

## The Story of a Miracle that Recently Befell a Certain Layman Otloh of St Emmeram<sup>1</sup>

Translated by W.L. North from the edition published in J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Latinae ... Cursus Completus* 146, cols. 241D-244B.

Because the world, corrupted as it has been by manifold acts of vanity and iniquity, is now showing forth in this time of watchfulness many signs that it was foretold would happen in the last days, it is necessary for all the faithful to guard themselves against the devil's treacheries with the utmost circumspection and to admonish whomever they can to do likewise. Indeed, the devil now deceives both learned and unlearned more than ever and draws them to greater vanity than he did people of earlier times. It therefore seems that he has been released from the fetters in which he had been bound until now, just as it is read to have been foretold in the Apocalypse of the apostle John. Now then, so that I may restrain some from their usual vanity, I wish to recount something that recently happened in a region to the West which a certain religious cleric told me when he was staying with me and he said that he was even there when it happened.

A certain distinguished man, the cleric recounted, had been accused of stealing a certain horse. When the count of that region learned of this accusation, he forcibly demanded from this same man that he either return the stolen horse or buy for a just price. Compelled by this demand, the man promised the count that he would acquit himself of this suspicion by whatever trial the count wished. Soon the count decreed that, once many witnesses were assembled, the man would acquit himself by the customary trial by water.<sup>2</sup> After he came together with many others to the decreed trial by water and

---

<sup>1</sup> Best known for his book of autobiographical reminiscences and dream visions entitled *Liber de temptatione cuiusdam monachi* (Book on the temptation of a certain monk), Otloh lived for most of his life as a monk and priest at the monastery of St Emmeram in Ratisbon near Regensburg. He was born ca. 1010 and early in life was given by his parents to the monastery of Tegernsee to be educated. There he showed talent and zeal in the copying of manuscripts and soon was being sent to other monasteries to execute commissions. After living as a secular cleric of Freising for a time, he left the world in 1032 and entered the monastery of St Emmeram where he remained, with several interruptions, until his death.

<sup>2</sup> The trial by water mentioned here is almost certainly the trial by cold water in which the accused, after the necessary ritual preparations of both the individual and the associated materials, would be lowered into a pool of water. If the person sank (commentators differed on the amount of the person that had to be submerged for the trial to be probative), the person was determined to have been received by the water and therefore innocent. If they floated, in contrast, the water was seen to have rejected them and they were declared guilty. For a clear discussion of this ordeal, see H. C. Lea, *The Ordeal*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1866 (as part III of his *Superstition and Force*); repr. 1973, pp. 72-87.

the entire process of examination that usually happens there was carried out, he was found to be guilty by this trial. When this happened, the man became truly troubled and was completely filled with a plea for justice not only with regard to paying for the horse but even more because of his unbearable fear of the count whom he knew would spare him but little if he were not absolved from the aforementioned crime. Therefore, gathering together all the clerics who were staying there, he sought their advice on how he might escape a crime for which he had inscribed nothing in his conscience.

While each person was responding to his question as he thought best, one of the clerics began to admonish the man that, after recollecting his sins a bit more attentively, he both reveal them in confession and promise God emendation. To him the man answered saying: *I have already done all these things so that there remains no sin in my memory that I have not confessed to you and for which I have not promised God emendation.* Then this cleric said: *How can this be true when I myself see a great sin upon you which you neither revealed to us in confessing nor believe to be a sin? For although you are a layman and should go about with your beard unshaven in the manner of laymen, you have nevertheless, in contempt of divine law, shaved your beard just like a cleric. Truly such a sin, although you regard it as nothing, I believe to be so great that you shall in no way be absolved from the crime into which you have fallen unless you do penance and promise God to avoid such behavior from now on.* When the man heard this, he immediately made a vow to God, saying: *Behold! I promise to God that if he shall free me from the verdict of guilty, into which I have just fallen, a razor shall never again touch my beard.*

After these words were spoken, all returned to the water, wishing to know whether the confession of sin and promise to avoid any future evils had done him any good. And when the trial was repeated, he became so safe that all who remained there praised God both for the man's innocence and for the judgment which had been revealed, namely that no layman should shave his beard. Thus was the man also freed from the power of the count who was hostile to him and from the violence of those who were forcing him to pay for the stolen horse.

After a short time, however, the man forgot the divine piety that had absolved him and did not take seriously what he had promised to God about not shaving his beard. He therefore ordered his beard to be shaved with a sharp knife, saying: *To be sure, I promised God that I would never lay a razor against my beard, but I never said anything about a sharp knife; therefore I will use this just like other people do.* But divine vengeance swiftly followed such presumption. For soon afterwards, he was captured by his enemies and deprived of sight when his eyes were gouged out.

Now then, since hearing this story from that cleric, I have eagerly told it to others so that I might lead some who have been frightened by this example to the correction of their behavior.