

From The Book of Margery Kempe

[The Birth of Her First Child and Her First Vision]

When this creature was twenty year of age and somedeal more, she was married to a worshipful burgess and was with child within short time, as kind would. And after that she had conceived she was labored with great accesses till the child was born, and then, what for labor she had in childing and for sickness going before, she despaired of her life, weening she might not live. And then she sent for her ghostly father, for she had a thing in conscience which she had never showed before that time in all her life. For she was ever letted by her enemy, the Devil, evermore saying to her while she was in good heal her needed no confession but [to] do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enow. And therefore this creature oftentimes did great penance in fasting bread and water and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, save she would not show it in confession. And when she was any time sick or diseased, the Devil said in her mind that she should be damned for she was not shriven of that default. Wherefore after that her child was born she, not trusting her life, sent for her ghostly father, as said before, in full will to be shriven of all her lifetime as near as she could. And, when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and gan sharply to undernim her ere that she had fully said her intent, and so she would no more say for nought he might do.

And anon for dread she had of damnation on that one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderly vexed and labored with spirits half year eight weeks and odd days. And in this time she saw, as her thought, devils open their mouths all inflamed with burning lows of fire as they should 'a swallowed her in, sometime ramping at her, sometime threatening her, sometime pulling her and hauling her both night and day the foresaid time. And also the devils cried upon her with great threatenings and bade her she should forsake her Christendom, her faith, and deny her God, his Mother, and all the saints in Heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends.

And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, her own self; she spoke many a reprevous word and many a shrewd word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; like as the spirits tempted her to say and do so she said and did. She would 'a fordone herself many a time at their steering and 'a been damned with them in Hell, and into witness thereof she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life after. And also she rived her skin on her body again her heart with her nails spiteously, for she had none other instruments, and worse she would 'a done save she was bound and kept with strength both day and night that she might not have her will.

And when she had long been labored in this and many other temptations that men weened she should never 'a scaped or lived, then on a time as she lay alone and her keepers were from her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesu, ever to be trusted (worshiped be his name) never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature, which had forsaken him, in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bed's side, looking upon her with so blessed a cheer that she was strengthened in all her spirits, said to her these words: "Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, and I forsook never thee?" And anon as he had said these words she saw verily how the air opened bright as any levin, and he sty up into the air, not right hastily and quickly, but fair and easily that she might well behold him in the air till it was closed again. And anon the creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as well as ever she was before, and prayed her husband as soon as he came to her that she might have the keys of the buttery to take her meat and drink as she had done before.

[Her Pride and Attempts to Start a Business]

And when this creature was thus graciously come again to her mind, she thought she was bound to God and that she would be his servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride nor her pompous

array that she had used beforetime, neither for her husband nor for none other man's counsel. And yet she wist full well that men said her full much villainy, for she wore gold pipes on her head and her hoods with the tippets were dagged. Her cloaks also were dagged and laid with divers colors between the dags that it should be the more staring to men's sight and herself the more worshiped. And when her husband would speak to her for to leave her pride she answered shrewdly and shortly and said that she was come of worthy kindred - him seemed never for to 'a wedded her - for her father was sometime mayor of the town N and sithen he was alderman of the high Gild of the Trinity in N. And therefore she would save the worship of her kindred whatsoever any man said. She had full great envy at her neighbors that they should be arrayed as well as she. All her desire was for to be worshiped of the people. She would not beware by one's chastening nor be content with the good that God had sent her, as her husband was, but ever desired more and more.

And then, for pure covetise and for to maintain her pride, she gan to brew and was one of the greatest brewers in the town N a three year or four till she lost much good, for she had never ure thereto. For though she had never so good servants and cunning in brewing, yet it would never prove with them. For when the ale was as fair standing under barm as any man might see, suddenly the barm would fall down that all the ale was lost every brewing after other, that her servants were ashamed and would not dwell with her. Then this creature thought how God had punished her beforetime and she could not beware, and now eftsoons by losing of her goods, and then she left and brewed no more. And then she asked her husband mercy for she would not follow his counsel aforetime, and she said that her pride was cause of all her punishing and she would amend that she had trespassed with good will.

