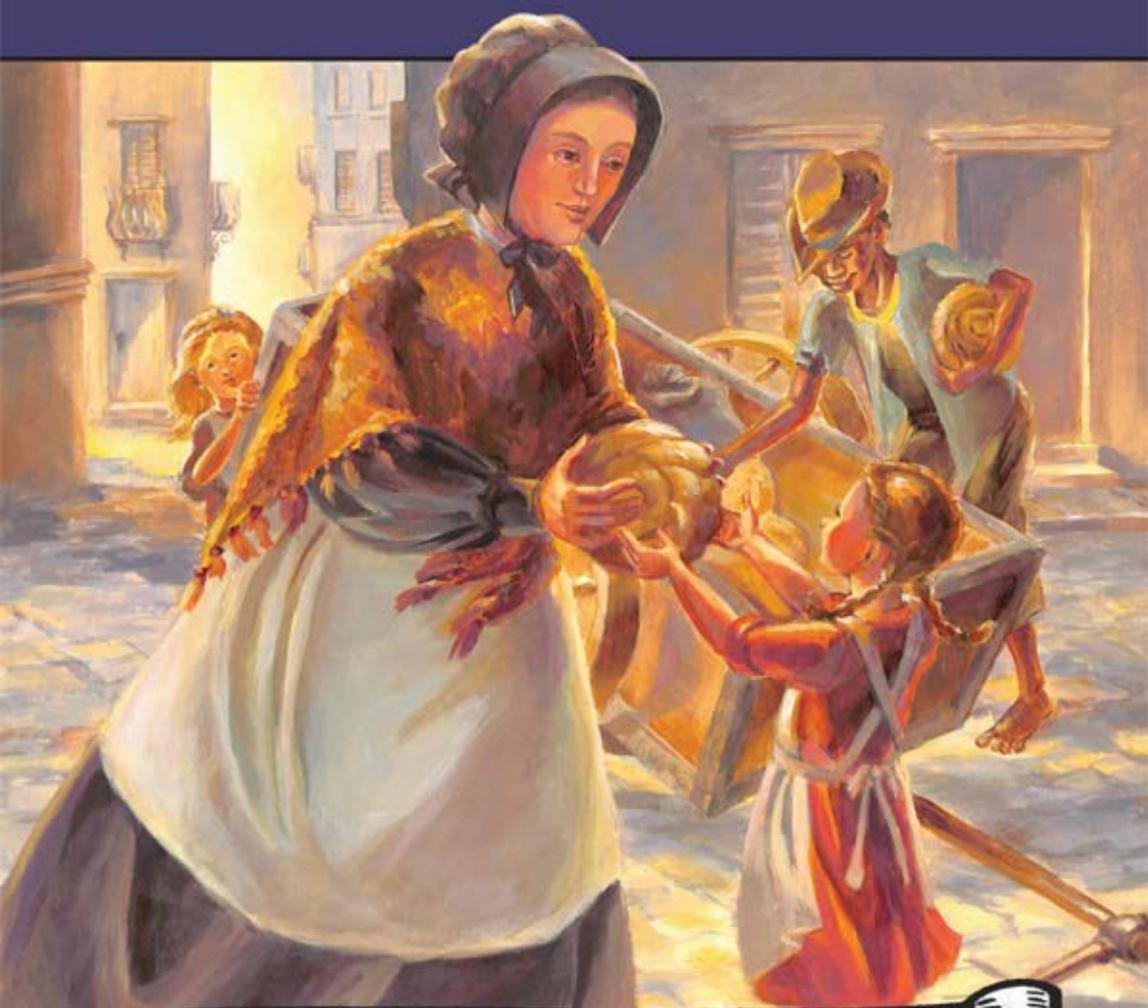


Margaret Haughery

Bread Woman of New Orleans



Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Flora Strousse

Margaret Haughery

Bread Woman of New Orleans

By Flora Strousse

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Portraits in Faith and Freedom

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Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950's and 60's by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

Web Resources

To access printable maps, a timeline, and other information, visit <https://www.bethlehembooks.com/margaret-haughery-bread-woman-new-orleans-846>

About Usage of Outdated Terms

In republishing the books that form our *Portraits in Faith and Freedom* series, the editors considered whether it would be worthwhile to update the authors' usage of words like "Indian" and "Negro." The more current preference among many is "Native American" and "African American." The editors found, however, that changing the original terms often did not work well for the context of those times. The attitudes of respect and honesty that inspired these works—written in the 1950s and early 1960s—clearly conveyed the authors' positive meaning. In most cases, therefore, we have let the words stand.

