

THE BOOK OF
MARGERY KEMPE

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Translated by B. A. Windeatt

PENGUIN BOOKS

Chapter 5

She lay beside her husband, and to have intercourse with him was so abominable to her that she could not bear it, and yet it was permissible for her and at a rightful time if she had wished it. But all the time she was tormented to sin with the other man because he had spoken to her. At last – through the importunings of temptation and a lack of discretion – she was overcome and consented in her mind, and went to the man to know if he would then consent to have her. And he said he would not for all the wealth in this world; he would rather be chopped up as small as meat for the pot.

She went away all ashamed and confused in herself, seeing his steadfastness and her own instability. Then she thought about the grace that God had given her before, of how she had two years of great quiet in her soul, of repentance for her sins with many bitter tears of compunction, and a perfect will never again to turn to sin but rather, she thought, to be dead. And now she saw how she had consented in her will to sin. Then she half fell into despair. She thought herself in hell, such was the sorrow that she had. She thought she was worthy of no mercy because her consenting to sin was so wilfully done, nor ever worthy to serve God, because she was so false to him.

Nevertheless she was shriven many times and often, and did whatever penance her confessor would enjoin her to do, and was governed according to the rules of the Church. That grace God gave this creature – blessed may he be – but he did not withdraw her temptation, but rather increased it, as she thought.

And therefore she thought that he had forsaken her, and dared not trust to his mercy, but was troubled with horrible temptations to lechery and despair nearly all the following year, except that our Lord in his mercy, as she said to herself, gave her every day for the most part two hours of compunction for her sins, with many bitter tears. And afterwards she was troubled with temptations to despair as she was before, and was as far from feelings of grace as those who never felt any. And that she could not bear, and so she continued to despair. Except for the time that she felt grace, her trials were so amazing that she could not cope very well with them, but always mourned and sorrowed as though God had forsaken her.

Then on a Friday before Christmas Day,¹ as this creature was kneeling in a chapel of St John, within a church of St Margaret in N., weeping a very great deal and asking mercy and forgiveness for her sins and her trespasses, our merciful Lord Christ Jesus – blessed may he be – ravished her spirit and said to her, 'Daughter, why are you weeping so sorely? I have come to you, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross suffering bitter pains and passion for you. I, the same God, forgive you your sins to the uttermost point.'² And you shall never come into hell nor into purgatory, but when you pass out of this world, within the twinkling of an eye, you shall have the bliss of heaven, for I am the same God who has brought your sins to your mind and caused you to be shriven of them. And I grant you contrition until your life's end.

'Therefore, I command you, boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love and shall be your love without end.' And, daughter, you have a hair-shirt on your back. I want you to leave off wearing it, and I shall give you a hair-shirt in your heart which shall please me much more than all the hair-shirts in the world. But also, my beloved daughter, you must give up that which you love best in this world, and that is the eating of meat. And instead of meat you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar. This is my will, daughter, that you receive my body every Sunday,³ and I shall cause so much grace to flow into you that everyone shall marvel at it.

'You shall be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world just as any rat gnaws the stockfish.'⁴ Don't be afraid, daughter, for you shall be victorious over all your enemies. I shall give you grace enough to answer every cleric in the love of God. I swear to you by my majesty that I shall never forsake you whether in happiness or in sorrow. I shall help you and protect you, so that no devil in hell shall ever part you from me, nor angel in heaven, nor man on earth – for devils in hell may not, nor angels in heaven will not, nor man on earth shall not.

'And daughter, I want you to give up your praying of many beads, and think such thoughts as I shall put into your mind. I shall give you leave to pray until six o'clock to say what you wish. Then you shall lie still and speak to me in thought, and I shall give you high meditation and true contemplation. And I command you to go to the anchorite at the Preaching Friars⁶ and tell him my confidences and counsels which I reveal to you, and do as he advises, for my spirit shall speak in him to you.'

Then this creature went off to see the anchorite as she was commanded, and revealed to him the revelations that had been shown to her. Then the anchorite, with great reverence and weeping, thanking God, said, 'Daughter, you are sucking even at Christ's breast,⁷ and you have received a pledge of paradise. I charge you to receive such thoughts – when God will give them – as meekly and devoutly as you can, and then come and tell me what they are, and I shall, by the leave of our Lord Jesus Christ, tell you whether they are from the Holy Ghost or else from your enemy the devil.'

