

The Life of the Spirit

BLACKFRIARS

Vol. II.

DECEMBER, 1945

No. 22.

| | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| A Royal Vagabond | Sister Mary Frances, O.P. | 161 |
| Sisters of Martyrs | L. E. Whatmore, M.A. | 165 |
| Martha and Mary | St. Augustine | 170 |
| Reviews | | 175 |

A ROYAL VAGABOND

*Princess Blanche of England (Sister Euphemia, O.P.
1343-1376).*

By

SISTER MARY FRANCES, O.P.

In the royal palace within the Tower of London, Queen Philippa of Hainault, the wife of King Edward III, gave birth to a daughter in March, 1342, and called her Blanche. But soon joy was turned to sorrow, for within the month the baby died, and was buried with pomp in Westminster Abbey, where her effigy in alabaster lies near that of her brother Prince William of Windsor in St. Edmund's Chapel.

The following year the queen was consoled by the birth of another girl-child and the expenses of "Queen Philippa's uprising at the Tower" are mentioned on 26th April, 1343 (Issue Roll 17 Edward III). This daughter was also named Blanche, in memory of the little one she had lost. Now the only other mention to be found of this "Lady Blanche" is in the Wardrobe account of 19th. Edward III at the date November 13th, 1345; after that she disappears from English history and appears in the history of the Dominican Order under the name of Blessed Euphemia of England.⁽¹⁾

How much of her story is historical fact and how much is legend it would be difficult to say. We give the account as it has come down to us.

"The living mirror of virtue, grace and beauty," so her biographer tells us, "the Princess was early enamoured of heavenly things." She sought advice on prayer and the spiritual life from "certain religious at the court of her father."

At this time her father's confessor was Fr. John Woodrowe,

(1) *Grande Année Dominicaine*—Fev. 27. Steil!—*Ephemerides Dominicano-sacrae*.

O.P., who was engaged during these years with the preparations for the foundation of Dartford Priory, the charter for which had been signed by King Edward in the year 1346. It is but natural that, on being told by the king's daughter of her desire to leave the world and become a nun, Fr. Woodrowe should have guided her thoughts towards this, her father's royal foundation for Dominican nuns. When he was sent to France to bring over the Sisters to train the young girls who were to form the community at Dartford, he no doubt hoped that the chief of these girls would be his royal penitent. But her father, the king, would not have it. Without being aware of the fact he was in this but the instrument of God who did not will this chosen soul to spend her life as a royal prioress, for she was destined to follow a thorn-crowned Bridegroom along the royal road of humiliation and disgrace.

In 1356, when Dartford was actually founded, that being the year the nuns from Poissy arrived in England, Princess Blanche was thirteen years old; in the Middle Ages, therefore of a marriageable age.

The Duke of Gueldreland at this time wished to make an alliance with England and Edward offered him the hand of his daughter Blanche. But when the king made known his wishes to his daughter she begged for a respite of three days to think the matter over, then retiring to the privacy of her rooms she gave herself to prayer.

At the end of the three days she was nowhere to be found.

How and with whose connivance she managed her escape, what dangers and difficulties she encountered, we can only conjecture; but with a courage and perseverance worthy of her warrior father she fled overseas and we next hear of her at Cologne. There, begging her bread, she spent several days visiting the famous shrines of the city and at the tomb of her countrywoman, St Ursula, she formed the resolution of devoting the remainder of her life to the service of the poor.

Calling herself by the name of Gertrude she joined a sisterhood in charge of one of the great hospitals of the city and gave herself up with ardour and devotion to the care of the sick. So tenderly did she nurse them, so unselfishly and lovingly did she accomplish the tasks appointed her, that all who saw her were filled with admiration. All, except one. Among the nurses was one whose envious heart was filled with bitterness at the girl's simplicity and humility, and burning with jealous anger at the praise bestowed on her this unhappy woman conceived a fiendish plan to injure her good name.

Taking a piece of stuff and a veil she owned she placed them underneath Gertrude's pillow, and then bewailed her loss in strident tones, filling the house with the story of her loss. Guid-

ing the search to the bed of her victim she drew forth the missing articles from the place in which she had hidden them. In vain did Gertrude assert her innocence, the circumstantial evidence was too strong. She was a newcomer about whom nothing was known, her enemy was a person of repute and standing in the place. The poor girl was sentenced to stand for several hours in the pillory, a butt for the insult and jeers of the rabble. She accepted the undeserved punishment with a humble heart and united herself in spirit with her Divine Bridegroom in his hour of trial.

Meanwhile her loss had caused consternation at the Court of England. Her father, the king, sent messengers far and wide in search of her. "By an altogether special permission of Divine Providence," says the chronicler, "a party of these knights arrived at Cologne on the very day and at the very time that the Princess they sought was standing in the pillory, being subjected to the indignities which were the usual lot of such unfortunates. Joining the crowd, they saw the poor victim of its insults and one said in astonishment: 'If this young girl were dressed in royal attire I would swear she is our lost princess'." Under this impression they went to the magistrate of the city and requested him to send for the young girl in question that they might examine her. Gertrude was forthwith brought before the English knights, who asked her about her family and antecedents.

