

## St. Margaret of Cortona: Her Life

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Margaret of Cortona was born in the year 1247 at Laviano, a little town in Tuscany. Her father was a small farmer, whose chief thought was for his farm and the soil he tilled. Of her mother we know only that she died when her daughter was but seven years old, and that she was a good woman of simple faith. "O Lord Jesus, I beseech Thee for the salvation of all whom Thou wouldst have me pray for," was a prayer she impressed upon the memory of her daughter, a prayer which Margaret never forgot. And without doubt the thought of her mother was a saving influence in Margaret's life. Two years after her mother's death, Tancred, her father, took to himself another wife, and with that Margaret's history may be said to begin. The situation is not difficult to reconstruct. A high-spirited, sensitive girl, full of vitality, her whole being athirst for life; and a stepmother whose nature had no response for the girl's, a woman who would brook no contradiction, who worshipped the respectabilities and the order of her own household, and expected others to walk in the narrow way of her own decalogue. With two such natures brought into daily contact, you may forecast disaster. Nor could the father's influence have availed much, even had he had the will, to smooth his child's path. He had committed the error of marrying a woman who must misunderstand his child. Consciously or unconsciously, he had by that act sacrificed his daughter to his own pleasure or convenience; perhaps he had not thought of her at all in his anxiety to provide his household with a careful mistress. At any rate, such evidence as we have points to the conclusion that the new wife ruled her husband as well as his farm-house, and that Margaret was left to bear her burden as best she might. Had Margaret's home-life been different, had she, as she grew from a child into a woman, known a

mother's understanding, love and patience, it is probable that Cortona would have lacked its most illustrious Saint. "Happy is the nation that has no history"; yes, but that depends upon the point of view.

Would it have been better for Margaret had a mother's love shielded her? She would have been saved the bitter tears of repentance; but would she in the end have been as true and noble a woman? Would her life have profited the world as it actually has? The question is not idle if it teaches us to see, even amid the worst miseries of earth, a providence which rebukes our own small judgments. There are characters — who has not known them? — that can only be wrought into high nobility and sanctity by humiliation and repentance. There are many who could only attain the highest of which they are capable, by the way of repentance and the sin that needs repentance. Why it should be so is one of the mysteries of life. It may be that with these souls the shock of a great sin is needful to bring them to that humility and self-knowledge which, the Saints tell us, are the only secure foundation of virtue. However this may be, it is for us to judge the sinner tenderly and with a certain reverence; for who knows but his sin may be the way to a nobler virtue?

Margaret's surroundings, then, were such as to force to the surface the weaknesses of her character. As is clear from her own confessions, she was by nature one of those women who thirst for affection; in whom to be loved is the imperative need of their lives. Some there are in whom this need is dominated by their primal need to love, who must pour themselves out upon others unless their faculties are to be atrophied. Such women are in a supreme sense the mothers of humanity. Not that the affection of others is to them an indifferent thing; but that their primary need is to give rather than to receive. But there are others who lack a certain vital warmth which they seek outside themselves and for which their souls clamour with passionate appeal. For them to be loved is as the breath of life. In an atmosphere of affection they will often blossom forth into sweetness and heroic deeds. In the love which others give them they may be said to find themselves; but until they have found what they need, their souls are athirst. Margaret was of this kind. She needed to be loved that her soul might be free; and in her home she found not what she needed. Had she been of the weaker sort, either morally or physically, she would have accepted her lot, vegetated in spiritual barrenness, married eventually a husband of her father's choice, and lived an uneventful life with a measure of peace.

But she was not in any sense of the weaker sort: she was full of vitality and of the wish to live. And so, not willing to be utterly repressed, she sought her life outside her home. As yet her spiritual nature was dormant, else she might even now have found in religion the liberty of soul she found afterwards; and in the pure love of Christ she would have been shielded against the temptations of the world. But the hour had not yet come wherein she was to find in the higher love security against the lower. Yet, even so, there was in Margaret no vicious taint, such as some of the later chronicles have fixed upon her. She was fond of gaiety doubtless; but the chronicler who describes her as an abandoned woman either had not read the story of her life fully related by Fra Giunta with evident candour, or else he distorted facts to suit a thesis, deepening the shadows of her early life that her conversion might seem the more remarkable.<sup>1</sup> What is clear from the whole course of Fra Giunta's narrative is that Margaret even in her fall had not altogether lost her self-respect. She was betrayed, as the Legend expressly tells us, under promise of marriage, by a man whom she seems to have sincerely loved.

