

# ABOUT THE HERESY OF FRA SERAFICO

BY

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*From the Author's*  
TALES TOTO TOLD ME (1898)

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## ABOUT THE HERESY OF FRA SERAFICO

ONE of Toto's brothers was called Nicola, and he was going to be a priest. He was nineteen years old, and very like Toto in appearance, with this notable difference — there was no light in his eyes. In manner, he was a curious, gaunt, awkward, unworldly creature; absolutely the opposite of Toto, who had the charm and freedom of a young savage on the loose. I don't know why the clergy, for whom I entertain the highest respect, of course, should always slink along by the wall, expressing by the cringing obsequiousness of their carriage that they would take it as a favour for some one to kick them, but such is the case. I used to see this Nicola sneaking about during his summer vacation, but I don't think I ever spoke to him except when he came to say "How do you do?" and "Good-bye." One morning, soon after his arrival, I asked Toto what was the matter with his brother; for he looked even more caged, humpty-backed, and slouching, more utterly miserable and crushed, than usual. "'Cola, sir," he said, "you must know, has a very feeling heart; and if he meets with any little misfortune it is a much more serious thing to him than it would be to me. I, of course, would say that it didn't matter, and look for something else to amuse me; but 'Cola will think over his grief so much till it seems far greater than it really is; and he will not be able to eat his food or take any interest in anything, and wish he was dead or that he had never given himself the annoyance of being born. And I suppose, now, he has had some little trouble in his college — dropped his garter, perhaps, and let his stocking down when out with the camerata in the street, and he has thought about it so much that he believes he has committed a sin against the sixth commandment, by an indecent exposure of his person. But, if I have your leave, I will ask him, for I can see him saying his beads behind the Emissario."

Toto ran away, and I took a little nap.

When I awoke, he was coming down the steps, holding a rhubarb leaf over his head. "I am sure you will be much amused, sir, when I tell you what is the matter with 'Cola," he said. "I made him very angry with me because I could not help laughing at him; and he said that I should certainly burn for making a mock of the clergy — clergy, indeed, and he only a sub-deacon, and I his brother who know all about him, and everything he ever did! And Geltruda, too! For my part, I am sure it is a gift straight from Heaven to be a priest, because I remember that 'Cola used to be quite as fond of enjoying himself as I am, but since he went to the Seminario he will not look at a petticoat — that is to say, the face that belongs to it, for it is only the petticoats he does look at. Have I not seen my little mother cry when he came home, because he

only put his lips to her hand—and they didn't touch it — as if she were la Signora Duchessa, instead of the mother who wished to take him in her arms? But his dolour now, sir, is this. You must know that at the Seminario, you have to preach to the other chierichetti in the refectory, during supper. This is to give you practice in delivering sermons. And after you have preached, you go to your place; and, if it is necessary to make any remarks upon what you have said, the professors tell you all they think. Well, it was 'Cola's turn to preach the night before he came home, and he says that it was a sermon which he had taken all his life to write. He had learnt it by heart; and on arriving in the pulpit he repeated it, moving his hands and his body in a manner which he had practised before his mirror, without making a single mistake. When he had finished, the rector paid him compliments, and two or three of the other professors did the same. But when it came to the turn of the decano, who is the senior student, he said that the college ought to be very proud of having produced an abbatino so clever as to be able, in his first sermon, to invent and proclaim sixteen new and hitherto unheard-of heresies. And 'Cola, instead of feeling a fine rage against this nasty, jealous prig, with his mocking tongue, takes all the blame to himself and is making himself wretched. I told him that there was no difficulty about heresies, if that was what he wanted, because I think that to do wrong is as easy as eating, and that the difficulty is to keep straight. But he says he is a miserable sinner, and that it is all his fault, for he cannot have perfectly corresponded with his vocation. Why, as for heresy, sir, I will tell you how a friar in Rome was accused of preaching heresy, and then you will know that it is not always the being accused of inventing heresies that makes you guilty of that same.

“Ah, well, formerly there lived in Rome a certain friar called Fra Serafico. When he had lived in the world he was of the Princes of Monte Corvino, but at about the age of 'Cola he astonished everybody by giving up his rank and his riches and his state, and becoming a son of San Francesco. Now the fraticelli of his convent were not quite able to understand why a young man who had his advantages, should give them up as he did, and prefer a shaved head and naked feet and to be a beggar. And Fra Serafico, though he had the best will in the world, did not make a good impression on the other friars, because his manners were different to theirs. He felt miserable without a pocket-handkerchief for his nose. And it was some time before the superiors became certain that he had a true vocation, for he went about his duties with diligence and humility, feeling so shy, because the things around him were so strange, that he gained for himself, amongst the other novices, the nickname of 'Dumbtongue.'

