

In Memory
of
GEORGE MARSH
A Faithful Martyr
from the
Parish of Deane
Bolton

George Marsh was a farmer in the rural parish of Deane in Lancashire, now a district in the town of Bolton, and bore a name still very common in the neighbourhood. Let us turn our steps to the early home of the martyr, let us visit the parish in which he preached and taught the truth for which he died, and the country where he wandered about like a hunted roe, a marked and persecuted man, because he dared to be true to his conscience and to the faith of Christ. Here it was on Deane Moor, (the place was then bare, bleak, and lonely,) that he met one of his friends at sunset, and "after we had consulted together," he says, "on my business, not without hearty prayer, kneeling on our knees, we departed. I not fully determining what to do; but, taking leave of my friend, said, I doubted not but God, according as our prayer and trust was, would give me such wisdom and counsel as should be most to His honour and glory, the profit of my neighbours and brethren in the world, and obtaining my eternal salvation by Christ in heaven."

When it was first intimated to George Marsh that he was in danger of being arrested, he doubted whether to fly from the danger that threatened him, or to remain: he says, "In the meantime I ceased not by earnest prayer to ask and seek counsel of God, who is the Giver of all good gifts." Then it was that he met the friend, as we have just seen, and they two kneeled down together on the dark and desolate moor, and prayed for direction to Him who graciously points out to His people the path in which they should go - saying; "This is the way, walk ye in it." In answer to these earnest prayers, he received such guidance from above as quite determined him that, at a time when the very existence of the truth was at stake, it was his duty not to run away from the danger, as under ordinary circumstances might have been allowable, but by facing it boldly, afford an unquestionable proof of the sincerity and steadfastness of his faith. We nevertheless find the future martyr none the less earnestly, and by exactly the same means, preparing

himself for the difficulties and trials which, he was well aware, were now awaiting him. "So betimes in the morning," says Marsh, "I arose, and after I had said the English Litany as my custom was with my other prayers, kneeling on my knees by my friend's bedside, I prepared myself to go to Smithills, and as I was going thitherward, I went to the houses of Harry Widdowes, of my mother-in-law, of Ralph Yeton, and of the wife of Thomas Richardson, desiring them to pray for me." From Smithills he was summoned to Lathom House (near Preston), and he says, "So the next day, which was Wednesday, we arose, prayed, and came to Lathom."

It was on the 12th of March, 1555 - that first memorable year of suffering and death to so many of God's saints and witnesses in England - on the Monday before Psalm Sunday, that George Marsh first heard, in his mother's house at Deane, of the search then making for him in Bolton, which was about a mile from Deane at that time. One Roger Wrinstone, and other servants of Master Barton of Smithills, had been sent to apprehend him; and they were ordered to take him first to their master at Smithills, and then, on the following day, to the Earl of Derby and his council, at Lathom House, to be examined in matters of religion. He had only come to Deane at that time, it appears, on a visit to his mother, perhaps to see her and his children, previously to his departure for Germany or to Denmark, as he afterwards told the earl of Derby. The earl, however, had been on the look-out for him, he said, as a heretic; and had intended to order a search to be made for him, and to take him either in Lancashire, or in London.

Lord Derby, as he himself told Marsh - when in King Edward's parliament, had constantly opposed himself to the acts brought forward for the Reformation. He seems to have been willing to spare the lives of the Protestants, if by the exercise of his authority, and by the force of his arguments and persuasions, he

could induce them to recant, but to have shown no pity towards those with whom he was unable to prevail. He knew his influence to be great, and probably supposed that he had only to exercise it, in order to prove it all-powerful. He busied himself that same year about Bradford, another Lancashire man, complaining before the Parliament, that he had done more hurt by his letters, and by private exhortations to those who came to him in prison, than he had ever done when at liberty by his preaching. He sent one of his servants, however, to Bradford, declaring his desire "to be a good lord to him", and even offering to exert his influence with the queen, to allow him to leave England, if he would consent to go where she might be pleased to send him; but Bradford replied, that he would rather be burned in England; "for he knew the queen would send him either to Paris or Louvaine, or some such place, where forthwith they would burn him".

George Marsh had passed the night at the house of a friend. On awaking in the morning, letters were put in his hand, whose advice was, that he should in no wise fly, but abide, and boldly confess the faith of Jesus Christ. This advice was in accordance with his own conscience and judgment; and from that time he consulted no more whether it would be better to fly or to tarry. He made up his mind not to fly, but to go to Master Barton at Smithills (in Bolton), and "patiently bear such cross as it should please God to lay upon his shoulders". And thus it was, that after he had commended himself to the prayers of his friends, and entreated them to comfort his mother, and be good to his little children; for, as he supposed, they should see his face no more until the last day: he took leave of them all, with many tears on both sides, and went of his own free accord to Smithills. On his arriving there, Barton showed him a letter from the Earl of Derby, wherein he was commanded to send George Marsh, with others, to Lathom, and had charged the brother of Marsh and one William Marsh, who was probably a

relation, to deliver him the next day by ten o' clock, before the earl or his council.

