

CHAPTER VI.


Origin of Penance in England—The Bradshaighs—Mab's Cross—Wigan and Blackrod Chuntries—The Bradshaigh Tomb in the Parish Church.

WHEN the Mohammedans laid forcible claim to Palestine a mad enthusiasm took possession of all Christians. The extraordinary efforts of one able statesman have been known to gain an unexpected victory for his party, but the efforts of Peter the Hermit at the end of the eleventh century diverted the actions of nations and millions of individuals from their old habits to new and sympathetic channels. The wonderful powers of Christianity had just spread their influence over Europe, which in its religious infancy had magnified the Christian marvels, and looked for miracles to be done for and by its own believing members. If Christianity had done so much for men as people were told it had done, then it was clearly the duty, they reasoned, of every man to do something for Christianity according to the ever-believed political-economy principle of service for service. The passion for doing something grew in all, and every man waxed so enthusiastic that he determined to take the kingdom of heaven by the force of his own sacrificial zeal. It was the great papal doctrine of paying, or working off, the debt of sin. To die in defence of the Cross was supposed to be, martyr-like, the greatest proof of honest belief in Christianity, so, in the hope of gaining eternal life, millions hurried to the Holy Land to die, whilst millions more talked of their bravery and the goodness of the cause, for, what myriads believed to be, said the ignorant and superstitious, must be, a divine mission. Many returned from this promised land of fabulous glory, romantic life, and martyrs' graves, with relics which were first considered sacred because of their associations, and then were worshipped because of the increased influences of superstition. The ordinary hardships of the journey and death on the battle-field were not always considered sufficient proofs of the sincerity of the believing soldiers, for many, troubled mayhap by the gnawings of a vexing conscience, wilfully added torments to their troubles as penance for sin. The fighting Christians of this early salvation army were model examples of faith and work combined, and, as they endured so much, others who lived quietly at home considered it their duty to prove their piety by self-inflicted

penance. By this course of reasoning it soon became fashionable to afflict the mind and torment the body. At the end of the twelfth century we find royalty itself, to the admiration of the whole nation and to the satisfaction of heaven as all believed, doing penance at the tomb of Thomas à Becket. Penance was considered a proof of humiliation and contrition which deserved absolution from sin, and thus it came to be believed as the only genuine proof of piety. In Wigan, too, there were guilty sinners and penitential saints. Once every week a noble lady, in scant penitential garb and naked feet, wandered from Haigh to a cross at the outskirts of Wigan. Though accustomed to all the luxuries the times afforded, she wandered alone, in the early morning, through the lonely woods of Haigh in frost and snow, fair weather and foul, waded through the river Douglas, and, wearied, fatigued, and well known, pursued her way along the public road, did penance at the cross before the almost worshipping burghers' children, and then returned as she came. She had committed a woful sin! She had been the happy wife of Sir William Bradshaigh, of Haigh and Blackrod, and was the mother of his children. Ten years before, he had gone off to the Scottish wars. Tardy news of his welfare and hardships came occasionally from him with expressions of tender love, but after a long interval of ten years came the intelligence that Sir William had died a soldier's death, and she mourned over the lost one whose grave even she could not visit. The estates, which she held in her own right, were valuable, and her children were unprotected. She was envied for the former by money-hunters, and the latter became the wards of the Earl of Lancaster, who was under great obligations to Sir Osmond Neville, who had fallen in love with the estates and sought the hand of the widow. She believed herself to be entirely at their mercy, and for the protection of her children she married the Welshman against her will; but the marriage was illegal (and thus she did penance), for Sir William was not dead, but had been taken prisoner, and, after his liberty, returned to save his wife from the oppression of the overbearing knight whom he slew.

An unprotected rich widow had by no means cause to consider herself secure. There were many greedy, lawless ruffians, ready to pounce upon such prey. In 1437 the rich widow of Lord Butler, of Bewsey, Warrington, was forcibly carried away from her own house to the wilds of Wales by William Pulle, of Liverpool, and brother of Sir John Pulle. She was most brutally treated and outraged, and petitions to the King and Commons for redress were alike in vain. Another tragedy in this family is recorded in a MS. now in the Bodleian Library. This story cannot be reconciled with known fact, and is, therefore, discredited, for it is either misunderstood or untrue. This tragedy of 1463 is thus briefly recorded:—"Sir John Butler, knight, was slain in his bed by the procurement of the Lord Stanley, Sir Piers Leigh, and

Master William Savage, joining with him in that action (corrupting his servants), his porter setting a light in a window to give light upon the water that was about his house at Bewsey. . . . They came over the moat in leather boats, and so to his chamber, where one of his servants, named Holdcroft, was slain, being his chamberlain. The other (the porter) basely betrayed his master; they payed him a great reward, and so coming away with him, they hanged him (the porter) on a tree in Bewsey Park."