"Alas, my lords," she replied, "I am but a poor miserable wretch; as to my family, my father was executed and my twelve brothers all died violent deaths, one of them even hanged himself. I am left all alone and you see in what plight I am."

The Englishmen naturally did not understand that the princess was calling our Lord her father and the twelve Apostles her brothers, so they drove her from their presence in anger, much to her own satisfaction. In haste she quitted Cologne, and following the course of the Rhine, she reached Pfortzheim in the territory of the Margrave of Baden. She knocked at the door of a monastery of Dominican nuns dedicated to our Lady and St Mary Magdalen, and it must have been now that she assumed the name of Euphemia, by which she was henceforth known. As she was doing her best to hide all traces that might lead to her discovery, the assertion of Père Souèges that she called herself Gertrude of Cologne seems unlikely. The Sisters at Pfortzheim never speak of her by any other name than Euphemia.

The Prioress, Mother Ludgarde von Asperg, listened to her request for alms and a lodging by engaging her as laundry-maid to the Community and gave her a small cottage at the doors of the monastery where she might live and work. Here she spent her time in close communion with her Lord, gladly doing her humble

task, asking for nothing better than to be left in her solitude and obscurity. The monastery supplied her scanty needs in return for her work and for several years she lived undisturbed.

But God did not will that her virtues should remain concealed from the eyes of those who would appreciate them at their full worth.

We are told that a holy hermit "across the sea", presumably in her native land, had for many years served God with great fervour and devotion until one day he was tempted by the devil's favourite temptation for spiritual persons who would turn with contempt from the lure of the world and the flesh. Pride haunted the hermit with the thought that he was dearer to God than anyone else in the world. Our Lord then appeared to him and said: "Get up, and cross the sea, and search all Swabia for a soul most dear to my Heart, she is holier far than you. I will make her known to you by a divine sign."

Humbly submissive, the hermit set out on his travels, and after many hardships and adventures he arrived at length before the gate of the Monastery of Pfortzheim. Entering the courtyard with the intention of begging for food and rest he saw the washerwoman, Euphemia, washing the clothes in a little stream that ran down on one side. To his amazement this poor creature appeared surrounded by a heavenly light and the hermit knew that this was the sign to be vouchsafed him. He approached the holy maid, and kneeling before her, humbly asked her blessing. She drew back in astonishment and declared she was but a poor sinner. Eventually the good man drew her into conversation, and each recognising the other's sanctity, they spent sometime in holy converse revealing the heavenly graces each had received from God.

Before leaving the monastery the hermit asked to see the Prioress, and after thanking her for the hospitality she had given him, he told her of the spiritual treasure lying unheeded at her door. The poor washerwoman then became an object of interest to the nuns, and when they had verified the truth of the hermit's assertions, the Prioress sent for Euphemia and told her that if she wished she might leave her humble work and enter the Community, there to give herself up to contemplation and prayer.

But Euphemia's humility took alarm and that night she fled from the place, and for the next two years nothing was heard of her. Probably she spent the time in making pilgrimages to famous shrines. The parties of pilgrims so frequently to be met with on the roads of medieval Europe would have afforded her protection and their charity would have fed her. Eventually she found her way back to Pfortzheim and was welcomed with joy by the religious of the monastery. Although she insisted on resuming her task of washing the nuns' clothes she was received

into the Community as a "Clothed Tertiary" of the Order. This is the rank which used to be held by Lay Sisters for a settled period before they began their year of Canonical Novitiate, therefore the lowest in the house. Thus she continued her humble life of work and prayer until the year 1376.

One cold day she was sitting by the infirmary fire recreating with some of the other Sisters, when one of them remarked during the conversation, that a recent visitor had brought news of the war between England and France. It was said the King of England's eldest son was dead and his body taken back to England with great pomp. This was the Black Prince, Euphemia's eldest brother. On hearing the news Euphemia was visibly affected and one of the Sister's, noticing her emotion, drew her apart and induced her to reveal the cause of her sorrow on the condition of keeping her secret. Euphemia then told her her story. This Sister, herself of noble birth, did all in her power to gain Euphemia's consent to her telling the truth of her parentage to the Prioress, so that she might take the place in the Community due to her rank. But all her persuasions were useless and Euphemia remained the humble Tertiary laysister until the end of her life.

She died not long after, in the odour of sanctity, and her confidant, now released from her promise of secrecy, told the Community who it was that had served them so long and so faithfully.

Princess Blanche of England, the humble Sister Euphemia, was buried with royal pomp in a stately tomb which was to be seen in the Church of her Monastery of Pfortzheim until it was destroyed by the Lutherans during the troublous times of the religious upheaval in the 16th century.

It is said that many miracles were wrought at the tomb of her, who had humbled herself in this world that she might reign in glory in the next.

SISTERS OF MARTYRS : A SIDELIGHT ON DOMINICAN HISTORY

By

REV. L. E. WHATMORE, M.A.

John Bridgewater, the martyrologist, writing in 1588, makes the interesting statement that the Dominican convent at Dartford numbered in its ranks not only a sister of St John Fisher, but also some sisters of the Carthusian martyrs. He is enumerating those Catholic women who had suffered persecution under Elizabeth, among whom Elizabeth Cressner, the Prioress of Dartford and her nuns occupy a rightful place. The passage in question is contained in an appendix at the end of the *Concertatio*