She was about seventeen years when the great temptation came to her, a woman in the first bloom of womanhood, as things go in the South. She was esteemed very beautiful even in the Tuscan country where many were beautiful; and her beauty of feature was matched by the vivacity of her wit. The tempter came in the form of a gay cavalier from the neighbourhood of Montepulciano. Some say he was the son of Guglielmo di Pecora, lord of Valiano and lands round Montepulciano, a warrior who had earned fame in the wars against the Saracens. But no hint of his identity is given by Margaret herself, or by Fra Giunta. Whoever he was, the young cavalier promised to make Margaret his wife, if she would only flee with him to his own home; and, dazzled by the vision of a life in which love, admiration, and gaiety would be hers to the full, she consented. Under cover of night, as one biographer relates, Margaret fled from home with her lover to his house amidst the hills. The marshes of the Chiano were flooded at the time and the two lovers were nearly drowned.<sup>2</sup>

There, in his home near Montepulciano, Margaret was installed as her lover's mistress; and there she lived for nine years in defiance of law and convention, but with a certain meed of happiness. He gave her every pleasure she might seek, except the one thing she most earnestly wished for — the right to call herself his wife. Often during those years she begged him to marry her, and as often he pleaded delay. Meanwhile, as the *Legend* expressly says, she surrendered herself unwillingly.<sup>3</sup>

A son was born to them, and yet the promise of marriage remained unfulfilled. It was with a growing feeling of bitterness that Margaret lived on at Montepulciano. Her saving sense of shame is recorded in the story of her life as she told it to Fra Giunta in after years. But to her neighbours she gave no sign of the canker that was at the root of her gaiety; in their presence she was the pleasure-loving, imperious and witty Margaret. They might on occasion hint that she should look to her soul before it was too late, but she would not reveal to them her remorse. With a touch of sarcasm she told her mentors that they need not fear for her, for she would yet be a Saint and they would come as pilgrims to visit her shrine, with staves in their hands and carrying pilgrims' wallets. Yet in this reply there was probably more than a witty retort: it may have been at the same time a half-shamed expression of her desire for better things and her prevision of a penitential life as her ultimate vocation. For she grew accustomed to seek out quiet places apart from the walks of man, and there would dream of a life given up to virtue and the praise of God.<sup>4</sup> And she was pitiful towards the poor and those in distress; the sorrow of her own soul leading her to find with them a certain comradeship, the one enduring thing in those days of swift disillusion.

Then came the break of her life, suddenly and without warning. Her lover was abroad one day when he was set upon by assassins and done to death, perhaps as the result of a family feud. Margaret's first intimation of the disaster was the return of her lover's favourite hound without its master, and the faithful brute's distress and evident endeavour to induce her to follow him. The hound led the way to a neighbouring wood, and there Margaret came upon her lover's mangled body. To her the murder came as a judgment from Heaven, terrible in its unexpectedness and extremity, and yet the summing-up of her own years of remorse and defiance. And the judgment had fallen not upon herself but upon her lover.

It is evidence of her inherent loyalty of soul, a loyalty which had kept her faithful to him during those nine years of broken promises, that, seeing him lying in death, she now accused herself of being the cause of his sin, and took the wrong-doing upon herself. She now felt a loathing for the beauty which had held him captive, and despised herself for the miserable triumph which had been hers in holding him fast. She returned to the house that day with her whole soul humbled to the ground, her pride broken. To herself she was a woman who had wrought death where she had sought sunshine, and not merely death, but the bitterness of hell. Nothing is told us as to the attitude his relatives took towards her, or of

the sensation caused by the murder amongst her neighbours. After all, such murders were not infrequent where family and civic feuds were the order of the day. There is no sign that Margaret had earned the ill-will of the people amongst whom she lived; we gather rather from the course of the *Legend* that her neighbours, scandalised though they may have been, yet had some affection for her. Pity, not resentment, met her when she returned later on to seek public forgiveness.

