

QUEEN HILDEGARDIS.

The emperor Charles the Great having marched with his knights and a considerable army to make war against the hostile tribes of Saxony, left his court at Ingelheim, as well as his young and beautiful consort Hildegardis, under the protection of his natural brother Taland.

Taland had long resided at the court of the Greek Emperor and his heart, tho' naturally noble and manly, there became dreadfully corrupt and demoralized; indeed to such a degree, that he no longer believed in the virtue of women, much less did he imagine that any maiden's innocence, or any wife's fidelity

could withstand the flattering tones of a seducers courtship.

Conspicuous above all the women and maidens at the emperor's court was the noble lady Hildegardis for beauty and virtue. Altho' she was the daughter of a knight of low degree and attired in the humble garb of a peasant, Charles had discovered her merit and drawing her from the solitude of her native village made her the partner of his Imperial throne.

But as the most brilliant jewel is that which excites in the highest degree the covetousness of the rogue, in like manner had the wicked Taland cast his eyes on the noble queen and made her, whose spotless innocence prevented her from suspecting his evil designs, the object of his criminal passion. Nothing therefore could be more agreeable to this dishonourable knight than the absence of his Imperial brother and his command to watch over and protect his court during his absence. Blinded by passion he took advantage of the first opportunity favourable to his treacherous intentions, to torment the noble lady, first, by soft and amorous words and afterwards, as she seemed not to understand him, by ardent declarations of love. The queen first hoped she could cure the guilty knight of his malady by gentleness and kind treatment. But she was mistaken, for, that which in the commencement was only vanity and gallantry, from daily beholding the charming queen and from the mildness with which she rejected his addresses, soon became deep rooted passion.

So audacious was he grown, that, one day, having managed to remove the Queen's ladies, he burst into her chamber, urged his suit with the most unseemly vehemence and concluded by declaring that he would kill himself, if she would not listen to him.

The virtuous Queen was at first so astonished at what he said, that she could scarce utter a word; but, recovering herself, she rejected his guilty proposals with the utmost indignation, menacing him with the heavy chastisement that must infallibly await him on the return of her spouse. However, as neither entreaties or menaces were of any avail, Hildegardis attempted to save her honour and render her wicked enemy harmless for the future. She pretended to grow gradually favourable to his wishes and at last promised him a rendez-vous, which for the sake of secrecy was to take place in a hidden and remote chamber of the palace.

On the appointed day and hour, Taland, burning with love, went to meet the Queen. She led him through a dark passage to a door which she opened and desired the knight to pass before her. But, no sooner had he crossed its threshold than she closed it upon him and quickly turning the key thus addressed the wretch who remained almost petrified with surprise and consternation: "Now, dishonourable madman," exclaimed Hildegardis, "you may cool your unholy passion between four damp walls and here await the punishment of your audacity till the return of my spouse, your Em-

peror and Lord." Thereupon she went away, abandoning the knight to his impotent rage and to whatever plans of vengeance his disappointed passion might suggest to him.

A lady of honour, whom the Queen had made her confidant in this matter, daily handed to the prisoner through a little window sufficient food. This lady, one day, brought word to her mistress, that the knight most pressingly besought her to grant him a short audience that he might make an acknowledgment of his fault and testify his sincere repentance. Hildegardis was rejoiced to learn this and acceded to the prisoner's request. Taland now protested in the strongest terms that he heartily repented his criminal enterprise, swore to the queen by the most sacred oaths, that in future he would allow no impure desire to rise in his soul and concluded by falling on his knees in a supplicating attitude and by imploring the queen not to expose him to the severe punishment which his brother and sovereign would no doubt inflict on him.

The tender hearted Hildegardis was moved by the apparent deep repentance of the knight and trusting to his promises, she released him from his confinement.

Thus Taland again appeared at court and as he gave out that he had been under the necessity of making a secret journey, none of the courtiers suspected the real cause of his absence.

A short time afterwards, messengers arrived

from the Emperor, announcing his speedy return. Everything was prepared at court for his reception and Taland accompanied by a few followers rode out to meet him. After the first salutations Charles enquired after his spouse, but instead of answering his question Taland requested permission to say a few words to him in private. This being granted the traitor related a tissue of the most diabolical falsehoods, in which he accused the Queen of infidelity to her Lord, confirming his infamy by the most blasphemous oaths and assurances of fidelity to his sovereign who, being of a violent and passionate temper, now broke into a most inexpressible fury and charged his brother instantly to cause his faithless wife to be put to an ignominious death.

Without waiting until the infuriated monarch should grow calm and probably retract his rash commands, the traitor galloped on before his majesty and immediately issued orders for the Queen's arrest. In the mean time, however, the lady of honour, who had been the Queen's confidant during Taland's imprisonment, escaped the fate reserved to her by a rapid flight and hid herself in the forest which surrounded the palace.

