

PART I

LIGHT OVER  
LOMBARDY





## CHAPTER ONE

# A CHILD AT PLAY

WHEN FRANCESCA CABRINI WAS a little girl she often used to go from Sant' Angelo, her village near the town of Lodi on the Lombard plains, to stay with her uncle at Livagra a few miles away. He was Don Luigi Oldini, one of the local priests, a man so charitable that he was known to take the shoes off his feet and the blankets from his bed for the poor. "He is a thief of himself," was the saying there. Francesca loved him because he was so kind, but she also liked to visit Livagra because there she had opportunity for a game she had invented and could not play at home. The deep, rapid Venera that crossed the town was built up with canal walls, and these made its current all the more swift. This exactly suited it to be the widest ocean in her imagination. Making paper boats, she filled them with violets and sent them down the stream. These violets were the missionaries she dreamed of sending all over the world.

Francesca always played this game alone, perfectly happy with her fancies. She was a very shy child and felt instinctively that to let anyone share her game would be to spoil it. Now and then a couple of boys passed her on the tow-path; they looked at her for a moment half in contempt and half in envy before muttering to one another, "What does a girl know about boats!" Even to the little girls who came up to ask what she was doing she did not explain. They saw the boats and

they saw the violets; she did not tell them that the violets were her missionaries. Only Uncle Luigi got a hint of that. "Very nice, Cecchina," he would say with grave interest. "Only be careful not to fall in the water."

One day when she was about eight she got a little too engrossed in this delightful game. Her blue eyes and her golden curls made her appear to be more ethereally delicate than she really was, but until that day nobody had seen any special danger in this launching of violet-laden ships. Then, leaning too far over the stone embankment, she fell into the canal. As a little way farther down it ran through a tunnel, she would have been drowned had she been drawn under it by the stream. But somebody pulled her out just in time and she lay on the bank half dead from fright.

A boy who saw her there dripping wet rushed off at once to Don Luigi's house near by shouting, "Come quick! Cecchina's drowned."

It was not as bad as that. She opened her eyes when her uncle knelt over her.

"Thank God you're all right!" he exclaimed. "But who pulled you out of the water?"

"I don't know, Uncle. I just found myself lying here."

Don Luigi pondered this. "Are you sure you don't know who pulled you out, Cecchina?"

She shook her head.

"Then *I* know," he said. "It must have been your guardian angel."

He took her up in his arms and carried her in. After his housekeeper had got her to bed he went into her room and sat beside her.

"Listen, Cecchina," he said gently. "You must never play with your boats again. What would your mother have said had anything happened to you while you were staying with me?"

"Don't tell mother," she begged. "Say you won't tell mother, uncle."

"I don't know whether I can keep this from your mother, child."

She was silent a long while. Then she whispered, "Well, tell mother if you like. Only make her promise not to tell Rose."

He was silent in his turn, thinking grimly. He knew why she said this, but he asked, "Why mustn't we let your sister know?"

"Rose would be very angry with me," she whispered again. "She thinks it silly of me to want to be a missionary."

"All right, naughty little missionary," Uncle Luigi said at last. "But you must promise me never again to go near the canal."

She was able to promise that with immense fervor. Nothing would ever again draw her to the banks of the Venera. She had acquired such a phobia about deep water that it would have put an end to all her missionary ambitions had they not been based on something more solid than dreams. The cold she caught that day soon went, but not for thirty years, when she was about to begin travels that would carry her over more of the earth than even her hero St. Francis Xavier ever saw, did she quite recover from the shock. All the same she continued to believe that she was to be a missionary.



Yet Francesca came of a most unadventurous stock, one securely rooted in those quiet, flat Lombard pasture-lands and rice-fields. So very stay-at-home had her forebears been that once, when they received word that a rich relative had died at Rome and had left a legacy which they could collect only by going there in person, they set out — but came back a couple of hours later. Upon reaching a point in the plain from which they could no longer see the campanile of the church and the five flaming red brick towers of the castle built centuries ago by Regina Visconti della Scala, they got frightened. They looked at one another, and without a word decided to drive home again.

Francesca herself was by nature as unadventurous as any of them. She was completely devoid of the desire to travel for the mere

sake of travel. But she did get quite early a desire to travel in order to win souls for God.