Bethlehem Books

TO
MY GODSON
Kevin Gillespie

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Maps

1. Just keeps Rollin' Along

NO ONE ON THE BOAT could have suspected that the Haugherys were honeymooners. Unlike most on their wedding trip, this couple had an air of anxiety; yet, their shy glances left no doubt of deep love between them.

The young husband, pale and often listless, gazed at his wife with eyes set deep in their sockets and gleaming with unnatural brilliance. They had gone to their stateroom after the noonday meal, and he apologetically said, "If you don't mind, Margaret, I think I'll be taking a little rest."

"And why should I mind?" his wife asked cheerily. "Sure rest is the medicine that will bring you back to health."

Charles stretched himself out on the bunk, and his wife, always careful not to alarm him, passed her hand fleetingly across his forehead. As she had suspected, he was feverish again, but Margaret tilted her tones to a high cheerful pitch when she added, "I'll be taking a little look around the boat, and later you will join me for a walk."

"That I will, darling," Charles promised wearily.

It was the weariness in his voice that wrung her heart, her husband's pathetic effort to pretend he was well when both knew their southward journey had been held out by the doctors as only a slim chance for Charles's recovery. Margaret quietly closed the stateroom door and moved down the long dim corridor. At the end a gray shaft of light suggested the sun might be shining; in the dreary long passageway it was difficult to tell. She moved swiftly on, head erect, her gait revealing unusual strength and resolution for a young woman of twenty-two.

The boat they traveled was *The Hyperion*, which, though not lavish as some of the floating palaces soon to make their way down the Mississippi, seemed very splendid to Margaret—splendid and jaunty, gaudy and a bit confusing. She had found a small alcove at the aft of the ship, outside the large lounge. It was protected from too much wind and sun, and she and Charles often sat there watching the trail of water churned up by the paddle wheel, water brown as a bitter brew of coffee. Margaret thought to go there then, but after reaching the vast interior—much like an enormous ballroom

vaguely divided with wooden latticework—she decided to linger for a while. Though shy, she was vitally interested in all kinds of people, and those sailing down the Mississippi in 1835 were as varied as their many tongues and dialects.

Only thirty years before, the American representative had received the keys of New Orleans from the Spaniards, and Louisiana was formally transferred to the United States. This astonishing purchase had as yet scarcely affected the Creoles, those first settlers from France and Spain whose most prized memories were of glittering courts and monarchs. Less real than their dreams was the fact that their state was now annexed to the United States! Indeed, to the Creole, most newcomers were untutored barbarians, whom they preferred to identify only with rough boisterous river-men. For their part, the Americans, who during the past five years had come to New Orleans in great numbers, termed the Creoles “decadent foreigners” and were gaining ascendancy over them. The whole world of prejudice and snobbery was confined within the limits of the boat.

The largest section of the lounge was the dining area. A group of Creoles still lingered at a table, chatting in French and letting out ripples of laughter when a *bon mot* was supplied by one of their party. The Creole women were extremely beautiful, lavishly dressed and jeweled, their flawless, slender fingers suggesting lives of languor and ease. Even the Creole men—more poised and better mannered than the Americans—had an air of foreignness, as if they had been molded to pursue poetry, art or music, rather than the more rugged professions.

Margaret, whose life had been full of toil and sadness, found these people who fluttered like exotic birds pleasurable to watch. Though scarcely noticing the prosperous Americans aboard, the “foreigners” seemed more kindly to their servants, more responsive to beauty than those of Anglo-Saxon strain.

Margaret, who held staunchly to the rule of judging no one but herself, was often the recipient of a pleasant word, an inquiry about her husband’s health from the Creole women. Though she dressed with utter simplicity, perhaps the sparkle in Margaret’s eyes and her general cast of feature revealed her Gaelic strain, which diluted discipline with warmth, humor and wit. The Irish were not ashamed to show their feelings, and she—whose maiden name was Gaffney—was Irish to the core.

Sometimes, when she heard the Creole ladies mention family connections with the French and Spanish courts, she wondered wryly if the name O'Rourke would ring in their ears as merely another Irish immigrant. For Margaret's own mother was a lineal descendant of the great house of O'Rourke, Prince of Breffny, one of the most courageous chieftains ever to battle the British foe. Although those early intrepid noblemen had long been banished, time had been powerless to extinguish in the Irish people their flaming love of freedom.

After Margaret tarried for a while, thinking her private thoughts, she decided to take a turn around the deck. She breathed in deeply as she hurried on, and, rounding a corner, almost collided with another woman. So austere and reproachful was this stranger that Margaret hastened to apologize.

"I'm sorry," she said. "So deep I was in thought, as not to be noticing—"

"That's quite all right," the woman said. She seemed unable to conceal her real cause for displeasure, and added, "It's a disgrace the way those people behave."

