

‘Margaret Catchpole’

Many persons are still living in the county of Suffolk who are well acquainted with the incidents of Margaret Catchpole’s life, and, should any of our readers doubt the accuracy of the extraordinary circumstances contained in this biographical sketch, a reference to old files of a newspaper, and to the printed annals of crime will speedily convince them that we offer no fiction, but a series of strange truths, to their attention.

Margaret Catchpole was born in the year 1773, at a little cottage near Nacton, Suffolk. Her father, Jonathan Catchpole, was a ploughman upon the farm of Mr Denton. When a child, Margaret was fond of riding upon the cart-horses, and indulged in feats of agility and strength which were rather suitable to a young lad than a girl. Her father and brothers indulged her in these freaks; and by the time she was ten or eleven years old, she could ride on horse-back as well as any person, male or female, in the neighbourhood. She was of a kind and good disposition; and much of her time was occupied in attending upon the sick bed of her sister Susan.

The Catchpole family was intimate with the Cracknells, who kept a small chandlery shop upon Mr Denton’s farm. One evening the Cracknells gave a little entertainment, and of course the Catchpoles were invited., At this time Margaret was sixteen; and although by no means pretty, she was well formed, had jetty hair, fine black eyes, and a pale but not uninteresting countenance. At that entertainment Margaret encountered a young man of the name of William Laud; and they sate or danced together the whole evening. In a word, there was a species of ‘love at first sight’ between the youthful couple; and as William Laud was a fine, active young fellow, there seemed a certain fitness in their union, which did not escape the eyes of their parents.

William and Margaret became engaged to each other in due course; and it was determined that they should be married as soon as William could obtain some settled employment. At length William called to inform his beloved that he had resolved to accept the proposal of one Captain Bargood, and to embrace a sailor’s life for a year or two, the captain having offered to receive him on board one of his own trading vessels. Margaret could not combat this resolution; but the dying Susan, her sister, reproached William for being too worldly-minded, too little religious, and too flippant in his conversation; and she concluded her solemn discourse by declaring her conviction that ‘Margaret would never marry William Laud !’

Months passed away and Margaret had received no tidings of William. One day a sailor presented himself at the cottage, and enquired if ‘Miss Margaret Catchpole dwelt there ?’ the reply was an affirmative; and the sailor entered, bearing with him a large packet, which he deposited on the table, saying ‘This is a present from William Laud to Miss Margaret.’ The parcel was opened: it contained lace and ribbons, silks and stuffs, gloves and scents; tea, coffee, sugar, snuff and tobacco; Meerschaum pipes with silver-tipped bowls and tubes: in a word

enough to stock a small shop. Margaret's heart instantly sank within her. A sudden light broke in upon her mind: – William Laud had become a smuggler !

Recovering her presence of mind, she desired one of her brothers to help her to tie up the parcel; and when this was done, she said to the sailor 'My good man, you may take all this finery away with you again. Neither my father nor myself will accept of it. But tell William Laud that a single riband, honestly purchased, would have pleased me more than valuables by which he cannot have honourably come.' The man, however, refused to take the parcel away with him, 'For,' said he, 'William Laud is the captain of the vessel to which I belong, and I should not dare offend him. He is all-powerful with our owner, Bargood, and I would advise you to throw away this stupid squeamishness.' Nothing would change Margaret's intentions; the sailor refused to take away the parcel, and departed in an ill-humour; and, when he was gone, the Catchpoles held a consultation to determine what they should do with the contraband articles.

In the midst of the debate, Mrs Cracknell called, and was duly informed of the incident that had just taken place. 'Well,' said Mrs Cracknell, 'times are very hard, and the laws are very severe; and I don't see any harm in a body getting a little money by a sidewind now and then. Give me those articles; I can dispose of them in a quiet way; and I will take care of you. You may have your groceries and other things at my house without payments for six months to come.'