Chapter 6

Another day, this creature gave herself up to meditation as she had been commanded before, and she lay still, not knowing what she might best think of. Then she said to our Lord Jesus Christ, 'Jesus, what shall I think about?'

Our Lord Jesus answered in her mind, 'Daughter, think of my mother, for she is the cause of all the grace that you have.'

And then at once she saw St Anne, great with child, and then she prayed St Anne to let her be her maid and her servant. And presently our Lady was born, and then she busied herself to take the child to herself and look after her until she was twelve years of age, with good food and drink, with fair white clothing and

white kerchiefs. And then she said to the blessed child, 'My lady, you shall be the mother of God.'

The blessed child answered and said, 'I wish I were worthy to be the handmaiden of her that should conceive the son of God.'

The creature said, 'I pray you, my lady, if that grace befall you, do not discontinue with my service.'

The blessed child went away for a certain time – the creature remaining still in contemplation – and afterwards came back again and said, 'Daughter, now I have become the mother of God.'

And then the creature fell down on her knees with great reverence and great weeping and said, 'I am not worthy, my lady, to do you service.'

'Yes, daughter,' she said, 'follow me – I am well pleased with your service.'

Then she went forth with our Lady and with Joseph, bearing with her a flask of wine sweetened with honey and spices. Then they went forth to Elizabeth, St John the Baptist's mother, and when they met together Mary and Elizabeth revered each other, and so they dwelled together with great grace and gladness for twelve weeks. And then St John was born, and our Lady took him up from the ground with all reverence and gave him to his mother, saying of him that he would be a holy man, and blessed him.

Afterwards they took leave of each other with compassionate tears. And then the creature fell down on her knees to St Elizabeth, and begged her that she would pray for her to our Lady so that she might still serve and please her.

'Daughter,' said Elizabeth, 'it seems to me that you do your duty very well.'

And then the creature went forth with our Lady to Bethlehem and procured lodgings for her every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received with good cheer. She also begged for our Lady pieces of fair white cloth and kerchiefs to swaddle her son in when he was born; and when Jesus was born she arranged bedding for our Lady to lie on with her blessed son. And later she begged food for our Lady and her blessed child. Afterwards she

soon the storm ceased, and the weather was fair - worshipped be our Lord. Those pilgrims were glad that they were released, and dared not stay in Leicester any longer, but went ten miles away and stayed there, so that they could get information as to what would be done with the said creature. For when they were both put in prison, they had told her themselves that they supposed that, if the Mayor could have his way, he would have her burnt.

Chapter 48

On a Wednesday, the said creature was brought into a church of All Saints in Leicester,¹ in which place, before the high altar, were seated the Abbot of Leicester² with some of his canons, and the Dean of Leicester,³ a worthy cleric. There were also many friars and priests; also the Mayor of the same town with many other lay people. There were so many people that they stood upon stools to look at her and marvel at her.

The said creature knelt down, saying her prayers to Almighty God that she might have grace, wit and wisdom, so to answer that day as might be most pleasure and honour to him, most profit to her soul, and best example to the people.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Then a priest came to her and took her by the hand, and brought her before the Abbot and his assessors sitting at the altar, who made her swear on a book that she should answer truly to the Articles of the Faith, just as she felt about them. And first they repeated the blessed sacrament of the altar, charging her to say exactly what she believed about it.⁴

Then she said, 'Sirs, I believe in the sacrament of the altar in this way: that whatever man has taken the order of priesthood, be he never so wicked a man in his manner of life, if he duly say those words over the bread that our Lord Jesus Christ said when he celebrated the Last Supper sitting among his disciples, I believe

that it is his very flesh and his blood, and no material bread; nor may it ever be unsaid, be it once said.'

And so she went on answering on all the articles, as many as they wished to ask her, so that they were well pleased.

The Mayor, who was her deadly enemy said, 'Truly, she does not mean with her heart what she says with her mouth.'

And the clerics said to him, 'Sir, she answers us very well.'

Then the Mayor severely rebuked her and repeated many reproving and indecent words, which it is more fitting to conceal than express.

'Sir,' she said, 'I take witness of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose body is here present in the sacrament of the altar, that I never had part of any man's body in this world in actual deed by way of sin, except my husband's body, to whom I am bound by the law of matrimony, and by whom I have borne fourteen children. For I would have you know, sir, that there is no man in this world that I love so much as God, for I love him above all things, and, sir, I tell you truly, I love all men in God and for God.'