This idea was implanted in her during the long winter evenings when the family sat round the large open fireplace in the house on the Borgo Santa Maria. While the logs crackled she listened to her father read aloud from the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*. That missionary magazine set her mind on fire. There in the old-fashioned patriarchal kitchen that served as the living-room — a large room with a kneading-trough, and a kettle hanging from a chain, and a bucket of water with a ladle from which they all drank — Francesca's imagination was stirred. And when a missionary from the Orient arrived at Sant' Angelo Lodigiano and preached on his work, what he had to say aroused so much enthusiasm in the thirteen-year-old girl that she could not hold herself in. She confided in Rose, who was more than twice her age, "One day *I'm* going to be a missionary."

Rose was crushing in her scorn. "*You* a missionary!" she exclaimed. "One so small and ignorant as you a missionary!"

Rose had talked like that before, but the words, so far from smothering Francesca's ideas, only hardened her determination. Though, after that, she was careful to keep her dreams to herself, her sturdiness of character may, at least in part, be set down to the credit of Rose herself. What she had said — what she often said — was far from kind, but she had made Francesca able to bear such taunts by the severe training she had given her.



The little girl had come as the last of thirteen children, and it fell upon Rose rather than their mother to bring her up. This she did in a stern, uncompromising fashion that does not make us like her, or make virtue appear very lovely in her case, but to which we may nevertheless attribute Francesca's resoluteness and perhaps even the extraordinary

sweetness that balanced it. Closely as Francesca imitated Rose as a child, nobody could have resembled her much less as a woman.

Just why Rose did not herself become a nun is something of a mystery. Or it would be, were it not clear that her true vocation was that of training a nun. In this she may have been vicariously achieving her own ambition. It is more likely that she was acting without any design and merely exhibiting her prim old maidishness toward her little sister. As the child's hair grew in beautiful curls, Rose did her best to prevent any youthful vanity by plastering down those curls on her head and trying to straighten them out.

"Stand still, can't you, Cecchina!"

"Yes, Rose."

"Bend your head down."

"Yes, Rose."

"*Lower*, child!"

She pressed the brush down until the stiff bristles brought tears into the little girl's eyes.

"There, that's better. I'm not going to have you looking like a silly simpering doll."

In her old age Francesca used to say that there was no danger of her hair ever turning white; it had received too much oiling from Rose for that to happen.



From the day of Francesca's birth — two months before its due time and when her mother was fifty-two — there seemed to be a special seal upon her. It may have been merely a charming coincidence, though it was taken for something more, that that very morning, when her father was threshing grain in the courtyard of his farm, a flock of white doves descended. He tried to scare them away with his flail, but they kept returning, and at last one of them got entangled in the leather thongs. It was unhurt and Agostino

Cabrini carried it indoors to show the children. They wanted to keep it, but he said, "No, no; let it join the others."

He opened the window and let it fly. That same morning of July 15, 1850, Francesca was born. A pretty story, kept in remembrance by the white doves now painted on the old house, though what it is supposed to signify is not very clear. But the family thought of her as a little white dove. They made her one by having her baptized the same day.



A dove or a lamb was what she seemed to be, this shy child who was to grow into a woman whose life, regarded from one angle, reads like a resounding success story. Nobody could have seen in her the great organizer and executive. What everybody did see was the *santina*, the little saint, even if some may have wondered whether so precocious a piety would last. It was only to be expected that she would be pious when she had a mother who rose at dawn to pray for an hour before going to Mass, and who prayed another hour before going to bed. The father, too, was admitted on all hands to be a *Cristianone*, a genuine Christian. With Rose to complete the process, Francesca could hardly have grown up except as she did. Even her dolls were all dressed as nuns, and she herself presided over them as a Lady Abbess.

Children are always given to the imitation of their elders. And Cecchina, as she was called in those days, set out to model herself upon Rose. This extended even to the gestures Rose made in church. Like her, Cecchina bowed her head right down to the pew in front, looking out meanwhile through her fingers to see whether she could catch any other hints regarding religious deportment. Now and then the imitation was a trifle embarrassing, as on the day the child followed the woman into the confessional. And again, at six, Cecchina wanted to go to Communion. Then Rose put her off with the explanation, "But, Cecchina, you have no white veil."

