

EVA VON GROSS  
BY  
EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

She lay face downwards upon her pallet bed, in the dim, narrow cell that she had been striving to regard as a home of sanctity and peace. She had torn from her head the stiff, white covering that it had worn for hard upon a year now, and which now seemed ready to stifle her. The long heavy robe of the nun which she wore fell about her in a mass of gloomy drapery. Everything was gloomy here. The narrow walls seemed to hem her in; the loophole window to admit an insufficiency both of air and light. It was all like the narrow, narrow, pent-up life of the cloister to which she had been doomed, and which had by this time become as a very dungeon to her.

"How can I bear it? How can I bear it?" she moaned; "I am so young, so very young. I have not taken the full vows yet. Oh, why would they not let me forth? Why may I not be free? I cannot bear the thought of the long, long years that lie before me—fifty—sixty, perhaps; who can say? The Reverend Mother is over seventy; and one sister lived to be nigh upon ninety. Oh, how did she bear it? How did she bear it?"

The young head sank down upon the hard pillow; a moaning came from the lips that should have been smiling and happy with the dawn of tender womanhood. But on that fair young face there was a look as of fixed despair.

Clasped in her hand was a letter, which seemed the immediate cause of her grief, as in a sense it was; for it was the stern reply sent to her by her parents in response to her passionate appeal to be taken away from the convent, and permitted to live the life of happy girlhood in her father's house, where, as she strove to point out, her place had been set.

"It is some subtle device of the enemy that is tempting thee away from the higher life," her father had written; "thy choice was made. It would be sacrilege that would imperil thy soul's salvation to seek to retrace thy steps."

"I did not choose! I did not choose!" cried Eva, as if in passionate remonstrance with the unseen father; "I was weak from sickness; thou and the priest did persuade me. It all sounded so peaceful, so beautiful, so holy. But I have tried it; and it is not peace, it is not joy. The Church is composed of all holy men and women, and we who are baptised into it become its members, knit into its life. I ask no more. Are these nuns better than other women? No—I say NO! I have watched. I have listened. I have felt. It is not a holy life; it is no holier than what we see led by the saints in the world outside cloister walls. There are saintly nuns, I deny it not; as there are saintly wives and mothers, and saintly maidens and virgins without the cloister wall. It is not the dress, the vow, the life, that makes the saint. It is something far, far higher. And the Spirit divides His gifts as He will. He is not bound by gates and bars and high imprisoning walls!"

Again the passionate sobs broke forth; and there was a sound as of anger and fierce resolve in that weeping, rather than of mere helpless despair. Eva suddenly sat up, a bright light shining in her eyes, her mouth taking an expression of almost grim determination.

"They cannot force me to ratify my vows at the close of my novitiate! What would happen if I refused? What are the tales that are whispered within these walls of nuns who have been found unfaithful—as they are pleased to term it?"

The girl was silent. There was a tense look upon her face. She was pondering deeply. In her dark eyes there showed from time to time a gleam as of fire. It was plain that within the spirit of this novice of the convent there dwelt a daring and a courage that is not vouchsafed to all.

And whence had come to Eva and to some other of her sister nuns this sudden disgust of convent life?—this sudden conviction that it was not in accordance with the dictates of

nature, nor with the scheme of salvation as set down in Holy Writ? How came that convent-bred girl to have glimmerings of a higher calling as a member of the Church, than as just a so-called cloister bride, brought, as it was then believed, in some way nearer perfection by having abandoned the place in the world in which she had been set.

That question is easily answered. Not very long before there had broken from the bonds of monastic life a young monk, Martin Luther by name, who had since then been taking the world by storm, preaching and teaching doctrines of liberty and enlightenment which had made the ears of his listeners tingle. This bold young teacher was related to some friends of two sisters, nuns in the Convent at Nimptsch, where Eva was undergoing her training, and in some way or other many of his writings had been introduced and circulated within the convent walls, with the effect that nine of its inmates, including the young Eva, had become so keenly dissatisfied with the life of seclusion to which they were vowed, that they were making every effort in their power to gain permission to rejoin their own families, and to be taken home by their parents.

But however much men's minds might be working with a sense of impending change—a suspicion that the things in which they had hitherto put their trust were about to fail them, and crumble into dust;—in spite of all the upheaval that was beginning in the Church and in the world, men's minds were not yet prepared for the revolt of nuns from their cloistered homes. The breaking of the solemn vows they had taken still seemed a thing impossible to condone or to permit. Not one of the fathers appealed to had consented to the earnest petition addressed to him. Not one had admitted the arguments by which the cloistered captives had sought to win upon the hearts of those in authority over them. Eva's heart had sunk within her these past days, as the stern replies came back; but she had ever buoyed herself up with the hope that in her case mercy would be shown. She was so young. Her full vows had not been taken. She had pleaded so earnestly. It seemed impossible that her father should not be moved to compassion. And yet his answer was now in her hands, and it was a stern, uncompromising refusal to consider her petition for a moment.