The interesting little history of Mabel is preserved in a few lines in the Bradshaigh family pedigree, a quaint copy of which may be seen in the introduction of Sir Walter Scott's "Betrothed." This family history says:—"Sir William Bradshaigh, second son of Sir John, was a great traveller and a soldier, and married to Mabel, daughter and sole heiress of Hugh Norris de Haghe and Blackrode, and had issue, in 8 Edward II. Of this Mabel is a story by tradition of undoubted verity, that in Sir William Bradshaigh's absence (being ten years away in the Holy Wars) she married a Welsh knight. Sir William, returning from the wars, came in a palmer's habit amongst the poor to Haghe, who, when she saw him, and conjecturing that he 'favoured' her former husband, wept, for which the knight chastised her, at which Sir William went and made himself known to his tenants; in which space the knight fled, but near to Newton Parke Sir William overtook him and slew him. The said Dame Mabell was enjoined by her confessor to doe penance by going onest every week barefoot and bare legged to a crosse near Wigan from the Haghe wilest she lived, and is called Mab  to this day; and their monument lyes in Wigan Church as you see them portrayed."

When or by whom this Mab's Cross was erected no record tells. Although it came to receive the name of Mab's Cross, it certainly stood where it now stands before Mab's time. In sorrow for her gentle sin and joy for her lord's return, she, to the very letter of the priest's humiliating mandate, did penance and was happy. Penance was not sufficient to appease the wrath of offended virtue and heaven. She was a devotee to the religious faith of her time, and paid willingly and liberally for the prayers of the priests to absolve her soul. She was able to pay, for, independent of her husband's fortunes, she herself was the heiress of the estates of Blackrod and Haigh. But, whilst she was enduring her weekly penitential suffering, Sir William was an enforced exile unable either to console or condole. He was condemned as a felon in 1309 (Inquisitiones ad quod damnum) for slaying the Welsh knight. After his compulsory exile of one year was over he returned, and both were happy, although the work of penitence still went on.

The venerable house of Haigh is closely connected with the history of Wigan, and is geographically so situated on the rising ground in the east of the town, as if meant to oversee all its acts and take a guardian interest in burghal progress. Whilst

the hall is itself sheltered from the bitter east winds, it commands a pleasant view of the undulating western plain in which the old borough is situated. It is said that in very clear weather the Isle of Man can be seen from it. On the same site was the home of the Bradshaighs, and within two miles of it the abode of the Norrys, the last of whose direct race was Mabella. The honourable family now inhabiting it have been ornaments to their town and country. They have been distinguished in war, politics, religion, literature, and science. Thence have come many of the most distinguished mayors and parliamentary representatives of the borough. No member ever represented it so long, or more faithfully, than Sir Roger Bradshaigh, who was also mayor of the town for eight different years. A member of another branch of the same family had the distinguished, but questionable, honour of being Judge in the trial of Charles I. This office of Chief Justice has been filled, according to the history of our land, by illustrious and notorious men. Clergymen, soldiers, and civilians have desecrated or adorned it; barbarous judgments, from that high office, have been given and approved of in half-civilised times, and bribes have been accepted by the chief representative of justice, such as even savages would condemn. In that very office filthy lucre has blinded justice, and made clear the way to lawlessness. Severity has marked some Chief Justices, and wisdom others. One was proved to have been a highwayman, when Prince Hal himself thought it not an ignoble act, and one of the greatest Judges of England was the disgrace of justice, and suffered imprisonment for his bribery. This office which Bradshaw held was of Norman institution.

It was the highest office in the kingdom, ranking even above all titles of nobility. Odo, the half-brother of the Conqueror by a Norman tanner's daughter, was the first Chief Justice of England. The Court of the King's Bench, over which the Chief Justice presides, has always been and is still supposed to be held wherever the sovereign is in England. The first who sat in Westminster Hall was the notoriously atrocious Flambard, in the reign of Rufus. The first Chief Justice of England who acted merely as a judge was Lord Chief Justice Bruce, grandfather of the great Robert Bruce, King of Scotland. He was appointed to the office, after an honourable career, on the 8th of March, 1268, in the fifty-second year of the reign of Henry III.

The Hall of the Norrys, within four miles of Wigan, with the houses of the retainers, was anciently the nucleus of a small, but, according to the beliefs of many, an important, town called Blackrod. The origin of this family or of the name, Norria, Norrys, Norreia, Norrea, Norensia, or Noricus cannot be traced. The barons hostile to King John were all denominated "Norensia," or North Countrymen; but whether this is the origin of the name cannot be positively affirmed. The first authenticated member of the local family is Hugh le Norris, or Hugh de Blackerode. On the 10th

October, 1199, King John confirmed to Hugh le Norris a caracute in Blackrod. In 1202 Hugh le Norris owed the Treasury one mark as part of the charge made for the confirming of his charter. His grandsons were William and Hugh, the latter of whom was the father of Mabella, the wife of William de Bradshaigh. The constables of this township in 1682 presented a favourable account of their district. They said: "We have no murders, felonies, or like misdemeanors committed within our liberties to present to the best of our knowledge: we have permitted no vagabonds or suspected persons to pass through our town that we know of. Winchester watch has been daily observed. We have no common drunkards, swearers, or cursers to present."—(Blackrod Vestry Accounts).

