

KATHERINE VON BORA



Katherine von Bora lived from 1499-1552 in what we now call Germany. She spent her childhood and early adulthood in a convent. She loved God and felt she could serve him best as a nun. Katherine lived during the time that Dr. Martin Luther had challenged the Roman Catholic Church. He was distressed to see so many people confused by the wrong teaching they received in church and how church leaders tried to tell people they could buy their



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way into heaven with money and good works. Two years before this story begins, Martin Luther was put on trial for speaking out for God's truth. The judge, Emperor Charles V, excommunicated Martin from the church and he had to go into hiding. From that hiding place, Martin wrote many books and pamphlets to teach people the true doctrines from the Bible. Katherine, living in her convent, came across some of Martin's books and they changed her life. Read on and find out what happened.



ESCAPE!

SPRING 1523

Sister Katherine set the stopper in the clay bottle and wiped the outside with a cloth just as the bell sounded for Vespers. Looking up, she saw Sister Magdalene, her aunt who was the Infirmaress, use sign language to signal her to finish quickly and follow her to the church. Katherine obeyed, washing her hands in the bowl of cold water and drying them on the towel that hung nearby. Then she followed her aunt out of the convent hospital, through the cloister and joined the line of nuns entering the church.

Katherine barely noticed the cold spring wind that whipped her long white skirt around her legs and tugged at her black veil. With her arms tucked comfortably inside her long sleeves, she walked up the dark stone church steps lost in thought. Her



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thoughts were troubling ones. She had lived in the Marienthron nunnery for fourteen years, sent there by her father when she was ten years old. In fact, Katherine remembered very little of her home or family. Her mother had died when she was very young and her father had sent her to another convent to go to school at that time. The people she remembered best were the nuns who had been her teachers and had cared for her along with other children who lived there. Growing up in the convent, she had learned to love the nun's way of life that was devoted to prayer and praise of God. And most important Katherine had come to love God. At the age of sixteen, Katherine had taken her vows to become a nun because she thought it was the very best way to serve God. Now she wasn't so sure.

Someone cleared her throat loudly, a sound that echoed in the silent church, and Katherine jerked her head up. She was standing on the stone steps leading up to the choir stalls where all of the nuns had taken their places. The Abbess, standing in the centre, glared at her and Katherine dipped her head in apology and moved quickly to take the last place. Standing beside Sister Ave, Katherine opened her mouth to join in the psalm of praise led by the Abbess. All the troubling thoughts went away while she sang and prayed, worshipping God as fervently as she could. But when they left the church to go to the refectory for supper,

the thoughts returned. Was she really serving God the right way?

After supper the nuns were allowed an hour of recreation, either in the warming room around a comfortable fire or walking in the garden. This was the one time in the day when the women were allowed to speak freely to one another. In spite of the cold spring air Katherine, Ave and Margarete met in the garden as usual. Walking on the pathways between the beds that would sprout herbs and vegetables when the weather warmed, the young women spoke in soft tones to each other.

“I have received a letter from my father,” Margarete told them. “He has refused to receive me back home. He says I should be happy to be dedicated to God and he would be in trouble with the church if he lets me come home.”

Both Katherine and Ave sighed. It was no surprise. Both their families had refused them too.

“What are we going to do now?” Ave asked. “I read part of Dr. Luther’s essay against monastery vows again this afternoon in the library. He’s very clear that there is nothing in the Bible about making vows to serve God in a convent or monastery. In fact he says that the rules of the convent violate the first commandment, because we are putting man-made rules above Christ. Oh, what do we do? Dr. Luther

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says our vows are not binding and we shouldn't stay here."

"I know," Katherine replied. "But we can't just leave. It's not allowed. And besides, we need somewhere to go. It isn't safe or right for a woman to live by herself."

They continued walking, very troubled in their thoughts. They and others in the convent had spent the last year reading Dr. Luther's writings and his German translation of the Bible during their times of private study and devotion. Then during the recreation hour, they would discuss what it all meant and how the church was changing. Dr. Luther said the Pope was just a man, not God's special anointed one on earth. He said that righteousness came by having faith in God alone and that no one could 'pay' God with their deeds or promises. And then he told monks and nuns they should leave their monasteries and nunneries and not follow the man-made rules. But following those rules was just what Katherine had been doing most of her life!

"If Dr. Luther thinks we should give up being nuns, maybe we should ask him how," Katherine said aloud and then stopped walking when she realised Ave and Margarete had stopped too.

"You can't!" Ave said in a shocked tone.

“Why not?” Katherine demanded. “He told us to leave, but not how. Shouldn’t he have to help us since it was his idea in the first place?”

“But he didn’t write those essays just to us. They were for all Germany to read. Why would such a great man bother with us?” Margarete protested.

“Because it’s his duty,” Katherine replied with more certainty than she felt.

Just then the bell sounded to call them to Compline. Obeying the bell all three ceased their conversation and left the garden to go to the church.

As they entered the courtyard between the garden and the cloister, Katherine saw Mr. Koppe’s large wagon pull in through the gate. She immediately had an idea. Leonhard Koppe was a merchant who visited the nunnery regularly, bringing in salted herring and other items that the convent couldn’t provide for itself. As a follower of Luther, he had also brought in some of the pamphlets and a copy of the German Bible they all read now. Katherine wasn’t sure the Abbess knew about these secret deliveries, and since no one had complained the nuns just shelved them in the library making them available to whoever wanted to read them. If Mr. Koppe could bring things into the convent, surely he could take things out. Things such as a letter to Dr. Luther asking for his help.

