

Frau Luther

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Chapter 1

Poor Little Escaped Nun The Bid for Freedom

“Dr. Martinus Luther!” Katharina von Bora, known to her friends as Kathe (Kay-ta), whispered the name almost reverently. What a wonderful man he had to be! Once an obscure monk, the Wittenberg professor was surely the most famous, or maybe some people would say notorious, man in all Germany, perhaps in all Europe—in all the world. A smile curved the girl’s delicate lips at the thought. She drew in her breath sharply, ecstatically.

The young professor thundered from pulpit and lecture hall against the evils of the church. And that thundering had reached her ears, even though she was locked away in the confines of the convent. His busy quill had written words that were shaking the very throne of Pope Leo in Rome. He had been excommunicated and branded as a heretic. A price had been put on his head, but still he continued to speak out for what he believed to be right.

Kathe sighed at the thought of such courage. Would she be able to face such trials?

The young nun’s nimble fingers took stitch after tiny stitch in the long, narrow altar cloth she was embroidering for the chapel. But her mind wasn’t on her work. How she wished that she could own some of Luther’s writings! His German translation of parts of the Latin Bible could be found in peasants’ hovels as well as in princes’ palaces. More than that, his pamphlets had penetrated the strongholds of monasteries and convents, smuggled in by brave souls who longed for light and peace.

Yes, some of those pamphlets were even in the Cistercian Cloister Marienthron (the Cistercian Convent of Mary’s Throne), and she, Kathe, would have a chance to see one of them that evening. She might even be able to hold it in her own hands. Her heart beat more quickly at the thought. She wondered what her dear Aunt Margareta, the abbess, would say if she knew how her young nuns had “oohed” and “aahed” at the stories that were filtering through to them of the monk who had defied Tetzl, the Pope’s representative.

Kathe folded her work, put it away carefully, then hurried down the long, dark passage to her friend’s room. Soon she and several other

girls were listening eagerly as Veronica read the pamphlet she had received from her brother.

"May I borrow this paper—just for tonight?" Kathe begged when they were ready to return to their cells for their prayer period.

"Oh, I don't know—" Veronica seemed reluctant to let the precious paper out of her sight.

"I'll look after the paper very carefully," Kathe promised.

"Very well. But I want it back before breakfast tomorrow."

"You'll have it; never fear." And with a smile of joy Kathe hurried to her own cell—like room for a period of meditation and prayer before going to bed in the large dormitory.

Though her cheekbones were a bit high for real beauty, Kathe made an arresting picture in the soft candlelight as for an instant she raised her eyes, which were the deep blue of cornflowers in spring. The flickering flame threw weird shadows on the wall, but the nun wasn't interested in shadows. Her thoughts were engrossed with the pamphlet before her. She longed to be free—free from the burden of sin that oppressed her and free to come and go like the happy peasants she watched through the heavy iron gates as they passed the convent night and morning. She looked down at the open page once more. How glad she was she had been permitted to bring those words of life to her own cell for further study.

Kathe gave a start as she heard a knock on her cell door. She grabbed the pamphlet and tucked it in among the folds of her robe. Then she walked to the door and opened it. So engrossed had she been in her reading that she had not heard the swish-swish of the voluminous folds of Sister Magdalene von Bora's white robe as she came down the long, drafty passage.

"Oh, it's you, Aunt Lena," Kathe said with an almost imperceptible sigh of relief.

"Yes, dear child, I was on my way to our sleeping room when I thought I should stop and visit with you for a few minutes."

"Come in and sit close to me," the younger woman invited as she drew her aunt toward the hard, narrow bench against the wall.

For a moment there was silence. "What's the matter with you, Kathe?" asked Sister Magdalene abruptly.

"Nothing, nothing." Kathe shook her head, but her voice didn't sound very convincing.

"There is something wrong. I've been watching you for several days, and I wish I could help you." The older woman spoke kindly as she slipped her arm around the girl's slender shoulders.

"Oh, Aunt Lena," the girl broke down, "I'm so confused. I know I'm a terrible sinner, but I cannot confess my sin to the priest. He wouldn't understand."