"It was just a temptation of the devil," he concluded.

A step was heard in the corridor without, and Eva quickly resumed her discarded headgear. Order and discipline were strong elements in her present life. What would the Reverend Mother or one of the senior sisters think, if they found her in such dishevelment? But the door had barely opened before she uttered a little cry of joyous relief.

"Oh, Katharine! is it indeed thou?"

It was one of the marks of those who longed to renounce the convent rule, that they had discarded, amongst themselves, their convent names. Katharine von Bora[A] was known as Sister Therese, as Eva was known as Sister Angela to their sister—nuns; but with the longing after home ties had come the longing after home titles. It gave Eva a thrill of joy each time she heard her once familiar name pass the lips of those about her.

[A] Afterwards the wife of Martin Luther.

"My little one, I saw by thy face in the chapel just now, that thou art in trouble. Is it that thou hast had thine answer too?"

Eva held out the crumpled sheet, and the elder nun's eyes quickly ran over the written words. She sighed as she read.

"It is no more than I feared; although so much less than I hoped. The walls and bars of the convent are strong indeed."

"Katharine—ah, sweet Katharine!—do not tell me that thou hast yielded up hope! I would dare so much! I would do so much! If a monk has escaped—like that brave Martin Luther—and nought is done to him, why may not we?"

The elder woman looked searchingly into the eager, quivering face, and caught the light of courage and purpose in the soft, dark eyes. Her own kindled beneath the glance.

"Little one, art thou brave enough, and discreet enough to be entrusted with a secret?" asked Katharine, "or wouldst thou rather remain in ignorance until the final moment? There is safety sometimes in ignorance; and thou art little more than a child."

The colour was coming and going in Eva's face; the look of purpose in her eyes deepened each moment.

"Tell me," she whispered, her eyes beginning to shine, "is it that there is hope for us? Can it be that help can reach us, even within these grim, strong walls?"

Katharine glanced round her to be certain that the door of the cell was fast shut. She even moved to it, and looked down the bare corridor, as if to assure herself that there was no spy within hearing. Who could tell, in such a community as that, whether it would not seem the bounden duty of any passing nun to play the eavesdropper, should she harbour for a moment a suspicion that all was not well with her fellow sisters? Who could tell whether or not the Reverend Mother had got wind of the discontent of some of her nuns? Probably she knew somewhat about it, since the appeal of certain of their number to their friends had been made. Might she not have set traps and devices in order to discover whether or not the answers they had received would be sufficient to quiet their discontent, and induce them to settle contentedly in their cloistered home? Would she not be intensely alert to discover if any other phase of revolt were passing in the minds of the imprisoned nuns?

"Thou art brave enough to know the truth and not to betray it?"

"I will die sooner!" cried Eva. "Ah, sweet Katharine, tell me! Is there indeed some hope for us?"

"I trust so. I believe so. We have done what we can. We have made appeal to Martin Luther himself!"

Eva's hands were clasped closely together. Her breath came and went in an ecstasy of excitement and hopeful expectation. The elder woman spoke on in a carefully lowered voice.

"It hath been done through Margaret and Katharine von Zeschau. Thou knowest that their relatives are friends of this Luther's, and that although their parents are still beneath the thrall of the old beliefs, others of their house are beginning to break through the toils. They have the letter, and will place it safely in the hands for whom it is meant. Word came through a safe channel to-day, that we might be assured of this; Martin Luther will never turn a deaf ear to such an appeal. He will rest not until he has answered us, and won for us our liberty!"

A look of ecstasy transfigured Eva's face. She threw her arms about Katharine's neck; her voice quivered as she cried:

"Oh, Katharine!—to be free—to be free! To drink in the pure air of heaven! To see one's life opening before one amid the sweet surroundings of home! To have brothers, sisters, a father and mother once more! But——" and here she paused, and a look of anxiety crossed her face. "But what if our parents refuse to receive us when we are free?"

Katharine's calm face expressed full comprehension. She drew Eva towards her, and they sat close together on the narrow pallet bed. The elder nun supported the quivering frame of her girl companion, as she sought to make her understand the situation.

"There are many things to think of, little one," she said; "and thou must not embark upon such an enterprise not knowing all its risks. First there is the peril to ourselves should this thing get wind before we are safe without the walls."

Eva shivered a little, and clung more closely to Katharine.

"What would they do to us?" she asked in a whisper.

"Nay, I know not. There are many frightful tales of the punishment inflicted upon nuns who have been 'unfaithful to their vows,'" answered Katharine steadily; "thou dost know the bricked-up niche in the crypt beneath the chapel, where they say such an one was walled-up to perish by hunger and thirst."

