

By your very patient presence you do preach to the world the truth of Christ, and the power of Christ, for it is in pursuit of his truth you are here, and it is by his power you are held. Let your waiting be the waiting of Dominic, and in God's good time you will be, you *must* be, among those, fire-tried and very well prepared to take up arms in our own grim warfare. Once again the enemies of Christ are far above the ordinary. Their eminence is due to the ignorance of the masses once more. To meet their representations, Dominic, your Father, appeals to you to rise to heights of sincerity and truth no matter what the cost of the ascent may be. For it is only men who tread those heights who can, with assurance, discern and preach the falsity of the most gifted and subtle opponents of the Saviour of Mankind.

And may our Father Dominic turn his 'kindly eyes, stored with simple truth' in benediction not only to his sons of Mary's white habit, but to those who still venture to wear the garb of Christ's Poverty.



## SIGRID UNDSET, T.O.S.D.

1882-1949

BY

A. M. SCARRE

(The Norwegian authoress, Sigrid Undset, was born in Kalundborg, in Denmark, on May 20th, 1882. Her father was the well-known Norwegian archaeologist Ingvald Undset. Her mother was Danish, daughter of the mayor of Kalundborg. The family removed to Norway two years later. In 1912 she married the artist Anders C. Svarstad, by whom she had three children. Her marriage was dissolved in 1924, the year she entered the Church.)



SIGRID UNDSET'S conversion in 1924 aroused something like consternation in Norway. There are few Catholics in the country—not quite three thousand—and there is much prejudice and accompanying ignorance of Catholic teaching. And yet her intimate friends and those who read her books carefully had long been aware of the trend of her thoughts. As far back as 1915 she wrote to a friend that 'the Roman Church has at least form and is not irritating to one's intelligence'. Later on she remarks that Roper's life of his father-in-law, Thomas More, is one of the most beautiful things she has ever read; and her preoccupation with and widening knowledge of the middle ages, the ages of faith, in

preparation for the writing of her masterpiece, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, no doubt played a great part in enabling her to take the final step. In her first two novels after her reception into the Church, *The Wild Orchid* and *The Burning Bush*, she champions Catholicism in a country predominantly Lutheran and anti-Catholic. Later she wrote many essays, some of considerable length, for different Catholic periodicals in Scandinavia. Some of these have been gathered into two volumes, *Stages* and *Stages: New Series*. Her studies of women are particularly clever and penetrating, for example of Blessed Margaret Clitherow, of St Angela, the foundress of the Ursulines, of Margery Kemp. The consistency and thoroughness with which she developed Catholic thought and dogma in her writings after her conversion have forced the admiration even of those who do not see eye to eye with her. Not long before the German invasion of Norway she gave a lecture to the Students' Society of the University of Oslo on the place of Christianity in modern thought; and although she has never been a great public speaker, a famous critic called her lecture 'the most learned and at the same time the wittiest that had been given to Norwegian students in the last generation'.

This is the Sigrid Undset that all Norway, all the world knows: Scandinavia's greatest novelist, probably the greatest of all women novelists. Her life as woman, as mother, as a true child of the Church is perhaps not so well known. She belonged to the Catholic parish of St Torfinn's in Hamar, situated about forty miles from her home at Lillehammer. Catholic churches are few and far between in Norway. South of Hamar the next church is at Oslo, some seventy-five miles distant, and to the north there is no church till we reach Trondheim, over two hundred and fifty miles away. Thus the congregation is a very scattered one. Exclusive of the nursing Sisters of St Charles Borromeo, who have a hospital in Hamar, there are not more than thirty or forty Catholics who live near enough to come fairly regularly to one or other of the two Sunday Masses. They have a pleasant custom of meeting afterwards in the convent, where the Sisters serve coffee, and the priest comes in for a chat. This helps to give a feeling of solidarity, particularly with the long-distance Catholics who come from time to time with touching fidelity, and often at great inconvenience and expense.

When Sigrid Undset was at home she came to Hamar for all the greater feasts, such as Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide, Corpus Christi, All Saints, which was the anniversary of her reception into the Church, and at other times. She was a tall woman, well built, with luxuriant masses of dark brown hair, and dark eyes, at the

same time brooding and piercing. Her hands were strikingly beautiful. When she had anything to say it was a joy to listen to the resonant, deep voice, the sparkling wit, the keen judgment, the quiet laugh that was almost a chuckle. When she had nothing to say she was completely silent—rather disconcerting to strangers. She identified herself entirely with the rest of the congregation, talking to the mothers, was godmother to eight or nine of the children, talked about her own children, about church matters, coming events, about flowers (how very much she knew about them, and how she loved them!) and so on. Her outstanding characteristic, complete honesty in thought and word and deed, showed itself in her natural behaviour towards all, in her unstudied humility, and unfailing loyalty to the Church, its pastors and institutions. Her actual material help to the Church and to the individual is not known in its entirety to anyone. The splendid collection of books which form the parish library is only one example of her boundless generosity. She was admirable, of course—was she not among the very greatest of living authors? But over and above admiration and respect, over and above even gratitude, what St Torfinn's congregation felt for Sigrid Undset was a very real and warm and deep affection.