Also, furthermore, she said plainly to his face, 'Sir, you are not worthy to be a mayor, and that shall I prove by Holy Writ, for our Lord God said himself before he would take vengeance on the cities, "I shall come down and see,"⁵ and yet he knew all things. And that was for nothing else, sir, but to show men such as you are that you should not carry out punishments unless you have prior knowledge that they are appropriate. And, sir, you have done quite the contrary to me today, for, sir, you have caused me much shame for something I am not guilty of. I pray God forgive you it.'

Then the Mayor said to her, 'I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you.'⁶

'Sir,' she said, 'you shall not know from my mouth why I go about in white clothes; you are not worthy to know it. But, sir, I will gladly tell it to these worthy clerks by way of confession. Let them consider whether they will tell it to you.'

Then the clerks asked the Mayor to go down from among them

Chapter 49

with the other people. And when they had gone, she knelt on her knees before the Abbot, and the Dean of Leicester, and a Preaching Friar, a worthy cleric, and told these three clerics how our Lord by revelation warned her and bade her wear white clothes before she went to Jerusalem.

'And so I have told my confessors. And therefore they have charged me that I should go about like this, for they dare not go against my feelings for fear of God; and if they dared, they would do so very gladly. And therefore, sirs, if the Mayor wants to know why I go about in white, you may say, if you please, that my confessors order me to do so; and then you will tell no lies, yet he will not know the truth.'

So the clerics called the Mayor up again, and told him in confidence that her confessors had charged her to wear white clothes, and she had bound herself in obedience to them.

Then the Mayor called her to him, saying, 'I will not let you go from here in spite of anything you can say, unless you go to my Lord Bishop of Lincoln for a letter, inasmuch as you are in his jurisdiction, so that I may be discharged of responsibility for you.'

She said, 'Sir, I certainly dare speak to my Lord of Lincoln, for I have been very kindly received by him before now.'

And then other men asked her if she were in charity with the Mayor, and she said, 'Yes, and with all whom God has created.' And then she, bowing to the Mayor and weeping tears, prayed him to be in charity with her, and forgive her anything in which she had displeased him. And he spoke fine words to her for a while, so that she believed all was well, and that he was her good friend, but afterwards she well knew it was not so.

And thus she had leave from the Mayor to go to my Lord Bishop of Lincoln, and fetch a letter by which the Mayor should be excused responsibility.

So she went first to Leicester Abbey¹ and into the church, and as soon as the Abbot had espied her he, out of his goodness, with many of his brethren, came to welcome her.

When she saw them coming, at once in her soul she beheld our Lord coming with his apostles, and she was so ravished into contemplation with sweetness and devotion, that she could not stand until they came, as courtesy demanded, but leaned against a pillar in the church and held on to it tightly for fear of falling, for she would have stood and she could not, because of the abundance of devotion which was the reason that she cried and wept very bitterly.

When she had overcome her crying, the Abbot asked his brethren to take her in with them and comfort her, and so they gave her very good wine and were extremely nice to her.

Then she got herself a letter from the Abbot to my Lord of Lincoln, putting on record what controversy she had been in during the time that she was in Leicester. And the Dean of Leicester was also ready to provide a record and act as witness for her, for he had great confidence that our Lord loved her, and therefore he comforted her very highly in his own place.

And so she took leave of her said son [Thomas Marchale], intending to travel to Lincoln with a man called Patrick, who had been with her to Santiago previously. And at this time he was sent by the said Thomas Marchale, from Melton Mowbray to Leicester, to inquire and see how things stood with the same creature. For the said Thomas Marchale was very afraid that she would have been burnt, and therefore he sent this man Patrick to find out the truth.

And so she and Patrick, together with many good folk of Leicester who had come to encourage her, thanking God who had preserved her and given her victory over her enemies, went out to the edge of the town, and there they gave her a good send-off, promising her that, if she ever came back, she would receive a much better welcome amongst them than she had before.

And then she thought that they followed on after our Lord, and saw how he made his prayers to his father on the Mount of Olivet, and heard the beautiful answer that came from his father, and the beautiful answer that he gave his father.

Then she saw how our Lord went to his disciples and ordered them to wake up – his enemies were near. And then came a great multitude of people with many lights, and many of them armed with staves, swords and pole-axes, to seek out our Lord Jesus Christ – our merciful Lord, meek as a lamb, saying to them, 'Whom do you seek?'

They answered in rough mood, 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

Our Lord replied, '*Ego sum.*'

And then she saw the Jews fall down to the ground – they could not stand for fear – but immediately they got up again, and searched as they had done before. And our Lord asked, 'Whom do you seek?'

