

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER VI.

A GAME OF SKILL.

It was near the close of a summer day, in the year 1683. In a small, but elegantly-furnished salon overlooking one of the boulevards of the old city of La Rochelle, two gentlemen sat at a gaming-table. One of them wore the black cap and gown of a candidate for priest's orders; the other, the elaborate attire of a French courtier. The former was still young, and his features had a boyish comeliness, though expressive of little more than good living and good temper. The countenance of his companion, though marked by the fine lines of fully twice as many years, was Grecian in contour, and had the soft colouring of a painting on ivory; the impassiveness also, for after one had watched it awhile, it seemed rather a mask behind which the wearer concealed himself, than a part of the man's living personality. Only the eyes, keen, furtive, black as night, seemed alive, and these gleamed with secret triumph, as for the third time that afternoon his delicate jewelled hand swept the contents of the pool toward his side of the table.

"Pardon, my young friend; luck seems to be against you to-day. But you shall have the opportunity to win it all back. It is the game, not the stakes, that I care for. The game amuses me, and to be amused is to live."

His discomfited antagonist did not answer. He had evidently some suspicion of sharp dealing, which his native politeness and good temper prevented him from uttering. Dubiously he had begun to shuffle the cards for a second deal, when the door of an inner apartment opened, and a young man, wearing the uniform of a French officer, sauntered in. His step, though martial in its gait, was languid. He carried his right arm in a sling, and a certain wanness was discernable through the bronzed tint of his cheek. In person he was tall and graceful, with a distinguished air. His eyes were dark and full of slumbering fire, but wore a listless, melancholy expression. His bold, handsome features formed a striking contrast to the feminine beauty of one of the faces turned toward him, and the pink and white freshness of the other.

The young abbe greeted him joyfully.

"Ah, here comes our handsome young captain. Take a hand at the game, monsieur, and assist me to my revenge upon your kinsman. Rumour says you are as invincible at the gaming-table as on the battlefield."

The young officer bowed courteously.

"I must beg M. l'Abbe to excuse me this afternoon," he said coldly.

The newly-fledged graduate of the Sorbonne elevated his eyebrows interrogatively, and then dropped them with a good-humoured laugh.

"I see. It is Sunday, and you are still a Huguenot. Pardon; I had no idea M. le Capitaine carried his religious prejudices so far. But take the advice of a well-wisher, monsieur. Prejudices are uncomfortable things; sometimes they are dangerous."

"Danger is hardly the cry with which to frighten off a French soldier," retorted the other with a curling lip. "As for the rest, M. l'Abbe, I have not been five years in the king's service, and seen all my claims to distinction passed by because of my creed, without discovering for myself that the faith of my fathers is a costly heritage."

"Back to the old grievance, Henri? Whatever path you take you always come home on that."

It was the elderly gentleman in the court-dress who spoke. His voice was like his face, cold and passionless. He had been regarding the young man, from the moment of his entrance, with quiet attention. The object of his scrutiny turned upon him fiercely.

"Can you deny it, sir? Will my cousin undertake to say that if I had been of his majesty's religion, my services to the State would have remained so long unacknowledged?"

"Certainly not: I predicted as much to your father years ago; I have warned you repeatedly since. To remain outside the king's religion is to remain beyond the pale of royal favour."

"Is it just? Is it statesmanlike?"

"A wise man will accommodate himself to the world as he finds it; a loyal subject will not call in question the justice of his sovereign."

The soldier laid his hand upon his sword.

"I did not impugn the justice of the king, and I will suffer no man to call in question my loyalty, not even you, cousin Claude. There are those about the king who take good care to keep him in ignorance that they may regulate public patronage to suit themselves. It is a well-understood fact that his majesty is continually deceived, not only as to the disposition of his Protestant subjects, but also as to their suffering under the edicts."