Bjerkebaekk, on the outskirts of Lillehammer, is world-known. It consists of several timber houses in the old Norwegian style. There is, for example, a separate 'guest house'; and the whole complex stands in lovely grounds. Sigrid Undset's first care was to make of it a home for her three children, a meeting place for her family and friends and for her sons' friends. How well she succeeded can be gleaned from her charming book, *Happy Days in Norway*, published in America in 1943. Here she tells about life at Bjerkebaekk during the course of a year, about her elder son Anders, her delicate little daughter Charlotte, and her youngest child Hans; about the visits of Grandma and aunts and uncles and cousins and of her step-daughters. In spite of the enormous amount of literary work she got through, she was in the first place a home woman, the perfect hostess, with time for all—except interviewers. A solid high fence, a couple of barking dogs, a devoted housekeeper saved unhappy journalists from the 'interview' they honestly dreaded. She could not bear to be fussed or flattered, but a whole book could be written of her as a friend to both high and low. When the news of her death came the author Oeverland summed up all when he said: 'We have lost a mother'.

Her life, especially the last ten years, was not without its tragedies. Not long before the war she lost her beloved mother,

and shortly afterwards the delicate child which had been her greatest joy and her greatest sorrow for twenty-three years. When war broke out her elder son Anders was one of the first to fall during the fighting in Gudbrandsdalen, and she herself travelled over two continents to dwell in exile in America. For her work for her country during these years she was decorated by King Haakon with the Grand Cross of the Order of St Olav. She was far from well when she returned to Norway, had been ill time and again in America. But it was not until last summer that she was obliged to give up work and rest for a while. On the occasions that she was able to come to church at Hamar it was all too plain to be seen that she was not far from the end.

It happens that 1949 is a jubilee year for Hamar: 100 years since the modern town got its charter, but 900 years since the old Hamar was founded, the Hamar that became a bishopric on the advice of the English papal legate, Nicholas Breakspere, and one of the chief centres of learning in Norway in the middle ages. Coincidentally it is also twenty-five years since the Catholic Church returned to Hamar. To celebrate all these anniversaries the Catholics were assigned a date, May 29th. Bishop Mangers came from Oslo, and some hundreds of Catholics walked in procession to the ruins of the old cathedral, on the edge of Lake Mjsa. Sigrid Undset was surprisingly well, joined in the procession and was present at the pontifical high Mass in the cathedral she has so splendidly reconstructed in *Kristin Lavransdatter* and in *The Master of Hestviken*. She was present at the various dinners and receptions in connection with the celebrations, apparently her old self, keen, appreciative, witty. It was her last connection with the visible church. Ten days later she was taken to the hospital at Lillehammer with another severe bronchial attack, and died quietly and alone the next day, June 10th. She was sixty-seven years old on the 20th May.

In the early evening of June 14th the body was brought to Hamar. Thousands of people lined the streets in Lillehammer to pay their last respects and, headed by the Town Council, followed their famous townsman to the boundary. Flags waved at half mast along the forty miles of country road, and people stood by the wayside as the cortege passed. The little church at Hamar was all too small for the company assembled at the Requiem Mass next morning. The coffin was draped in the Norwegian flag, and the King's wreath lay at its foot. Beautiful wreaths lined the altar rails and were placed on the floor around. Many others hung round the walls—wreaths from the Crown Prince and Princess, from the Government,

the Storting, the Association of Authors, the family, from Denmark, Sweden, Norwegian women, the Catholic Women's Association, St Torfinn's congregation, her publishers Aschehoug, from the Town Councils of Hamar and Lillehammer, the Urban Council of Faaberg, the County Councils of Hedmark and Opland, from her birth-place Kalundborg in Denmark, from her personal friends, from the Norwegian Fjells, and many, many others—all the glory of summer laid at the feet of her who would never allow any fuss about her person. Eight of her author colleagues formed a guard of honour round the coffin. After Mass had been said by Bishop Mangers, assisted by the Prior of the Dominicans, the Bishop preached on 'truth in charity' from Ephesians 15, 4. Then followed the laying on of the wreaths, a Norwegian custom. As each wreath was offered, the last words of appreciation, gratitude and affection were said. What her country, her colleagues, her fellow Catholics, her friends and her own people thought was well summed up by the deeply touched eighty-year-old author Peter Egge: 'Everyone who has been so fortunate to penetrate the enclosed world she lived in, knows that a nobler soul has never lived among us. We thank her in love and wondering admiration.'

She was buried in the family burial place at Messnalien, north of Lillehammer, in a lonely cemetery high up on the mountain side. The bell in the little forest chapel tolled its welcome. It was here she wished to be buried, a mother between her two loved children, lonely, as her life had been in a sense lonely, but high up and free. May she rest in peace.



## THE OBEDIENTIAL CAPACITY

BY

AUSTIN BARKER, O.P.



FROM the wider and more general considerations we may now presume to formulate in clearer and more precise terms what is here meant by the words Nature and Grace. In the modern vernacular they no longer at once offer to the mind the clear-cut idea they once represented when Catholic doctrine was more familiar and more closely ingrained in the English mind. In the developing and perhaps changing philosophy of any given people, particular terms or words endure in current use; but gradually they are emptied of the signifi-