Margaret remained silent; her scruples only required the removal of the goods from the cottage, and old Catchpole snapped at Mrs Cracknell's offer. The bargain was struck, and in the evening Cracknell called and fetched away the things. But Margaret remembered the words of her deceased sister, and she wept bitterly.

Regularly every month the same sailor, who had visited the cottage as above described, called with presents for Margaret, and tender messages from William; and the contraband articles all found their way to the Cracknell's shop. The brothers of Margaret became completely demoralised by the sources of enjoyment opened to them through these means; the Cracknells always supplied them with ready money; they grew idle and dissipated; and the once honest labourers were now the constant guests of the publican. At length Charles, the elder brother, was inveigled into the meshes of a recruiting sergeant, and embarked with an infantry regiment for the East Indies; Robert, the second brother, died of *delirium tremens* in 1791; and James, the younger brother, turned poacher and was shot in an affray with game-keepers. Thus did the presents of William Laud deprive old Jonathan Catchpole of his three sons, and Margaret of her three brothers.

The Catchpole family became the object of suspicion and distrust in the neighbourhood. Strange stories were circulated relative to Margaret's connexion with the smugglers. The consequence was that old Jonathan was compelled to change his abode; and, from a regular workman, he became a jobbing labourer, obtaining employment when and where he could.

Meantime the name of William Laud became famous – or rather, infamous; and the deeds which distinguished him in his desperate avocations, and the constant collisions in which he and the preventive officers found themselves became the theme of general conversation. In one of these encounters, William Laud was fearfully wounded in the head, and was conveyed to Captain Bargood's house. The same sailor, whom we have already seen visiting the Catchpoles, and whose name was John Luff, now called upon Margaret, and implored her to hasten to the presence of the wounded man. Not for one moment did Margaret hesitate. She was deeply attached to William; and she had now two objects in view. She was anxious to tend him on his sick couch; and she longed to draw him away from his desperate course of life.

She accordingly hastened to the house where William lay concealed, under the protection of Captain Bargood, his patron. The lovers now met after a separation of two years; and for a few moments the past conduct of Laud was entirely forgotten by the affectionate girl. She then dressed his wounds, and resolved upon remaining with him until his recovery. She constantly seized opportunities of remonstrating with Laud upon his illegal and dangerous pursuits. She endeavoured to awaken religious feelings in his mind by reading the bible to him; and there were moments when she really made a deep impression upon him. Weeks passed away, and she never deserted him. He at length recovered, and faithfully promised her to quit his former companions, and enter on board a Dutch trader. She believed him; they parted once again; and Margaret felt happy under the impression that she had worked a great and important change in her lover's mind and conditions.

She now seriously thought of going out to service; and, through some kind friends who still looked favourably upon her, she obtained a place at the Priory Farm, belonging to Mr and Mrs Wake, at Downham Reach. She proceeded to her situation in 1792, and became a servant of all work. There was a young man employed upon the farm, whose name was John Barry. He soon became enamoured of Margaret, and proposed to her. She at once, and with extreme candour, revealed to him her attachment to, and engagement with, William Laud, declaring at the same time that she would never marry another, so long as William Laud was alive.

In the meantime William Laud returned to his old pursuits, and was again the commander of a desperate band of smugglers. His passion for Margaret amounted almost to a species of madness, and he determined to possess her. He communicated his feelings and his wishes to John Luff; and this black-hearted villain proposed that they should carry her off. William might then marry her in Holland. This proposition was well-received by Margaret's lover, and it was resolved to put the scheme into immediate effect. A note was sent to the Priory Farm to inform Margaret that William was most anxious to see her, and appointing a time and place for the interview. The time was evening – the place was the sea-shore. The reader need scarcely be told that Margaret gladly flew to the appointment. She believed that her lover had abandoned his late desperate courses, and had become an honest man. It was therefore with the more readiness and with greater joy that she repaired to the coast where she was to meet him.