There he appeared at the time appointed, but not till four o' clock in the afternoon was he summoned to the presence of Lord Derby and his council. A long and vexatious questioning of this simple-hearted minister then took place; and when it was ended, he adds: "After much ado, the earl commanded me to ward (that is, to prison), in a cold, windy, stone house," where, he adds, "there was a little room, where I lay two nights without any bed, saving a few great canvas tent-cloths; and, that done, I had a pair of sheets, but no woollen clothes: and so continued till Palm-Sunday, occupying myself as well as I could in meditation, prayer and study, for no man could be suffered to come to me, but my keeper twice a day, when he brought me meat and drink."

On Palm-Sunday after dinner he was again called before the earl and his council, among whom were Sir John Biron and the vicar of Prescott; Sir William Norris and Sir Pierce Leigh, who had been of the party at his former examination, were now absent. He was questioned as he had been before, on the sacrament, and then the vicar of Prescott took him aside and for a long time conferred with him. On returning to the earl and his company, the vicar spoke kindly on behalf of the poor prisoner, saying that, "his answers were sufficient for a beginner who did not profess a perfect knowledge in that matter, until he had learned further".

The earl was now very well pleased, and said he doubted not, but by the help of the vicar of Prescott, Marsh would be made conformable in other things. So after many fair words the prisoner was dismissed and a bed and a fire were ordered for him, and liberty was given him, "to go among the servants, on the condition that he did no harm with his communications among them".

During these two examinations George Marsh had replied to the questions put to him, with only that wise prudence, which the circumstances in which he was placed demanded. So it had seemed to him at the time; but afterwards, on strictly searching himself he was not satisfied; his conscience told him that he had been all the while too anxiously seeking to escape the dangers which threatened him, and that his replies had been rather evasions than answers; he felt that he had not been so straightforward as he ought to have been, and he was deeply grieved that he had not with more boldness confessed Christ, but had sought to deliver himself out of their hands, so far as he could do so, without openly denying his Lord. The thought of his faithlessness and his fears sorely troubled him, and made him feel ashamed of his weakness. He cried earnestly to God, that He would strengthen him with His Holy Spirit, and give him boldness to confess Christ, and would deliver him from the snare of enticing words. Other examinations followed, and now this poor persecuted servant of Christ was enabled to keep to his steadfast of mind - and would not consent to agree to the arguments and persuasions of his subtle and wily opponents. He was commanded by Lord Derby to be taken to Lancaster Castle, and lodged there in prison.

Thus George Marsh was taken from the home of his childhood. It was in this hilly country that he passed his early years. These wooded dingles, where the quietness knows no disturbance, but from the gurgling of the clear streams which murmur through them, and from the sweet notes of the merry birds singing their welcome to the joyous spring, where the wild rose trails its luxuriant branches of vivid varnished green, and puts forth its first delicate leaflets, where the woodbine twines its graceful wreaths, where the clustered stems of the hazel are richly tasselled with golden catkins, and the primrose decks the sheltered banks with its fresh blossoms, and nestles in the velvet moss at the roots of the hawthorn and

the hazel, where the full bright sunshine fills every little dell with genial warmth and glowing radiance, glancing here and there among the bursting foliage of the old gnarled oaks and the tall shafts of the yet leafless ash: - here, in these sweet sylvan solitudes, were the pleasant haunts of this good man, and it was in this sweet spring season, that he was taken hence, never to return. Here he has often wandered in his merry childhood, seeking the first flowers of the spring or the brown nuts of autumn; and here in the grave and thoughtful season of his early manhood he may have sat, when the toil of the day was done, on many a long summer evening or in the quiet hours of the Sabbath day, - his Bible in his hand, and his heart filled with adoring love - musing on the wondrous love of Him who gave His own and only Son to death, that all who simply trust in Him and call upon His name, may never perish but have everlasting life.

He had been a farmer, following the calling of his father and his brothers, till the death of his wife, when he resolved to devote himself wholly to that high office to which he was called by the Holy Spirit; and leaving his young children to the care and tenderness of his mother, he set out for Cambridge. There he pursued his studies, and prepared himself for the ministry; and after he was ordained, he became curate of Lawrence Saunders, of Church Langton in Leicestershire, another eminent servant of God, who, like himself, witnessed a good confession, and died a martyr to the truths he preached.

