

HISTORY
OF THE
MORAVIAN CHURCH

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Book One

The Bohemian Brethren.

Chapter 1

The Rising Storm

When an ordinary Englishman, in the course of his reading, sees mention made of Moravians, he thinks forthwith of a foreign land, a foreign people and a foreign Church. He wonders who these Moravians may be, and wonders, as a rule, in vain. We have all heard of the Protestant Reformation; we know its principles and admire its heroes; and the famous names of Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Latimer, Cranmer, Knox and other great men are familiar in our ears as household words. But few people in this country are aware of the fact that long before Luther had burned the Pope's bull, and long before Cranmer died at the stake, there had begun an earlier Reformation, and flourished a Reforming Church. It is to tell the story of that Church—the Church of the Brethren—that this little book is written.

For her cradle and her earliest home we turn to the distressful land of Bohemia, and the people called Bohemians, or Czechs. To us English readers Bohemia has many charms. As we call to mind our days at school, we remember, in a dim and hazy way, how famous Bohemians in days of yore have played some part in our national story. We have sung the praises at Christmas time of the Bohemian Monarch, "Good King Wenceslaus." We have read how John, the blind King of Bohemia, fell mortally wounded at the Battle of Crecy, how he died in the tent of King Edward III., and how his

generous conqueror exclaimed: "The crown of chivalry has fallen today; never was the like of this King of Bohemia." We have all read, too, how Richard II. married Princess Anne of Bohemia; how the Princess, so the story goes, brought a Bohemian Bible to England; how Bohemian scholars, a few years later, came to study at Oxford; how there they read the writings of Wycliffe, the "Morning Star of the Reformation"; and how, finally, copies of Wycliffe's books were carried to Bohemia, and there gave rise to a religious revival of world-wide importance. We have struck the trail of our journey. For one person that Wycliffe stirred in England, he stirred hundreds in Bohemia. In England his influence was fleeting; in Bohemia it was deep and abiding. In England his followers were speedily suppressed by law; in Bohemia they became a great national force, and prepared the way for the foundation of the Church of the Brethren.

For this startling fact there was a very powerful reason. In many ways the history of Bohemia is very like the history of Ireland, and the best way to understand the character of the people is to think of our Irish friends as we know them to-day. They sprang from the old Slavonic stock, and the Slavonic is very like the Keltic in nature. They had fiery Slavonic blood in their veins, and Slavonic hearts beat high with hope in their bosoms. They had all the delightful Slavonic zeal, the Slavonic dash, the Slavonic imagination. They were easy to stir, they were swift in action, they were witty in speech, they were mystic and poetic in soul, and, like the Irish of the present day, they revelled in the joy of party politics, and discussed religious questions with the keenest zest. With them religion came first and foremost. All their poetry was religious; all their legends were religious; and thus the message of Wycliffe fell on hearts prepared to give it a kindly welcome.

Again, Bohemia, like Ireland, was the home of two rival populations. The one was the native Czech, the other was the intruding German; and the two had not yet learned to love

each other. From all sides except one these German invaders had come. If the reader will consult a map of Europe he will see that, except on the south-east frontier, where the sister country, Moravia, lies, Bohemia is surrounded by German-speaking States. On the north-east is Silesia, on the north-west Saxony, on the west Bavaria and the Upper Palatinate, and thus Bohemia was flooded with Germans from three sides at once. For years these Germans had been increasing in power, and the whole early history of Bohemia is one dreary succession of bloody wars against German Emperors and Kings. Sometimes the land had been ravaged by German soldiers, sometimes a German King had sat on the Bohemian throne. But now the German settlers in Bohemia had become more powerful than ever. They had settled in large numbers in the city of Prague, and had there obtained special privileges for themselves. They had introduced hundreds of German clergymen, who preached in the German language. They had married their daughters into noble Bohemian families. They had tried to make German the language of the court, had spoken with contempt of the Bohemian language, and had said that it was only fit for slaves. They had introduced German laws into many a town, and German customs into family life; and, worse than all, they had overwhelming power in that pride of the country, the University of Prague. For these Germans the hatred of the people was intense. "It is better," said one of their popular writers, "for the land to be a desert than to be held by Germans; it is better to marry a Bohemian peasant girl than to marry a German queen." And Judas Iscariot himself, said a popular poet, was in all probability a German.

Again, as in Ireland, these national feuds were mixed up with religious differences. The seeds of future strife were early sown. Christianity came from two opposite sources. On the one hand, two preachers, Cyril and Methodius, had come from the Greek Church in Constantinople, had received the blessing of the Pope, and had preached to the people in the

Bohemian language; on the other, the German Archbishop of Salzburg had brought in hosts of German priests, and had tried in vain to persuade the Pope to condemn the two preachers as heretics. And the people loved the Bohemian preachers, and hated the German priests. The old feud was raging still. If the preacher spoke in German, he was hated; if he spoke in Bohemian, he was beloved; and Gregory VII. had made matters worse by forbidding preaching in the language of the people.

The result can be imagined. It is admitted now by all historians—Catholic and Protestant alike—that about the time when our story opens the Church in Bohemia had lost her hold upon the affections of the people. It is admitted that sermons the people could understand were rare. It is admitted that the Bible was known to few, that the services held in the parish churches had become mere senseless shows, and that most of the clergy never preached at all. No longer were the clergy examples to their flocks. They hunted, they gambled, they caroused, they committed adultery, and the suggestion was actually solemnly made that they should be provided with concubines.

