

Extract from
The History of Germany
by H E Marshall

Above all things Charles [V Holy Roman Emperor] was a Catholic. When he was crowned he lay prone before the altar, and spreading forth his arms in the form of a cross, he promised to defend the Church and to obey the Pope in everything. But Charles was soon to come face to face with one of the Pope's greatest enemies. This was the monk Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was the son of a poor workman. But poor though he was, Martin's father managed to send his son to school, and afterwards to the University of Erfurt. After a time, however, Luther gave up his studies and became a monk.

From the time when he had been quite a boy Luther had been religious. Now he had given up all his life to religion, and ought to have been happy. But Luther was not happy. He was attacked by terrible doubts. It seemed to him that many wicked things were being done by the Church, and by the Pope whom he had been taught to look upon as holy. One of these wicked things was the selling of pardons, the granting of forgiveness of sins, both done and to be done, for money. Whenever the Pope wanted money for anything he sent messengers from Rome to carry into all the countries round about his letters giving them power to sell pardons.

With incense and lighted candles, with banners flying and trumpets blowing, and the papal letter or bull carried on a crimson cushion, these messengers moved from place to place. Thus they would enter a town, and, to the sound of chanting and ringing of bells, march to the church. And there, before the altar, in the shadow of the crucifix, they would set up their tables and spread forth their wares, and all who chose might come to buy.

Now at this time a monk named Tetzl came to Germany with pardons to sell. He was vulgar and blasphemous, and his ways of selling pardons shocked many people who had found no evil in it before. They filled Luther's heart with sorrow and indignation and he began to preach against the indulgences, as they were called.

At first Luther preached with some doubt and hesitation; then ever more and more boldly. For as he preached his doubts vanished, and it became more and more clear to himself that to sell God's forgiveness for money was wrong. At length one day Luther wrote out ninety-five reasons against these indulgences, and nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The chief reason was "that by true sorrow and penance alone, and not by payment of money, forgiveness can be won."

Luther himself little knew what a great deed he did when he nailed his paper to the door of the church at Wittenberg. For long years many people had been discontented with the Church as it was, but they dared not speak. Luther's hammer broke the spell of silence which was upon them, and the Reformation was begun.

The excitement was tremendous. In a month's time Luther's Theses, as they are called, were spread through all the length and breadth of the Empire. Many people rejoiced, but the Pope was angry. Luther was therefore commanded to appear at Augsburg before the Pope's messenger, Cardinal Cajetan, and there answer for his heresy.

To Augsburg Luther went, although many of his friends feared for his safety. Then for three days the cardinal and the monk disputed with each other. The Cardinal would gladly have bribed Luther to silence. But Luther would accept no bribe. Then the cardinal grew angry. "Recant and see your error," he said. "The Pope wills it thus, whether you like it or no."

But Luther stood firm. He talked and argued till he made the Cardinal fear him. "I will talk no longer with this monster," said he at last, "for he has deep eyes and marvellous ideas in his brain"; and he sought means to imprison him.

Then, hearing that the Cardinal was about to have him taken prisoner and thrown into jail, Luther fled in the night. Friends opened a little gate in the city wall, and, clad only in his monk's robe, and mounted on a swift little horse, Luther galloped away and reached his home in safety. There he began again to teach and preach as boldly as before.

But the Pope was determined to silence Luther, and excommunicated him. Sixty days were given him in which to repent, and if within that time he did not confess his errors, then he was to be cast out of the Church. In whatever town he should be no bell might call the people together for prayer, no child might be baptized, no couple wedded, even the dead must be laid to rest without chant or prayer.

This was the Pope's decree, and he sent his messenger to publish it to the people of Germany. But the Pope little knew the state of Germany. Instead of receiving the bull with trembling fear the people received it with scorn and anger. It was torn in pieces, it was trampled in the mud, and by Luther himself it was publicly burned. "Because thou dost trouble the Holy One of the Lord, may everlasting fire consume thee," he cried, as he cast it into the leaping flames.

All these things happened just as Maximilian died and Charles V came to the throne. Now Charles called his first Diet at Worms, and to it Luther was summoned.