But, whatever may have been the attitude of neighbours and relatives, Margaret had already judged herself; and the energy of her pride now passed into her repentance. She was not the woman to let her life flow away in ineffectual emotion. She had done wrong and her life had been a scandal to her neighbours, encouraging them to sin. She would now confess her wrong-doing before the world, and do penance and win pardon; that was her duty, the duty she owed to God and man. She must needs leave her lover's house, where she was no longer mistress; but more than that, she resolved to return to his relatives the wealth he had settled upon her and the jewels he had given her, Some few ornaments she sold, and gave the price to the poor whom she had been accustomed to help.

With the barest necessaries for herself and her little son, she now set forth on foot to retrace the journey of nine years before, and return to her father's house. It was the instinct which so often brings the prodigal home at last. In the first crushed days of repentance the days of childhood come back vividly to the prodigal's thoughts with yearning desire, and the home of his innocence becomes a vision of refuge in a world of disaster. In these days, too, the penitent is like a child, with a child's simple trust in the parent's power to shield. Bruised and shaken, the repentant, whether men or women, need the love of father or mother, or the friend who is as father or mother. The time comes when they must face the world again, and by their own resolution build up their lives anew and seek to regain a place in the society they have outraged. But it is well for them in the day of their re-birth to be shielded from the world's bitterness by the love which watches over the uncertain steps of children. The finding of this home-love is often the determining factor between a penitent's hope and despair. And so with a true instinct of nature, Margaret sought her father's house.

Yet here again we find one of those providential permissions which seem needful for the working out of Margaret's heroic story. Her father, it appears, was willing to receive her and her boy and would have taken them in; perhaps he felt he had been already somewhat to blame.

But he reckoned without his wife. She would have none of the penitent, if penitent indeed she were. The virtuous household at Laviano was no place for such as she. So Margaret was turned away from her father's door and told to go whither she would. Very simply, in words in which the tears are still undried, she herself has described the desolation and despair of that hour, in relating to her spiritual director one of those Divine intimations with which she was so often favoured after her conversion. The words are the words of Margaret, though the thought is the thought of Christ:

“Remember, *poverella*, how, thy tempter being dead, thou didst return to thy father at Laviano, with thy whole being filled with sorrow, with thy tears and drawn face, clothed in a black robe and utterly ashamed. And thy father, lacking fatherly pity, and urged on by thy stepmother, did drive thee from his house. Not knowing what to do, and being without any adviser or helper, thou didst sit down weeping under a fig-tree in his garden and there thou didst seek in Me a Guide, a Father, a Spouse and Lord; and with a humble heart didst confess thine utter misery of soul and body. Then he, the serpent of old, seeing thee cast out by thy father, sought to his own shame and thy destruction to make thy comeliness and youth an inducement to presume upon My mercy; putting it into thy heart that, since thou wast now cast out, thou mightest excusably go on in sin, and that wheresoever thou shouldst come or go thou wouldst not lack lovers amongst the great ones of the world, because of thine exceeding beauty.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus reverently is Margaret's soul unveiled to us at the supreme moment of trial. But in that hour of despair the Divine Mercy sought her out and took her by the hand and with much tenderness led her into safety. As she called upon God for help in her temptation, a voice spoke in her soul, bidding her to rise up and go to the Franciscan Friars at Cortona and put herself under their care.

It was the return of hope, and she seized upon it with the avidity of a soul utterly desolate. Yet perhaps she had some doubt as to the reception she would meet with; for she had now tasted the bitterness of her situation, and knew by experience how the world regarded her. She does not seem to have known the Friars at Cortona, though probably she had seen some of them as they went about the country doing the work of their apostolate; and it may be she had heard of their gentleness with sinners, a legacy bequeathed them by the Founder of the Order, who had not refused to admit a repentant robber into his fraternity. When she came to Cortona, she knew not what direction to take to get to the house of the Friars, and her evident misery and loneliness attracted the attention of two

ladies whom she met when she arrived at the city. With an intuition born of pity, these ladies — Marinaria and Raneria by name—divined her trouble and spoke to her, offering to befriend her. To them Margaret told the purpose of her coming to Cortona. They immediately took her and her boy to their hearts as mothers might and gave her a home in their house. After awhile they introduced her to the Franciscan Friars, who at once extended to her a paternal pity and became to her as fathers in Christ. Thus, in the city of Cortona, Margaret found that parental solicitude which had been denied her at Laviano.