“And this went on until he had finished his probation, and taken the habit and the vows.

“One day after this, the Superior, in order to give him a good humiliation, told him to prepare to preach a sermon before the convent at the chapter that afternoon. Fra Serafico received this command in silence, and, having kissed the ground before the Fra Guardiano, he went away to his cell, and when the afternoon came he stood up to preach.

“Then, sir, a very curious thing happened, for Fra Serafico preached, and while he preached the faces of the other friars became set in a glare of astonishment, and the eyes of the Fra Guardiano were almost starting out of his head by the time the sermon was finished. Then there was silence for a little while, and the friars looked at one another and nodded. It seems that they had been entertaining an angel unawares, for this Dumbtongue, as they called him, had turned out to be a perfect Golden-mouth. And the friars were more than glad; for, though they were all good men and very holy, they had no great preacher among them at the time, and they thought it was a shame that an order, whose business was to preach, should have no man who could preach well, and at last they saw a way out of the difficulty: ‘For surely,’ they said, ‘this Serafico speaks the words of San Paolo himself, with the tongue of an angel.’ After this he gave fervorini daily in the convent church, till all the city was filled with his fame, and at last he was named by Papa Silvio to preach the Lent in the Church of San Carlo al Corso.

“Of course you know very well, sir, that the devil is always disgusted to see the works of God going on as easily as water running out of a turned-on tap, and you know also that when a good work seems to be thriving at its best, then is the time the devil chooses to try to upset it. And so he went to a little Jesuit called Padre Tonto Pappagallo — and, of course, I need not tell you that the Jesuits are not what you might call friendly to the Franciscans — and he suggested to him the evil thought, that it was a bad thing for the Jesuits to be beaten in preaching by the Franciscans, and what a score it would be if a Jesuit were to have the honour of catching Fra Serafico in the act of preaching heresy. Padre Tonto, it happened, had made a bad meditation that morning, having allowed his eyes to fix themselves upon some of the stone angels who were dangling their beautiful white legs over the arches round the apsis, and his thoughts to wander from his meditation to those things, which every good priest flies from with as much haste as he would fly from the foul fiend appearing in person. And so his mind was just like a fertile field; and when the devil popped in his suggestion, the seed immediately took root, and before the morning was over it had burst into blossom, for this Padre Tonto cut off to the Church of San Carlo to hear the

great preacher; and when he saw the vast multitude all so intent upon those golden words that if an earthquake had happened then and there I believe no one would have even blinked, and when he heard the sighs from the breasts of wicked men, and saw the tears rain down on women's cheeks, he envied Fra Serafico the power to do these things; and so he began to listen to the sermon that he might catch the preacher preaching heresy. Now, of course, while he was staring about, he had not paid attention to the words of gold, and the first sentence that caught his ear when he did begin, indeed, to listen was this, 'No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.'

"Padre Tonto jumped up and ran out of the church. He was delighted, for he had heard a heresy straight away. 'No one shall be crowned,' he said, 'that is, of course, with the crown of glory which the saints in heaven wear for ever — unless he has contended lawfully — that is to say, as the martyrs did in the Colosseo. Pr-r- r-r-r-r, my dear Serafico! And what, then, becomes of all the holy bishops and confessors, and of the virgins and penitents and widows whom Holy Church has numbered with the saints? These were not martyrs, nor did they fight with beasts, like San Paolo' (and I cannot tell you the place, sir). 'If I were Pope, Seraficone mio, I should burn your body in the Campo di Fiore to-morrow morning, and your soul in hell for ever and the day after.' And saying these words and all sorts of other things like them, he ran away to the Sant' Uffizio and made a mischief with much diligence.

"Now Padre Tonto had a very good reputation and was exceedingly well thought of in Rome. Moreover, the accusation he made appeared to be well founded. So Fra Serafico was sent for, and the question was put to him, 'Did you or did you not, in your sermon preached in the Church of San Carlo al Corso on the second Monday in Lent, say, "No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully?"' And Fra Serafico replied that his questioner, who was the Grand Inquisitor himself, spoke like a book with large letters and clasps of silver, for without a doubt he had used those very words. The Grand Inquisitor remarked that confession of wrong done was always good for the soul: and he pointed out to Fra Serafico the dreadful heresy of which he had been guilty in uttering words which, if they meant anything at all, meant this, *That it was impossible to get to Heaven unless you suffered martyrdom*. And he told Fra Serafico, that as he had made his heresy public by preaching it to all Rome, it would be necessary to make amends also in the place of his crime, or else to let himself be burnt with fire in the Campo di Fiore on the next public holiday, both to atone for the sin, and in order to encourage other people who might feel it their business to preach heresy as he had done. And Fra Serafico answered that he wished

to live and die a good and obedient son of Holy Mother Church, and to submit his judgment in all things to hers; therefore, it would give him much joy to make public amends for his heresy at any time or place which his eminence, in his wisdom, might be pleased to appoint.