After Taland had proclaimed the Queen's crime and the will of his sovereign, he delivered Hildegardis into the hands of two soldiers who were devoted to him and gave them strict injunctions to deprive her of life. Therefore as soon as it grew dusk the innocent Queen was conducted into the wood, where as soon as she reached a

spot near a wide spreading oak, the soldiers who only answered with scorn and insult the moving prayers of the noble lady, desired her to kneel down, to recommend her soul to God and be ready to receive her death blow.

Suddenly, however, an angelic voice proceeding from the branches of the tree uttered these words: "Desist, malefactors, from thy wicked purpose, otherwise the wrath of heaven will overtake thee!" Fear seized the superstitious men, on hearing this, — their arms which were already uplifted to commit a cruel murder, grew stiff, as if petrified by magic and they looked timidly and fearfully at the tree, from which descended the wonderful voice. Not perceiving any human form, they were confirmed in the belief, that they had heard the command of some supernatural being; so they crossed themselves and fled as fast as they could from the spot.

Hildegardis' pious awe did not allow her to raise her eyes to the oak tree from which her miraculous deliverance had come; but she addressed ardent thanksgivings to the holy Virgin. Suddenly she heard a rustling both in the branches and on the ground, — and, before she could look round, she felt some one seizing the hem of her robe and covering her arms with kisses and tears of joy. It was the faithful lady of her court, who had escaped Taland's vengeance. Wandering about the forest in quest of a human dwelling, she had heard the savage voices of men approaching her and had sought refuge in the dense foliage

of an oak tree ; thus through the gracious dispensation of divine providence she had become the guardian angel of her innocent mistress.

After they both had derived consolation and confidence from long and fervent prayers they lay down upon a bed of leaves and enjoyed the sweetest repose, until the warbling of innumerable birds announced the dawn of day. The berries and herbs, which they found in abundance, then supplied them with a refreshing meal, and trusting in the assistance of God they boldly pursued their course through the forest.

In the mean time, the miscreants sent by Taland to commit the murder, returned to the palace and fearing the resentment of their master, declared to him, that they had executed his orders. To corroborate their statement, they showed him their swords dripping with the blood of a doe which they had killed.

Taland first praised and rewarded the villains and then informed the King, who shortly reached his castle, that his command had been executed and that the vile adulteress had suffered the punishment due to her crime. The monarch expressed his satisfaction by a nod of the head, but from that moment he lost all his cheerfulness and falling into a state of sombre melancholy no longer took pleasure in any of the duties or amusements of his august position.

In the mean while Hildegardis and her faithful companion wandered for several days about the wood; at length they came to the hut of a venerable old hermit, with a long white beard, who willingly gave

them a lodging under his miserable roof. Here, separated from the rest of the world, these females lived a considerable time, passing the days chiefly in prayer and acts of devotion. Hildegardis, moreover, occupied her leisure hours in studying the healing virtues of plants and herbs, a study, to which she had applied herself with predilection in her early youth and in which she was now assisted by the skilful instructions of the hermit. By the advice of the old man to whom Hildegardis had made known her rank and misfortunes, they finally left the hermitage, to proceed on a pilgrimage to Rome; "There," said he, "persecuted innocence ever obtains justice and protection from the holy father."

Having reached the nearest town, the Empress and her friend assumed the garb of pilgrims, and, with light hearts, pursued their journey to Rome. Having at length arrived at the holy city, they visited all the churches and received the Pope's benediction. To gain their livelihood and satisfy their pious inclinations, Hildegard began to practise the science she had first learned in the joyful days of her youth in her father's woods and which had subsequently become better known to her, through the hermit's instructions. The noble lady visited the sick and infirm, assisting and curing the greater number and soothing by pious and edifying consolation the passage into eternity of those whom no ointment or herb could save. So that the whole city of Rome not only rung with praises of the virtue and divine art of sister Dolorosa, which was the



name she assumed, but all who were sick or afflicted repaired to the noble lady, to be cured, and to be consoled by her devout exhortations. By degrees, the fame of the holy physician spread far and wide, so that Pope Adrian likewise heard of her benevolent actions. One day indeed, as he was entering a church at the head of a procession, the pious woman having knelt down to kiss the hem of his garment, he gave her his benediction before all the people.

Thus it happened, that pilgrims, on their return from Rome to Germany, related at the court of the emperor Charles, the wonderful cures of sister Dolorosa.

