small creeks and inlets where sailing ships and boats were moored.

At nightfall it was the custom (so it was said) for priests travelling from the Continent to leave their ship before it reached port. The priests were secretly rowed ashore in small boats into one of the numerous inlets adjacent to the lands of some friendly Papist. After resting for a night or two they travelled further afield to Winchester or Petersfield, whence they could readily make their way to any other part of England.

It must have been a thrilling experience to the young priest to land on his native shores under the shelter of darkness, amongst strangers and in a part of the country unknown to him.

In all probability Father Robert Nutter landed in England on the shores of Portsmouth harbour in the neighbourhood of the ancient town of Fareham. An old road from Fareham skirted the north side of Portsdown Hill and led past the villages of Boarhunt and Southwick to Petersfield and thence to London. Following this old road to Southwick, near the roadside may be seen the ancient Saxon Church of Boarhunt. At the neighbouring Manor House under the alias of Askew, Father Robert Nutter enjoyed the hospitality of the Henslow family.

What record have we of the Henslows being resident at Boarhunt? Inside the ancient Saxon Church there may be seen a remarkable Tudor monument surmounted by three delicately carved figures representing the three Sister Saints of Faith, Hope and Charity. Below on the panels are engraved the initials R. H. (with arms of the Henslow family), C. P. (with arms of the Pounds), and K. P. (with arms of the Pooles). The monument was erected to Ralph Henslow, who died in 1577.³ The mother of Catherine (wife of Ralph Henslow) was a member of the family of Pound and a connection of Thomas Wriothlesley, first Earl of Southampton (to whom the manor of Boarhunt formerly

³ *Victoria County History of Hants*, Vol. III, p. 145.

belonged). Helen, the daughter of Ralph Henslow, married John Fortescu, grandson of the martyr Blessed Adrian Fortescu, Knight of St. John. John Fortescu was also a great-grandson of Blessed Margaret Poole (Countess of Salisbury), through his mother, Katherine, daughter of Sir Geoffrey Poole of Lordington. It is evident therefore that the arms on the monument bear testimony to these relationships.

It is probable that Fr. Robert Nutter would have become acquainted with John Fortescu and his wife, Helen, then resident in Hampshire. Helen Fortescu (née Henslow) achieved an enviable fame for her cleverness and wit in deceiving Topcliffe and his band of pursuivants. In the Chronicle of St. Monica's Convent at Louvain, it is related that "Topcliffe could not abide her because she played him so many pretty tricks in shifting away the priests out of his fingers."⁴ Her nephew, Anthony Fortescu, resided in the neighbourhood of Boarhunt and was reported to be a supporter of Mary Queen of Scots.

An interesting link is afforded by this family with Shakespeare and the Dominican Order. In 1590 Father Robert Nutter became a prisoner in Wisbech Castle, about which time he became a member of the Dominican Order. During the selfsame year John Fortescu and his wife, Helen, leased and occupied the Gatehouse at Blackfriars (part of the old Dominican Priory in London). Here the pair entertained priests and refugees, who by secret passages were led out to the water-ways of the River Thames, whence they could make good their escape. Ben Johnson was resident at Blackfriars in 1605, where he is cited as a recusant.⁵ The Fortescus were still living then at the Gatehouse. Is it not likely that our great dramatist visited Blackfriars to see his friend Ben Johnson? In 1611 William Shakespeare purchased the lease of the Gatehouse and its precincts from Henry Walker, minstrel and citizen of London.⁶

⁴ *Chronicle of English Augustinian Canonesses at Louvain*, by Dom Adam Hamilton, Vol. II.

⁵ *Catholic Record Society*, Vol. 34.

⁶ *Life of William Shakespeare*, by Theodore Chambers.

The Hampshire gentry whose houses Robert Nutter frequented were likely to have been friends and acquaintances of the Earl of Southampton, if not of Shakespeare's Patron, the third Earl, at least of his father, known as the "Catholic Earl." Boarhunt, the seat of the Henslow family, was but five or six miles from Titchfield, the Hampshire residence of the Earls of Southampton.

The heroic fortitude of the Henslow family is exemplified by Hampshire Recusant Lists of Elizabeth's reign. A recusant, be it noted, was one who failed to attend the services of the Church of England as established by law. By the Act of 1581 a fine of £20 per month was imposed upon such recusants; moreover it was accounted High Treason to reconcile or be reconciled to the Catholic Church.

