THE WITCH OF PRAGUE.

A Fantastic Tale.

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CHAPTER XV—CONTINUED.

Once more the cloud of passing time dissolved and was lifted. Then the walls of the house were opened and in a low arched chamber the rabbis sat about a black table. A huge skull and a single smoking lamp was lighted, a mere wick projecting out of a [illegible] vessel of copper which was half opened and was hung from the vault with blackened wires. Seven rabbis sat at the board and at the head sat Lazarus, with crossed hands and claw-like nails over it, motionless and there was a lurid fire in his unfathomable eyes. They bent forward speaking to each other in low tones, and from beneath their greasy caps their long ringlets dangled and swung as they bent their heads. But Levi the short-handed was not among them. The muffled talk was interrupted from time to time by the sound of sharp, loud blows of a hammer striking upon nails, as though a carpenter were at work not in the room in which they sat.

"He has not repented," said Lazarus, breaking a pause. "Neither many stripes, nor fear nor hunger nor thirst, have brought him to righteousness. It is written—'He shall be cut off from his people.'"

"He shall be cut off," answered the rabbis in low voices.

"It is right and just that he should die," said at last the father. "Shall we give him over to the Christians that he may dwell with them and become one of them, and be a scandal before the world to our shame?"

"We will not let him go," said the dark rabbis. A smile flickered from one to another as a firefly flutters from place to place in the night—as though the thought had touched each one in turn.

"We will not let him go," said each again.

Then he paused as though in assent, and waited for he had a little before he spoke.

"I am obedient to your judgment. It is the command and mine to obey. If you say he must die, let him die. He is my first-born. Did not our father Abraham take upon the altar and offer him up a sacrifice before the Lord?"

"Let him die," said the rabbis.

"Let him die," answered Lazarus. "It is my covenant. It is mine to obey."

"It has been on our heads," they said. And again the evil smile went round.

"By the covenant that we determine among us his death shall be," continued Lazarus, inclining his body to signify submission.

"It is lawful to shed his blood," said the rabbis.

"And we cannot stone him, lest it be said in derision of the Christians, that we stone the manner of his death."

"It is lawful. If you will let it, let him be crucified before us. Let us all see our own shame in his denial, and if he recant at the last, it is well, let him live. If he harden his heart against our entreaties, let him die. Levi hath brought the poison of weed killer to my house, and I am weak at work. If the youth is stubborn in his belief, let him die even as our fathers died—by the righteous law of the Romans."

"Let him be crucified!" the rabbis said with one voice.

Lazarus rose and went out, and in his place the rabbis remained seated, motionless in their places, awaiting his return. Presently Levi's hammer echoed through the vaulted chamber, and at last the smoking lamp quivered a little and strange shadows upon the walls beneath its light. At last footsteps were heard outside, and Lazarus entering, bore the body of his son before them.

"I have brought him before you for the last time," said. "Question him and hear his confession out of his own mouth, that, though I have done my part to bring him back to the path of the law, I may be clear. Question him, my masters, and see what he will say."

He was exhausted with long hunger and his back broken by torture, and he was no longer sensible to bodily pain or he would have fallen to the ground. But his father would not hold him up. His head hung forward and his noble face was inclined towards his breast, but the deep, dark eyes were raised calmly upon those who sat in judgment at the table. A rough piece of linen was wrapped about the boy's middle, but his thin arms were bare.

"Thou Simon, son of Lazarus!"

"I answer thee in whose presence I stand."

"We know you all." There was a tone in the voice, though it trembled a little, as he said, "We know your errors, and having witnessed the chastisement of thy folly, rejoice with the father and of thy God of all thy people."

"I know my sins, and whatsoever is laid on me to suffer I will, by God's help, endure as to one not unworthy of his sonship."

They looked at the brave young man and wagged their beards, and one another, in low tones.

"We have heard," they said. "He is stubborn, and he is worthy of death. It is written that the young rebel should have poison under his tongue, and shall speak things not lawful for an hour. Let him die, that we may be no more, and that our children be not led by his damnable teachings."

"Thou shalt die." It was Levi who spoke, while holding up the cup from the table and hissing the words through his teeth.

"I am ready. Lead me forth."

"It is not time to repent. If thou say what thou hast said these three days and return to us, thou shalt be our brother, and thy days shall be long among your children's days after the death, and we may exchange love and good offices among thy fellows."

"Let him be crucified," said the rabbis. "He is mad."

"Let him be crucified," said Simon Abeles.

"Let him be crucified," said the rabbis, one after another, repeating the rabbis, "Let him be crucified."

"Let him be crucified," answered Lazarus. "It is my covenant. It is mine to obey."

"It has been on our heads," they said. And again the evil smile went round.

"By the covenant that we determine among us his death shall be," continued the elder