

It was solemnly impressive spectacle, this dread ecclesiastical court—forerunner of the even more dreadful court of latter times, that of the Inquisition—holding its sessions in one of the halls of the Dominican cloister, trying this man and that woman for heresy. The investigation of a freer and better age was unknown to those stern judges, who extorted testimony by the rack, and punished offences by breaking the hapless culprit over the wheel, by quartering his living body, or by committing him to the more merciful flames. Need it be said that a tribunal guided by such a code, was one organized solely to convict? That the accused who appeared at its bar was doomed even before the judges commanded the hearing of the cause.

Yet Ernest Eberhard, knowing all these things, was stout of heart: for him death had no terrors; he had faced and courted it before this on the field of battle. But he trembled when he saw his unhappy daughter brought in; she, at least, he hoped, would have been spared the misery of seeing her father condemned as a felon. But even here his courage did not forsake him, and, as she took her place by his side, he endeavored to infuse some of his bold spirit into her. It seemed, however, to no purpose, for Bertha was overwhelmed by the thought of her father's danger.

After a long dead-like silence, the hearing of the cause was commenced. The accusation was read, and Casper Hass, with his bad face full of hatred and vengeance, took the witness stand, kissing the crucifix held to his lips by one of the judges as a declaration that he would tell the truth and only the truth. His testimony was of the most damaging character to the accused, but, in order to convict, the law required a corroborating witness, and the judges, fanatics and merciless though they were, dared not disregard this merciful provision. Scores of the craftsmen were called—brothers of the Chapterhouse every one of them—and in this hour of peril they stood by the Master. Not one remembered the speech imputed to Master Eberhard, and even the threat of the rack made no impression upon them.

At last, despairing almost of securing a conviction, the judges turned to Bertha. Stern as they were, they were yet humane enough to feel compassion for the young girl's misery, but their duty was plain, and the question was asked:

“Maiden, did'st thou hear the prisoner speak the impious language laid to his charge? Did he declare that it was sinful and unholy to wipe out the ungodly heretics by fire and sword?”

Bertha trembled like an aspen leaf, but the Master, in a voice so clear and distinct that it rang like a clarion blast throughout the hall, said:

“My daughter, I pray you, nay, I command you, to tell the truth, even if I am to suffer for it. I would not owe the life of this miserable carcass to the pollution of thy pure lips by a lie!”

“Silence!” exclaimed the judges, but even they could not help admiring the sturdy courage of the Master. On Bertha her father's speech was almost electric. Advancing a step or two, and bowing to the judges with the grace of a queen, she began:

“My lords, you are very cruel to put these questions to a prisoner's own child. My lips, I can tell you, would have been sealed; you might have tortured me, you might even have taken my life, and you should have had no answer. But my father commands me to speak, and to speak only the truth. It is my duty to obey, even though his life be forfeited. Know ye, then, that he, Ernest Eberhard, said these things, and that I believe they are just and righteous. Know ye, my lords, that I do not believe that the Saviour came upon this earth and suffered an ignominious death, in order that poor ignorant men, women and children should be hanged and quartered as heretics. My father,” she added, turning to the Master and winding her arms around his neck, “if your daughter cannot save you, she knows how to die with you.”

Indescribable astonishment and dismay were depicted on her hearers' countenances. Even the judges were struck dumb with wonder, but with them it was only a momentary emotion. Consulting briefly with each other, they adjudged that the daughter's testimony condemned the father; and furthermore, that Bertha Eberhard, by her own deliberate confession, had avowed herself a heretic and a blasphemer of Jesus Christ; that it was, therefore, decreed that father and daughter should expiate their crimes at the stake.

VII.

After the sentence was passed, the two unfortunates were removed to the dungeons of the cloister to prepare themselves for death. Two short weeks only were granted them as a respite for this purpose, and arrangements were immediately begun to carry out the extreme sentence of the law with the utmost solemnity.

All Cologne was thunderstruck when the sad tidings were made public, for Master Eberhard was universally esteemed and Bertha beloved by all. Frau Eberhard, when she heard the fatal news, fell down in a dead swoon, and when she was brought back to consciousness, ran with dishevelled hair through the town, uttering the most