No one listened more eagerly to this report than the profligate Taland, whom a malignant disease had deprived of his sight. Well aware that this affliction was a punishment from heaven, the cruel knight had heartily repented him of his base conduct towards the innocent Queen, but fearing Charles' wrath he dared not make any disclosure to him, hoping for the forgiveness of his sin from the mercy of God and the intercession of the soul of his victim. But when the Emperor resolved to undertake a journey to Rome, Taland begged and obtained leave to accompany him, that he might be cured by the far famed lady.

The report of the King's approach was soon spread over the holy city and carried to the pious Hildegardis by her faithful attendant. Her heart beat violently on hearing these tidings and a presentiment told her,

that now the prophetic words of the hermit would be fulfilled and that the end of her unmerited sufferings was near at hand. She therefore prostrated herself with fervour before the altar of the mother of God, and unable to speak, eased her oppressed bosom by a flood of tears.

King Charles, accompanied by Taland, had scarcely made his entry into Rome ere the latter despatched a message to the pious physician, begging permission to wait upon her on the following morning. Hildegardis consented and prepared to receive him without fear or agitation. At length the moment arrived and her mortal enemy, stricken with blindness, humbled and imploring assistance, stood before her. Suppressing her emotion, she said to him: "Sir knight!—before I can undertake, with God's aid and that of his son and the blessed Virgin, to cure your malady, it is necessary for you to purify yourself of your sins and crimes by a voluntary acknowledgment of them. Kneel down therefore, and confess your sins and testify to me your repentance, in order that you may thus become a partaker of God's mercy."

Taland replied to her: "Truly, most holy lady, I have committed sins of divers kinds, — being a weak infirm man. But none weighs more heavily on my conscience than that which I was guilty of against a pure and virtuous woman, whom, contrary to the laws of God and man I vilely slandered and ruined. If God in his mercy pardon me this crime, I may confidently hope for the forgiveness of all my other sins."

"Say!" replied the confessor, "have you

avowed your evil deed to him whom, after God, you have thereby most agrieved and injured?"

"No," rejoined Taland with considerable hesitation: "the dread of his just wrath has detained me; for he, whom I have wronged is my sovereign."

"The wrath of heaven is a thousand times more to be dreaded by sinners than all earthly punishments," rejoined Hildegardis, "I cannot assist you therefore until you have made known to your injured sovereign the crime of which you have been guilty. If you will do this candidly and without reserve, I will endeavour to obtain your pardon."

After reflecting a short time Taland replied with firmness: "Your counsel, holy woman, is good, for it is better that I should suffer mortal death, than that I should peril my eternal salvation. Come with me, I beseech you and be the witness of my confession. Preserve me, in the name of the blessed Trinity, from the anger of my sovereign."

Thereupon he ordered his servants to conduct him before the king, who was at that moment engaged in private with the holy Father. Upon entering the Royal presence Taland threw himself at his brother's feet and to the great joy of the Queen and her attendant, who had followed him to the door, avowed his crime with the utmost humility and repentance and warmly craved forgiveness.

Speechless with astonishment and indignation, Charles listened to the account of his vile treachery. Instantly placing his hand upon his sword he would

have chastised his unheard of wickedness, but at this juncture Hildegardis appeared and throwing herself on her knees between the King and the culprit cried out: "Stop! O most puissant Lord, heaven has already inflicted sufficient punishment. It becomes your majesty to forgive."

The astounded King drew back and would scarce give credit to his eyes or ears when he beheld the image of his consort whom he imagined dead and heard the sound of her once dear loved voice. In the mean time, Hildegardis approached the blind man, led him to a seat and, having desired him to sit still and recommend his soul to God, she undertook to cure him and did in fact restore him that instant to the light of day.

The first person he saw on recovering his sight was his deliverer; — his terror and astonishment was more intense than that of the King, for he thought the object before him was a spirit. He therefore cast himself at her feet, crying out aloud: "Unless a disordered phantasy has succeeded to my blindness, my eyes behold the spirit of her who was so cruelly and unjustly murdered by my orders."

"You do not see her spirit — but herself, whom the Almighty rescued from death, thereby preventing you from committing a sin, and," added she, turning to her bewildered husband, "thus preserving his faithful wife to my gracious Lord and spouse."

The Pope blessed the reunited couple and the Em-

peror Charles in the joy of his heart forgave his repentant brother; after which they all returned to Germany, where the news of the happy and wonderful event had preceded them and spread universal joy amongst both high and low.

King Charles enjoyed for many years the happiness of possessing his beloved Hildegardis and was never wearied of hearing the account of her adventures. He never ceased to deplore his credulity, or to thank God for the deliverance of his beloved Queen. Nor was he forgetful of the faithful maiden who had saved her mistress and who had been the companion of all her wanderings and tribulations. She was named lady of honour to the Queen for life and was shortly united to a nobleman of high rank, wealth and dignity.