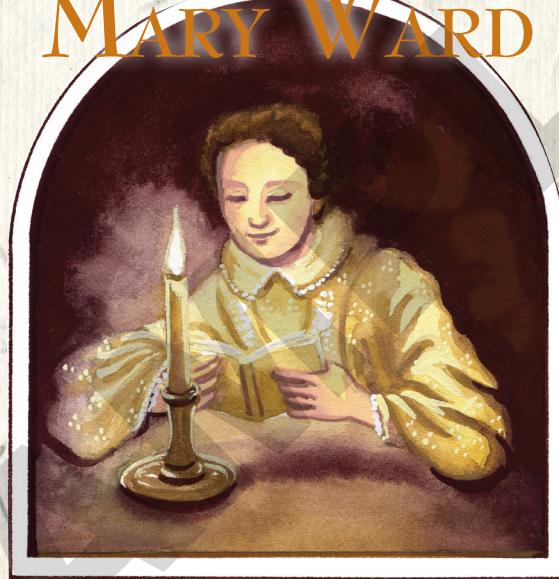


THE GIFT OF MARY WARD



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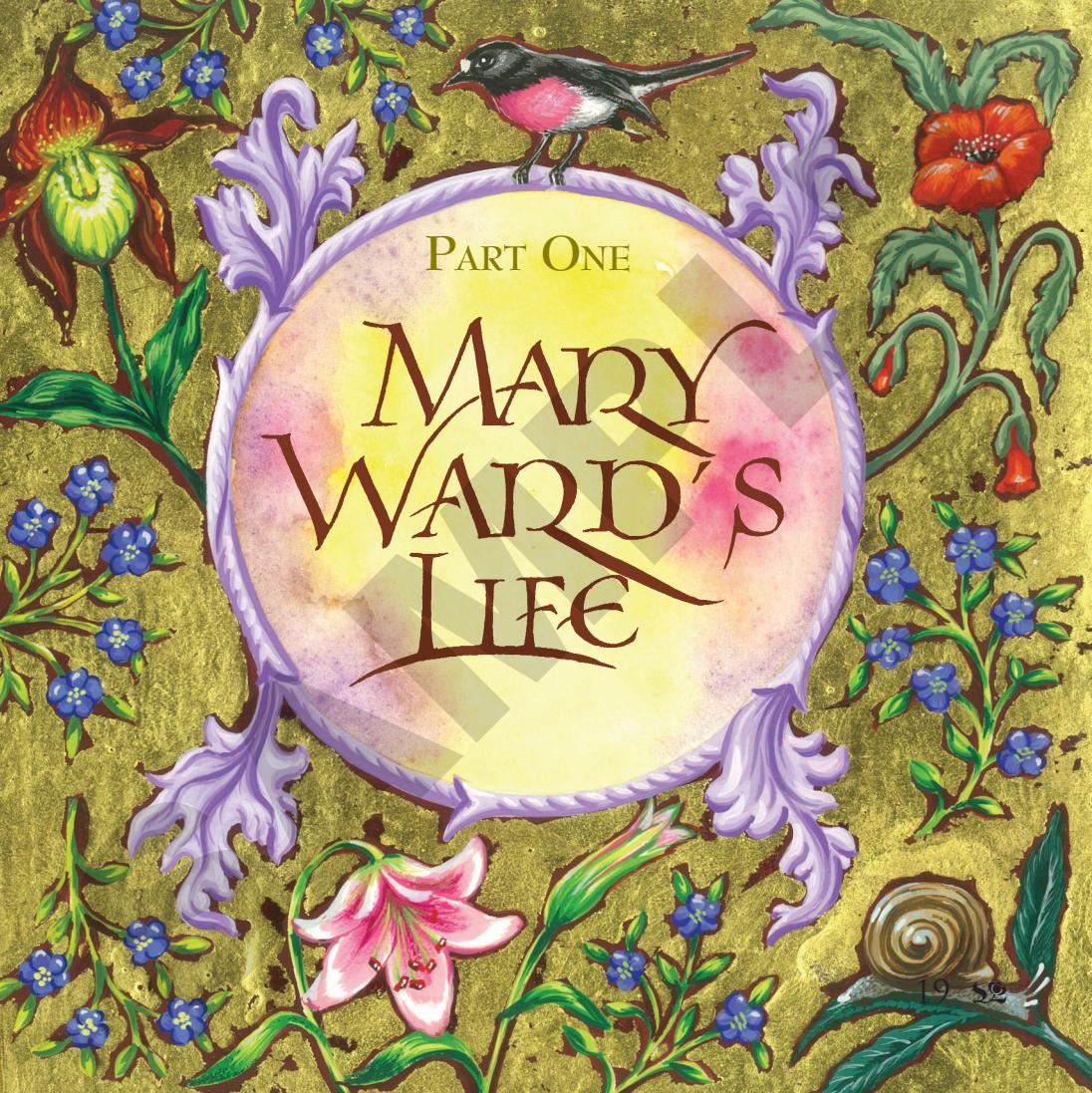
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I
Hope
IT WILL BE SEEN
THAT
WOMEN
IN TIME TO COME
WILL DO
MUCH.