"It is a fact less understood in Paris than in the provinces," returned the courtier sarcastically. "Take my advice, my kinsman, and do not hug the delusion of the king's ignorance too fondly to your heart. There was one man, who had the hardihood, or the courage,—which you will,—to represent to his majesty the value to France of the heretic vine-dressers and silk-weavers. His remonstrances have perhaps done something to delay the inevitable destruction, but the result to himself will hardly inspire others to emulate his example."

"You refer to our noble kinsman, Minister Colbert?"

"I do. You know the result. He is dead—worn out by fruitless endeavours to prevent the demands of the royal exchequer from increasing the burdens of the people—and buried by night to escape the fury of the mob—unmourned by his sovereign, and bitterly execrated by the people for whom he had sacrificed himself. Small encouragement for his successor to follow in his steps, even were he so disposed. But M. Louvois is cast in a different mould. There is little love lost, it is said, between himself and the widow Scarron, but in one enterprise, at least, you may be sure they will join hands—the extirpation of heresy."

The cheek of the Huguenot flushed darkly, and his hand moved instinctively to a small jewelled ornament suspended

by a chain about his throat, and bearing the historic legend of his race—a cluster of roses and pansies set in a circlet of wheat-ears.

"There is a seed which springs the faster the more it is trampled on," he said significantly.

The Parisian shrugged his shoulders.

"Charming, as a figure of speech, my cousin, but worth nothing, you will find, when the royal ploughshare is put to the field. Even were the king himself less resolved upon the conversion of his Huguenot subjects, the widow Scarron gains in influence every day, and the darling desire of her heart is—the revocation of the Edict of Nantes."

"In that she will never succeed. The king is bound to preserve our liberties, bound by his plighted word."

M. Renau smiled.

"Have you little more than the name of them left now?" he asked.

"Nay," as the quick scarlet leaped once more into the swarthy cheek. "I meant not to anger you, Henri, only to prove how little the Huguenots of France have to hope for from their king. Hear me a moment. You have not the religious attachments of your father, and theology is not your forte. For the few prayers you will say in the course of a year, why will not one Church do you as well as another?"

The officer turned toward the door.

"I have already forbidden that subject," he said sternly. "I may be a heathen, cousin Claude: I will never be a papist. If I cannot reflect glory upon my father's name, I will not dishonour it."

"Silly boy. You will talk heroics when I am dealing with common sense. But it was the cards after all, not creeds, that were under discussion. Come, Henri, and take a hand at the game, and let us hear no more of these scruples about the day, which seem to have come across you suddenly since we crossed the Spanish border. If my memory serves me right, you showed little hesitation last winter in taking a seat at the roulette-table, Sunday, or any other day. Your refusal, too, is a reflection on our friend, the abbe here."

The good-humoured young priest looked around from the window to which he had discreetly retired.

"Having satisfied my own conscience with my morning's devotions, I am indifferent to the censure of another," he said, smiling. "Captain La Roche is under no obligations to remain for my sake."

Captain La Roche regarded him fixedly, and then, disarmed by the downright kindness of his glance, smiled also.

"Your amiability forces me to a confession, monsieur. It is not so much the day, as a previous engagement, that compels me to decline your invitation. I am at your service any time this evening."

He turned once more to the door, but before he could lay his hand upon the latch, M. Renau asked quietly.

"Whither now, Henri?"

"To the preaching in the Huguenot temple." The young man turned and faced his kinsman with a look that said plainly: "I am not to be laughed out of it."

The elder man threw up his hands with a whimsical gesture of dismay.

"You will be haranguing a *prêche* in the desert next. What new spell is on you, *mon ami*?"

"The spell that controls the actions of most men—a pair of handsome eyes, I fancy," the young abbe interposed, with a roguish twinkle in his eye. "Captain La Roche has probably found out, as I have, that his lovely innamorata attends service in the Huguenot temple every Sabbath afternoon."

