

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

FROM THE FRENCH OF HAOUL DE NAVERY. CHAPTER VII.

THE YOW AND ITS FULFILLMENT.

The night was come. It was lowering and dark; a night meet for fearful thoughts and guilty deeds. Otried was lying on the floor of one of the darkest dungeons of Prague. Word was sent to him that he must die on the morrow. With a mournful resignation he reviewed the rapid events and changes of his life. He was about to die, to die in his twentieth year! To die a fearful death for a crime he had not been guilty of!

The queen knew Wenceslaus too well not to know also why Otried was about to be put to death. Not an hour, not a moment was to be lost. She trembled at the thought that her adopted brother, the companion of her childhood, was doomed. He was the victim of a deep, wicked plot. Far from being able to lighten his suffering, prayer or a word breathed by her would in his favor would only double the rigor of his punishment. A word is enough to turn a jealous king into a dreadful tyrant. The more strongly she asserted her belief in Otried's innocence, the stronger would become the suspicions of Wenceslaus. The unhappy queen was a prey to deepest bitterness; she saw nothing but danger around her; her reason rejected as useless the counsels her heart had prompted.

She could wait no longer. Minutes were worth ages. A few hours more and all would be finished; Otried would have suffered a terrible death, mainly because of his devoted and blameless attachment to the queen. There was only one resource left to her. She sent for Father John Nepomucene. She went down to the chapel to await his coming. The frescoes on the walls were lost in the dark; the lamp in the sanctuary cast only a dim fugal gleam on the rich statues and draperies. She shook nervously at the least noise. Two of her maids were kneeling at the lower end of the chapel. Her confessor was in the confessional; she entered, knelt down, and made the sign of the cross.

"Father," said she, in a voice tremulous with distress, "I wish to place this confession in the keeping of the angels, and under the seal of confession. I do not come to speak of my faults. I have bound myself to try to save the life of a person condemned to death. I need your advice. If you tell me to sacrifice my life I am ready to obey you."

"Your life belongs to God," he answered, "I have made a vow, I made it before my marriage, warily. I do not suffer the remembrance of it to rest in my mind; it does not trouble my mind in the present, nor shall it in the future. If I have suffered, God alone knows it; I have never had one thought unfavourable to the king, my husband and lord. But when I think of Otried, of how much have I to accuse myself? Do you know how much I owe to him? His father died to save mine; in the hour of her death my dear mother Isabella bade me watch over Otried. All her anxiety for him, the whole force of the obligation she enjoined me, were summed up in these words: 'A life for a life! Forget it not.'"

"A life for a life!" repeated the priest. "Who would desire the death of Otried, if Hatto did not seek it as a means to regain the influence which he had over the king, and which I had broken?" Thanks to you, my child, I escaped the snare he had set for my ruin. He does not now attack me directly. My station is too high to accuse me openly of a crime. But as Wenceslaus has been made the victim of attempted assassination, will no suspicion come into his mind that I am in some manner connected with the crime? In striking at Otried, it is I who am aimed at. Otried is condemned. I believe myself to be suspected. After his death the prison will open to receive me. Prison and punishment have no terrors for the innocent; but if I shall die young, I should strive as best I may to keep my mother's stainless name from suffering in me. I will not be ill-judged by him whom I have accepted for my husband, and who has made me such an ill return for the many sacrifices I have made for him. If Otried dies, my ruin will follow soon after. Save this young man for his own sake, for mine, for sake of the solemn promise given to Notberg. Let to my own unaided efforts, I am powerless. The king is tenured with jewels of price rare enough to tempt a poor jailer. Show me a better means of saving Otried, otherwise I go at once to the prison to save him, and come what may, I shall be able to say I have kept the promise made to Notberg—A life for a life."

"You shall not do so," said the priest, earnestly. "Otried must be saved." "My child, this is a serious and solemn moment for you. Represent to yourself the tribunal of Christ; search your conscience with the light of His Gospel, search it closely; examine your most hidden motives, and answer me, in your heart ever troubled with any other thought of Otried than as of one whom your mother charged you to defend, and whose innocence and defenceless condition deserve your pity, and, if need be, your help?"