[Margery and Her Husband Reach a Settlement]

It befell upon a Friday on Midsummer Even in right hot weather, as this creature was coming from York-ward bearing a bottle with beer in her hand and her husband a cake in his bosom, he asked his wife this question: "Margery, if there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless that I should commune kindly with you as I have done beofre, say me truth of your conscience - for ye say ye will not lie - whether would ye suffer my head to be smit off or else suffer me to meddle with you again as I did sometime?" "Alas, sir," She said, "why move ye this matter and have we been chaste this eight weeks?" "For I will wit the truth of your heart." And the she said with great sorrow, "Forsooth, I had liefer see you be slain than we should turn again to our uncleanness." And he said again, "Ye are no good wife."

And then she asked her husband what was the cause that he had not meddled with eight weeks before, sithen she lay with him every night in his bed. And he said he was so made afeared when he would 'a touched her that he durst no more do. "Now, good sir, amend you and ask God mercy, for I told you near three year sithen that ye should be slain suddenly, and now is this the third year, and yet I hope I shall have my desire. Good sir, I pray you grant me that I shall ask, and I shall pray for you that ye shall be saved through the mercy of our Lord Jesu Christ, and ye shall have more meed in Heaven than if ye wore a hair or a habergeon. I pray you, suffer me to make a vow of chastity in what bishop's hand that God will." "Nay," he said, "that will I not grant you, for now I may use you without deadly sin and then might I not so." The she said again, "If it be the will of the Holy Ghost to fulfill that I have said, I pray God ye might consent thereto; and if it be not the will of the Holy Ghost, I pray God ye never consent thereto."

Then they went forth to-Bridlington-ward in right hot weather, the foresaid creature having great sorrow and great dread for her chastity. And as they came by a cross, her husband set him down under the cross, cleping his wife unto him and saying these words unto her, "Margery, grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire. My first desire is that we shall lie still together in one bed as we have done before; the second that ye shall pay my debts ere ye go to Jerusalem; and the third that ye shall eat and drink with me on the Friday as ye were wont to do." "Nay sir," she said, "to break the Friday I will never grant you while I live." "Well," he said, "then shall I meddle with you again."

She prayed him that he would give her leave to make her prayers, and he granted it goodly. Then she knelt down beside a cross in the field and prayed in this manner with great abundance of tears, "Lord God, thou knowest all thing; thou knowest what sorrow I have had to be chaste in my body to thee all this three year, and now might I have my will and I dare not for love of thee. For if I would break that manner of fasting which thou commandest me to keep on the Friday without meat or drink, I should now have my desire. But, blessed Lord, thou knowest I will not contrary to thy will, and mickle now is my sorrow unless that I find comfort in thee. Now, blessed Jesu, make thy will known to me unworthy that I may follow thereafter and fulfil it with all my might." And then our Lord Jesu Christ with great sweetness spoke to this creature, commanding her to go again to her husband and pray him to grant her that she desired, "And he shall have that he desireth. For, my dearworthy daughter, this was the cause that I bade thee fast for thou shouldest the sooner obtain and get thy desire, and now it is granted thee. I will no longer thou fast, therefore I bid thee in the name of Jesu eat and drink as thy husband doth."

Then this creature thanked our Lord Jesu Christ of his grace and his goodness, sithen rose up and went to her husbandm saying unto him, "Sir, if it like you, ye shall grant me my desire and ye shall have your desire. Granteth me that ye shall not come in my bed, and I grant you to quit your debts ere I go to Jerusalem. And maketh my body free to God so that ye never make no challenging in me to ask no debt of matrimony after this day while ye live, and I shall eat and drink on the Friday at your bidding." Then said her husband again to her, "As free may your body be to God as it hath been to me."

This creature thanked God greatly, enjoying that she had her desire, praying her husband that they should say three Pater Noster in the worship of the Trinity for the great grace that he had granted them. And so they did, kneeling under a cross, and sithen they ate and drank together in great gladness of spirit. This was on a Friday on Midsummer Even.

Source: The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 6th Ed. Vol. 1. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.