

THE QUEEN'S CONFESSION. OR, THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. JOHN NEPOMUCENE.

FROM THE FRENCH OF HAOUL DE NAUVER, CHAPTER IV. CHARITY.

The missals were closed, the hymns were ended, taper and torch had ceased to burn, the worshippers arose from their knees, and pressed through the doors of the church in crowded groups.

It was the Queen of Bohemia. A few paces behind her knelt a young man of firm build and noble mien, with his arms crossed upon his breast.

Near the queen stood a young woman, slightly veiled, seemingly weary of the devotion of their royal mistress, and impatiently awaiting the time she might think fit to leave the church.

Near the baptismal font, before a picture of our Blessed Lady, knelt the young priest, Father John Nepomucene, whose holy eloquence was daily bringing crowds to the shrine of our Lady of Tein.

The queen at length arose from her knees, gave her prayer book to one of her maids, and walked slowly down the church. As she approached the door, a child timidly came forward, then hastily withdrew, and then came forward again.

It was the little girl charged with playing a part in the comedy arranged by Hatto and Maupier. As soon as the queen had passed the door of the church, the little girl, her face burning with confusion and wet with tears, caught the queen's robe, pressed it to her lips, and throw herself on her knees before her.

The queen put her hand into her purse, but the child cried out sobbing: "This not money I want, but justice and pity."

"Pity!" said the queen. "As a woman, I feel for the sorrowful; but as a queen, I owe justice to all my subjects. For whom do you ask pity, my child?"

She raised up the little girl, and stepped down kindly to her. Seeing the queen kneel, the officers of her suite approached where she stood, and very soon a crowd gathered near the porch of our Lady's Church.

The little girl narrated all that had taken place the evening before—the death of Julie's father and mother, the suspicions and fears, and the terrible cruelty the mob had shown the orphan girl.

"Then," demanded the queen, "is the poor child still shut up in the house?"

"Yes, your Majesty, and the dead body of the woman who died of the plague is there too."

"It is too terrible," murmured the queen. Then, turning to the officers, she said: "Go, pull down every stone of that house, if need be; I wish to save the child's life."

The courtiers bowed lowly, but not one moved to do the queen's bidding.

"What!" exclaimed the queen, with flashing eyes, "are men afraid?"

"Please, your Majesty, twenty times have we faced death on the field of battle, but we confess we fear the pest."

"But it is to save a life! The officers looked at one another, and then bowed their heads in shame and silence.

"We have enough of this," said Jane. "I no longer ask; I command it to be done: who will dare disobey?"

"The king our master has commanded us not to interfere in such matters."

"Enough," said the queen. "Now, I know the real measure of your zeal and your courage. When men quail, women must act. Perhaps you are right, and to you are to be yielded the battle field and the siege; to us more homely dangers, less glorious valor. Come, child," said she, "lead me to Julie's house."

The crowd closed in to prevent the queen from an act of needless heroism, but her bold, commanding look forced them to fall back, and leave the way open before her.

The child hastened on to the house of the imprisoned girl; the queen followed. Hearing a footstep behind her, she turned round, and saw Ofried coming after her. She did not speak; she smiled, and in her smile were blended joy and confidence. From the distance arose the noise of gathering tumult, as the crowd pressed onwards, eager to witness the behavior of the queen.

The young priest whom we saw kneeling in the Church of our Lady missed nothing of the dramatic scene which took place outside the door of the church. Instead of following the queen and the crowd, he took a much shorter way, which led him more quickly to the place whither all were hurrying.

It was a touching sight to see the young queen advancing a paces from which the bravest died. From time to time the little girl looked round to make sure that the queen was near her. At last, having entered the street to which they were going, the child raised her arm and pointed out the house.

The window was closed. Julie having given herself up for lost, would end her agony as soon as possible by closing out the pure air, and leaving herself wholly a prey to the noxious odors of her heated, gloomy apartment. She sat down at the end of the bed, and rested her burning head on the feet of the corpse.

All at once she heard a loud noise in the street. The clamor became louder. What could it mean? Julie, fearing the people were gathering to murder her, trembled with new terror. She rushed to the window and looked down at the crowd below. "Ah," she said, "they are going to pull down the house. I shall die," she said, "but they shall not touch me." Raising the coverlet, she lay down beside the corpse, and awaited the entrance of those who, she thought, were coming to destroy her. "I defy them now," she said: "they will not surely think

that my mother died of the plague." A horrible thought crossed her mind, that the house was abandoned, that it was set on fire, and she became unconscious.