At Lancaster Castle, George Marsh was placed in the common prison among thieves and the worst and vilest characters there, and with them brought up to the bar with irons on his feet, before Lord Derby. On the arrival of Dr. Cotes, the bishop of Chester, at Lancaster, to set up there the idolatry of the mass and the other superstitions of popery, he was requested to send for Marsh and to examine him. This at first, he refused, saying, he would have nothing to

do with heretics. But he sent for the gaoler and rebuked him, because he had suffered the poor prisoner to fare so well, "willing to have me," says Marsh, "more strictly kept and dieted. But if his lordship," he adds, "were tabled with me, I do think he would judge our fare but slender enough." The schoolmaster and others were also rebuked for speaking to him, and the jailer for suffering them to do so. But while in Lancaster Castle, the innocent prisoner was more and more confirmed in his faith and courage, and daily he and his "prison-fellow" prayed and read the Scriptures in so audible a voice, that the people passing by would seat themselves beneath the prison walls to listen to the word of God, when they read it. For this also was Marsh rebuked. We are reminded by the account, of those two holy men, who, in the prison at Philippi, prayed, and sang praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them.

He was removed to Chester, and now we return thither. Come with me through this fine old gateway, whose groined arches, blackened with time and smoke, lead into the Abbey Square. That building on the right, as we enter, is the bishop's Palace, in former times the residence of the Abbots of Chester, and still joining on to the old Cathedral. The upper part of the building alone is modern, but the ground-floor, which now lies below the level of the garden-court, is as it was in the days of the Reformation. It is here in this ancient hall, that Bishop Cotes summoned George Marsh to appear before him, and held his first conference with him, no other person on that occasion being present. Others came afterwards to question him, but they all failed to shake his constancy; and, time after time, during his imprisonment of four months within the precincts of the palace, he was examined and sent back to his miserable prison. The old dark door-way, on the left side of this groined archway, opening out into the Abbey Square, was the porter's lodge; and behind the little chamber occupied by the porter, lay the dungeon in which George Marsh was

confined; for a Bishop's prison was always a portion of the Bishop's palace in those days. Not many years ago, as one who had seen the palace, and described it to me, told me, the staples and rings of rusty iron by which the prisoner was fastened to the wall of that dark and miserable dungeon, were to be seen.

In the Lady Chapel of the cathedral, George Marsh was brought as a prisoner by his keeper and others, with bills and divers weapons, keeping guard over him. The bishop sat as the judge; and beside him stood Master George Wensloe, the then chancellor of Chester, who opened the proceedings by a fulsome address to the bishop, comparing the prisoner to a diseased sheep, and the judge to a good shepherd. The written answers of George Marsh, at his various examinations were produced, and read to him, and he was asked by the chancellor whether he would stand to them. To each question he answered "Yes." "In your last examination," then said the chancellor, "among many other damnable and schismatical heresies, you said that the church and doctrine taught and set forth in King Edward's time, was the true church, and the church of Rome is not the true and catholic church?" "I said so indeed," replied Marsh, "and I believe it to be true."

We pass over the particulars of what occurred, till we are told that the bishop took a writing out of his bosom, and began to read the sentence of condemnation. When he had read almost the half of it, the chancellor interposed, and said, "Good my lord, stay, stay: for if ye proceed any further, it will be too late to recall it again:" and the bishop paused. Then the popish priests, and many others of the ignorant people (for a crowd was collected), called upon Marsh to recant; saying to him: "For shame man! remember thyself, and recant." They bade him kneel down and pray, and said they would pray for him. So they kneeled down, and he desired them to pray for him, and he would pray for them. But soon after, we are told

that the bishop put his spectacles again upon his nose, and read some more lines of his sentence; and then again the chancellor, with "a glavering and smiling countenance," called the bishop, and said: "Yet, good my lord, once again stay; for if that word is spoken, all is passed: no relenting will then serve." But the resolution of the prisoner wavered not: his sentence was read to the end. "Now," said the bishop, "will I no more pray for thee, than I will for a dog." But Marsh answered, "Notwithstanding, I will pray for your lordship."

He was delivered by the bishop to the sheriffs of the city. His late keeper parted from him with tears, saying, "Farewell, good George." And now being given over to the civil power, the prisoner was carried to the dismal prison-cell on the city walls, near the north gate. There were a few citizens in Chester, who, we are told, "loved him in God for the gospel's sake," although they were not personally acquainted with him: and sometimes in the evening, at the hole upon the wall of the city that opened into the dark prison, they would call to him, and ask him how he did. Marsh would answer them cheerfully, that "he did well, and thanked God most highly that He would vouchsafe of His mercy to appoint him to be a witness of His truth, and to suffer for the same, wherein he did rejoice, beseeching God that He would give him grace, not to faint under the cross, but patiently bear the same, to His glory and the comfort of His church. And so he often spoke, at various times, as one whose chief desire was to be with Christ. Once or twice he had money cast him in at the same hole, for which he gave God thanks."