“The next day the people of Rome were called by proclamation to the Church of San Carlo al Corso to see Fra Serafico’s humiliation; and because he was such a celebrated man there came together all the noblest and most distinguished persons in the city. Papa Silvio sat upon the throne with the Princes Colonna and Orsini on his right hand and on his left. All around there were fifty scarlet cardinals, bishops by the score in purple and green, friars grey, friars white, friars black, monks by the hundred, and princes and common people like raindrops. And when they had all taken their places, Fra Serafico entered, between two officers of the Sant’ Uffizio with their faces covered in the usual manner; and first he prostrated himself before the Maesta in the tabernacle, and then at the feet of Papa Silvio, then he bowed from the waist to the Sacred College and the prelates, and from the shoulders to the rest; and then he was led into the pulpit from which he had proclaimed his heresy. There he began to speak, using these words: ‘Most Holy Father, most eminent and most reverend lords, my reverend brethren, most illustrious princes, my dear children in Jesus Christ. I am brought here today on account of the vile and deadly heresy, which I am accused of preaching from this pulpit on the first Monday in Lent. That heresy is contained in the following words: “No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.” I freely confess, acknowledge, and say, that I did, in real truth, use those words. But before I proceed to abjure the heresy contained in them, and to express with tears my penitence for the crime I have committed, I crave, my beloved children in Jesus Christ, most illustrious princes, my reverend brethren, most eminent and most reverend lords, and, prostrate at your feet, most Holy Father, indulgence for a few moments while I relate a dream and a vision which came to me during the night just past, which I spent for the good of my soul upon the tender bosom of the Sant’ Uffizio.’ Fra Serafico’s face, as he spoke, beamed with a beauty so unearthly, his manner was so gracious, and the music of his golden voice so entrancing, that Papa Silvio, making the sign of the cross, granted him the favour he had asked.

“The friar went on: ‘In my dream it appeared to me that I was standing before the bar of the Eternal Judge; and that there I was accused by a certain Jesuit named Padre Tonto Pappagallo of having preached heresy on the first Monday in Lent, in the Church of San Carlo al Corso, using these words: “No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.” And while I waited

there, Beato Padre Francesco himself came and stood beside me. And the Judge of all men looked upon me with wrath and anger, asking whether I confessed my crime; and I, wretched man that I am, in the presence of Him who knows all things, even the inmost secrets of the heart, could do nothing else but acknowledge that it was even so. Then the Padre Eterno, who, though terrible beyond all one can conceive to evil-doers, is of a justice so clear, so fine, and straight, that the crystal of earth becomes as dark as mud, the keenness of a diamond as blunt granite, and the shortest distance between two points as crooked as the curves in a serpent's tail — this just Judge, I say, asked me, who am but a worm of the earth, whether I had anything to allege in excuse for my crime.

“And I, covered with confusion as with a garment, because of my many sins, replied, “O Clementissimo Signor Iddio, I have confessed my crime; and in excuse I can only say that when I was preparing my sermon, I took those words from the writings of San Gregorio.”

“The Judge of all men ordered my angel to write this down, and deigned to ask whether I could say in what part of the writings of San Gregorio this heresy could be found. “O Padre Celeste Iddio,” I replied, “the heresy will be found in the 37th Homily of San Gregorio on the 14th chapter of the Gospel of San Luca.” Then I covered my face with my hands and waited for my dreadful sentence; but Beato Padre Francesco comforted me, and patted my shoulder with his hand, all shining with the sacred stigmata; and the Padre Eterno, speaking in a mild voice to the Court of Heaven, said, “My children, this little brother has been accused of preaching a heresy, and this heresy is said to have been taken from the writings of San Gregorio. In this case, you will perceive that it is not Our little brother who is a heretic, but San Gregorio, who will therefore have the goodness to place himself at the bar, for We are determined to search this matter to its remotest end.” Then San Gregorio was led by his Angel-guardian from his throne among the Doctors of the Church, and came down to the bar and stood beside me and Beato Padre Francesco, who whispered in my ear, “Cheer up, little brother, and hope for the best!” And the Padre Eterno said, “San Gregorio, this little brother has been accused before Us, that on the first Monday in Lent, in the Church of San Carlo al Corso, he preached heresy in the following words: ‘No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.’ We have examined him, and he alleges that he has taken these words from the 37th Homily, which you have written upon the 14th chapter of the Gospel of San Luca. We demand, therefore, that you should say, first, whether you acknowledge yourself to have written these words; and secondly, if you have done so, what excuse you have to offer?” And San Gregorio opened the book of his writings which, of course, he always