"Katharine," said Eva suddenly, "is it right to be unfaithful to our vows? We are not doing that which is abhorrent?"

"I think not—and truly believe not," answered Katharine, her eyes glowing and dilating; "and I have spent many a night in prayer and fasting, asking to be led and guided. These vows were forced upon us ere we understood their meaning. They wrapped up the real truth in such a way that we were much deceived. There is a terrible side to convent life which is never breathed beyond the walls. There is a wide-spreading corruption going on that shows to me the system is not Heavenly. God will understand that, in the spirit, our vows to be His for ever will be kept, as far as poor frail flesh can keep them, albeit the letter be broken. I fear not to cast myself upon His mercy in this thing. I know that were I to remain here they could not be kept as truly as they shall and can be without!"

Eva felt a shiver run through Katharine's frame. She only partly understood; but she knew enough to cause her to spring to her feet and cry, although in the instinctively hushed tones that soon become natural to the convent-bred girl:

"Then take me, take me too! I will do anything, I will dare anything, to escape from these terrible walls! I would even face that terrible fate; for is it not a living death to be for ever here without the prospect of release?"

After that the days seemed to go by strangely in the convent. It was Lent; the celebration of the Lord's Passion was drawing very near. The nuns were engrossed in their appointed hours and religious exercises; they grew thin and pale from vigil and fasting; but there was another reason why some of them looked white and careworn. The looked-for answer to their appeal had not reached them yet. Could it be that the thing was too hard for this bold advocate of liberty to attempt?

Good Friday had come. The long exhausting services had been gone through with rigorous exactitude; and the Reverend Mother had now retired to her own room, the nuns being bidden each to her cell, to spend the interval in meditation. Eva felt a light touch upon her arm as she was leaving the chapel. Katharine's voice in her ear spoke in the softest whisper:

"Come to my room."

A sudden hope flooded Eva's heart. She dared not lift up her eyes lest they should betray her. She continued her soft walk with drooping head and hushed footfall; but there was a clangour in her temples of the young blood coursing there, and she was asking herself a thousand eager questions as she slipped like a ghost past her own door, and to the apartment of Katharine von Bora, where, to her amazement, there were gathered together the whole party of those nuns who desired escape, a look of strained expectancy upon all faces.

When Eva entered, Katharine closed and locked the door, and flung the key through the open window into the courtyard below. There was something in her aspect so resolute and tense, that Eva's heart leapt up within her, and she cried:

"Katharine—tell me—ah, tell me!"

"They have promised to come for us to-night," answered the other Katharine. "We are to wait here for the signal. When it comes we are to drop noiselessly into the court below, and they will have means to convey us over the wall and away! It seemed a good day; all the world resting and exhausted after the day's exercises. Suspicion dulled, we trust. We may hear the signal at any moment now. Pray heaven it comes speedily!"

They were all trembling with excitement and a nervous terror that was inevitable in their reduced condition. Katharine von Bora looked round upon the ring of white faces, and said:

"If we have been betrayed;—if the thing is known—and who can be certain that it is not? Spies abound within cloister walls, as women have found to their cost ere now;—if it be known we shall be captured, and our punishment will not be light. If any is afraid, there is yet time to turn back. Let none who is faint-hearted seek the perils of flight!"

Her eyes dwelt chiefly upon the tender flower-like face of Eva. Her love for the youthful novice was deep and tender. She longed for her to escape from the terrible bondage of the convent; but what if they should be discovered and brought back? She could bear the thought for herself; but for Eva——

But there was no fear in Eva's face as she read the thought in the eyes of her friend. The pulsations of her heart seemed to become quiet and regular; her gaze was steady and fearless. She was the youngest and tenderest of all that band; but there was no tremor in her tones as she said:

"Heaven will help us, I am sure of it. Have we not been asking it? But even if not, let me go with you. Far better is death itself, than a living death within these pitiless walls."

"The signal! the signal!" cried a strangled voice from the window; and Magdalene von Staupitz, who had been leaning out with straining ears, held up her hand to enforce instant silence.

They all heard it then; the rumble of wheels, and the careless whistling by the driver of a familiar tune, agreed upon as the signal of approaching help.

The room in which they were assembled was quite dark, save for the dying twilight of the April evening. The bars of the casement had been carefully filed through before, and could be removed noiselessly now with a single wrench. The courtyard was not far below; and the sisters helped each other to drop silently down into it, having selected this particular window on the north side of the convent, as being most remote from danger of observation. Eva was the last to descend; she was so light and bird-like in her movements, that having helped to lower the others, she found no trouble in hanging by her hands from the sill, and dropping lightly into the arms of her sister nuns, as she fancied. To her astonishment, and for a moment to her terror, she found herself confronted by a goodly youth of fine proportions, but, of course, a perfect stranger to her, who set her gently on her feet with the reassuring words:

"Your pardon, sweet maid; but time presses, and your companions are being hurried over the wall to the waggon. They tell me you are the last. So let us lose not another moment."