When the child, Julie's little friend, pointed out the house, Ofried drew his dagger, pushed it in between two of the stones built up in the doorway, and made room for his hands. It was very difficult to remove the stones; the needful tools were not at hand. Time was becoming more precious; the death-like stillness within the house made him fear the girl was already dead.

His hands were covered with blood, his dagger was broken; he stopped a moment; the queen caught the large stones in her delicate hands; the queen's courage and hope were renewed; with one mighty effort he loosened the stones, pulled them from their place, and made a large breach in the wall. Jane was the first to enter the breach. Ofried said to her respectfully: "My sovereign will allow me to enter alone; I shall be sufficient to save the imprisoned child."

"Thanks, Ofried; I refuse your request only because I am bound to give my people an example of courage."

The queen quickly advanced over the rubbish torn from the door; but her foot having slipped, to save herself from falling she cried out: "Ofried, your hand!" and both disappeared in the dark passage, followed by the brave little girl who was so anxious to save Julie.

At the time Ofried presented his hand to the queen, two men appeared in the entrance to the street. One walked rapidly in deep rage, the other followed with a cruel joy, which he could hardly hide.

"It is not so! It cannot be!" cried the one whose anger blazed in his face. While he spoke, he saw the queen and Ofried disappear through the breach made in the rubbish with which the door had been filled. He staggered for a moment; then seizing his dagger, he rushed like a tiger towards the house.

His companion followed him. It was Wenceslaus and Hatto.

After having set the snare in which he hoped to ruin the queen, Hatto hastened to the king. Wenceslaus was in great good humor that night. He showed some of his former friendship for Hatto. He told him he had an important commission, which he wished to entrust to a man worthy of the charge.

"Whom does your majesty deign to honor?" asked Hatto.

"Ofried has always given me proof of his zeal and devotedness."

"Doubtless; yet I should say it is because of her majesty the queen."

The king was offended at the tone in which these words were spoken.

"What do you mean by these words, count?"

"Only what they speak. I have always admired Ofried's respectful affection for the queen."

Wenceslaus was silent for a moment. "Ofried has been with the queen since he was a child."

"I understand that the noble lady of the house of Bavaria took him under her special protection, Notberg having saved the life of the count in an adventure of the chase. But your Majesty surely knows the history of this adventure, for one of the tasks of the bear which destroyed Notberg is to be seen in the oratory of the queen."

"The task of the bear?"

"Your Majesty may wish to hear the legend?"

"Surely."

"None can be more touching. Notberg had just died his terrible death, when the lady of Hainault, whose promises had calmed the fears of the dying man, laid her hand on the brow of Ofried, saying at the same time to her little daughter, I mean her Majesty: 'Here is your brother.' This event ended the day; the hunters returned to the castle. Next day Ofried demanded the tasks of the wild boar, and presented one to her Majesty. I am sure the queen sets a higher price on such a deed than on all the jewels in the crown of Bohemia."

"And I approve it with all my heart," said Wenceslaus. "I knew that the father of Ofried had saved the life of Count Albert."

"I. is that which explains the gratitude of the whole family."

"Up to the present there have been few acts to prove such gratitude."

"In the beginning, yes; but it has not been in the power of Count Albert. Events in their unforeseen march have led to the fortune of Ofried. But the young man has no ambition; he takes no pride in the favor with which the queen honors him."

This time Hatto's voice took a tone of ratiolary.

"It is a barren favor; I will see he is better rewarded."

"Be cautious, your Majesty; pardon the zeal which may carry me beyond the limits of your Majesty's favor. Why give Ofried more than he covets? In the possession of power lies his danger. Her Majesty has too much goodness not to yearn for opportunities to repair the injustice which fortune has done to a betrothed."

"A brother!"

"Without doubt a brother, and always a brother; but once Ofried had reason to hope."

"Albert promised them?"

"Albert promised; but it seems to me your Majesty should have been made acquainted with these important details in the queen's former life."

"I have known them," said Wenceslaus, sadly. "And yet this evening I will—Speak, speak, or on my soul!" Wenceslaus ceased; his voice shook in anger; rage burned in his eyes; jealousy was already gnawing his heart.

"Hear, then, all that I know. The Count of Bavaria promised to Ofried the hand of his daughter, in order to be free himself to make a new alliance, and to make happy two young persons who loved one another."

"Malediction!" cried Wenceslaus. "The heiress of Bavaria and Hainault, who had accepted the hand of Ofried, understood political expediency. Nothing betrayed her into an expression of regret. Your Majesty saw her come into Prague with a smile on her lips. She was beautiful enough to dazzle every eye; she shone—"

"She brought Ofried with her," murmured the king.

"Her brother," rejoined Hatto. "Her former betrothed."

"Oh, it does not matter, sire; may not noble souls triumph over passion?"