And they said again, 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

Our Lord answered, 'I am he.'

And then she immediately saw Judas come and kiss our Lord, and the Jews laid hands upon him most violently. Then our Lady and she had much sorrow and great pain to see the Lamb of Innocence so contemptuously handled and dragged about by his own people, to whom he was especially sent. And very soon the said creature beheld with her spiritual eye the Jews putting a cloth before our Lord's eyes, beating him and buffeting him on the head, and striking him on his sweet mouth, shouting very cruelly at him, 'Tell us now, who hit you?'

They did not spare to spit in his face in the most shameful way that they could. And then our Lady and she, her unworthy handmaid for the time, wept and sighed keenly because the Jews so foully and so venomously treated her blissful Lord. And they would not spare to lug his blessed ears, and pull the hair of his beard.

And soon after, she saw them pull off his clothes and strip him all naked, and then drag him before them as if he had been the greatest malefactor in the world. And he went on very meekly

before them, as naked as he was born, towards a pillar of stone, and spoke no word back to them, but let them do and say what they wished. And there they bound him to the pillar as tightly as they could, and beat him on his fair white body with rods, with whips, and with scourges.

And then she thought our Lady wept wonderfully sorely, and therefore the said creature had to weep and cry, when she saw such spiritual sights in her soul as freshly and veritably as if they had been done in her bodily sight, and she thought that our Lady and she were always together to see our Lord's pains. Such spiritual sights she had every Palm Sunday and every Good Friday, and in many other ways as well, many years together. And therefore she cried and wept very bitterly, and suffered much contempt and rebuke in many places.

And then our Lord said to her soul, 'Daughter, these sorrows, and many more, I suffered for your love, and divers pains, more than any man on earth can tell. Therefore, daughter, you have great cause to love me very well, for I have bought your love most dearly.'

Chapter 80

Another time she saw in her contemplation our Lord Jesus Christ bound to a pillar, and his hands were bound above his head.¹ And then she saw sixteen men with sixteen scourges, and each scourge had eight tips of lead on the end, and each tip was full of sharp prickles, as if it had been the rowel of a spur. And those men with the scourges made a covenant that each of them should give our Lord forty strokes.²

When she saw this piteous sight, she wept and cried very loudly, as if she would have burst for sorrow and pain. And when our Lord was severely beaten and scourged, the Jews loosed him from

the pillar, and gave him his cross to bear on his shoulder. And then she thought that our Lady and she went by another way to meet with him, and when they met with him, they saw him carrying the heavy cross with great pain, it was so heavy and so huge that he could scarcely bear it.³

And then our Lady said to him, 'Ah, my sweet son, let me help to carry that heavy cross.'⁴

And she was so weak that she could not, but fell down and swooned, and lay as still as if she had been a dead woman. Then the creature saw our Lord fall down by his mother, and comfort her as he could with many sweet words. When she heard the words and saw the compassion that the mother had for the son, and the son for the mother, then she wept, sobbed and cried as though she would have died, for the pity and compassion that she had for that piteous sight, and the holy thoughts that she had in the meantime, which were so subtle and heavenly that she could never describe them afterwards, as she had them in feeling.

Later she went forth in contemplation, through the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to the place where he was nailed to the cross. And then she saw the Jews with great violence tear off of our Lord's precious body a cloth of silk, which had stuck and hardened so firmly and tightly to our Lord's body with his precious blood, that it pulled away with it all the skin from his blessed body and renewed his precious wounds, and made the blood to run down all around on every side. Then that precious body appeared to her sight as raw as something that was newly flayed out of its skin, most pitiful to behold. And so she had a new sorrow, so that she wept and cried very bitterly.

And soon after, she beheld how the cruel Jews laid his precious body on the cross, and then took a long nail, all rough and coarse, and set it on one hand, and with great violence and cruelty they drove it through his hand. His blessed mother beholding - and this creature - how his precious body shrank and drew together with all the sinews and veins in that precious body for the pain that it suffered and felt, they sorrowed and mourned and sighed very grievously.

Then she saw, with her spiritual eye, how the Jews fastened ropes on to the other hand - for the sinews and veins were so shrunken with pain that it would not reach to the hole that they had drilled for it⁵ - and they pulled on it to make it reach the hole. And so her pain and her sorrow ever increased. And later they pulled his blessed feet in the same way.