"What do you mean?"

"For some time I've felt rebellious toward God. I didn't see why I couldn't have a mother and a home and folks to love me."

"I—I know what you mean, my child." Aunt Lena, the older nun, gave Kathe an understanding hug.

"You do?" Kathe's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Why, I thought you were quite content to live here in the Nimbschen Convent of Marienthron. Father told me that you chose to become a nun, and that your greatest desire is to nurse the sick. That was why he decided to put me here when his new wife didn't want to be bothered with having a ready—made daughter to care for. Father thought that since you are his sister and the abbess is from my mother's family, between the two of you I would be happy."

"But you aren't happy?" The question came softly.

"Oh, Aunt Lena, it is difficult to explain. When Father put me in the convent at Brehna, I was only five years old. I was so lonely. It was very hard for me to understand that because my mamma had died my father didn't know what to do with me. I wanted a mother and father to put me to bed at night, to soothe away my fears, to love me and hold me tight. I wanted my big brothers, who alternately teased and spoiled me. Instead, I had only the nuns, and they did not have extra time to spend with me, for there were many other little girls who needed their attention."

The older nun listened in silence, looking straight ahead.

"Maybe you know how things went when they took me home for a while after Father remarried," Kathe continued. "I suppose I irritated his new wife, for I admit I was headstrong. Anyway, she suggested that I enter the convent and prepare to become a nun. I liked the idea at first, for I thought their white robes and black veils made them look dignified and mysterious, and, besides, I wasn't happy at home. But now that I wear a white robe and black veil, now that I've taken the vows and become a nun, it's a different story."

"What do you mean?"

“Well—er—I can’t seem to feel quite the same way about it all as I did.”

“Have you been reading the writings of the monk of Wittenberg, Martin Luther?” Aunt Lena asked as she glanced keenly at the young girl. Kathe averted her face. She felt as if her aunt could see that pamphlet right through the thick folds of cloth. She hesitated, for she didn’t want to lie, yet she was afraid to answer the question.

“Yes, I see you have. And that is what has fanned your growing discontent,” Sister Magdalene said.

Kathe was silent for a moment longer. Then she looked up bravely. “You’re right. Several of us girls have studied a pamphlet he wrote, and, Aunt Lena, I can’t be a hypocrite and go to confession when I know that the priest cannot forgive my sins. I must confess to God, for only He can help me. More than that, I don’t believe there is any virtue in all those relics we are required to kiss. Besides, Dr. Luther says it’s a sin to live in a cloister; so I want to get away. In fact, several of the other nuns want to get away as well,” she ended almost defiantly.

“Well, why don’t you write to your brother Hans and ask him to take you out of the convent. Since your father is dead, your oldest brother could insist that you come home to help him. I’ve heard that he looks with favor on the teachings of Dr. Luther. Of course, I don’t really know for certain—we don’t get much news here.”

To the girl’s amazement Sister Magdalene hadn’t been at all shocked by her niece’s confession. Kathe had expected her to be horrified by such heretical sentiments.

The older woman added: “As a matter of fact, I’ve advised several of the other girls to do the same thing. But you had better not say too much about this, for I assure you the abbess would not be pleased by such an action.”

Impulsively Kathe gave her aunt a quick hug. “You’re a dear. I’ll do just that. Surely Hans will understand and help me.”

Kathe and her friends wrote the letters to their families and waited impatiently for the convent to be opened and allow them to walk out into the free world. At last came the replies.

“We are sorry to hear that you are not happy in the convent. We wish we could help you, but you must realize that you have lived such a sheltered life that you would not be able to face the wickedness in the world. You would have no way of making a living; so we feel it is really much better for you to stay right where you are. Be content. Count your beads, say your Ave Maria’s, and pray for the souls of your family.

You will be far happier doing this than trying to live out here in the cruel world.”