"Then it was a passion!"

"Everything in our life is passion," continued Hatto. "Remember that the queen owes to Notberg the life of her father. None can discharge such a debt too well. What matters it if the child of Count Albert was allowed to think for a few days that she was to be the spouse of Ofried? She had seen nothing of the great world; the chateau was like a cloister. She had seen no one except the old chaplain, the old nurse, Bridget, and Ofried. Albert had thought of marrying again, and the step-mother would not have suffered that a large slice should be cut from the domains of Albert to furnish a marriage portion for her step-daughter. What surprise! what ecstasy! Boleslas comes to offer them a crown!"

"Yes, what ecstasy indeed! She accepted it—"

"What could she have done? Her father—"

"She had not known me," murmured Wenceslaus.

Your Majesty knows that princess—"

Without waiting to listen, Wenceslaus arose, went over to a large mirror, looked at himself for a moment, and then stamped his foot with rage, saying: "I am not handsome."

"Could your Majesty have made a better choice? The queen is, as is well known, very much attached to you. Her time is passed in the duties of her high estate, or in prayer and retirement."

Wenceslaus did not reply. He looked at Hatto with a threatening air. The latter, embarrassed by his master's look, stammered out a few words, and was silent.

"After that?" demanded the king.

"What does your Majesty deign to mean?"

"That is not all."

"I don't know."

"You know something more. Speak; what do you fear?"

"I fear—"

"Fear only falsehood, Hatto."

"Sire," said the villain, bowing profoundly, "I have experienced your Majesty's goodness; her Majesty has deprived me of its enjoyment. I regret the privation; but I have not duty to fulfill, I believe it to be stain my allegiance, from the faithfulness which I owe, and I continue to watch over my sovereign's honor as I would guard his life."

"You have said my honor; take care, vassal, you are referring to the queen!"

"I think not of any risk I may run when there is need to prove my devotion to your Majesty."

"You confess to them, that all these clever windings through which you have brought this conference, have only one end—to enlighten me as to the past?"

"And that you may be on your guard even now."

Wenceslaus started as if he had been bitten by a viper.

"I do not," said Hatto, "cast the shadow of a doubt on the queen's virtue. I believe it to be stain my allegiance, from the faithfulness which I owe, and I continue to watch over my sovereign's honor as I would guard his life."

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through the breach made in the door that was closed up the evening before. Wenceslaus would have rushed in to see the queen, but Hatto said to him: "Wait one moment more."

Julie lay in the chamber of the dead. She heard the door opening. She closed her eyes that she might not see those who she believed were coming to murder her. Hearing a mild voice calling her, she opened them again, and reading her deliverance in the pity which shone in the eyes of the queen, Julie arose and knelt before her in tears.

Ofried spoke a few consoling words to her, and the queen was recommending the poor girl to leave the place at once, when a hurried footstep was heard coming from the door of the street. "They are coming," cried the terrified girl. In another moment a priest entered the room. It was Father John Nepomucene whom we saw kneeling in the church of Our Lady. "It is God, who has sent you," cried Julie; "my mother will not be buried without Christian rites."

The priest knelt down. Ofried also knelt, and the queen and the orphan girl were reciting the psalms for the dead along with the priest, when Wenceslaus rushed in, with his dagger in his hand, and the foam of his mad rage whitening his lips. The priest walked up to him, and demanded: "Why do you come thus, sire, into the presence of the dead?"

Wenceslaus was lost in astonishment at what he saw. The cold, stiffened corpse, the tearful orphan, and the priest praying the prayers for the dead. It was very unlike what he had been led to expect, and remembering the anguish of the miserable night he had passed his rage was turned against Hatto.

The plotter was taken by surprise, and he was likely to pay the penalty of his wickedness, had not the queen arisen from her knees, and gone to meet the king. "Oh, my noble spouse, we must strive to make this poor girl forget all her sufferings."

"And let her pray for us," said Wenceslaus, as he threw his dagger into the garden to see me brave the pest, the duty of sovereigns is to make their people believe in Providence. We have been placed at an early age on the throne; we have, therefore, many years before us to lighten the burthens and the sorrows of our people. Your treasures have been always placed generously within my reach. Promise me you will not exact a strict account from charity; alas lay up the richest treasure in heaven."

"Jane, no one shall thwart your holy zeal."

"And if I ask so much for those that want clothes and food, I am none the less anxious to fill the nation's treasury."

"Are you going to speak on affairs of state?"

"Perhaps so."

"Very well; I am pleased."

"You are listening?"

"Attentively."

"And when you will have heard me—"

"I will profit by your advice."