Dame Mabella, the year before she founded a chantry in Blackrod, founded and endowed one in the Parish Church of Wigan, dedicating it to St. Mary the Virgin. The endowment at first was a messuage in Wigan, supposed to be the present Mesnes, in the tenure of Henry Banastre, and with certain premises in Haigh, where she was lady of the manor. This chantry was founded with the assent of Roger, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, the Earl of Lancaster, and the Rector, De Langeton. The attesting witnesses to the deed were Thomas de Lathom, Robert de Langeton, Rich. de Hoghton, Wil. de Lee, the parsons of Wigan and Standish, and others. She was famed for her wealth, misfortunes, and piety. The incumbent priest who first derived the benefits of this endowment was John de Langeton, the rector, but on the 2nd September, 1338, John de Sutton, presbyter was instituted as priest to the chantry of the altar of St. Mary by the Bishop of Lichfield; and more than 200 years after, in 1553, when the population of Wigan had risen to 2600 "houselyne people," for this part of his duties the incumbent, Hugh Cokeson, at the age of 51 years, was receiving a pension of £3 0s. 3d.—(Willis's Hist. Mitr., Abb., p. 109).

The lady Mabella survived her husband, Sir William Bradshaigh, and founded a chantry in the Chapel of Blackrod in 1338, which she dedicated to St. Katherine the Virgin, giving as an endowment "two messuages, sixty acres of land, eight acres of meadow, ten acres of wood, with their appurtenances, in Blackrode, with turbary of the said messuages, to have and to hold to the chantry-priest and his successors for ever, saying divine service daily in the said Chapel of Blackrode for ever," making special mention of the name of Mabella in mass celebrations.—(Lancashire Chantries, part I., p. 125. Chet. pub. Reg. Northburgh, Lichf., p. 58).

When Mabella died, and was laid with the remains of her husband in the chantry built by her at Wigan, the most magnificent fine-art monument in the neighbourhood was erected to their memory by money left for the purpose. It was an altar-tomb, with the effigies of Sir William and Mabella lying alongside on the top. His effigy is in chain-mail, cross-legged, with his sword partially drawn from the scabbard on his

left side, with a shield charged with two bends, the Bradshaigh arms; hers is in a long robe, veiled, her hands elevated and joined over her breast in an attitude of prayer. At the recent restoration of the church (1847) under the Bradshaigh Chapel stairs, lay the two figures, then commonly known as Adam and Eve, where they had been removed out of the way. Their exact original position was unknown. The figures were removed and the tomb restored, after the designs of Mr. John Gibbs, Architectural Sculptor. The present figure of Lady Mabel is the original one, but that of Sir William is new, although an exact copy of the old one which lies in a very dilapidated state in the centre of the present erection. In the vault were found skeletons, supposed to be those of Sir William and Mabel. They were put into new coffins and deposited in a new vault.

There are instances in history showing that some men, and learned men, too, have tried all sorts of religion with the general result of either coming back to the beliefs of childhood or ending in infidelity. More generally still is it, however, that men in the prime of life and vigour of health have been the servants of mammon, and when their shattered bodies were no longer capable of enjoying the pleasures of life they have devoted the remainder of their days to righteous services, whilst many have led wicked lives and left their possessions to build and endow sacred places, where their souls might be prayed for for ever. This was the origin of many of our Church foundations, and especially of chantries. The Papal faith, with its dogma of absolution by payment, fostered this idea. Many a fat living has been left to pay for poor prayers for the dead. Provision for the poor and prayers for the dead have been left by many a hypocrite, although many in all honesty of heart and purpose have founded churches, thinking thereby to do God service. Sir Gilbert Haydock of Haydock petitioned the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry to be allowed to build a chantry in the church of Winwick, which was allowed. His descendant, Peter Legh, of Lyne and Haydock, presented a priest to that chantry in 1542. The Legh Chapel is on the south side of the nave, and contains a monumental sepulchre of brass, on which are placed the effigies of Sir Peter Legh and his wife. On the north side of the nave is the chapel of the Gerards of Bryn, on the oak gate of which is a rude carving of the initials of Sir Thomas Gerard and his wife, executed in 1471. In the year 1650 the Commissioners reported that at Haydock there was a parsonage house, glebe, and housing of the yearly value of £161; three water corn-mills, worth £30 a year; the rents of some tenements, worth £28 a year; and the tithes of corn and small tithes, worth £445 2s. 0d. a year. Of the then incumbent, Mr. Charles Herle, they found him to be "an orthodox, Godly-preaching minister," but that he did not observe Thursday, the 13th day of June inst. as a day of humiliation.—(Parl. Inq., Lanch. MSS., vol. II.)