He landed from a little boat, and in a few moments they were in each other's arms. He then hastily implored her to accompany him to Holland, where their hands should be united. She refused: a vague suspicion of evil darted into her mind. That fear was in another instant confirmed; for the light of the moon revealed to her the person of John Luff, who kept watch at a little distance. Then the poor girl felt afraid. Could it be possible? Had William deceived her? Was he once more the companion of smugglers?

She expressed her alarms to William. He laughed, and answered evasively. She began to reprove him mildly and to implore him to listen to her warning voice. At that moment the voice of Luff was heard: – 'Come, Bill – none of this delay: the Preventives are about!' Laud seized Margaret around the waist, and hurried her towards the boat, whispering in her ear, 'Forgive me dear girl – forgive me; it is my love that makes me thus desperate!' But Margaret would not be pacified: she struggled and screamed: still Laud relinquished not his hold. Already was the margin of the ocean gained, when a person rushed from an adjacent copse, sprang upon the smugglers, and felled William Laud to the ground. Margaret escaped, but Luff darted with a demonic rage and intent upon her deliverer. The latter had but a stout ash-stick in his hand: still he wielded it manfully against the cutlass of his enemy: – then, watching an opportunity, he darted off quickly as a fawn, and escaped into the co[r]pse. The smugglers did not follow him; and the deliverer of Margaret reached Priory Farm, in safety; – for he was John Barry, the unsuccessful suitor for her hand.

Soon after this incident, John Barry departed for Australia, where he had obtained a grant of land, and whither he was glad to proceed in order to separate from the object of his hopeless passion. But when he took leave of Margaret, he declared his unalterable love for her, and begged her to think sometimes of one who was so devotedly attached to her.

Circumstances compelled Margaret to leave Priory Farm and return home. She was one day visited by William Laud; and his sophistry, aided by her love, enabled him to make his peace with her for the desperate attempt he had practised to carry her off by violence. He then declared that reflection had lately induced him to resolve upon changing his ways; and he took leave of her with a solemn assurance that he would embark on board of a man-of-war, and never return until he should have repaired his character. This time William was sincere; and Margaret believed him. They parted with mutual vows of love; and Margaret felt more happy than she had been for some time.

In the course of a few weeks, Margaret obtained the situation of housemaid in the service of Mr and Mrs Cobbold. The dwelling of this couple was known as the Cliff, and stood on the banks of the Orwell. Here Margaret's time passed smoothly on until May 1797, when she received a letter signed William Laud, dated from the Dog and Bone public-house in the Borough of Southwark, and earnestly imploring her to repair to London without delay, that their hands might be united. She was overjoyed with these news. But how was she to get to London? She had no money; and

she knew that her master and mistress would not grant her leave to undertake a journey which was to lead her to William Laud. She, however, soon made up her mind how to act. She attired herself in the garb of a groom; and mounting one of Mr Cobbold's horses, commenced her journey. We have said that when a child, she delighted in riding on horseback, and this freak of her childhood stood her in good stead by giving her experience for the present occasion. She actually rode Mr Cobbold's horse from Ipswich to London in eight hours and a half – a distance of seventy miles !

She alighted at the Bull in Aldgate; and, determined not to go empty-handed to rejoin her lover, intimated to the landlord her desire to sell the horse. A customer was soon found; eighty guineas were offered for the animal; and the bargain was about to be brought to a close, when constables entered the inn-yard, and took the pretended groom into custody. The horse had been missed immediately after Margaret's departure; a pursuit had been commenced; and she had been traced, stage by stage, from Ipswich to London.

Margaret was taken before the sitting magistrate at the (then) Whitechapel Police court, and committed for trial. But as the offence was committed in the country, she was removed to the county gaol at Ipswich. To attempt to depict the unfortunate young woman's feelings would be impossible.