Wenceslaus, the richest kingdoms are those in which there are fewest poor. Bohemia is filled with rich lords and famishing beggars. Heaven forbid that I should speak ill of the memory of Charles IV, but in his haste to make the empire flourish, and to gather to himself the partisans of Louis, he raised heavy incomes, first, to reward the services of the nobles, and afterwards those incomes were to be so to fill the royal treasury. Is not this an abuse? Every place bought by a wealthy lord, careless of his duties, would have been conscientiously filled by a poorer but more honest man. By following your father's rule of conduct, reality and simony shall go hand in hand, and you lay yourself open to the danger of having none but corrupt and ambitious men around you.

It is not well governed people who foment revolution, but a people governed by persons reckless of what happens in the masses beneath them. Keep yourself steady eye to the welfare of the people if you would have your throne settled on a broad, firm foundation. Do not sell to the highest bidder what should reward the most worthy."

Then the king and the queen reviewed the names of the great men of the court, and they resolved that some of them should be taught a severe lesson, that some should lose their places, and that those who had it in their power to make promises should learn that the merits of candidates should weigh more in the balance than their wealth.

"Bat," said the king, "there is one of your protégés for whom you do not ask any favor."

"My brother Ofried," said the queen, smiling; "sire, he is not ambitious."

"As he never been ambitious," Jane?"

In spite of himself, Wenceslaus felt a touch of bitterness in asking this question.

"Never," replied the queen. "When fortune seemed favorable to him, he welcomed it; when fortune abandoned him, he knew how to be resigned. His is a noble heart, wholly devoted to your interests; you can put it to the test."

"If I should entrust him with a mission?"

"He will do his best in fulfilling it."

"It shall be a difficult and distant one."

"Inaction is not good for men of his age; employ Ofried as you may deem fitting."

The queen spoke these words with so much frank simplicity, that the king felt pained at having placed a snare before his young wife.

"Be it so, then; to-morrow he shall go to France, Hatto would have been entrusted with the message, but Hatto is unworthy of any favor."

Wenceslaus then began to speak of John Nepomucene. The queen had many opportunities of hearing of the priest; she told the king all she had heard of his zeal in the service of God, and his learning and piety. He was spoken of him to preach the Advent at the court.

"Then you will not have the honor of converting me?"

That evening, while John Nepomucene was praying in his cell, he received a request from the king, asking

him to come to the court to preach during the Advent. The queen chose the preacher as her confessor, and the holy priest lent himself to the task of guiding her, not only in the way of virtue, but to highest Christian perfection.

Hatto discreetly hid himself. With one being disgraced, he was sorely vexed. Great disgrace threatened him; he was too cunning not to endeavor to escape it. He accordingly shunned the court till the anger of the king should have passed away. His wickedness and his tact whispered to him that he would yet succeed in the evil work he had undertaken. Ofried, who had gratefully accepted the mission entrusted to him by the king, had not yet returned from France. John Nepomucene had won a wholesome influence over the king. Everything had promised a happy future to the kingdom and to the royal household, when

Hatto's evil genius, pushed the latter to a desperate resolve, which would cost him his liberty and his life, or ruin the queen forever.

CHAPTER VI. THE POISONED CUP.

The feast of the Three Kings was celebrated with great pomp and rejoicing. Wenceslaus invited to his table all the great men of the kingdom. The ministers of the king, the ambassadors, Hatto, whose pardon had been obtained by the queen, and all who held high places in the court, sat round the table of the king.

Ofried, who was come from France, after a year's absence, had that evening the honor of waiting on the queen. He had fulfilled his mission; the king was thoroughly pleased with him. The king would have given him a very honorable post, but for some time past the young man's thoughts had been turning to the cloister, and the more he advanced in life, the stronger became his yearning to break the ties that bound him to the world. His modesty and unselfishness won the admiration of Wenceslaus. He consulted him on many important questions. As astonished at his prudence and wisdom, he began to cherish a high esteem for the son of Notberg.

The wine cups were pledged and were honored by the joyous guests. The empty wine-cups were refilled. Ofried had just taken one from a side-board, when a valet roughly took it from his hands, and gave him one filled with Tokay in its stead. A group of valets, in passing near him, jostled against him. In the confusion of the moment, a cunning hand dropped a small packet into his pocket. The king was in the act of raising to his lips the cup presented to him by Ofried, when his arm was suddenly and roughly grasped. Wenceslaus merely turned round to see who could have been guilty of such daring insolence. Hatto was behind him, and Hatto's piercing eyes stared into his.

"Wretch!" cried Wenceslaus. "The king shall not drink," said Hatto.

"You shall be chastised this instant," answered the monarch.

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