



KATERI'S CONTEMPORARIES

MARTIN
SKANDEKONRAKSEN

ONCE, AND TWICE AGAIN

FATHER FREMIN'S eyes were red. He had just attended a meeting at the Mission of St. Francis Xavier shortly after Christmas 1675. *No group of religious, anywhere in the world, he thought, could speak better than his Indian converts of God and of Our Blessed Mother.*

One of his men had recently died at the hunt. The ancient pagan custom of burying the deceased's effects with him had been abandoned by the Caughnawagas. Instead they distributed the dead person's belongings to the poor. This time, moreover, his relatives and the important chiefs of the town had been invited for the distribution.

The Great Mohawk, the chief who presided at the reunion, had begun his harangue by offering the assembly a beautiful wampum belt. He informed his audience of the dying wishes of Martin Skandekonraksen. Holding the belt aloft for all to see:

"Behold, my friends," he cried out, "the voice of our dead brother! Look at it well, listen to it! He wants it to remain everlastingly among you, either as a continual reproach of your false-heartedness, if you give up your Faith, or as a precious token he is leaving you, of the reward we shall all enjoy with him in paradise, if we listen to the voice of God and, also, to his!"

Skandekonraksen, a handsome Indian brave, was only eighteen years old when, in 1673, he found his way to the Mission of St. Francis Xavier through the efforts of his near relative, Kryn the Great Mohawk. Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha, only a year younger than he, certainly knew him in her native Gandaouagué.

Sixty years later, Father Luke Nau, Superior of the Mission, in a letter to a Jesuit across the seas, furnished him with a description of the typical Iroquois, which will help us visualize Skandekonraksen:

"Generally speaking," he wrote, "you nowhere could see finer looking men. The Indians are of better build than the French, but side by side with the Iroquois, other Indians seem dwarfed. Nearly all the men of our mission are nearer six feet in height than five. Their countenance is in keeping with their stature, and their features are regular. The children especially are diminutive, picturesque types, transparency of color being alone wanting. Their complexion is of an olive shade, but not so tawny as that of other tribes, not differing much from the Portuguese . . . They would for the most part be as clear-complexioned as the French, were it not for the effects of the smoke in the cabins . . . Their hair is trimmed somewhat like that of the Recollect Fathers, with this difference, that they raise in a bunch the hair of the crown by means of a kind of wax mixed with vermilion, and allow three or four hairs to protrude above, to which they fasten a wampum bead or so, or a feather of some bird seldom met with..."

Skandekonraksen's disposition harmonized with his appealing exterior. His first biographers heap laudatory adjectives on his memory. "He was naturally good," they noted, "peaceful, tractable, obedient and diligent." His whole being thirsted for Christianity.

With others of his people, he asked Father James Frémin, S. J., Superior of the Mission, to be baptized. As military in bearing as the Great Condé in far-away France, as blunt as Count de Frontenac in Quebec, and at the same time, as kind as St. Vincent de