The following documents about the foundation of a Standish Chantry, written in 1328, and recently published by the Cheetham Society, are given as interesting specimens of a general medieval religious rule:—

“To all the sons of Holy Mother Church, to whom the present tripartite charter shall come. Henry, son of John le Waleys, chaplain, sends greeting in the Lord, because in the future praise and glorious reward is to the souls of those who while they live serve the Lord with all their strength charitably and devoutly, to the praise and honour of our Redeemer and the most Blessed Virgin His Mother. Know that I have ordained and constituted in the Church of Standish a certain free chantry for ever, in the manner following, namely: That a certain chaplain may be resident there for ever (*et perpetuus*), who at the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Parish Church of St. Wilfred of Standish, shall celebrate divine offices daily for the soul of the same Henry, and for the souls of his father and mother and his ancestors and all the faithful deceased. So that at the death of one chaplain another should be appointed to perform these offices, and so successively at what time soever or as often as any deputed chaplain of the said chantry shall die or from any other cause the same chantry shall become vacant. I also will and concede that any fit and honest chaplain is to be elected in regard of charity by me while I live, or by other feoffees of the same chantry after my decease, and without receiving anything from the same chaplain to the said chantry, doing it as is aforesaid assigned, graciously and felicitously. And to the use and sustentation of the same chaplains and their successors I concede, give, assign, and constitute two messuages and 60 acres of land, with their appurtenances, in Standish and Longetre, to have and to hold to the same chaplains so there celebrating, and their successors in fee and perpetual alms quietly and free from all secular service for ever. And I the same Henry and my heirs will warrant, acquit, and defend the aforesaid chaplains and their successors doing their service (congrue) for the said chantry, against all men. Of the lands and tenements of this chantry, pertaining to the same chantry, I ordain, make, and constitute these feoffees after my death, namely, Richard le Waleys and his heirs, nevertheless subject to such condition that if in the collation of the same chantry with the said lands and tenements they shall be remiss or negligent for one month from the time of vacancy of the same, I will and concede that John de Standish, patron of the same church, and his heirs, shall collate to the same chantry that time. And if the said John and his heirs shall make default in the aforesaid collation for 15 days following, I am willing that the Prior of Burscogh who shall then be shall collate that time to the said chantry, but saving otherwise to my heirs their collation to the said chantry when it should become vacant. And that this, my donation, may be firm and stable to these presents tripartite, I have appended my seal. These being witnesses—Sir William de Bradabaigh, William de Worthington, John de Cophull, William de Anderton, William de Burgh, John de Chissenhall, Thomas de Adelington, and others.”

“Edward, by the grace of God, King of England, Lord of Ireland, and Duke of Aquitaine. To all to whom the present letters shall come greeting. Although by the common counsel of our kingdom it is ordained that it is not lawful for religious men or others to enter upon any fee so that it may not come to Mortmain without our licence and that of the chief lords, of whom that fee is immediately held; yet we have granted and given licence by a fine, which Henry, son of John le Waleys, chaplain, made to us and our heirs, as much as in us lies, to the same Henry, that he may give and assign two messuages and 60 acres of land, with appurtenances, in Standish and Longetre, to a certain chaplain, that he may celebrate each day divine offices for the soul of the said Henry and the souls of his father and mother and his ancestors, and all the faithful deceased, at the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church of St. Wilfrid, of Standish, for ever. And that the same chaplain may be able to receive and hold the said messuage and land from the said Henry to him and his successors for ever. And that neither the said Henry nor his heirs, nor the said chaplain or his

successors, by reason of the said statute, be not proceeded against in any way, or be troubled by us or our heirs. Saving to the chief Lords of the fee the usual and accustomed service. Dated at York 12th February, 2nd year of his reign (Ed. III.)"

"To all the sons of Holy Mother Church to whom this present charter indented shall come. Henry, son of John de Waleyes, chaplain, sends greeting in the Lord, because in the future praise and glorious reward is to the souls of those who, while they live, serve the Lord with all their strength, charitably and devoutly, to the praise and honour of our Redeemer and the most Blessed Virgin, his Mother. Know that I have ordained and constituted in the afore-named Church of Standish. (Here he recites his first charter.) These being witnesses—William de Worthington, Thomas de Longetre, William de Anderton, William de Burgh, John de Chissenhall, Roger de Chissenhall, Henry de Ines, and others. Dated at Standish the Thursday on the Feast St. Gregory, Pope, 1337."