

Margarethe

Chapter I

The Sisters

SPRING sunshine was gilding the tops of the tall pines of the great Thuringian forest,¹ and penciling streaks of gold here and there on the soft velvet turf below. The turf had been well cleared of sticks and pinecones; for in the valley a little lower down was nestled a tiny village of peasant huts—the houses of the retainers who served the knight living in the grim-looking fortress that crowned the hill.

From the castle terrace one could look down upon the tops of the swaying pines, and they effectually hid the little cluster of cottages, and even the thatch-roofed church, from the eyes of its lordly owner, who thought little and cared less for how his peasant retainers might fare, so long as they served him faithfully.

¹A forest in central Germany

Today two young girls were walking here on the terrace, and looking down upon the road that wound its circuitous way between the pines up to the castle gate.

“Fritz said he should be home today; that he would come early, too. I do hope—” and there she stopped.

“What is it, Else, you are afraid of? for I can see you are afraid of something,” said her sister, turning upon her rather sharply.

“Nothing, only you know the burghers of Erfurt might hinder him, Margarethe.”

“Those miserable burghers!” stamped her sister impatiently. “But I do not believe they would dare to rob and murder a knight,” she exclaimed the next minute.

“O, not murder him! of course not; but I heard my father say—” and then again Else glanced at her sister hurriedly, and stopped.

“Well, what did our father say?” asked Margarethe, with a little more color in her cheeks.

“Only this, dear, that he wished the time had come for me to go to the convent, and he might make himself strong enough to punish these upstart burghers.”

Margarethe started, and her cheeks flamed, and her dark eyes flashed. “He may punish these burghers if he will—burn their town and university, if he likes; but, Else, if you are sent to the convent he shall never join hands with Count von Schonstein through me.”

CIRCUITOUS: *round about*

BURGHERS: *the inhabitants of a borough or town*

“O Margarethe, you do not know; it is not so terrible for me to go to the convent. Of course I shall miss you, and—and I am afraid it will be a long time before I can leave off loving you so much, and thinking of you as my beautiful clever sister Margarethe, as Father Sebastian says I must; but then, you know, he says my heart will be so filled with the ineffable love of the spouse—the Church and all the saints, I suppose he means—that there will be no room in my heart for any earthly love.”

Margarethe looked rather hurt. “O Else, do you think you can leave off loving me like this? Why, we have been all the world to each other, and I-I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, leave off loving you. O, how I do hate religion and every thing about it! I am glad I have no vocation, and—”

“O hush! hush! Margarethe; do not say such dreadful things,” said Else, the tears welling up to her eyes as she spoke.

Margarethe looked down into the gentle blue eyes, and kissed her sister passionately. “It is cruel, cruel,” she said, “and I hate it all. I am not a bit religious, I know, and, of course, God hates me; but I don’t care; no, I don’t care! I will love you, and, Else, you must love me, even though they do take you away to the convent.”

“Yes, yes, dear, I will—at least I will pray for you always, and perhaps by and by God may give you a vocation; and then if you come to the convent we can love each other again, because we shall be sisters again, you know.”

INEFFABLE: *impossible to express in words*

VOCATION: *calling from God to the life of a nun*

But Margarethe shook her head. “No, no; don’t pray for me to have a vocation and come to the convent; because I hate convents, and priests, and even the Holy Father at Rome sometimes. There is no religion in the world for me. I wonder almost that God let me be sister to such a dear, gentle, patient girl as you; only, of course, He always meant you to be a saint, and to take you away from me just when it was like taking my heart out of my body, that He might punish me. But it doesn’t seem quite fair that He should begin to make me as miserable as He can here when He knows I shall go to endless misery when I die.”

“O Margarethe, don’t,” said Else pleadingly, “pray don’t talk so dreadfully.”

“Dreadful! But it’s true; you know it is; and I say it isn’t fair. I wouldn’t do it, I know, not even to one of those Erfurt burghers whom we ought to hate, it seems, as our hereditary enemies. If I knew I could make him miserable by and by, I would let him have a little peace now, and not watch for every little chance to make him unhappy, as God watches everybody that doesn’t have a vocation. I wonder whether there is anybody else in the world as wicked as I am,” concluded Margarethe in the same defiant tone.