"Never," answered the queen. "Oat of obedience to my father I sacrificed myself in accepting Wenceslaus for my husband, but since that hour I have had no regret, no after thought for which I should blush before God or you."

"May heaven bless you, child," he said. "Do you advise me to try to save Otried?" "No, I should not deem it prudent."

"But my promise?" "It shall be kept." "I have promised a life for a life." "Do you require anything more than

to free Otried from his prison?" "To procure him the means of flight."

"If Otried be not found in the prison to-morrow, shall it not be said, the queen procured his escape? Hatto closely watches for his prey. When he strikes Otried, he aims at you. Be cautious; the wicked as well as the good are likely to expect you will do an act of generous imprudence. The prison is guarded well. Otried must be snatched from the hands of the hangman without your being compromised."

"And who will be bold enough to expose himself to the deadly hate of Wenceslaus?"

"I will," said the priest. "You! you!" repeated the queen. "Otried," said the priest, "is now awaiting a confessor. Doubtless he has already sent for me. He feels the need of avowing his innocence to a friend, and of receiving from my hands the crucifix, the emblem of innocence condemned. I alone can save Otried. I am known and loved in the prison. I will go into it, and demand to be shown the condemned. I will go into his cell to encourage him. I can remain a good while with him; no one will wonder why I stay so long. My cloak will be large enough; the tunic and the countenance of the priest need not be seen, and Otried may pass out quietly in the cloak of the priest."

"But yourself!" exclaimed the queen. "I shall remain praying there till the hour for the execution." "The hour will be discovered." "Doubtless; but before they shall have missed Otried, he will be securely hidden in the Cistercian monastery."

"The king's anger will be terrible." "It will be inflamed against me only." "But you will be accused of treason." "I have so often proved my devotedness to Wenceslaus, that he will never be convinced of my guilt."

"I fear, I fear very much," cried the queen. "The worst that can come is to condemn me to death in place of Otried; even then you need have no cause of sorrow on my account. I shall die the martyr of charity; it is a favor which God does not often grant to His servants now-a-days."

"And I shall have drawn you to your doom." "I speak of martyrdom, and you answer me by pointing out the suffering to be undergone. Child, this is not how a Christian speaks. If on my life rests the saving of the innocent, the fulfillment of a duty, an act great and holy, truly worthy of God, why should the thought of my death distress you? I engage myself in a cause doubly lawful; you are guiltless, your adopted brother is good and innocent. Pray the Lord, then, to give me grace and strength, while I am employing my self for you."

The confessor, raising his hands, and pronouncing a fervent blessing on the queen allowed her to leave the chapel with her maids, and then he quitted the confessional, and hastened to the prison. He gave his name to the guards, and passed on quietly to the apartments of the jailer. The jailer knew and loved the priest, and his rugged features lighted up in a smile as soon as he saw him.

"You have been expected," said he; "but without doubt you have been staying by the bedside of some sick person."

The priest answered not; but who was so sad as the queen, whose soul so troubled? While the priest and the jailer went together to Otried's cell, the latter said: "Poor youth! he declares his innocence in a voice which we understand. He is as guiltless as my daughter's latest born child. If I could save him by remaining a whole year shut up in his place, I would do it cheerfully. But the law is strict; he who aids a prisoner to escape shall undergo the punishment to which he had been condemned. I did not know that it was so severe. Count Hatto struck at it, and he added that a lady, deeply veiled, would come surely, and offer me a rich bribe to give the prisoner a chance of escape. But in his zeal for the interests of the king, the count must have surely exaggerated; in any case, no lady has crossed the door of the prison."

"No one will trouble you; poor Otried has neither father nor mother," replied the priest. "Surely, surely; but Count Hatto seemed to fear that I could not withstand the influence of a lady so rich as to be able to offer me half of Bohemia as a bribe. I am poor, very poor indeed; yet the richest bribe could not make me waver in my duty, though death were the consequence of my refusal."

"Nothing less than a miracle will save Otried," said the priest. "But if God, who watches over the innocent saves him, do not fear; you shall not suffer in his stead."

