

These were words which filled the mother with terror, not only with her burning maternal affection for her only boy, but for the too likely consequence to a wife who gave her husband no male heir. It was true that the Franks were nominally Christian, but their hold on their religion was very slight, and even where the doctrines and the pious practices were most closely kept, the holiness and inviolability of marriage were very slow to be accepted. Even two centuries later the noted Charlemagne was very faulty in this respect. Thus Bernhild was conscious that her fair cheeks were growing weather-stained and rugged, and she had been quite startled when she caught a glimpse of her face in a pail of water. If her little Hundbert was gone, what hold should she have on her husband?

And Hundbert pined more and more every day. Valhild was better, only very fractious, and often bringing on herself blows, for her mother was almost angry that a worthless maid child should recover when her beautiful boy was getting weaker and weaker. He could not stand now, and he cried whenever anyone touched him except his mother.

Suddenly an idea came to her. Perhaps it was inspired by hearing Bodo, who in his authority was much sharper with the establishment than even his master, threaten those who stole away in the morning and evening to the old rogue in the woods, and chiefly Milo and Attalus, whom he accused of making all the others idle, and rated sorely, threatening them with the lash.

Attalus flashed out: "I am no slave," he said, "to be struck by a base retainer!"

"We will see," began Bodo; but Roswitha dashed at him, crying, "He is a free man of noble blood; not to be touched. I will call my mother if thou layest a finger on him. O mother!"—for Bernhild was close on them.

"Get away with thee, Bodo," she said; "thou hast no right to threaten or chastise a free-born hostage of my lord's;" nor did she listen to his murmurs of "An abject Gaul," but turning to the two children she exclaimed, "Atli, Roswitha, this man is wise, a diviner. He saved his deer from the hounds. Take me to him. Mayhap he will heal my son."

"He hates unholy magic arts," began Attalus, rather imprudently; "but often God grants His servants to work wonders."

"Oh! let us take Hundbert to him, mother," entreated Roswitha; "he will pray to his God over him and cure him."

Bernhild muttered a little about Frey, but though slow to own herself persuaded, she really longed after anything that would give her hope for her boy. She wrapped him up in a deerskin, in spite of his low moans, and bade the two children show her the way; she would try anything.

For weeks Hundbert had been in the atmosphere of peat and wood smoke, and every other variety of foul smell—the steam of soup, the scent of the stable, and, chief of all, savage human nature frying over the fire. True, the building had much involuntary ventilation, but it was all carefully kept from him by the sides of the stall or compartment belonging to his parents, and at night he slept (or did not sleep) in his mother's box bed.

When first taken out into the pure, fresh spring air he began to gasp and cry, and his mother wrapped him more closely; but presently his little wasted hands pushed the covering aside, and he drew a longer breath. He was quiet all the way, almost asleep, while Attalus and Roswitha sped on, closely followed by the anxious mother, and the chief of the idle household following in the rear, to the valley, with the brook in the green meadow, now bright with flowers between; and beyond the steeper bank, crowned with the pine trees. The two deer were feeding in the valley, and Attalus pointed them out as the creatures that had been safe from the dogs. Roswitha sped on, across the stepping-stones which had been placed since Gilchrist's hermitage had become a resort. She sprang up to the pilgrim in his hollow tree to warn him that her mother was bringing her little sick brother to be healed.

Gilchrist shook his head. "I am no saint to work miracles," he said; "I can pray for the child, but his life or death is in God's hand. Pray, pray with me, my children, if haply God will have mercy on the little one."

Meantime Bernhild had passed the stream and mounted the bank. She stood before the hermit with her wonted air of command.

"Old man," she said, "heal my son."

"It is not in me to heal the sick," replied Gilchrist, looking quite as dignified, in spite of his rags, his small stature, and wild locks and beard, as did the chieftainess.

"Thou canst not? Then will I have thee chased away by dogs and servants."

"I cannot heal, woman. It is not in me, but in my God, and He will not be commanded, but entreated."

"Entreat Him! Oh, entreat Him, then," cried Bernhild. "I will do anything, offer anything to save my son!"

"Wilt thou give up thy pagan ways, and bring him up to lead a Christian life?"

"Yes, yes; I will never offer to Grim or Frey again. I will give him to be baptized in the name of your Christ."

"Life and death are in God's hands. The boy hath not been baptized?" said Gilchrist.

"He was born since King Clovis sent the priest," said Roswitha.

"Thou wilt give him to be made the child of God?" said Gilchrist.

*(To be continued.)*