The little girl looked at Rose in dubious silence.

Rose repeated, "You understand, Cecchina. Before you can go to Communion you must have a white veil."

Cecchina's acceptance of this explanation was set down by her elders to her beautiful simplicity. It may, however, have been rather because she perceived there was no use in arguing with grown-ups when they present children with what purports to be a relation between cause and effect. Many children have felt this, and Cecchina was, after all, an unusually intelligent child.



Contrary to the custom prevailing today,<sup>1</sup> she was confirmed before she made her First Communion. In fact Confirmation, which was conferred on her on July 1, 1857, was the great experience of her childhood, the turning-point of her life. For her there was no need of any conversion, but at her confirmation she passed from the innocence of childhood to a conscious union with God, such as is the mark of sainthood. Years later when she spoke of this, she used to make a gesture which seemed to convey that the Holy Spirit had surrounded her with His light as with a cloak. Then she said, "The moment I was being anointed with the sacred chrism I felt what I shall never be able to express . . . I seemed no longer on earth. My heart was replete with a most pure joy. I cannot say what I felt, but I know it was the Holy Ghost." And in middle age, writing in a notebook she never supposed anybody would ever see, she addressed Christ, "You know that my heart has always been yours." That "always" is the key to her life.

<sup>1</sup> In 1910, Pope St. Pius X lowered the age for First Communion but did not address confirmation, causing many to delay confirmation to after First Communion. The order familiar to Mother Cabrini (confirmation and then First Communion) was restored in 2015.

Already little incidents had occurred to her in which the miraculous has been seen. Nor need the miracles be doubted by anyone who has been aware many times of a protecting hand. One day, having gone to pray, as she often did, in a retired spot, she chose a wood-pile - which fell down the moment she had left it. We can imagine that once more her guardian angel was looking after her. On the other hand, when she went, another day, to the parish church at a time when the doors were usually locked and found, upon pushing, that they opened to her, the incident may perhaps be adequately accounted for on the simple supposition that the sexton had forgotten to lock them. What is really more remarkable, as evidence of the growth of her character, is the self-control the child had already developed to a high degree. Once when an earthquake shook the village and when the terrified elders ran all over the house to save the "baby," they came across her sitting quietly in a corner saying her prayers quite undisturbed.

This self-control sometimes showed itself in quaint ways. As she was going to China as a missionary, and as she had somehow got it into her head that there was no candy in that country, she gave up eating candy, the better to prepare herself for an austere apostolic life. Yet she was normal enough to feel intense disappointment whenever her delicate health kept her from going out to join in a local *fiesta*. She found it hard to stay indoors when bands were playing in the streets and people walking down them holding hands and singing.

She did not take that or any other disappointment as children usually do — sulking or in tears, so early had she begun to learn in the school of the saints. In the local priests she found simple, humble men who understood what was going on in her soul. The first of her spiritual directors was Don Melchisedecco Abrami, the curate of the parish; the second, into whose care she passed when she was fifteen, was the pastor, Don Bassano Dedè. Don Melchisedecco, who used to

call her his little child because of her fragile build, permitted her to take a private vow of chastity when she was eleven, but, being a wise man, only for one year. Many years afterwards he was to write that he had always considered her a saint. Not until she was nineteen was she permitted to make her vow permanent, though it still remained only of the private sort that could easily have been dispensed had she ever asked to be released.

Don Bassano was of a laconic temperament, and his advice when she told him her small problems was nearly always the same. After thinking in silence he would say, "Go and tell that to Jesus." He may well have considered that Cecchina stood in some danger of being cast in too rigid a mould by Rose and hoped to counteract this by encouraging a familiar and spontaneous intercourse with God. For her this was the best possible advice that could have been given. The circumstances of her later life made it impossible for her to have any regular spiritual direction. It was therefore good that she was so early led to trust herself completely to the divine promptings.



There are times when one cannot but feel a little sorry for Cecchina, so often was she domineered over by her dry, sharp-spoken sister. Their mother had sometimes to intervene when she thought Rose was carrying things too far. "But she is hardly more than a baby, Rose!" she would protest. "You must not be so hard on her." Then for a while Rose would soften the regimen a little.