carries with him, and turned the pages with an anxious finger. Presently he looked up with a smile into the Face of God and said, "O Dio, Padre delle misericordie, our little brother has spoken the truth, for I have found the passage, and when I have read it, You will find the answer to both questions which Your Condescension has put me." So San Gregorio read from his writings these words, "But we cannot arrive at the great reward unless through great labours: wherefore, that most excellent preacher, San Paolo, says, 'No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.' The greatness of rewards, therefore, may delight the mind, but does not take away the obligation of first fighting for it." "Hm-m-m-m," said the Padre Eterno, "this begins to grow interesting; for it seems, my children, that our little brother here has quoted his heresy from San Gregorio, and that San Gregorio in his turn quoted it from San Paolo, upon whom, therefore, the responsibility seems to rest. Call San Paolo."

"So seven archangels blew their trumpets and summoned San Paolo, who was attending a meeting of the Apostolic College, and when he came into Court his Angel-guardian led him to the bar, where he took his place by the side of San Gregorio' (the man who made them Christians in England, sir, and the chant, sir, and saw San Michele Arcangiolo on the top of the Mola), 'of Beato Padre Francesco, and of my wretched self. "Now, San Paolo," said the Padre Eterno, "We have here a little grey friar who has been accused of preaching heresy on the first Monday in Lent, in the Church of San Carlo al Corso, in these words, 'No one shall be crowned unless he has contended lawfully.' And he has informed Us that he quoted these words from San Gregorio's 37th Homily on the 14th chapter of the Gospel of San Luca. We have examined San Gregorio, and he has pointed out to Us that he did indeed use these words, as Our little brother has said; but San Gregorio also alleges that they are not his own words, but yours. The Court, therefore, would like to know whether San Gregorio's statement is true." Then San Paolo's Angel-guardian handed to him the book which contained all the letters he had written, and after he had refreshed his memory with this, the great apostle replied, "O Principio di ogni cosa, there is no doubt that both our little brother and San Gregorio are right, for I find in my second letter to San Timoteo, chapter ii. verse 5, the following words: 'And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned except he contend lawfully.'" "Well!" said the Padre Eterno, "this is a very shocking state of things that you, San Paolo, should publish heresies in this manner, and lead men of all ages into error! San Gregorio, taking the statement on your authority, preaches heresy in his time, and a thousand years after, our little brother, innocently thinking that men of such eminence as the Apostle of the Gentiles and the Apostle of England are of good



authority, preaches the same heresy. You see now that it is impossible to know what the end of a lie will be when once it has been started on its course." "But hear me," said San Paolo, who was a very bold man, "for I venture to submit to La Sua Maesta that the second letter which I wrote to San Timoteo has been placed by Your Church on earth on the list of the Canonical Books, and this means that when I wrote that letter I was inspired by the Third Person of the Maesta Coeterna dell' Adorabile Trinita and that therefore I was divinely protected from teaching error in any shape or form!" "Of course it does," replied the Padre Eterno. "The words that you have written, San Paolo, in your second letter to San Timoteo, are not the words of a man, but the Words of God Himself, and the matter amounts to this, that our little brother here, who took the words from San Gregorio, who took them from you, who were divinely inspired to write them, has not been guilty of heresy at all, unless God Himself can err. And who," continued the Padre Eterno, with indignation, "We should like to know, is the ruffian who has taken up Our time with this ridiculous and baseless charge against Our little brother?" Somebody said that it was a Jesuit named Padre Tonto Pappagallo, at which the Padre Eterno sniffed and said, "A Jesuit! and what, in the name of goodness, is that?"

"So the Madonna whispered that it was a son of Sant' Ignazio of Loyola. "Where is Sant' Ignazio of Loyola?" said the Padre Eterno. Now Sant' Ignazio, who had seen the way things were going, and what a contemptible spectacle his son was presenting, had hidden himself behind a bush and was pretending to say his office. But he was soon found and brought into Court, and the Padre Eterno asked him what he meant by allowing his spiritual children to act in this way. And Sant' Ignazio only groaned and said, "O Potenza Infinita, all my life long I tried to teach them to mind their own business, but in fact I have altogether failed to make them listen to me."

"That was my dream, Most Holy Father, most eminent and most reverend lords, my reverend brethren, most illustrious princes, my beloved children in Jesus Christ; and since you have been so gracious as to listen, I will no longer delay my recantation of the heresy of which I am accused of having preached on the first Monday in Lent, in the Church of San Carlo al Corso.'

"But Papa Silvio arose from his throne, and the cardinals, and the bishops, and the princes, and the people, and they all cried in a loud voice, 'Evviva, evviva, Bocca d'Oro, evviva, evviva.'"