The day appointed for his execution came. The sheriffs of the city, whose names were Amry and Cooper, with their officers, went to the North gate, and took out Marsh from the prison, who went with them most humbly and meekly, with a lock upon his feet. There was an old custom, peculiar to Chester, to put money into the

hands of a felon going to execution, that he might give it to a priest to say masses for his soul; "whereby" says Foxe, "they might, as they thought, be saved" and money was offered to Marsh for this purpose. But he said that he could not meddle with it; and entreated that some good man would take what the people were disposed to bestow, and give it to the prisoners, or the poor. And so he went forward with his bible in his hand, his look always fixed on the open page; and many of the people said as he passed along "this man goeth not unto his death as a thief, or as one that deserveth to die"

The place where the stake and the faggots were prepared, was then an open space, near to the Spittal Boughton. If I am not mistaken, it was on the bank, now a pleasant garden, sloping in terraces near the river, for it was here that, up to a late period, the gallows were erected, whenever an execution took place in Chester. The spot was regarded as desecrated ground and lay waste until a magistrate of the city, charmed with the beauty of the prospect which it commanded, purchased the ground which is opposite his house, and laid it out as a garden, in terraces and plots of flowers. It is not a lovely prospect—the dark blue mountain side, seeming to lock in the broad stream of the winding river toward the west, and to the south, right before us, the rich green meadows, with the woods of Eaton Hall bounding the view!

We may picture to ourselves the spot as it appeared on that most sad and shameful day. The holy martyr with his Bible, prized more dearly than his life by him, keeping his eyes full upon it, as he turned them away from the pardon of the Queen, "a writing under a great seal," which was placed before him, as the custom was on those occasions — the last bait of Satan, to tempt him from the steadfastness of his faith; and not yet quite the last temptation, for here an opening to escape was offered, which Foxe had evidently never heard of, but which is recorded in the old documents

of the city. One of the sheriffs, Master Cooper, and his armed followers, touched to the heart, no doubt by the meek endurance of the faithful sufferer, determined to attempt a rescue. A struggle and a fight ensued. It ended however in the defeat of the brave man and his followers. He was compelled to flee for his life, and escaped over Holt bridge, some few miles down the river Dee, into Wales. There he remained, hiding himself among the vastnesses of the mountains an outlawed man till Elizabeth came to the throne, when he returned with a honoured name to his native city. Such an attempt is not recorded on any other like occasion. We gladly relate it to the lasting credit of the good old city of Chester.

The execution proceeded. Marsh would have spoken to the people, declaring the cause of his death, and exhorting them to cleave unto Christ; but Amry, the other sheriff, would not permit him to speak, and said to him, "George Marsh, we must have no sermoning now." "Master," he replied, "I cry you mercy," and so, kneeling down, prayed. It was indeed a cruel death that he suffered; for they added an unusual torment, "a thing made like a firkin filled with tar, was placed over his head, and the fire being unskilfully made, and driven to and fro by a strong wind, he suffered great extremity in his death, which, notwithstanding, he abode very patiently." They that stood lower down on the bank, and looked upon the shapeless mass which the body of the poor sufferer presented, as he stood a long time tormented in the fire without moving, supposed that he was dead, when suddenly, he spread abroad his arms, and crying out, "Father of heaven, have mercy upon me," and so yielded his spirit into the hands of the Lord. "Upon this," adds Foxe, "many of the people said that he was a martyr, and died marvellous patiently and godly, which thing caused the bishop shortly after to make a sermon in the cathedral church, wherein he affirmed that the said Marsh was a heretic, burnt like a heretic, and was a firebrand in hell." This wretched prelate died

soon afterwards, as many thought, under the just judgment of God.

(Taken and adapted from the chapter entitled "Chester, Lancaster, Deane" in the book "Memorials of the English Martyrs by Rev.C.B.Tayler.)

In Bolton at Deane Parish Church, where George Marsh worshipped, there is a memorial to his martyrdom in the church yard. Inside the Church there is a stain glass window named after George Marsh and the Lord's Table depicts a wooden engraving of the scene of his death. The Anglican Church "George the Martyr" is named after George Marsh.

In Chester there is also a memorial to the martyrdom of George Marsh.

Annual commemoration services in remembrance of George Marsh are held in Bolton and Chester on the weekend nearest to the anniversary of his death - April 25th 1555.

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