The jailer turned a heavy key in a strong lock, pushed back the heavily barred door, and allowed a ray of light from his small lantern, to cast a dim glimmer into the prison. The unexpected ray fell on the eyes of the lonely prisoner. He tried to describe the countenance of his visitors, but the feeble light falling on the floor, he was unable to recognize the person who had come into his cell of stone. The priest made a sign to the jailer, who withdrew. Then Father John Nepomucene pushed the heavy bolt of the door into its place, and he was alone with the prisoner.

"Did you not expect me?" "I expected you, because I sent for you; but there is another for whom I did not send, and whom I expected to come."

"Whom do you accuse, my son?" "I accuse not; I pity."

"Do you not know how much that person would have to brave?" "I know, father—death." "Then you are vexed because mortals are ungrateful?" "I pity those who have no heart."

"For your accusing, repent; no one is pure before God." "Ah," cried Otried, "I am sorry I have not given my whole life to God,

instead of having lost the best part of it for creatures, who think neither of my devotedness nor of the sacrifices I have made. I would wish for a long life now, in order to give it to Him who alone could grant me such a blessing. My life has been an illusion, and I am justly punished for it. I believed in friendship, in gratitude. I thought that fortune could not harden every heart. Folly and deceit! Prosperity blunts the noblest feelings. A woman, who would be a saint in the bosom of an humble family, becomes selfish and heartless in a palace."

"Take care, Otried." "I know what you would say. The queen is gentle and modest; she loves to scatter alms with bounteous hand; she keeps in her heart the remembrance of the past; she is a heroine; she braved the terrors of the plague to save the dying. No matter for my part I say, Jane, Queen of Bohemia and Germany, breaks her solemn promise in allowing me to perish. I once believed that if the earth opened at her very feet, she would have kept her word."

"Otried! Otried! you will bitterly regret the words you have spoken." "What did she do when she saw me in bonds? Did she speak one word to appease the anger of Wenceslaus? Did she take any trouble to discover the real criminal? The deepest plots are devised for the ruin of one who never judged ill of any one. I have fallen into the snare. One hand alone can save me out of it. That hand has not stirred to save me."

"Do you know the reason?" "The word ingratitude is sufficient explanation." "The queen has not forgotten the promise made by Jane of Hainault. But the son of Notberg forgets that evil-minded men make use of past innocency to speak ill of their sovereign. They do not say, Otried is the adopted brother of Jane, but that she trifles with the honor of a woman and a queen."

"Infamous! Infamous! who dares to cast a stain on a spotless name?" "It has been dared." "Who? but who has dared to speak so foul a lie?" "Doubtless the man who put the poison into your pocket to cause your arrest, and to make your apparent guilt bring disgrace on the queen."

"Hatto!" murmured Otried; "the wretch Hatto! Then she has acted wisely in not coming to my release. I no longer complain. The hangman is less terrible than the anger of Wenceslaus will be. To-morrow I shall die; the sword which will be raised and broken more slowly and pitilessly."

"And yet," said the priest, "she wished to come to release you. I allowed your bitter words to pass; I was sure you would regret them. The queen knows well she owes you a life; she was going to save you, though she had no reason to hope she could succeed. The approach to the prison are watched. I have made the promise she would not be guilty of any indiscretion. She has yielded to my advice, and I am come to fulfill the vow she had made, the promise she undertook to keep. You are going to be freed, freed in a moment. I am going to remind you of the Christian wish expressed by you when he says you had none, that you would consecrate your life to God were it prolonged."

"I swear to do so, father." "Then I am well repaid already," said the priest. "What means do you use to set me free?" "The simplest."

"You will bribe the jailer?" "It happens that he will not be bribed."

"How then?" "The priest drew from his shoulders the large cloak which covered him, and it fell down at his feet. "Take this cloak," said he; "cover up your face; ascend the two stairs by which the prison is reached. A miracle! cried many voices, while others added: "Long life to Otried!"

Wenceslaus cast a stupid, angry look at the arena, and finding himself cheated of his expected prey, he cried in a voice hoarse with passion: "Traitorous priest! thou shalt pay dearly for this!" And turning to the queen, he added: "He is also your accomplice; but justice shall be done to you both."