Cecchina herself never complained of Rose. So far from that, she took her as a kind of spiritual model, though fortunately this did not continue too long. And not only did Rose train her in religion, she was also Cecchina's first teacher, for as she had a normal-school certificate, she conducted a little private school in the town. She appears to have been a good teacher and was certainly a courageous one. For

when the inspector pointed out that her classes in Christian doctrine were contrary to the prevailing law, she told him she meant to go on in the same way. As it was so very private and small a school, he did not think it worth while to raise any further objection.

From Rose she learned a little French and a deep appreciation of their Italian language. One feels from her letters — hastily written as they were and without the faintest idea that any of them would ever be published — that she might have become a writer had she cared to aim at that calling. Such things, however, were merely incidental to her; to have felt any ambition of that kind she would have had to be an entirely different woman. At this time the only study that really absorbed her was geography. By the hour she used to pore over the maps in her atlas. No longer did she send violets down the river in paper boats as missionaries, but her imagination was taking hold of something more concrete by learning facts about the various countries of the world.



These years went by extremely quietly, the quietness deepening as the Cabrini family retired more and more into seclusion as politics grew more and more confused in Italy. The struggle for independence had begun, and in the spring of 1859 white-uniformed Austrians marched into the town, only to pass through it again in early summer<sup>2</sup> — this time in disorderly retreat. But the nationalist movement was by now getting so entwined with an extraneous anti-clericalism that it was not very easy for good Catholics — especially for those who wished for a peaceable life — to take sides. Nor did clarification come from

<sup>2</sup> The Austrian Empire held Lombardy and other Italian territories until The Second Italian War of Independence in 1859. Thereafter, Austria lost these territories to the Kingdom of Sardinia, which proclaimed a united Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The Kingdom of Italy conquered the Papal States in 1870, unifying the Italian peninsula.

the fact that Cecchina's father's cousin, Agostino Depretis — who was later to be Prime Minister of a united Italy — was already one of the nationalist leaders. General Garibaldi,<sup>3</sup> with whom this cousin was now associated, himself arrived at Sant' Angelo one day in 1862 in his red shirt and made a speech there of a kind hardly calculated to please the pious Cabrini. Distrustful of the revolutionary spirit, and essentially timid and conservative, they were careful to take no part in politics. But in later life Francesca came to believe that the quarrel between political Italy and the Church was for the most part adventitious. There was no greater patriot than herself.

It was from circles so still as almost to be called stagnant that Francesca was drawn forth to her masterful and exciting career.



At thirteen she was sent to a private school conducted by the Daughters of the Sacred Heart at near-by Arluno. This promised an even greater seclusion than she had known at home. There she remained for five years, taking the courses that would lead to a teacher's certificate, the *corsi magistrali*. From the frequency with which she quotes Latin in her letters — and without any books of reference at hand — it is evident that she learned Latin thoroughly, though without bothering with more than she required for practical purposes. One may also infer that she had a good head for mathematics; she needed it for the big business deals she was to make in subsequent life.

In taking a teacher's certificate she appears to have been again imitating Rose, for there was no obvious need for her to prepare herself to earn a living. Teaching was virtually the only "white-collar" job then open to women. As Rose was a teacher, Cecchina became

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) was a revolutionary general and prominent figure in Italian unification. He was anti-clerical and was responsible for war on the Papal States.

one too. Beyond that there could have been no definite plans, and though as a missionary she had to initiate many forms of charitable activity, with the training of young girls as the chief of them, Francesca herself was hardly if ever in the classroom. She remained a teacher, however, and she was one by natural endowment rather than by grace of the state examining board.

At eighteen she obtained her teacher's certificate, rounding out her studies at Arluno with a course of lectures at the Lodi normal school. Her health was so precarious that it was feared that she would not be able to sit for her examinations. But she passed them *cum laude*, and immediately afterwards applied for admission into the community.

She was refused by the superior, Madre Giovanna Francesca Grassi. The nuns had all been vastly edified by her, but they did not believe she was strong enough for the religious life. There was nothing for it but to go home and settle down to the domestic routine.