He took her hand and led her across the courtyard, the beating of her heart sounding in her ears like the clangour of an alarm-bell in the tower overhead. Suppose this was a trap?

Were they walking blindfold to their destruction? For a moment her feet faltered; but a strong hand upheld her, and a voice spoke in her ear with masculine reassurance:

"Fear not, sweet lady. Having so far succeeded, we will not give you up without such a struggle as shall set all Germany in a blaze!" He looked at the fair face beneath the nun's coif, and added with sudden fire and chivalry: "I would lay down my life to save you from all hurt!"

Eva felt herself quivering and tingling all over. The blood was racing through her veins as it never seemed to do within those stagnating cells. The next instant she found herself being helped up a ladder to the top of the wall, and immediately a pair of strong arms lifted her, and she was placed beneath the friendly covering of a waggon, where she felt, rather than saw, that her friends were all packed together.

"Ladies," spoke the voice of the elder man, "we must ask you, for awhile at least, to consent to somewhat cramped quarters. There are a dozen big barrels in the waggon. Each is roomy enough to hold a human being. The only safe way in which we can convey you through the country we have to traverse is by concealing you in these barrels. I trust you will not find the captivity a very oppressive one."

Instantly there was willing bustle and confusion, as the nuns joyfully concealed themselves within the great casks, which were sufficiently roomy to permit of their squatting down upon the thick layer of straw considerably provided, whilst the air-holes previously bored gave them ample breathing space when the tops were fastened down.

Eva was helped into her cask by the youth who had caught her on her descent from the window, and whom she heard the elder man address sometimes as "Leonard." He picked up a rug from his own seat upon the box, and tucked it about her to make her nest softer; and when she looked up with a grateful smile, and asked:

"Whither are we going, fair sir?" he answered eagerly:

"We take you first to Dr. Martin Luther, who has arranged all this. But afterwards you will be housed and sheltered by some of the good citizens of Wittemberg, till it be seen whether or not your parents will receive you back. But even if not, methinks there will be other happy homes speedily open to you. My mother is even now hoping to house and shelter some of you. Wilt thou be willing to trust thyself to my mother's gentle care?" And as he spoke young Leonard leaned a little nearer, and just touched Eva's hand with his.

She felt a strange thrill run through her frame. She was half-terrified, half-delighted. It was like a strange dream, this tent-like waggon, with its heavy cover, and the gleam of the lantern that lighted up the rows of casks with their living occupants, and shone upon the flushed and eager face of the handsome youth, and the grave bearded countenance of his father. It recalled to her a thousand blissful dreams of childhood, when she had revelled in the romances and stories of knights errant and bold heroes. As the light was shut out from her eyes, and she felt the heavy waggon begin to move on, she realised that the first and worst of the peril was past. They had escaped! They were outside the convent walls! They had broken the chain which bound them!

Peril might still menace them for awhile; but at least they had achieved something. Eva had a feeling, which she was almost afraid to analyse too closely, that "Leonard" would fight a very grim and determined battle before he would let her be carried back to the gates of the cloister.

Many were the halts and interruptions of the journey; and many times did Eva's heart seem almost to stop beating, as a voice would ask close in their ears, as it seemed:

"What have you here in this waggon?"

"Barrels of herrings," was the reply, made in a grumbling tone from the driver; "barrels of herrings, and a very slack market for them since Easter is so nigh. I should have had them before; but there was delay, and now nobody wants our wares."

Eva had fallen asleep, and her sleep was so sound that she was startled at last on waking suddenly, to find the sunlight illuminating the bright world. The head had been taken from her cask, and the tall, handsome youth was looking eagerly down upon her, saying with a smile and a blush:

"Mistress Eva, you are safe now. Dr. Martin Luther wishes to welcome you with the rest. And when you have refreshed yourself, and changed your attire, my father and I are to have the honour of welcoming you and Mistress Katharine von Bora under our humble roof, there to await the result of such representations as will be made by you to your parents."

Eva never forgot that memorable breakfast taken in presence of the great man, whose name was becoming a household word throughout the length and breadth of the land.

She remembered less clearly the drive to Torgau with Councillor Koppe and his son Leonard. It was like a dream to sit in a coach, attired in the ordinary garb of a citizen maiden, and to be in conversation with a handsome youth like Leonard, whose devotion never allowed her a moment's anxiety or a single ungratified wish.

But the motherly kindness of Frau Koppe was worth all the rest to Eva, when that worthy matron opened her arms and folded her in a loving embrace. And when it came out at last that her offended parents declined to receive her home, Eva could meet the disappointment bravely; for had she not found a second home and second mother in Torgau; and what was to hinder her speedy marriage with Leonard, when both knew their own hearts so well?



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