For some years a number of pious teachers had made gallant but vain attempts to cleanse the stables. The first was Conrad of Waldhausen, an Augustinian Friar (1364-9). As this man was a German and spoke in German, it is not likely that he had much effect on the common people, but he created quite a sensation in Prague, denounced alike the vices of the clergy and the idle habits of the rich, persuaded the ladies of high degree to give up their fine dresses and jewels, and even caused certain well-known sinners to come and do penance in public.

The next was Milic of Kremsir (1363-74). He was a Bohemian, and preached in the Bohemian language. His whole life was one of noble self-sacrifice. For the sake of the poor he renounced his position as Canon, and devoted himself entirely to good works. He rescued thousands of fallen women,

and built them a number of homes. He was so disgusted with the evils of his days that he thought the end of the world was close at hand, declared that the Emperor, Charles IV., was Anti-Christ, went to Rome to expound his views to the Pope, and posted up a notice on the door of St. Peter's, declaring that Anti-Christ had come.

The next was that beautiful writer, Thomas of Stitny (1370-1401). He exalted the Holy Scriptures as the standard of faith, wrote several beautiful devotional books, and denounced the immorality of the monks. "They have fallen away from love," he said; "they have not the peace of God in their hearts; they quarrel, condemn and fight each other; they have forsaken God for money."

In some ways these three Reformers were all alike. They were all men of lofty character; they all attacked the vices of the clergy and the luxury of the rich; and they were all loyal to the Church of Rome, and looked to the Pope to carry out the needed reform.

But the next Reformer, Matthew of Janow, carried the movement further (1381-93). The cause was the famous schism in the Papacy. For the long period of nearly forty years (1378-1415) the whole Catholic world was shocked by the scandal of two, and sometimes three, rival Popes, who spent their time abusing and fighting each other. As long as this schism lasted it was hard for men to look up to the Pope as a true spiritual guide. How could men call the Pope the Head of the Church when no one knew which was the true Pope? How could men respect the Popes when some of the Popes were men of bad moral character? Pope Urban VI. was a ferocious brute, who had five of his enemies secretly murdered; Pope Clement VII., his clever rival, was a scheming politician; and Pope John XXIII. was a man whose character will scarcely bear describing in print. Of all the scandals in the Catholic Church, this disgraceful quarrel between rival Popes did most to upset the minds of good men and to prepare the way for the Reformation. It aroused the scorn of John Wycliffe in

England, and of Matthew of Janow in Bohemia. "This schism," he wrote, "has not arisen because the priests loved Jesus Christ and His Church, but rather because they loved themselves and the world."

But Matthew went even further than this. As he did not attack any Catholic dogma—except the worship of pictures and images—it has been contended by some writers that he was not so very radical in his views after all; but the whole tone of his writings shows that he had lost his confidence in the Catholic Church, and desired to revive the simple Christianity of Christ and the Apostles. "I consider it essential," he wrote, "to root out all weeds, to restore the word of God on earth, to bring back the Church of Christ to its original, healthy, condensed condition, and to keep only such regulations as date from the time of the Apostles." "All the works of men," he added, "their ceremonies and traditions, shall soon be totally destroyed; the Lord Jesus shall alone be exalted, and His Word shall stand for ever." Back to Christ! Back to the Apostles! Such was the message of Matthew of Janow.

At this point, when the minds of men were stirred, the writings of Wycliffe were brought to Bohemia, and added fuel to the fire. He had asserted that the Pope was capable of committing a sin. He had declared that the Pope was not to be obeyed unless his commands were in accordance with Scripture, and thus had placed the authority of the Bible above the authority of the Pope. He had attacked the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, and had thus denied the power of the priests "to make the Body of Christ." Above all, in his volume, "De Ecclesia," he had denounced the whole Catholic sacerdotal system, and had laid down the Protestant doctrine that men could come into contact with God without the aid of priests. Thus step by step the way was prepared for the coming revolution in Bohemia. There was strong patriotic national feeling; there was hatred of the German priests; there was a growing love for the Bible; there was lack of respect for the immoral clergy, and lack of belief in the Popes;

there was a vague desire to return to Primitive Christianity; and all that was needed now was a man to gather these straggling beams together, and focus them all in one white burning light.

Chapter 2

The Burning of Hus.

On Saturday, July 6th, 1415, there was great excitement in the city of Constance. For the last half-year the city had presented a brilliant and gorgeous scene. The great Catholic Council of Constance had met at last. From all parts of the Western World distinguished men had come. The streets were a blaze of colour. The Cardinals rode by in their scarlet hats; the monks in their cowls were telling their beads; the revelers sipped their wine and sang; and the rumbling carts from the country-side bore bottles of wine, cheeses, butter, honey, venison, cakes and fine confections. King Sigismund was there in all his pride, his flaxen hair falling in curls about his shoulders; there were a thousand Bishops, over two thousand Doctors and Masters, about two thousand Counts, Barons and Knights, vast hosts of Dukes, Princes and Ambassadors—in all over 50,000 strangers.

And now, after months of hot debate, the Council met in the great Cathedral to settle once for all the question, What to do with John Hus? King Sigismund sat on the throne, Princes flanking him on either side. In the middle of the Cathedral floor was a scaffold; on the scaffold a table and a block of wood; on the block of wood some priestly robes. The Mass was said. John Hus was led in. He mounted the scaffold. He breathed a prayer. The awful proceedings began.