a few pages near the end of the book. How that volume has also survived the river of time is a miracle in the realm of literature. Some years ago a small village library in Suffolk was sold out and an old book of the gospels was, for a small sum, purchased by the Bodleian Library of Oxford; in a latin verse, on its fly leaf, in 11th century caligraphy, it is related that this book was once the property of a king and his holy queen. Facts were examined and its ownership traced back ultimately to an Elizabethan antiquary. The appearance of the book coincides exactly with Turgot's description except that Malcolm's beautiful jewelled covers are no more; the rapacious soldiery of Henry VIII may be responsible for their disappearance. Madan's view that, between the life of Queen Margaret and that of the seventeenth century antiquary, the Queen's Book of the Gospels found a resting place in Durham Priory, appears to have the support of circumstantial evidence; Turgot, her favourite priest, was there and she is believed to have directed that several of her books should be bequeathed to Durham, a great centre of the religious life of her time. Be that as it may, there lies now, among the treasures of the Bodleian, this bit of drift from the ever flowing river of time, the most intimate link we possess with that " parfait Queen " of long ago.

As Turgot relates the story of the death of the Queen at her Castle of Edinburgh he rises, in spite of, or because of, his meticulous attention to detail to vivid and almost dramatic portrayal; it is a great and solemn passage this, Mendelssohn-like, in the melody that is the life of Margaret of Scotland. There is her clairvoyant knowledge of the tragedy that has befallen her and Scotland, of the future of her children and of Scotland. There are her last solemn religious observances, the priests around her repeating their psalms, the coming of her son and her command to him that there shall be no compromise with truth when he gives her the news that her husband and eldest son are slain, there is the agonised search on the part of her ladies for her Holy Rood and when it is found she dies with it in her fingers, after repeating the whole of the fiftieth Psalm. The pain which had racked her body subsided at last and she passed peacefully to her rest. The pallor of death disappeared soon after and a lovely colour returned to her face so that it became as that of a little child.

Then comes another phase—not the last. Donald Bain has seized his opportunity and, hearing of Malcolm's death, has invaded Edinburgh with his rough, ill-disciplined soldiers. Up in the towers on the Castle Rock lies " shrouded as became a Queen " (Turgot) the beautiful form, in all the majesty of death, wherein had dwelt the spirit that was Margaret, Queen of Scotland. Her son and courtiers go about with heavy, anxious brows and her ladies look longingly to where Dunfermline lies, across the silver Forth. Can that precious burden be got down the Castle Rock and out of the town without insult or worse from the soldiery of Donald Bain, without some bloody encounter? For any captured son of Malcolm would be a prize indeed for Donald Bain. And then there happens what the poor folk of her kingdom have always regarded as one of the miracles connected with their Queen. There falls like a shroud over town and castle—a thick haar. Immediately all is activity within the castle. In a very short time a ghostly procession passes silently in the mist, down the western side of the Castle Rock. There is nothing here of the measured tread and stately dignity that one would associate with the funeral procession of a Queen. First, dim in the mist, is carried the bier, straggling figures follow, careful of every foothold, careful too that no falling stone shall give the alarm to any sentry of Donald Bain. At last they reach the end of their precipitous journey and, passing beyond the city, reverently lay down their burden, and look back on the ghost of a town from which the mist is just beginning to rise. Then, with their burden, they continue on their way, stopping once or twice at one or other of the hospices she built, until they reach what is still called South Queen's Ferry. She embarks for the last time; the waters of the Forth are kinder now and carry her gently to North Queen's Ferry; from there the last stage of the journey is soon accomplished. Her son Ethelred, Abbot of Dunkeld and Earl of Fife, recites the service of burial and the Queen is laid to her rest, close to the altar in the church she built over that in which her nuptials to Malcolm were celebrated.

I wish there had been time to tell you something of the wonderful legends of the miracles connected with Queen Margaret's canonisation in 1251, some hundred and fifty years after her death, of the desecration of her tomb at the Reformation, of how her head with its beautiful fair hair was taken in a jewelled casket to Mary, Queen of Scots, and afterwards guarded by the Laird of Dury, of how it was taken by a Jesuit Priest to Douay, then to Antwerp and again to Douay and set up for veneration each time. It was last seen, still beautiful and in fine preservation, in 1785 by Carruthers the historian; it disappeared somehow in the turmoil of the French Revolution. A King of Spain secured other relics which found their way to the Escurial in Spain and were kept in a chapel dedicated to Malcolm and Margaret of Scotland. Not so very long ago a few vertebrae were authenticated there and brought back to St. Margaret's Convent in Edinburgh, where they now lie.

Such was Margaret, Malcolm's Queen, the last Saint on the Scottish Calendar, Royal Succourer in a barbarous age of the poor, the sick and the dying. She combined within the compass of her mind the qualities of theologian and scholar, patroness of learning and of the arts, statesman, lawmaker and judge, re-former and most consistent Christian. I am aware that there is variance between Protestants and Roman Catholics as to the extent to which value should be placed on the reformation which Margaret brought about in the Church in Scotland, but we are not on a sectarian platform now. As the life of St. Elizabeth of Hungary went very deeply into the religious life of Central Europe so did that of St. Margaret go deeply into the religion and culture of Western Europe.

To-day, near the Abbey of Dunfermline and under the shadow of the ruined Palace of the Scottish Kings, lies the beautiful Pittencrief Glen, maintained as a pleasure ground for the people under the provisions of the Carnegie Trust. Coming down from the palace and passing across the well-kept footpaths, with their rustic bridges, you can still see the crags that surrounded her castle and hear the " crooked burn " tumbling on its circuitous route to the sea. Beyond you pass into splendid gardens, where once that trackless forest stood; then, through rose-covered arches, you reach a wide vista of beautifully kept lawns and magnificent trees. At certain hours of the day you can listen to fine music there; it echoes round the walls of a cave in the cliffs, beyond the glen, where once a great Queen spent long hours in holy meditation. It seems as though the spirit of the saint were ever brooding over Dunfermline, her ruins and her gardens; it seems too as though the youthful Present were asking questions of the hoary Past—What lessons does the life of Queen Margaret have for the Present? And the Past gives many an answer, but there is one point I would like to stress. All through what I have called the melody that is the life of Margaret of Scotland, that lovely lady of jocund speech who rode on the storm waves into her kingdom, there is sounding the note of courage. I once heard it said that it must have taken a great deal of courage on the part of Malcolm to be the husband of a Saint; equally it must have required courage on Margaret's part, to marry *that* particular lion of Scotland. Unlike his youngest son he was no " sair saint for a croon " when *she* began the taming of him. And she never *quite*

previous page next page