Henceforth, Cortona was her home. There she lived and developed in sanctity, till at the end she died and was buried in a church in the city. There her body has been kept these six centuries as a most priceless treasure, and there in its silver shrine it may be seen to-day, incorrupt as though this bodily incorruption were meant by Heaven to bear witness to the spiritual integrity to which she at length attained after years of contrition and penance.

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It is the story of these years of purification and growing sanctity that is set forth in the Legend of Fra Giunta Bevegnati. The essential part of that legend will be found in this book. But first, before we speak of Fra Giunta's Legend, it will be well to trace the sequence of Margaret's life; for, as we shall see, the fourteenth century Friar and friend of Margaret had no regard for chronology.

Margaret came to Cortona probably in 1273, though some would say in 1274.<sup>6</sup> The city had already acquired some fame in Franciscan history as the city of Brother Elias' predilection. Hither he had retired in the hour of his humiliation and built himself a convent and church with the generous donations of the people of Cortona, grateful to the worldly-wise Friar who had been their friend with the Emperor. He had died in their midst a sad, desolate death, just twenty years before Margaret came to give the city a holier name amongst those who loved St. Francis.

It was at the house which Elias had built that Margaret now sought renewal of life. She came in the strength of her new resolution; but also in the weakness of her broken life. Very tenderly must she be cared for in these first days, and, indeed, for many years to come; and this the Friars understood, as did the ladies, Marinaria and Raneria. For the first three years of her conversion the penitent knew the discouragement and seeming hopelessness of the struggle with flesh and blood. Temptation did not cease when she overcame the first impulse to despair under the fig-

tree in her father's garden. Much as she abhorred her past sin, something of the old leaven still remained in her. Not that she had any desire for the former ways; but the flesh was not yet wholly subdued by the spirit. And at times it seemed hard to her to give up all the things she had loved. Why should she embrace a penitential life and cut herself off from all worldly pleasure? Why not be as the ordinary run of Christians? There were days when the temptation was strong within her; but in her innermost soul she knew it could not be. For her there must be no compromise with the world. She must be either Saint or sinner, either seek God wholly, or enjoy the world's pleasure to the full. Such was her nature; half measures would not satisfy her.

In these struggles she found her chief earthly support in the sympathy and counsel of the Friars, particularly two, who were in a special sense her friends and directors: Fra Giovanni da Castiglione, afterwards the Custos, and Fra Giunta Bevegnati, who was also her ordinary confessor. She seems to have relied much upon Fra Giovanni, who frequently acted as her adviser until his death in 1289; but her chief mainstay was Fra Giunta. He was a man of intense zeal for souls and of great purity of heart; very prudent too, and of keen sympathies. As a preacher he was simple and direct, avoiding the rhetoric so common with the preachers of the day; on several occasions he acted as peacemaker among the citizens. To the end of her life Margaret loved to converse with him; because of his knowledge of the soul and of Holy Scripture. And as the years went on a holy intimacy of spirit grew up between them, and the penitent became almost as much the support of the confessor in his own trials and difficulties as he was hers. But in the first year of her repentance, Fra Giunta had need of all his sympathy and tact to guide her safely through the alternation of despair and elation which came to her.

Thus, one day she came to him with a proposal of public reparation. She would go to Montepulciano, she said, garbed as a penitent and so present herself to the people who had been accustomed to see her in all her finery; and she would hire a woman to lead her by a rope round her neck after the fashion of criminals, and the woman should call aloud as they went along: "Behold Margaret the sinner!" But Fra Giunta would not have it, both because he thought it unbecoming in a young woman, and because he was afraid lest a singular exhibition of that sort should end in a reaction of spiritual pride. But afterwards he permitted her to go to Montepulciano and publicly beg pardon of the people one Sunday when they were assembled in the church for Mass.