

Margaret of Cortona

Edith Wharton

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FRA PAOLO, since they say the end is near,
And you of all men have the gentlest eyes,
Most like our father Francis; since you know
How I have toiled and prayed and scourged and striven,
Mothered the orphan, waked beside the sick,
Gone empty that mine enemy might eat,
Given bread for stones in famine years, and channelled
With vigilant knees the pavement of this cell,
Till I constrained the Christ upon the wall
To bend His thorn-crowned Head in mute forgiveness . . .
Three times He bowed it . . . (but the whole stand writ,
Sealed with the Bishop's signet, as you know),
Once for each person of the Blessed Three —
A miracle that the whole town attests,
The very babes thrust forward for my blessing,
And either parish plotting for my bones —
Since this you know: sit near and bear with me.
I have lain here these many empty days
I thought to pack with Credos and Hail Marys
So close that not a fear should force the door,
But still, between the blessed syllables
That taper up like blazing angel heads,
Praise over praise, to the Unutterable,
Strange questions clutch me, thrusting fiery arms,
As though, athwart the close-meshed litanies,
My dead should pluck at me from hell, with eyes
Alive in their obliterated faces! . . .
I have tried the saints' names and our blessed Mother's,
Fra Paolo, I have tried them o'er and o'er,
And like a blade bent backward at first thrust
They yield and fail me — and the questions stay.
And so I thought, into some human heart,
Pure, and yet foot-worn with the tread of sin,
If only I might creep for sanctuary,
It might be that those eyes would let me rest. . .

Fra Paolo, listen. How should I forget
The day I saw him first? (You know the one.)
I had been laughing in the market-place
With others like me, I the youngest there,

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Jostling about a pack of mountebanks
Like flies on carrion (I the youngest there!),
Till darkness fell; and while the other girls
Turned this way, that way, as perdition beckoned,
I, wondering what the night would bring, half hoping:
If not, this once, a child's sleep in my garret,
At least enough to buy that two-pronged coral
The others covet 'gainst the evil eye,
Since, after all, one sees that I'm the youngest —
So, muttering my litany to hell
(The only prayer I knew that was not Latin),
Felt on my arm a touch as kind as yours,
And heard a voice as kind as yours say, "Come."
I turned and went; and from that day I never
Looked on the face of any other man.
So much is known; so much effaced; the sin
Cast like a plague-struck body to the sea,
Deep, deep into the unfathomable pardon —
(The Head bowed thrice, as the whole town attests).
What more, then? To what purpose? Bear with me! —

It seems that he, a stranger in the place,
First noted me that afternoon and wondered:
How grew so white a bud in such black slime,
And why not mine the hand to pluck it out?
Why, so Christ deals with souls, you cry — what then?
Not so! Not so! When Christ, the heavenly gardener,
Plucks flowers for Paradise (do I not know?),
He snaps the stem above the root, and presses
The ransomed soul between two convent walls,
A lifeless blossom in the Book of Life.
But when my lover gathered me, he lifted
Stem, root, and all — ay, and the clinging mud —
And set me on his sill to spread and bloom
After the common way, take sun and rain,
And make a patch of brightness for the street,
Though raised above rough fingers — so you make
A weed a flower, and others, passing, think:
"Next ditch I cross, I'll lift a root from it,
And dress my window" . . . and the blessing spreads.
Well, so I grew, with every root and tendril
Grappling the secret anchorage of his love,
And so we loved each other till he died. . .

Ah, that black night he left me, that dead dawn
I found him lying in the woods, alive
To gasp my name out and his life-blood with it,
As though the murderer's knife had probed for me
In his hacked breast and found me in each wound. . .

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Well, it was there Christ came to me, you know,
And led me home — just as that other led me.
(Just as that other? Father, bear with me!)
My lover's death, they tell me, saved my soul,
And I have lived to be a light to men,
And gather sinners to the knees of grace.

All this, you say, the Bishop's signet covers.
But stay! Suppose my lover had not died?
(At last my question! Father, help me face it.)
I say: Suppose my lover had not died, —
Think you I ever would have left him living,
Even to be Christ's blessed Margaret?
— We lived in sin? Why, to the sin I died to
That other was as Paradise, when God
Walks there at eventide, the air pure gold,
And angels treading all the grass to flowers!
He was my Christ — he led me out of hell —
He died to save me (so your casuists say!) —
Could Christ do more? Your Christ outpity mine?
Why, yours but let the sinner bathe His feet;
Mine raised her to the level of his heart. . .
And then Christ's way is saving, as man's way
Is squandering — and the devil take the shards!
But this man kept for sacramental use
The cup that once had slaked a passing thirst;
This man declared: "The same clay serves to model
A devil or a saint; the scribe may stain
The same fair parchment with obscenities,
Or gild with benedictions; nay," he cried,
"Because a satyr feasted in this wood,
And fouled the grasses with carousing foot,
Shall not a hermit build his chapel here
And cleanse the echoes with his litanies?
The sodden grasses spring again, — why not
The trampled soul? Is man less merciful
Than nature, good more fugitive than grass?"

And so — if, after all, he had not died,
And suddenly that door should know his hand,
And with that voice as kind as yours he said:
"Come, Margaret, forth into the sun again,
Back to the life we fashioned with our hands,
Out of old sins and follies, fragments scorned
Of more ambitious builders, yet by Love,
The patient architect, so shaped and fitted
That not a crevice let the winter in, — "
Think you my bones would not arise and walk,
This bruised body (as once the bruised soul)

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Turn from the wonders of the seventh heaven
As from the antics of the market-place?
If this could be (as I so oft have dreamed),
I, who have known both loves, divine and human,
Think you I would not leave this Christ for that?

— I rave, you say? You start from me, Fra Paolo?
Go, then; your going leaves me not alone.
I marvel, rather, that I feared the question,
Since, now I name it, it draws near to me
With such dear reassurance in its eyes,
And takes your place beside me. . .

Nay, I tell you,
Fra Paolo, I have cried on all the saints —
If this be devil's promptings, let them drown it
In Alleluias! Yet not one replies.
And, for the Christ there, — is He silent too?
Your Christ? Poor father; you that have but one,
And that one silent — how I pity you!
He will not answer? Will not help you cast
The devil out? But hangs there on the wall,
Blind wood and bone —

How if I call on Him —
I, whom He talks with, as the town attests?
If ever prayer hath ravished me so high
That its wings failed and dropped me in Thy breast,
Christ, I adjure Thee! By that naked hour
Of innermost commixture, when my soul
Contained Thee as the paten holds the host,
Judge Thou alone between this priest and me;
Nay, rather, Lord, between my past and present,
Thy Margaret and that other's — whose she is
By right of salvage — and whose call should follow!
Thine? Silent still. — Or his, who stooped to her,
And drew her to Thee by the bands of love?
Not Thine? Then his?

Ah, Christ — the thorn-crowned Head
Bends . . . bends again . . . down on your knees, Fra Paolo!
If his, then Thine!

Kneel, priest, for this is heaven. . .