Captain La Roche would evidently have denied it if he could, but there was no hiding the "light of sudden laughter" that "dimpled in his swarthy cheek."

"You appear to be well acquainted with her movements, M. l'Abbe."

"I use my eyes and ears, as others do, M. la Capitaine."

The soldier laughed merrily.

"Then you are probably also aware that I have no time to lose if I would not be late for service. Cousin Renau, I see you are reassured since you find that the spell that draws me is of 'the earth, earthly.' *Au revoir*, gentlemen. I give you good luck at your game."

The door closed behind him, and the two left alone, looked at each other and smiled.

"Is it the game or the stakes that most interests you now, monsieur?" inquired the priest.

"The game still, though the stakes are certainly worth playing for. It is to my interest to keep the lands of Beaumont free from encumbrance, and to do this Henri must marry wealth. His father has seriously embarrassed his property by the fines which he has incurred through his devotion to the Reformed Church, and mademoiselle, as I understand, will inherit large estates at her marriage."

"So madame has repeatedly whispered to Natalie and myself. She has even gone so far as to intimate to my sister that M. Laval is likely to make his pretty young ward his heir. But that is under the rose. He certainly dotes upon her. But it is not clear to my mind, monsieur, how this golden draft is to be drawn into the net of the Church. Captain La Roche appears devoted to his faith."

"As he would be to a hardly-pressed banner or a losing cause in a fight. It is the reckless chivalry of youth, Louis, not the stubborn fanaticism of his father—a much harder thing to fight, I assure you. My kinsman would never consent to the marriage of his son with a Catholic, and I can but congratulate myself that the fair Huguenot who has enslaved our hitherto invincible soldier, is not one of the psalm-singing, puritanical kind, but a giddy butterfly, eager to wander from flower to flower, for whom the world and its pleasures have endless attractions. Let me but plunge the two into the whirl and glitter of court life, and bring my cousin under the personal fascination of the king, and we will find these hereditary scruples melt like wax in the fire. Hearts can be taken by stratagem, *mon ami*, that can never be stormed."

"Then your game is already assured, monsieur. The young captain gives every evidence of *la grande passion*."

"He is bewitched by a pair of handsome eyes, undoubtedly; but it is on that point I feel most uneasiness. Let Henri discover too soon the identity of his fair unknown with the betrothed of his friend and our scheme miscarries at once."

"But I understood from madame, the aunt, that the betrothal is not a formal one, only a family understanding."

"All the more binding on one of Henri's temperament. His honour is his religion. If he learns the truth before he

is thoroughly enslaved, our game is up. Are you sure madame can be depended on?"

"Madame is in raptures at the prospect of such a brilliant alliance for her young kinswoman. She will hold her tongue, I promise you."

"That is well. But how about the old nurse? Is she still laid up? She would prove a sad marplot just now."

"She still keeps her room, monsieur, and is likely to do so for some time, from all I can gather. It is madame's own maid who accompanies mademoiselle in her walks."

"Very good once more. Now let us have our game."

There was silence while the cards were dealt, and then the abbe glanced up once more.

"You appear to have overlooked one possibility, monsieur. Suppose the young lady herself proves unmanageable?"

M. Renau compressed his thin lips in a way that was not pleasant to see.

"The young lady has nothing to do with it. She will marry as her elders think best."

"On the contrary, monsieur; there is some prejudice in the family against a *mariage de convenance*. Madame assures me that the young lady's inclination will be the bar after all that will decide the question."

"Be it so. Is my cousin a man likely to woo unheard?"

"But there may be a previous attachment. Madame admits she had much ado to comfort the little demoiselle for her separation from the Chevaliers at the first, and that her foster-brother's name was on her lips even in her sleep."

"That was five years ago and they were both children. Madame has done her work ill if the girl hesitates between reigning as the mistress of Beaumont or leading an obscure, perilous existence as the wife of a Huguenot physician. I believe it was to that the boy aspired. You appear to overlook, Louis, that the proffer of my cousin's hand is an honour for which mademoiselle, in her position, could not have looked."