The king dared not, ornel despot though he was, to order the punisher of the priest before a people by whom he was loved and venerated as a saint. Besides, what could he gain by the priest's death? What Wenceslaus most wished for was the truth regarding the queen; and who was better able to enlighten him than the man whose treasonable interference had saved Otried?

Wenceslaus commanded the tribune and the platform on which the priest had been bound to be taken to pieces. The royal cortège returned to the court; the king shut himself up in his private apartments, refusing admittance to every one, even to Hatto.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KING AND THE CONFESSOR.

The floor of the chamber shook under the king's heavy, rapid stride. Father John Nepomucene watched him from his place by the mantel-piece. The king's anger found vent in vehement, abrupt words. He roared like a tiger, and blasphemed like Julian the apostate. The words which fell from his lips sounded like threats. Every time he found himself face to face with the priest he seemed about to give orders for the death of the man who foiled him of his expected victim, then he suddenly checked himself as he was going to speak, and cast about in his mind for an inference, which he could not draw.

At length he muttered through his lips, white with the foam of rage, the words: "Do you know that the horses which were to drag the poisoner to pieces are still in the stable of the executioner?" "I know it, sire."

"And have you no fear of a traitor's punishment?" "In what have I betrayed my king?"

filled his lungs with it, and hid himself in the pores of a church to await the opening of the gates of the city. When he had crossed the draw-bridge his joy was so intense that he forgot the priest, and the fear which he had had that he would be sacrificed to his great charity. He was now free; all he had to do was to seek an asylum amongst the Cistercians.

While he turned his steps towards the monastery the city was awaking from the slumbers of the night. Prague awoke to unrest, to noisy bustle, to pain, and suspense. Otried had been sentenced to die that morning, and the burghers and the people were thinking of the sad spectacle which they expected to take place. Many of them, however, loved Otried. They remembered his almsgiving; they spoke of his manly bearing, his frank open countenance, so free from laughings. The murmured cries of a young man so brave and good should have undergone a punishment so terrible. They could not think of accusing him of the crime. Who had warned the king of the poison? Hatto. Who had said the poison was to be found on the person of Otried? Again, Hatto. It was true Hatto made a great boast of his devotedness to the king; but he really respected his sovereign would he have shown his hatred for the queen so openly? When the people had drawn this inference which these observations suggested, they lowered their voices, and looked around in fear. Many spoke of having the Holy Sacrifice offered up for Otried. Some asked if he would die with a fair day. Some asked if a queen, because of her having to be present at the sad spectacle.

All at once the bells of the city began to ring. They sounded the death-knell. Two platforms, hastily constructed in the night, were the most striking objects that caught the eyes of the people in the morning. One furnished with hangings of black cloth was the tribune; the other, made only of coarse planks, rudely joined together, was the resting place prepared for the prisoner before he was dragged by the wild horses.

The windows were thronged with eager faces; the streets were choked up with the swaying crowds, and the shattered cries of the women and children rent the air. There was speaking and earnest gesture, but high above the uproar of the people rose the deep, mournful clangor of the cathedral bell.

Two men, stripped to their waists, held four wild horses, that plunged and reared, their manes flowing in the morning wind, and their hoofs angrily stamping the flagged street. Soldiers stood around the platform to keep back the surging crowds. At last the royal cortège came in sight. Wenceslaus had ordered the young queen to dress in her richest, gayest robes, that she might bear witness to her joy in the king's happy escape from the wicked hands that attempted his life. On one side of the monarch sat Hatto, a greater favorite than ever. The anxious Jane sat in front. Wenceslaus inclined himself towards her with deep tenderness. Hatto smiled wickedly. When the king and queen reached the tribune, a signal was given, which was at once answered by another from the top of the prison tower, and the funeral procession began to form.

The prisoner, whose form was shrouded in a large coarse cloak, moved onwards with firm, even tread. He walked up to the tribune with the same fearless ease; he heard his death sentence read, and calmly waited for the end. The executioner's assistants led the horses nearer, and in the iron rings fastened to their harness they fixed strong ropes, to which they bound the limbs of the doomed man. When all was ready, the executioner pulled off the veil which covered the face of the prisoner, and a cry, long and loud, arose from the astonished crowd: "Father John Nepomucene! A miracle!" cried many voices, while others added: "Long life to Otried!"