The stranger gestured toward a window where the Creoles still sat sipping their brandy, laughing, telling jokes. Her gaze then wandered back to Margaret's simple dress, and she nodded in approval. "I'm sure a sensible woman like you must find these creatures distasteful," she added sternly. Then she moved to Margaret's side and gestured that they should walk along together while she awaited some reply.

"It's not for me to be judging," Margaret said. "For myself, I've always felt others must decide what they want according to their consciences."

"But those—those people give themselves such airs," the woman went on. "And wouldn't you think they'd let go their foreign ways and learn to speak English?"

The stranger continued to express her displeasure for all foreignness, finally taking a dig at the Irish. She termed them a low-class breed of ruffians, brawling and drinking and swearing all over the place—and if the influx of Catholics into America did not soon cease, the Jesuits would soon be taking over the country and a Pope installed in Washington.

"Of course," she went on, "it's worse in New Orleans. But since the Louisiana Purchase, more and more patriotic, red-

blooded Americans are coming. Just you wait, they'll put things aright."

"Is it your idea, then, that those of Catholic faith are not good Americans?" Margaret asked with feigned innocence. "If so, you're speaking to one who definitely disapproves this shallow view."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," the woman replied. "I was not talking about people like *you*. It's quite obvious you're a lady. But if you could see those Paddies, those roughnecks digging the canal, those petty shopkeepers fighting and drinking and making trouble, I'm sure you would agree with me."

"That's no more than I am, myself," Margaret returned. "Indeed, I'm not positive if after digging a dirty canal, I might not also find a few nips very welcome. Did you ever think of it that way?"

"No," the woman said, she never did.

And Margaret, drawing herself up with the hauteur of O'Rourke princess, put in proudly, "If you'll excuse me now, I'd rather be walking by myself."

She started on ahead of the woman and decided to go to the stateroom to see if her husband had awakened. He had, and seemed to be feeling better since his nap.

Margaret told him about her visit to the lounge, her interest in the Creoles whose carefree manner suggested that time is only meant to kill. She did not, however, mention the woman who had joined her—because, since Charles's illness, any slight or hostile attitude increased his hankering to go home. For him, home was Ireland, which in memory had to him become a haven of tranquility. In truth, Charles had known only hardship in his youth, so that faraway place must have become a symbol of his yearning to return again to vigor and health.

"A breath of air will do you good, my darling," Margaret told him, "so let us first take a turn on the deck, then find our cozy nook."

Again she moved down the dim corridor, this time slowly, pacing her footsteps so that Charles would not lag behind. On the second deck, they crossed through the partition where gamblers endlessly sat around large tables, each seemingly assured that Lady Luck would smile on him.

The cards deftly shuffled and dealt revealed hands and sleeves reaching across the table that could be consulted as a sort of guide map of the human flow down the Mississippi. From beneath fabric of uncut velvet, white fingers unscarred by toil told of a Creole returning to his home in New Orleans; hands with greater strength, yet free from signs of menial work, suggested a rich planter who had come from the Carolinas with his slaves and his oxen to start anew and cultivate the soil in Natchez; sinewy, muscled fingers identified a young fellow as having previously manned a flatboat on the river. And, of course, there were the splashy fabrics of professional gamblers' sleeves, wherein were hidden an extra card or two!

As the Haugherys passed the players, Margaret noticed a large pile of money passed across the table. Such a sum would keep Charles and her in food and lodgings for at least a year!

They strolled around the deck at a snail's pace, then settled in their usual alcove, which afforded privacy. There, away from the prying eyes of people, it was soothing to watch the trail of water and hear the constant chum of the whirling paddle. Sometimes from the first deck, where alongside the boiler room freight and cattle were kept, came the mournful cry of an animal bewailing its confinement.

They had left the frost behind and were nearing Natchez and would soon be in their future home in New Orleans.

"Before long, you'll be chipper as a squirrel," Margaret maintained cheerily. "See the fresh green foliage on that bank beyond; I'm sure there are flowers, too."

Charles smiled and replied, "When you speak of green, it's Ireland I think of, Margaret. Sure, you have to admit this wide, muddy river is no match for the glorious Shannon."

"And, sure you'll have to admit we've never been persecuted for our Faith, in America," she replied.

Margaret then remembered the snobbishness of the woman on her walk, and she had to admit that prejudice was not absent even in this great country of her choice. But, she thought, America was young, with the battle of 1812 not far behind. Natural that a country so recently shorn of shackles should have growing pains. If only Charles would come to love this land as much as she did!

As they sat holding hands, Margaret tried to encourage her husband, prayerfully hoping that some of her strength might be conveyed to him.