The trial took place on the 9th of August 1797, before Lord Chief Baron Macdonald. Margaret pleaded guilty and was condemned to death. The judge, in condemning her, declared that he had never known, throughout his judicial experience, a person who was so well-acquainted with the principles of right and wrong – good and evil – and who had perverted that discriminate power in so strange a manner. The sentence was afterwards committed to seven years imprisonment in Ipswich jail; and she became the servant of Mrs Ripshaw, the wife of the governor of the prison. Two years passed away; and her exemplary conduct led to hopes that at the expiration of another twelvemonth she would be restored to liberty. But it happened that William Laud, who had lately returned to his former evil practices, was arrested upon a charge of smuggling, tried, and sentenced to one year's imprisonment in Ipswich gaol. As Margaret washed the linen of the prisoners, she was frequently compelled to visit the men's quarters in the day time. There she one day encountered William Laud – him who she has never for a moment forgotten, never deserted in her heart.

Dread was the effect of this meeting upon Margaret. The hope of obtaining a remission of her sentence happening to be defeated, William Laud prevailed upon her to attempt to escape from the gaol as soon as his term of incarceration should have arrived. At length he was set free; and the plan for escape was duly settled and arranged.

When the appointed night arrived, Margaret managed to avoid being locked in her cell; and at eleven o'clock she found herself at liberty in one of the court-yards. But how was she to mount the wall. She was provided with a rope – and that was all. Casting around her eyes, she espied,

by the moonlight, a large frame that was used to cover the governor's flower-beds. By dint of immense exertions, she raised it in a sloping position against the wall. Here was a ladder for her. She then took a clothes prop, and, mounting her ladder, fixed, by means of the prong of the prop, the noose of the rope over the upright piece of iron on the wall which sustained the horizontal bar of the *chevaux-de-frise*. She then drew herself up by the line to the top of the wall, and actually bent her body over the bristling spikes. The *chevaux-de-frise* revolved and she was thrown over to the outer side of the wall. The rope enabled her to lower herself to safety; and as the clock of Saint Clement's Church, Ipswich, struck twelve, she was free !

William Laud received her in his arms; and they fled together. In a bye-place Margaret shifted her clothes and donned a sailor's garb. They then proceeded towards the Orwell ferry, on their way to Sutton Walks and Sudbourn. And now they have reached the ferry – they were about to enter a boat which John Luff has provided for them, when a body of the Preventive guards rush up to the spot. Margaret fainted through excessive alarm. William Laud, with a pistol in each hand, strode over her, and swore he would defend her and himself, or die. A terrible combat took place between the smugglers and the revenue officers; and William Laud was shot dead with a pistol. Thus was fulfilled Susan's prophecy: Margaret never married William Laud !

The young woman was taken to Ipswich, recognized and conveyed back to the gaol. In due time she was brought to trial before the same judge who has before condemned her. The law was imperative. Any person who, suffering a commuted sentence, broke prison, was doomed to undergo the original penalty. This was death; and Margaret, who again pleaded guilty, was again condemned to die ! But powerful interest was made on her behalf, and her sentence was commuted to transportation for life. She accordingly sailed for Australia in May, 1801.

On her arrival in New South Wales she obtained a good position in a menial capacity, and conducted herself in so exemplary a manner that she speedily obtained privileges and indulgences which greatly alleviated the sorrows of her condition.

And now we come to the strange incident in this woman's remarkable life. In the month of June, 1812, Margaret Catchpole became the wife of Mr John Barry, of Windsor Place, near the Hawkesbury Green Hills in Australia. Thus did she espouse the man who had loved her so tenderly and many years previously in England, and who had saved her from the mad design of William Laud. The fruits of this union were one son and two daughters, who have recently come to settle in the land of their parents' nativity. John Barry departed this life on the 9th of September, 1827, and Margaret died on the 10th of September, 1841. The latter portion of her life was spent in ease and comfort; and her children have inherited a considerable property by her decease.

Not one single incident of the above romantic narrative is exaggerated – much less invented; every line – every word – is true; – and we now leave this history, without comment, for the contemplation and reflection of our readers.