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"Otried lives, Otried is free, and you ask—" "Otried is not guilty, sire. I have spared you long remorse—" "The cup of poisoned wine—" "The cup was exchanged by cunning hands."

"The poison was found on his person." "Otried has enemies." "Enemies! what enemies? My friends, who watch over my life, and love me, and would defend me? Otried is guilty, not only of attempted murder, but also of a crime more hateful, which makes me a but for the rally of my subjects."

"Sire, anger blinds your better judgment." "I know it all. She and he: two beings in whom I had so much trust; two who seemed to love virtue equally well—and under the cloak of religion, under the mask of hypocrisy."

"Otried is not a hypocrite." "Do you know him so well that you may answer for him?" "I have known his respect and his love; often he came to my cell for advice or consolation."

"He suffered, then?" "Who does not suffer?" "And you, priest, heard the confession of his pain?" "Yes, and I shared in it; his suffering childhood, his father's untimely and tragic death, were enough to excite my pity for him."

"Speak not of that." "Often, also, he told me of his wish to embrace a religious life." "What reason did he give to make him think he had a vocation?" "The little hold the world had on him."

"Did it not promise him a great deal?" "It always promises too much." "And do you believe in his yearning to quit the world?" "Yes, sire."

"To quit the world, to renounce all, to clothe himself in the garb of a monk!" "I am a priest," said Father John Nepomucene. "You were poor, Otried was rich and of gentle blood. Your heart never trembled to a feeling of love: Otried loved."

"Otried's love was pure and holy, sire." "Otried should die for having dared to raise his eyes to her whom he loved."

"Even if, by a fatal coincidence, the poison had not been found on him?" "Perhaps so," said the king in a bitter tone. "Oh, what prejudice!" cried the priest. "You, at any rate, could save him."

"I tried to do it." "By aiding in his escape. What does that avail? My soldiers will find him; a price has been set upon his head. But what is now most pressing is to bring peace to me, to quench the jealousy which consumes me, to prove—" "Can I prove anything, sire?"

The king continued, as if he had not heard him. "To prove that I am right in believing in the fidelity of the queen." "Ah, sire, believe in it as if it were as clearly seen as the light of the sun."

"I demand proof." "Can I apply the proofs?" "John," said the king "you inspire me with great confidence. One word from you will save two lives, the queen's life and Otried's. The queen shall die to atone for his crime. Now you ought to speak that word. The circumstances are so grave that every other consideration gives way to the obligation of restoring to the queen and to Otried the good name they have lost. The poison was shown to me, but I do not attach so much importance to the attempt made on my life as I do to an affection or passion which undermines my happiness. If Jane loved me, Otried would have never attempted my life. Now I wish to know from you if I am loved by the queen."

"Then ask your own heart, sire." "It might deceive me." "Then ask Almighty God." "God has ministers in this world," said the king, "to Whom He gives powers which raise them above other men, and make them in some manner like to their Divine Master. They are made judges of right and wrong; they bind and loose. Nothing is hidden from them. The dearest secrets, seen and rets dangerous and deadly are told to them. Well, it may one day happen that a man tortured by keenest anguish, and otherwise unable to know the truth, shall say to the priest, 'Give me the confidence I need to save me from a crime.' I am that man."

"I do not understand you, sire," said the priest. "Must I then speak out? You do not understand me! It is false; you know what I demand and what I need."

"No, no," cried the priest, pressing his hands to his head, "it cannot be what I fear; it is too dreadful!" "I see well that you understand me."

"It is impossible." "We shall make it possible. Speak, and there is no place in our kingdom, which you may not claim. I offer you the bishopric of Leitomeritz, the chancellorship of the kingdom, whatever you covet. You shall be my chief adviser; all my favors shall be in your gift; all my confidence shall be placed in you."

"I have begged this as a favor from you," said the priest, "you would trust me in the very hour in which I should make myself unworthy of every trust."

like another man. My wife's heart should be laid bare to me." "Now," said the priest, in a tone of deepest sorrow, "now is the minor of God counted vile indeed; he is asked to sell the secrets of the confessional."