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A month later Katherine was in the garden once more, reading Dr. Luther's reply to the nun's plea for help. Six other nuns were crowding around, all wanting a chance to read the letter too. Knowing they should all be walking instead of standing about in clusters, Katherine quickly passed the letter to someone else and followed her aunt, Sister Magdalene, down the pathway.

"Will you come too?" Katherine asked her. Her heart pounded with excitement as she thought of the proposed plan of escape.

"Yes," Sister Magdalene replied. "I have become convinced that Dr. Luther is right. I seem to have wasted so many years here," she finished sadly.

"You didn't know the truth then, but now you do. Surely God hears our pleas for forgiveness," Katherine tried to reassure her. "It will be so hard to carry on as usual knowing we are leaving on Easter weekend."

The week passed very slowly for Katherine. In some ways she was very sad to leave a place that had been her home and all the familiar routines of the convent. In other ways she could hardly contain her excitement. She was going to live in the outside world, hopefully marry and have children, something she had taken a vow never to do. She had thought her vow to remain unmarried was what God had



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wanted, but now she knew better. She could serve God by being a good wife and mother.

The Saturday before Easter Katherine and eleven other nuns all followed the usual routines of the convent, except that instead of going to sleep after Compline, they each crept out of their small cells and met in the shadows of the cloister walkway. No one spoke as they waited for Mr. Koppe to signal that the way was clear.

His large wagon stood where it had been since the afternoon, to one side of the courtyard. He had arrived with a delivery and his helpers, but they had taken their time with the unloading. Some of the herring barrels still stood beside the wagon. He and the two young men had been given dinner in the kitchen by the convent servants and were just now emerging into the darkening evening.

Mr. Koppe, an older man with a rounded belly, spoke to his helpers in normal tones, instructing them to start loading the barrels. Then with hand signals, he motioned to the group of nuns to come forward one at a time.

Ave, the youngest, went first. Mr. Koppe pointed to where she was to sit in the large wagon as she climbed in. One of the young men lifted a large wooden barrel with ease and set it into the wagon, still leaving room for Katherine, the next one, to



climb past and slip in beside Ave. And so it went; first a nun and then a barrel was loaded until all were squeezed in tightly, nuns and strongly smelling fish barrels. Lastly, Mr. Koppe threw blankets over the top of them to hide them from view.

Katherine felt the wagon shift as the three men climbed aboard the wagon and heard Mr. Koppe call out to the porter.

“Open the gate, if you please. We are loaded and ready to go.”

Then the wagon lurched forward as the horses began to move. Katherine felt herself being pushed into Ave as the fish barrel beside her shifted. Straightening her back she pushed back at the barrel.

“Sorry,” she whispered, as her friend struggled to keep her balance.

“I think we’ll all be badly bruised at the end of this journey,” Margarete muttered nearby.

Then they were quiet. No one in the town of Grimma, just outside the convent, must know there were people hiding in the wagon. Mr. Koppe and his helpers would be arrested and the nuns returned to the convent to be severely punished. Onward the wagon went, lurching over the rutted roads. The journey lasted all night and each weary hour was punctuated with hills and valleys. Going uphill meant

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they and the barrels all slid downward. Katherine and Ave clung together, trying to stay in place. Going downhill meant the opposite. Then they put their backs against the barrels and pushed to keep the barrels from crushing them against the front of the wagon. At one point they heard voices shouting and running feet. Ave gripped Katherine's arm in fear. Had they been discovered?

Once the sound of voices receded, Mr. Koppe pulled back the blankets letting in some welcome fresh air. The sky overhead was black and obscured in part by tree branches. They must be in a forest.

"Be at peace, ladies," Mr. Koppe said. "Those voices were peasants angry at their lord. They know nothing of your escape and showed no interest in us. We will move as quickly as the horses allow, but we must also be cautious. The duke of this state is an enemy of Dr. Luther so we must not bring attention to ourselves. Once we are close to the town of Torgau, all will be safe. So do your best to stay quiet and pray for our safety."

Then he covered them up with the blankets once more and the wagon began to move. Katherine and Ave gripped hands and silently prayed for God's mercy and safekeeping.

Just as Katherine thought the journey would never end, the wagon stopped and the blankets were



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lifted from overhead. This time along with the sweet smelling air, sunlight tumbled in making them all close their eyes for a moment. Then they heard the bells of the town ringing out the joy of Easter Sunday.

“Christ has risen!” Sister Magdalene called out.

“He has risen indeed,” all the other nuns responded with the customary Easter greeting.

Katherine could have shouted for joy as she slowly stood up letting the blood return to her cramped legs. How fitting they should have arrived on the best day in the Christian calendar, the day to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection from the grave. She too felt like she was starting a new life, one that would be dedicated to God in the way he commanded.

The two young men helped each of the twelve women down from the wagon in the town square. Their white habits were smudged and wrinkled, their black veils askew. They rubbed their arms and stretched their backs to get the kinks out of their cramped muscles. But in spite of all the stiffness, they each wore wide smiles on their faces. People began to gather, wondering how these somewhat dishevelled nuns smelling of fish had arrived in their town.

Mr. Koppe, also smiling, opening his arms wide and said, “Welcome to Torgau, my ladies. We will provide a place for you to tidy up. Tomorrow I will





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take you on to Wittenberg where you will meet Dr. Luther himself.”

“Thank you, Mr. Koppe for your bravery in rescuing us,” Sister Magdalene replied. Then turning to the other nuns, “Now we should go to church,”

“Yes,” Katherine agreed. “We have much to thank God for.”

If you want to read more about Katherine von Bora you will find her in *Ten Girls who made a Difference* by Irene Howat

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