MW

PART ONE

MARY WARD'S LIFE





CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNINGS



Her world

For those in the inner circle of knowledge and power, Europe and England in the late 16th and early 17th Century were bursting with possibilities. The frontiers of science were expanding, new music was being heard in cathedrals and courts, artists were producing masterpieces that still fill us with awe. Shakespeare was shaping the English language and deepening our understanding of human nature. The boundaries of the known world had expanded. Palaces of the wealthy could boast the coffee, potatoes, spices, tea and tobacco from the Americas, Africa and Asia ... and slaves from exotic lands. Religious division across Europe was sharpened by economic and political changes. In addition to Christians making martyrs of those who held alternative Christian doctrines, fear of difference meant that Moslem or Jewish minorities in cities across Europe were at risk from Christian lynch mobs.

For the ordinary family, life was bounded by the village. The luxuries and intellectual excitement of the powerful were unknown. Taxes to maintain court lifestyle and military recruitment pressed hard on both the poor and gentry classes. In England, and across much of Europe, the fracturing of Christian unity confronted and confused ordinary people. As princes and kings saw

benefit in breaking away from the Catholic Church or staying within it, the populace was required to follow the faith of the leader.

Some did this readily, disillusioned with corrupt Church practices. Many accepted whatever was required. A small number held fast personal convictions against the prevailing change of doctrine. In both Church and State, unity required uniformity. Protestant rulers saw Catholics as traitors, loyal to a foreign power. Catholic rulers saw Protestants as heretics, leading the populace to hell with false doctrine. Faith mattered. So much so, that over 5000 individual Catholics, Protestants and Anabaptists went to their death in support of their particular brand of Christianity. Religion and politics were inextricably entwined. In the process, the heart of Jesus' message—love of God and neighbour—was often lost.

Mary Ward's early life

For fifty years, since the time of Henry VIII, Yorkshire in northern England had been a hot-bed of Catholic resistance. Court reports from that time note that women were particularly intransigent in their refusal to attend

Protestant services or relinquish their Catholic allegiance. Born in 1585, Mary was the eldest child of propertied parents, loving and dedicated to their faith. They were part of a network of families committed to keeping the Catholic faith alive in England, despite extra taxes, random house searches, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment. These families were supported by priests who travelled in various disguises, because the penalty for celebrating Catholic Mass was a cruel and horrifying death. From the 1580s onwards, the majority of these priests were young and dynamic Jesuits, who instructed families in the larger manor houses and celebrated the sacraments with them, their servants and trusted neighbours. In the guise of tutors to the young men of Catholic families, they were heroes to the youth growing up in this hot-house atmosphere. Mary imbibed from her earliest days the importance of faith, of courage, and of perseverance.