"Ask it as a husband, not as a king." "Before the confessor the king is only a man, and to this man never will I betray the confidence of a penitent, never will I break the seal of confession."

"Then," said Wenceslaus, "the queen is guilty, otherwise you would not fear to speak."

"Sire, you know well I am not free to speak. You know I am not free to furnish you with proofs of a penitent's guilt or innocence."

"Could she blame you for speaking to save her?" "You forget I have a soul; you do not think of my damnation. When I present myself before my Judge, the angels, who keep watch and ward round the tribunal of penance could not find flaming swords keen enough, nor thunder bolts terrible enough, to hurl me with those eternally cursed by God. The demons themselves would say to one another, 'Behold that infamous priest! he has betrayed the secret of confession; he has brought into our midst the guilt of a crime hitherto unknown!'"

"A man may obey his sovereign. When the monarch speaks the subject should obey."

"He should never disobey the Monarch of kings and of subjects."

"Do you save the queen or abandon her to destruction?" "I can do nothing, sire; nothing more than remind you of the goodness, the gentleness of the queen, the sterling virtues she has taught by word and example. Could one like her have fallen from the traditions and virtues of the princesses of her race? Could one like her have forgotten the modesty of a woman and the dignity of a queen? Could she have spurned a love like yours, which, though violent, may be none the less sincere?"

"Sincere!" said Wenceslaus. "Jane, with her tenderness, in which I once believed; with her eyes of blue, which beamed with heaven's own light; her angel's smile; her small fair hands, which spent my treasures in almsgiving; she was queen of my heart. All my heart, soul and feeling were hers. Of my savage heart she made a human heart. She ruled a nature wild and ungovernable. I obeyed her, and found my pleasure in obeying her; but it was her virtue I obeyed. Now I know not whether I ought to bless her or to curse her."

"Curse only your blind passions, sire," said the priest. "Will you speak out as I have demanded?" "Never!" answered the priest. "And the queen's confession?" "She shall be known only to God and to me."

"This is folly and madness?" cried the king. "Sire, passions blind you. You do not see things as they ought to be seen. If the penitent could not trust in the silence of the priest, would he ever open his lips in the confessional? Take away the obligation of strictest secrecy, and you do away with sacramental confession; you rob the Church of one of her highest privileges, the privilege of granting pardon. If she once betrayed, who would come to her for pardon?"

"I agree with you," said the king, "that the obligation of secrecy weighs with great weight in ordinary circumstances; but in this instance common rules may be set aside. It is not the case of a man asking a question by chance. It is the case of a king demanding an answer from a subject; of a husband asking if he may still trust in the faithfulness of the woman who has solemnly promised to honor and obey him."

"Sire," said the priest "you find many plausible reasons to help you out in your demand. Viewed in the light which religion gives, the reasons you allege are groundless. You claim to argue against the decrees of a law divinely made and sanctioned. To the priest and not to the king it is said, 'What you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven.' With the confessional you have nothing to do. To us it is given to keep the secrets of the soul. In the creature who kneels in the confessional the priest sees only a Christian. Be it queen or peasant, it is all the same. All Christians have the same claim, the same title, the same right to the inviolable silence of the confessional. The claims of the wife are strong as those of the husband. Were it otherwise, the queen might ask the same questions of me as you have, had I been the confessor of the king. If you could urge you claims successfully, why should not a father claim to have betrayed to him the secrets of a son, a master those of a servant? Lastly, sire, betrayal is impossible."

"Stubborn priest, you will suffer the queen to be accused to be imprisoned, perhaps put to death, when one word might save her. If the queen be guiltless, nothing shall convince me that Otried sought my death; the person really guilty shall be punished, and your protégé may return to the court."

"Better for him to stay far from it," said the priest. "But the queen is a queen!" "One day you will know the whole truth."

"One day! And endure this anguish till then! No; I would rather see her dead, lost to me for ever, than bear the torture of thinking she loves another. Your silence will be fatal to her. To one your king is no wrong. Give, then, to Christ what belongs to Christ."

"And to God what belongs to God," rejoined the priest. "I have begged this as a favor from you."

"I know that, and I am sorry you persist in asking it." "If I should command it as a right?" "Then I would refuse, now and always."

You will ruin the queen by your