“O don’t say any more: think what you will have to tell Father Sebastian the next time you go to confession, and what a hard penance he will give you.”

HEREDITARY: *passed down through the generations*

CONFESSION: *private confession of sins to a priest*

PENANCE: *punishment for sins committed*

“I don’t care for the penance; but I don’t mean to go to confession anymore,” boldly avowed Margarethe, and her color brightened as she spoke.

“Not—go—to—confession!” slowly uttered Else, as though she thought that for her sister to absent herself from that sacrament of the Church was a depth of wickedness she doubted even in her with all her daring.

“No, I don’t mean to go again,” Margarethe coolly avowed. “Father Sebastian asked me some questions which I told him no maiden would ever answer, the very last time I went;” and at the recollection Margarethe drew herself up with dignity and walked away.

Else noticed the proud carriage, and thought she could guess what the questions had been. At least she would try to save her sister from the commission of such a great sin as absenting herself from the confessional; and as she walked along the terrace she slipped her arm within Margarethe’s, as she was about to turn in her walk.

Looking up into the dark, flashing eyes, she said, “I believe you are of our mother’s family, and more a Bohemian than a German, although you were born in this German forest, Margarethe.”

“Perhaps I am, little sister,” she said rather sadly.

“And the Bohemians are proud—prouder than the Germans, I think I have heard,” said Else, again glancing up into her sister’s face.

“Perhaps they are,” again assented Margarethe.

“Yes, I think they must be,” said Else, rather timidly; “and that is why you feel so hurt at Father Sebastian’s questions. Of course you cannot help being proud, dear Margarethe, but—”

“But I never mean to answer such questions as Father Sebastian asked,” interrupted her sister. “He said I was proud, and that such pride ought to be humbled and mortified; and—”

“O Margarethe, I was sure that was how it was, and you—you will go to confession again, I am sure you will,” said Else.

“I am sure I will not. I tell you, Else, he had no business to ask a maiden such questions. Of course he has not dared to ask you such. You are but fourteen—two years younger than I. But if I thought he would—” Margarethe stopped suddenly and clenched her fist. “I wish I were a man, like Fritz,” she abruptly added.

“That is an old wish, Margarethe. But look! look!” and Else pointed to a distant opening in the forest glades, where two or three horsemen were seen rather wearily wending their way up the road toward the castle.

“It is Fritz—Fritz has come at last,” exclaimed Margarethe joyfully, and everything else was forgotten for a time; and, after giving due notice of the approach of the travelers to those within the castle, the two girls took their places to watch the cavalcade as it slowly wound round the steep, circuitous road.

“I wonder whether Fritz went to the great fair at Nuremberg, and what he will bring us? He always does bring us something, you know, Else.”

“Yes, perhaps he will bring you a new velvet bodice,” said her sister.

“And you some wonderful toys, or one of those mirrors of the new Venetian glass that he was talking about when he was at home before,” said Margarethe.

But Else shook her head. “He knows that toys and mirrors will be of no use to me in the convent,” she said.

“O dear! that dreadful convent! it rises up like a ghost every time one speaks. I don’t think I shall be greatly disappointed if I don’t go to heaven, but to the other dreadful place instead,” concluded Margarethe.

Her sister looked up, shocked and pained. “I mean to help you get to heaven; and that is why I am glad sometimes that I am going into the convent so soon, that I may have time to collect a store of good works.”

“I wish you would not, then, for I am sure I should never be happy in heaven, where, of course, they are all monks and nuns, living something as they do in their convents here, only the walls being of shining gold, instead of bricks and stone, must make one’s eyes ache sooner. But there! we will forget there is such a thing as a convent, or religion either, now that Fritz has come home. We’ll listen to the glad, merry birds as they sing

to their little ones in the tops of the pine trees; and go down to the valley, and see how many dear little babies have come to live there during the winter, and how all the old folks are; and we'll tell them about Fritz and his long journey to Italy, and listen to their stories about mother and father when they were young. But I wonder what Fritz will bring us?"