So with a safe-conduct from the Emperor Luther set forth upon what both he and his friends well knew was perilous journey. Some would have had him refuse to go. But Luther would not hear them. "Nay," he cried, "I am lawfully called to appear in that city. And thither will I go in the name of the Lord. Yea, though there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the houses, I would still go on."

When Luther arrived in Worms the people came out to greet him in thousands, they thronged in the street, they followed him to his lodging, calling upon God to bless him, happy if they might touch his hand or even his clothes.

When at length Luther appeared before the Emperor, the Great Council Hall was thronged from end to end. Seldom had so many princes and nobles been gathered together. The Emperor, in his splendid robes, sat upon his throne beneath a canopy of cloth of gold. On one side of him were the cardinals, on the other the Electors, and all around them sat and stood a glittering throng of knights and nobles. They were all come to judge the case of one poor monk.

As Luther in his dark robe made his way through the brilliant crowd, a friendly knight patted him on the shoulder. "Little monk, little monk," he said in tones of admiration, "you go your way to make a stand such as I, and many a commander beside, even in our fiercest fight have never taken. And you are of good intent and certain of your affair, so go in God's name and be comforted. God will not forsake you."

The sitting was long; dusk fell, and the great hall was lit up by countless candles. In the dim and flickering light the young monk stood alone, a dusky figure amid the surrounding splendour. His face was pale, his eyes bright and shining. From first to last he refused to retract his heresies. "Here I stand," he said, "I can do no other. So help me, God. Amen."

It was his last word, and Charles bade him begone for a rebel and a heretic. But there were some there who would not thus lightly have let him go. He was in their power; why not have done with him? Why should he not die, as Huss had died? they asked.

“Nay,” answered Charles, “he has my safe-conduct. I would not have cause to blush as Sigmund blushed.”

So Luther was allowed to depart in safety. But hard upon his heels followed the Edict of Worms. By this Luther was declared to be under the ban of the Empire; that is, he was an outlaw. He had lost all the rights of man, and was but as a hunted animal on the face of the earth. No man might give him shelter or food, but was commanded to deliver him up to the powers of justice.

But Luther had many friends. Among them was Frederick the Wise, Duke of Saxony. While the anger of the Pope's party was so strong against Luther, Frederick feared for his safety. He determined, therefore, that Luther should disappear from friend and foe alike, until the storm was calmed.

So one day as Luther's carriage drove along on his way homeward, a band of masked and armed warriors suddenly dashed from the forest. The carriage was surrounded, Luther's servants were scattered, and he himself was seized and carried off, none knew whither.

Great was the anger of his foes, great the grief of his friends, when Luther thus suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. His followers mourned for him as dead; and for a time they were as sheep without a shepherd. But at length they were comforted, for letters came to them from their leader. Yet they knew not whence they came, for Luther dated them “from my Patmos.” This was in memory of the Isle of Patmos to which the apostle John had been banished.

Luther, meanwhile, was a prisoner in kindly hands, for he was hidden in the Duke Frederick's strong castle of Wartburg. For better concealment he was dressed like a knight, and rode forth with a golden chain about his neck, and a sword by his side. He was called the Chevalier George, and none knew who he really was save his friendly jailer. But Luther was soon weary of his life of ease, weary of splendid clothes and rich food. He spent much of his time translating the Bible into German. But still he felt that he was living in idleness.

At length, after nearly a year of this pleasant imprisonment, Luther left the Wartburg. In his absence many of his followers had become over-zealous, and were doing deeds of violence against the old religion which made Luther sorry. He felt that he must do something to stop these deeds. So he returned to Wittenberg, and once more began to teach and preach. He bade his followers to be kindly and tolerant, and at length succeeded in quieting their excesses.

For the next few years Luther was busy translating the Bible into German, and building up a new Church out of the ruins of the old. He grew farther and farther away from the Romish Church, and in 1525 he married a nun named Catherine Bora. Many other priests and clergy followed his example, and so the division between the old Catholic Church and the new Protestant Church grew wider and wider.