Catherine, widow of Ralph Henslow, and Catherine, wife of Thomas Henslow, were cited as recusants for Boarhunt.⁷ In 1586 the aged widow Katherine Henslow wrote a pathetic letter to the Commissioners for recusancy. In response to a demand for money she states "that she is in depte more than she can pay yet she offers XXs by the yere hoping that their Lordships will accept this some as a poor widowes myghte." Anthony Fortescu, her nephew, added a further sum to his aunt's subsidy.⁸

Whilst resident with the Henslows, Fr. Robert Nutter could scarcely have failed to have met the Tichbornes of Porchester, who lived but a mile away on the other side of Portsdown Hill. Peter Tichborne, the head of this branch of the Tichborne family, spent most of his time in the White Lion Prison in Southwark, for he was a determined recusant, although no other crime save that of papistry was ever alleged against him. Chideock, his eldest son, was cited as a recusant for Porchester in April, 1583, but some little time later he seems to have lived at his grandmother's house near Winchester, where he apparently invited Fr. Robert Nutter. Dodwell informs us that "Mr. Tichborne of Porchester nowe residinge at Longwood receaveth Askewe (Nutter),

⁷ *Catholic Record Society*, Vol. 22.

⁸ *Essay on Hampshire Recusants in Old English Bible*, by F. Aidan Gasquet.

ffisher, Yonge als Adams, Gardner, Somerfeilde.⁹

Longwood House was situated on the border of a long wood (as its name betokened) skirting the old road from Winchester to Alton. It was a house famous for its secret hiding-places where the priests were hastily thrust in times of danger. The old house has been demolished but the estate is once more in Catholic hands.

Chideock Tichborne, of an ancient family in Hampshire, was by all accounts a most cultured and chivalrous young gentleman. But alas! he became the friend and associate of the gallant but hot-headed youth Charles Babington, a devotee of Mary Stuart and leader of the so-called Babington conspiracy. Babington and his friends were used as tools by the Secretary of State to procure the downfall of the Scottish Queen, who was accused of plotting against Elizabeth. All the conspirators were captured under dramatic circumstances and charged with High Treason. A general compassion was felt for young Tichborne, who suffered for loyalty to his friend rather than for any personal share in political intrigue. The night before he was executed Chideock Tichborne wrote some pathetic verses which have since earned him immortal fame amongst the Elizabethan poets. The MS. runs thus: "Made by Chideock Tichborne by himselfe in the Tower the night before he suffered death who was executed in Lincolns Inn Fields for Treason 1586."¹⁰

My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares
And all my goodes is but vain hope of gain.
The day is fled and yet I saw no sun
And now I live and now my life is done! [First verse.]

Some years later two brothers, Thomas Tichborne, a priest, and Nicholas, a layman, both cousins of Chideock Tichborne, were brutally hanged and quartered at Tyburn. Their names are enrolled amongst the English Martyrs.

From Longwood House near Winchester it was but a short distance to travel from the Valley of the Itchen to the

⁹ *P.R.O. Domestic State Papers Elizabeth*, Vol. 168, n. 33.

¹⁰ *Disraeli's Curiosities of Literature* (Chideock Tichborne).

Valley of the Meon. Through wooded and undulating country, Fr. Robert Nutter would have ridden over the hills to Exton where, according to Dodwell, he enjoyed the hospitality of Mr. Goldsmith. An amusing echo of those times is conveyed in the MS. correspondence of the Privy Council. The Councillors had been requested by the ecclesiastical authorities to deal with the obstinate popery of Mistress Goldsmith (wife of Robert Nutter's host). Time and again John Goldsmith had been confined to prison on account of his wife's recusancy, but no sufferings of his could prevail upon his wife to go to the Parish Church, for "wild horses would not drag her thither." All the forces and threats of the Bishop of Winchester were unavailing. At length the Privy Councillors, after debating the matter, issued the command that John Goldsmith was to be released, for, said they, "*we are crediblie given to understand that the saide Goldsmithe is not hable to over rule his wife's peevisch disposition in that behaulfe [of religion] and therefore the correction of her obstinacye is to be laid upon her own carcass.*"¹¹