Due to family circumstances, her own health and, later, the hope of encouraging a good marriage, Mary lived much of her young life away from parents and siblings. At age five she went to live with her grandmother who had spent fourteen years in prison for the faith. Her autobiography shows a child who was shrewd enough to find ways to attract praise and observant enough to recognise both her grandmother's devotion and also the inappropriate behaviours of some family members away from her grandmother's eye.



She returned home when she was ten, and was reunited with her growing family, which eventually consisted of three younger sisters and two brothers.

Mary was now of the age when most young women were promised in marriage. She was a strong character: attractive, shy and with a growing understanding of her Catholic heritage. Her family looked forward to her becoming a lynch pin in the resistance network. Her first suitor arrived when she was ten, but the young man died soon after he made his offer. Her growing reluctance to consider marriage concerned her parents. Because her health was not strong, she stayed with a widowed cousin when her family moved further north to escape government fines. A year later she moved to the Babthorpe household. Lady Babthorpe had spent five years in prison. Records show that this was a very religious home, with Morning Prayer, scripture readings, Mass and instruction when possible. Mary and other young women living there seem to have had the opportunity to learn languages and to study their faith, possibly joining their male cousins studying with a tutor.

All monasteries in England had been disbanded and destroyed. Mary first heard of the existence of Religious Life from an old serving woman who told a story which highlighted the unswerving focus on God central to such a life.¹ Mary's initial attraction grew into a conviction that God was calling her to

HER THREE
TOUCHSTONES OF
FREEDOM,
JUSTICE,
SINCERITY,
ALL CENTRED ON
RELATIONSHIPS
AND ARE GROUNDED IN
TRUTH.

O parent of parents and
friend of all friends,
without entreaty thou
ookeſt me into thy care,
and by degrees led me
from all else that
at length I might ſee
and ſettle my love
on thee...

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENT, 1618

follow this path. Her father forbade such a choice. Against the wishes of her parents, extended family and priest advisors, Mary turned down three further offers of marriage. The last one was from a nobleman. Marriage to him would have linked the resistance families of two northern counties of England. Mary loved her parents and as a child had thirsted for approval. Her stand is extraordinary in an era when good young women were obedient, and in a context where priests were revered so highly.² To hold out for the next six years against their combined arguments and disapproval showed a tenacity evident throughout her life. Without the money needed to travel from the north across the channel and gain admittance to a monastery, Mary's choice was blocked.

She admits it was a difficult period and her only recourse was to put her



hopes in God's hands. She would hold firm, and beg for God to arrange what was beyond her control.

Insights from her inner journey

The maturity and determination of this young woman developed through small stages. Looking back, Mary had a strong sense of God protecting her in various situations and shaping her through her experiences, but on this journey she faced confusion and anxiety. Her autobiography tells us that, preparing for her first communion, she was given a message—supposedly from her father—forbidding her to continue. She was separated from him, and was ashamed because she felt that such an order implied her father was wavering in his faith.³

It later turned out that the letter was a fake. However, Mary had to tussle with the issue on her own. After prayer she finally listened to her inner truth and decided to receive her first communion, even if it displeased her father. During this time at the Babthorpe's, Mary moved from a youthful attraction to martyrdom to a recognition that *living* for God was her calling. She was drawn to various devotional practices recommended in spiritual books.

Gradually she realised that too many devotions were making her anxious and scrupulous. She tells us in an autobiographical fragment that she gained peace when she realised that:

God is not pleased with certain acts made thus by constraint, and to acquire one's own quiet, therefore I will do these things with love and freedom, or leave them alone.

Gradually, she gained a sense of God's grace at work in her life, and realised this was sheer gift, not the result of her own efforts. As she waited for God's moment to unfold, she found comfort in the phrase from the Gospels: "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all things else shall be given you (Matthew 6:33)."

I experienced through those events and even more often during the subsequent years that when God is sought sincerely, the way to him is always open, and the pardon of defects committed through frailty is easily obtained.
(Autobiographical fragment, 1618.)