"I do not, monsieur, and that brings me to my last misgiving. The *Sieur La Roche*—how is he likely to regard the match? Will the mysterious hints which madame doles out to us of the young lady's gentle birth and high connections satisfy his aristocratic demands for his only son?"

"I would I were as sure of the cut of my new cloak, *mon ami*. My kinsman, I happen to know, is as well acquainted with mademoiselle's lineage as madame herself, and a chance word of Henri's years ago betrayed to me that the silence was a matter of religious policy. When our pretty little demoiselle is once united to a Huguenot husband able to protect her, I fancy there will be no longer any need for secrecy. But even were it otherwise, I believe it would suffice M. La Roche that the girl is the foster child of the Chevaliers, whom he seems to think have had a patent of nobility straight from heaven."

"The abbe lifted his eyebrows. "I see you have thought of everything, monsieur. Your position seems impregnable, and I am your most obedient servant henceforth."

They resumed their cards, and silence once more fell upon them.

In a beautiful grove of elms, about a quarter of a mile south east of the old city, stood the large stone structure to which the Huguenots had long been accustomed to resort for public worship.

For many years the Protestants of France had only been suffered by their Catholic rulers to elect their temples outside the corporate limits of a town; but in the present instance, the love and industry of the worshippers had done much to soften the disadvantage. The church itself was built on the slope of a gentle hill, commanding a fine view of the town and a glimpse of the distant sea. The road thither was paved with stones, worn smooth by the going and coming feet of many generations, and bordered on either side by stately chestnut trees. The edifice, though as scrupulously devoid of ornament as the worship within, was, like it, not without a grand and simple beauty, and the hoary lichens and trailing vines with which time had mantled it, softened the asperity of its rigid outlines. The service was just beginning, when Henri La Roche, after a hurried walk, mounted the steps, and the stately old beadle, who stood on the threshold holding the ponderous staff of his office, advanced, with as much haste as his dignity would permit, to show the young officer to a place. That young gentleman, however, intimidated by a gesture that he was not yet ready to enter. His quick glance had caught sight of two figures coming up the avenue: one of them, a slender girl dressed in simple white, with her head set daintily on her small throat, like a young queen's, and a step as light and quick as a breeze when it pricks its way across a summer sea. His head began to tremble like a leaf. He drew back hastily into the shadow of the entrance and waited, smiling at his own folly, yet unable to resist the spell that was on him. Two weeks before, chancing to go out early one morning, and turning a corner hastily, he had jostled against a young girl coming from the opposite direction. The collision sent the basket of roses she had been carrying tumbling to the ground. He had only time to catch sight of a small, rosy mouth, pouted like a bud, as he stooped in confusion to gather them up. In a moment they were replaced in the basket, and the basket in the hand outstretched to receive it—a pretty hand, white as snow and dimpled like a child's.

"A thousand pardons, mademoiselle."

"A thousand thanks, monsieur."

The next moment she had passed on her way, followed by her chattering maid. But was it accident or fate or something sweeter still, that left one of those crimson roses lying on the stones at his feet? He snatched it up and went home with his brain in a whirl. There are natures to which love at first sight is impossible, but his was not one of them. He did not try to analyze his feelings—introspection was not one of his characteristics; but all that day those merry eyes looked at him from every book and picture, and at night followed him into his dreams, and made his blood tingle. Other eyes he had seen, bright and sweet—eyes that had graciously smiled upon him and wooed him shyly, and into which he had thought it pleasant to look for an hour, but none that had ever haunted his solitude like these. Early the next morning he was out on the boulevard once more, pacing slowly up and down, with a red rose fastened in his coat. His vigil was soon rewarded. A far off he saw her coming; his heart already singling her out in the crowd with a sense of passionate proprietorship.

(To be Continued.)