This was the gist of all the letters. Not one of them offered any hope that the girls would be welcomed back at their homes. They were all keenly disappointed. They talked it over in hushed tones whenever they got together, but probably they would have settled down to making the best of it had not one of the novices overheard two of them talking about their thwarted plans. Kathe realized what would happen. The novice would probably gain extra merits for herself if she reported the conversation to the abbess.

Soon the mother superior called the girls together. Only a short while before, she had boasted to the bishop that her convent was completely safe against heresy. While she was saying those very words her nuns were trying to repudiate their vows and go back into the world! This situation demanded attention—and immediate action. The abbess was horrified. She lectured the nuns on the wickedness of their deed, and meted out the penance they would have to do before they could be absolved from their “sin.”

As Kathe and the other culprits crawled on their knees across the cold, hard stone floor to the uncomfortable backless benches where they had to sit humiliated and with downcast eyes during the service that followed, Kathe’s thoughts were anything but contrite.

“I’m not sorry I wrote that letter. I’ll never feel that it is right for me to live in the convent. I don’t believe the church has power over a person’s soul,” Kathe told herself.

During the days that followed, the girl’s eyes grew more somber. As the pangs of hunger knotted her stomach, her thoughts were continually of food. The thin gruel she was allowed didn’t satisfy her, and she grew pale and thin. She longed ever more earnestly to be free of the restrictions of the convent, to be free to eat as much as she wished, no matter what sin she committed!

“You still want to be free, don’t you, Kathe?” asked Aunt Lena when she dropped in at the girl’s room as she was passing down the hall one evening.

“Yes, I do, more than ever. Oh, how I wish I could eat a whole loaf of good black bread all at one time,” she said hungrily.

“Well, the heretic monk says God didn’t intend women to live in convents; so I’m going to write to him to help us get away from here.”

"You are?" The girl's eyes lighted up; then she shook her head sadly, "Oh, Aunt Lena! A great man like Dr. Martin Luther couldn't be bothered about some insignificant nuns in the Nimbschen Convent!"

"Maybe not. And then again—maybe he could. We can at least ask the good God to put it in the doctor's heart to help us," the older woman replied.

Then it dawned on Kathe that Aunt Lena was including herself in the plans. "You said us. Do you want to leave the convent too? That would be wonderful! But how are you going to send the letter to Dr. Luther? If you address it to him, the abbess will be furious. She'll never let the letter leave the convent. If she gave us such a hard penance for writing to our families about leaving the convent, what would she do to you for writing to the one she calls a heretic?" Kathe shivered in nervous anticipation.

"Just don't say a word to anyone. Don't discuss it, even with those who are interested. We don't want this plan to be spoiled. Now, good night. Be sure to pray about this. May God bless our efforts." Aunt Lena slipped out of the room.

Kathe pressed her hands together and caught her breath. She stood by the high, narrow window and looked up at the stars. "Father God, maybe life is going to be beautiful after all. Please look after Aunt Lena's letter and take it safely to Dr. Luther. And please let him help us, but only if it is Thy will. In the name of our loving Jesus. Amen." A tear rolled unheeded down the girl's thin cheek.

The next morning at breakfast Kathe turned to her companion. "Aunt Lena, did—?" Kathe asked under her breath.

"Wouldn't you like to come for a walk in the garden with me so that we can tell our beads together?" Aunt Lena suggested with an almost imperceptible shake of her head to discourage more questioning. She walked resolutely from the room without a backward glance but motioning with her hand.

The two nuns walked quietly to the garden as they fingered their beads, each of which was supposed to represent a prayer.

"I know what you want to ask. Yes, I did, and early this morning I gave it to the gardener. I have upon occasion been able to help him and his family in time of sickness; so he is always willing to do an errand for me. Now it is left for us to pray that the good Father will provide us with the means." The two continued fingering their beads. Instead of saying the prayers prescribed for each bead, however, Kathe lifted her

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heart in supplication to heaven. At one time telling her beads had been an unconscious routine. Now she was really praying.

Every day Kathe and Aunt Lena looked for the answer to that precious letter. Would the great Dr. Luther have time to worry about twelve insignificant nuns? They hardly dared hope lest they be disappointed once more.