The lady whose carcass was to be corrected was Dorothy, daughter of Henry Middleton of Kent. We do not know in what manner her "carcass" suffered, but in any case it made no difference to Mistress Goldsmith's "obstinacye in poperye." Some years after Robert Nutter had left Hampshire, the whole family suffered ruin through the expropriation of their lands due to inability to pay the fines for recusancy. In 1592 for eight months' recusancy the family was fined £600, equivalent in our money to a sum of some £7,000. Little wonder that the majority of the Catholic gentry and their tenants were ruined in Hampshire.¹²

Another Hampshire house in which Fr. Nutter received hospitality was that of Lady Paulett of Crondall. Lady Elizabeth was the widow of Sir George Paulett, a younger brother of the celebrated Sir William Paulett, Lord High Treasurer and Marquis of Winchester. She was a spirited

¹¹ *Victoria County History of Hants*, Vol. II.

¹² *Catholic Record Society*, Vol. 18, p. 281.

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adherent of the Old Faith and after having been repeatedly cited for recusancy, was imprisoned in the Fleet for religion in 1586. She died at a great old age in 1601 at Crondall.

In the Hampshire mission field Fr. Nutter not only resided in rural parishes but is reported to have stayed in Winchester at the house of a lady of noble birth, Lady West. She appears to have been the widow of Sir George West, tenth Lord la Warre. In April, 1583, she was cited for the Parish of St. Thomas as a recusant.¹³ In December of that year a general warrant was issued by the Privy Council to search for priests, since information had been received that "an assemblie was determined to heare Masse within the Citie." A search in Lady West's house was rewarded with the discovery of "a secret place enclosed with bordes in which were hidden divers new and old papisticall books printed and written." In a place "more secret underground was founde a chest bound with iron wherein was all manner of massing apparall, a chalice of tynne, a boxe full of singinge cakes (hosts)—a pyx of ivorie sett in woode, also in green silk too Agnus dei enclosed in Satten broken in manie peeces, besides divers new Masse books, mannells and catechismes." In the ladies' chamber was "founde a super altaure and it is confessed by one ffraunces her servant that the same cheste was that morning also in the ladies chamber and removed into the house when thee herde that there was searche in the Citie." Fraunces the servant was imprisoned and examined whilst the aged Lady West was confined to her house.¹⁴ The authorities seem to have decided that it would be inadvisable to molest her. Her house was however watched and in February, 1583 (O.S.) Thomas Dodwell the informer reports that "My Ladie West of Winchester keepeth Fisher alias Holmes in her house for the most part. And also entertaineth Askew alias Nutter, Stone alias Gunn, Pilcher alias Foster, Lasey alias Dickenson which is nowe apprehended and in Newgate."

The spy's information led no doubt to the detection of the

¹³ *Domestic State Papers Eliz.*, Vol. 160 (26).

¹⁴ *Domestic State Papers Eliz.*, Vol. 164 (14).

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whereabouts of Fr. Nutter, for it was about this time that he was apprehended and committed to the Tower of London. Here he suffered the torture known by the name of "The Scavenger's daughter," an iron hoop in which the body was confined. A year later he was banished to Normandy with twenty other missionary priests. Too earnest and courageous to relinquish his vocation he returned to England at the earliest opportunity. He was once more captured and after confinement in Newgate and Marshalsea prisons he was sent a prisoner to Wisbeach Castle. In a report of the Sheriff of Lancashire to Sir Robert Cecil regarding the executions of the Ven. Robert Nutter and Edward Thwing it is stated that Nutter in his examination "confessed that he was professed a friar of the Order of St. Dominic during the time he was prisoner in Wisbeach, when in the presence of divers priests he did take his vow; the which was certified to the Provincial of that Order at Lisbon and by him allowed!"¹⁵

With four other priests Fr. Robert Nutter succeeded in escaping from Wisbeach Castle when in the year 1600 he made his way to Lancashire. He was recaptured and tried at Lancaster Assizes on the charge of being a seminary priest resident in England contrary to the Statutes. For this legal offence he was condemned to death and won his crown at Lancaster, being executed on July 26, 1600.

Thus his priestly career closed in eternal glory. As for those Catholic families in Hampshire who had aided him in his mission, they shared with our martyr a tragic end, for all were ruined by the storm of persecution which assailed Catholics at this period. The members of these Catholic families who sacrificed so much on account of their loyalty to the Church of Peter surely deserve a share in the glory of the English Martyrs and "their name liveth (we hope) for evermore."

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¹⁵ Hatfield MSS. *Historical Commission*, Vol. X.