"I don't know. He will bring Aunt Ermengarde a book, perhaps, from the elector's new printing-press," said Else.

Margarethe turned up her nose. "I hate these printing-presses," she said, "for I heard Father say if it were not for this new fashion of multiplying books, and making learning cheap and common, the burghers of Erfurt would not be so upstartish and troublesome as they are."

"But our grandfather says it will be good for the world by and by."

"It will not be good for me if those tiresome burghers and students of Erfurt get everything their own way," objected Margarethe.

But now the cavalcade that had been hidden from their view during the last few minutes again emerged from under the brow of the hill, and now they could see one of the horsemen had taken off his plumed cap and was waving it, in token of his recognition of them.

Margarethe and Else were not slow to return the greeting, and when the horsemen again passed out of sight they ran down to the great hall to be

in time to greet the travelers. They had not long to wait before the horn at the gate was sounded, and the next minute the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard in the castle yard; and then Fritz, looking every inch a knight, as Margarethe whispered to Else, was led into the hall by his father, while the old count, their grandfather, met the lad with tears of gladness and exultation.

Margarethe and Else kept modestly in the background, but their turn for greeting their much-loved brother came at last, and Margarethe contrived to draw him into a little nook and extort a promise from him that he would join them on the terrace as soon as he had seen his aunt; for Dame Ermengarde rarely left her own room now, and his father would be occupied for the next half hour with some of his retainers, who had been sent to meet Fritz.

"Well, little sister, you are still our little German blue-eyed Else," said Fritz, as he stepped out into the terrace: and then he bowed in mock reverence before Margarethe.

"Be quiet, Fritz; I am not in the humor to be teased," said his sister laughingly.

"What may it please your ladyship to command her loyal knight?" asked Fritz, with a merry smile.

"O don't tease. Have you been to the Nuremberg fair to buy Else some of the wonderful toys they sell there?"

"And to buy Margarethe a new velvet bodice?" interrupted Else.

“I have been to Wittenberg, but not to buy a velvet bodice,” said Fritz.

“Wittenberg! That is where the elector’s new printing-presses are set up. I hate them!” exclaimed Margarethe.

“Then you shall not be troubled with them, my lady sister. But while I was at Wittenberg I heard of one Dr. John Tetzel, who was at Jüterbogk, a place close by, who had come from Rome with merchandise that could not fail to please my sister Margarethe, seeing that Lent, with its fasts, is ever such a sore trouble to her.”

Margarethe laughed: “You will never forget how I cried for meat once, it seems.”

“My sister has little love for religion at all, I fear,” said Fritz, in the same mocking tone.

“I don’t like it a bit. I hate it!” said Margarethe hotly.

“Well, it seems you are not the only one in the world, and doubtless someone must have told the Holy Father at Rome how many people there were who hated to keep the fasts of the Church and keep various commandments besides; so, to accommodate these, he has most obligingly invented a new kind of religion—just the sort of religion to suit you, Margarethe.”

“I don’t believe it,” said his sister; “there is no kind of religion in the world, nor ever could be, that would suit me.”

“O don’t say that. Just listen now.” And Fritz drew from his pouch a slip of parchment sealed with an



Fritz Reading the Pope’s Indulgence

enormous seal, and looked quite business-like and official, as he solemnly proceeded: "Listen now: 'I absolve thee, Margarethe von Ranitz, from all the excesses, sins, and crimes which thou hast committed, however great and enormous they may be; I remit for thee the pains thou oughtest to have to endure in purgatory; I restore thee to participation in the sacrament; I incorporate thee afresh into the communion of the Church; I re-establish thee in the innocence and purity in which thou wast at the time of thy baptism, so that at the moment of thy death the gate by which souls pass into the place of torment shall be closed for thee, while that which leads to the paradise of joy will be open to thee; and if thou art not called to die soon, this grace will remain unaltered. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"

PURGATORY: a supposed place of punishment where the dead pay for their sins before going to heaven