Had Francesca been accepted by these Sisters she would probably never have been heard of again by the world. But that she applied for admission is a little strange, in view of her missionary ambitions. Must one conclude that she had brought herself to believe that these were only a childish dream? Perhaps she thought that, as there was no such thing at that time as an order of missionary nuns, she had better reach out her hand to take what seemed more within her grasp. A sensible compromise — that was all that appeared to be possible. It was one that she was not permitted to make.



Returning home that autumn of 1868, the young woman who still looked like a child made no effort to obtain a teaching position. Without a ripple she slipped back into family life, helping her mother and Rose with the household duties, saying her fervent prayers, and doing little

acts of unobtrusive charity. It looked like a life that might last indefinitely; she had no designs for herself beyond what the day brought forth. But she continued to believe that God had designs for her.

This life did not last long. There came a morning in the following February when her father was getting ready to go to church. Suddenly he slumped into a chair and said in a strange voice to his wife, "Stella, do you think you could stir the fire and warm some coffee for me?"

"What is the matter, Agostino?" she asked anxiously. "Are you ill?"

"It's nothing. I'm just cold. Very cold. Icy."

When the coffee was brought he found he could not swallow. The doctor was sent for. Agostino had had a stroke.

He lingered on for about a year and then died, telling his wife that they would soon be reunited in heaven. The words proved to be prophetic. Before the year was out Stella Cabrini, while dressing for Mass, felt death upon her. They got her into bed. Before the night fell she was gone.

By now only four of the thirteen children were left, and of these one was a girl who had infantile paralysis. She also died before long. But Giovanni Baptista, the only brother left, was able to keep the farm going with hired help and a hand lent by Rose and Francesca. He was a brisk young man and when he attended the local fairs he did not affect anything like his father's old-fashioned mantle lined with fur. But he had no great interest in the farm and was already planning to become a teacher. If he managed the little estate, this was only because there was for the moment nothing else to do.

They were certainly in no want, even though they lived, by habit, frugally. As of old they were still able to give to the poor. When a child, Cecchina had often got her father and mother to double the alms they gave at the door; now she and Rose made themselves responsible for the feeding of an old woman dying of cancer. It was a manner of existence that gave no hint as yet of what the future held.



A remarkable change had come over Rose with the death of her parents. The sternness that made her virtue not always attractive disappeared: to Francesca, to whom she used to be somewhat unnecessarily harsh, she now showed a beautiful tenderness. The very fact that there was no longer any mother to restrain her when she was being too severe with the “baby” made her put a restraint on herself. Now, nearing middle age, she knew that she would have to give up all idea of becoming a nun. Perhaps it was because she had looked upon herself as thwarted that she had been somewhat sharp and even bitter. With resignation came sweetness.

That she had actually known towards what development she had been leading Francesca cannot be supposed; she had simply been acting, according to her lights, as her mother’s auxiliary. But by now she perceived that all she could do for Francesca had been done, though she could not have been wiser than everybody else as to what was her sister’s destiny. If she had a share in developing Francesca, her methods, had they been applied to anybody else, might well have defeated their own purpose. As it was, Francesca always spoke of Rose gratefully.

The year 1871 went by placidly and uneventfully. But the spring of the new year brought an epidemic of smallpox to Sant’ Angelo, and Francesca herself caught the infection while nursing those who were stricken. That she had a deep repugnance to the sight and smell of sores and wounds made her charity towards her cancer patient, as now towards those whom she nursed in smallpox, all the more heroic. The natural inclination of this notable founder of hospitals was very far removed from work among the sick.

Now that Francesca herself had smallpox, Rose had a chance to signalise her devotion. Not only did she carry Francesca safely

through, she was so unsparing in her attention that no pockmarks were left. Constant anointings with salves and washings in milk, without any thought for her own safety, more than made up for all the cutting remarks of earlier years.

It is our last glimpse of Rose, and it gives us the truest idea of her. By severity she had moulded Francesca's character, at the same time convincing her that severity is not the best means for the purpose. An exquisite kindness and affability were always marked in Francesca's disposition. At the same time it would be less than just to Rose not to admit that in the case of Francesca the methods were successful, and that at the end Rose became not unlike Francesca herself. We hear of her going out some years later to Argentina to keep house for her brother when he accepted a teaching position there. She had done her work; Francesca was just about to begin her own.