And then she thought, in her soul, she heard our Lady say to the Jews, 'Alas, you cruel Jews, why do you treat my sweet son like this, and he never did you any harm? You fill my heart full of sorrow.'

And then she thought the Jews spoke back roughly to our Lady, and moved her away from her son.

Then the said creature thought that she cried out at the Jews, and said, 'You accursed Jews, why are you killing my Lord Jesus Christ? Kill me instead, and let him go.'

And then she wept and cried surpassingly bitterly, so that many people in the church were astonished. She straightaway saw them take up the cross with our Lord's body hanging on it, and make a great noise and cry; and they lifted it up from the earth a certain distance, and then let the cross fall down into the mortise.⁶ And then our Lord's body shook and shuddered, and all the joints of that blissful body burst and broke apart, and his precious wounds ran down with rivers of blood on every side, and so she had ever more reason for more weeping and sorrowing.

And then she heard our Lord, hanging on the cross, say these words to his mother, 'Woman, see your son, St John the Evangelist.'

Then she thought our Lady fell down and swooned, and St John took her up in his arms and comforted her with sweet words, as well as he could. This creature then said to our Lord, as it seemed to her, 'Alas, Lord, you are leaving here a mother full of care. What shall we do now, and how shall we bear this great sorrow that we shall have for your love?'

And then she heard the two thieves speaking to our Lord, and our Lord said to the one thief, 'This day you shall be with me in paradise.'

Then she was glad of that answer, and prayed our Lord, for his mercy, that he would be as gracious to her soul when she should pass out of this world as he was to the thief – for she was worse, she thought, than any thief.

And then she thought our Lord commended his spirit into his father's hands, and with that he died. Then she thought she saw our Lady swoon and fall down and lie still, as if she had been dead. Then this creature thought that she ran all round the place like a mad woman, crying and roaring. And later she came to our Lady, and fell down on her knees before her, saying to her, 'I pray you, Lady, cease from your sorrowing, for your son is dead and out of pain, and I think you have sorrowed enough. And Lady, I will sorrow for you, for your sorrow is my sorrow.'

Then she thought she saw Joseph of Arimathea take down our Lord's body from the cross, and lay it before our Lady on a marble stone.⁷ Our Lady had a kind of joy when her dear son was taken down from the cross and laid on the stone before her. And then our blessed Lady bowed down to her son's body and kissed his mouth, and wept so plentifully over his blessed face, that she washed away the blood from his face with the tears of her eyes.

And then this creature thought she heard Mary Magdalene say to our Lady, 'I pray you, Lady, give me leave to handle and kiss his feet, for at these I get grace.'

At once our Lady gave leave to her and all those who were there, to offer what worship and reverence they wished to that precious body. And Mary Magdalene soon took our Lord's feet, and our Lady's sisters took his hands, the one sister one hand and the other sister the other hand, and wept very bitterly in kissing those hands and those precious feet. And the said creature thought that she continually ran to and fro, as if she were a woman without reason, greatly desiring to have had the precious body by herself alone, so that she might have wept enough in the presence of that precious body, for she thought she would have died with weeping and mourning for his death, for love that she had for him.

And at once she saw St John the Evangelist, Joseph of

Arimathea, and other friends of our Lord, come and want to bury our Lord's body, and they asked our Lady that she would allow them to bury that precious body. Our sorrowful Lady said to them, 'Sirs, would you take away from me my son's body? I might never look upon him enough while he lived. I pray you, let me have him now he is dead, and do not part my son and me from each other. And if you will bury him in any case, I pray you, bury me with him, for I may not live without him.'

And then this creature thought that they asked our Lady so beautifully, until at last our Lady let them bury her dear son with great worship and great reverence, as was fitting for them to do.

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When our Lord was buried, our Lady fell down in a swoon as she would have come from the grave, and St John took her up in his arms, and Mary Magdalene went on the other side, to support and comfort our Lady as much as they could. Then the said creature, desiring to remain still by the grave of our Lord, mourned, wept, and sorrowed with loud crying for the tenderness and compassion that she had of our Lord's death, and the many mournful desires that God put into her mind at that time. Because of this, people wondered at her, marvelling at what was the matter with her, for they little knew the cause. She thought she would never have departed from there, but desired to have died there and been buried with our Lord. Later the creature thought she saw our Lady going homewards again, and, as she went, many good women came to her and said, 'Lady, we are very sorry that your son is dead, and that our people have done him so much shame.'

And then our Lady, bowing down her head, thanked them very meekly by her looks and expression, for she could not speak, her heart was so full of grief.