

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XVI.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

"You are looking pale, madame; I fear you feel the confinement to your apartments."

The early service in the chateau chapel was just ended, and M. Renau, cool and bland as the October day without, laid a detaining hand on the slender, black-robed figure, which would have glided past him without a word. Attendance upon matins was one of the new duties imposed upon Eglantine by her confessor, and she was scrupulously exact in the observance of the religious rite; but unless directly addressed by Henri's kinsman, she always went and came without taking any notice of his presence. M. Renau had enjoyed his triumph to the full, but he began to be somewhat uneasy at the weary face, and broken, spiritless manner of his victim. He had vowed to humble her pride to the dust, and punish her for her rejection of Henri and her destruction of his plans, by forcing her to the concession for which she had despised her husband, but he was not ready to scandalize society, or to incense M. Laval by having her fade like a flower in his grasp. The banker was now convalescent, and growing imperious in his demand for his grand-daughter to come down to him at Nismes. It would not be easy to quiet him much longer with the plea that Eglantine herself refused to leave the chateau, and M. Renau might find it hard to carry out the remaining part of his revenge, if M. Laval should take matters in his own hand, and come up in person to Beaumont.

"I must insist that you spend a couple of hours in the garden every day," he went on suavely, yet with something in his tone that reminded his listener of the master. "It is necessary for the child's health as well as yours, that you take more exercise. I will give strict orders that the soldiers and new servants leave you unmolested, and Marie shall always watch over the babe while you are gone."

The mother lifted her eyes for a moment to his face, and then fixed them once more on the floor. He might safely enough open her prison-doors, and bid her wander to the ends of the earth while he kept the babe in his own grasp; he knew well she would not stray far from that cradle; but the hint in reference to her child's health touched a secret terror in her heart, and stimulated her to avail herself of the permission thus accorded. And every day after that, the young madame might be seen walking slowly to and fro in one of the avenues of the bocage. Her long seclusion—her youth, beauty, and many sorrows—had excited much interest among the new retainers of the chateau, but M. Renau's orders were peremptory: madame was not to be spoken to or interfered with in any way; and after it was discovered that she preferred the path leading to the fig and olive plantation on the side of the hill, neither soldiers nor servants ventured into that part of the park during the hour that she took her airing. Eglantine had chosen the path because it commanded a good view of her chamber window, and through every opening in the trees she could look up and see Marie sitting at work beside the child's cradle. When the view was interrupted by the shrubbery she would walk with her eyes cast upon the ground, taking no notice of the bright autumn beauty of the woods about her; sometimes she would be compelled to rest for a few moments on one of the rustic seats placed here and there in the wood, and then she would sit so mute and motionless, with listless hands dropped upon her lap, that the birds hopped about unscared at her feet, and even a timid rabbit would now and then scurry across her path.

It was as she sat thus one day, a little deeper in the shade than usual, for the sun was warm—that she saw a servant coming down the avenue with a basket of grapes on his arm. She had noticed the man once or twice before, dressing the flower-borders on the terrace, and Marie had told her that he was one of the new gardeners. But what was he humming as he strolled carelessly along? The sharp, penetrative voice, with a strong northern accent, brought the words to her ear, though they were scarcely spoken above his breath.

"I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined his ear unto me, and heard my cry."

What could it mean? Who could be so mad as to sing one of Clement Marot's psalms under the very walls of the chateau? Was the man a recusant Huguenot—did he know what he was doing? Why had he chosen the words that so peculiarly suited her case? Surely M. Renau would not employ any but staunch Catholics in his service. She cast a frightened, hurried look at the figure approaching her. She had certainly never seen the man before. He had stopped humming the psalm, and was whistling an air, which had been a great favourite among the work-people of La Rochelle; the sound woke memories which made her tremble, but the gardener was evidently quite unconscious of her proximity. He seemed absorbed in some object upon the opposite wall; apparently he would have passed her, without taking any notice of her presence, had not his basket jostled against a low-hanging bow and part of the contents spilled on the ground at her feet. It was a moment's work to gather the fruit up quickly and to hurry on his way, but Eglantine's quick ear had caught a whisper in that second:

"Be comforted, dear lady, friends are near."

Nothing more; and before she could rally her startled senses, and try to question him, he was out of sight.

The next day she was earlier in the park than usual, and remained longer; but though she could see Pepin—as Marie had told her the soldiers had nicknamed the gardener, on account of his low stature—working at some distance, he did not dare to come near enough for her to venture to speak to him. The next day and the next she did not see him at all. The momentary excitement kindled by his words flickered out. She had either been the victim of a cruel hoax, or else her brain was beginning to give way, and she had imagined the whole affair. But suddenly, on the fourth morning, as she sat with closed eyes in her accustomed seat in the wood, a bouquet of flowers was laid between her fingers. She opened her eyes instantly; there was no one near her, but Pepin, at a little distance was trimming the oleander bushes. As soon as he saw that he was observed, and that she was about to

come to him, he shook his head and retreated slowly, looking at the flowers in her hand. Then Eglantine saw a slip of paper, laid in the cup of the white lily in the centre of the bunch. She drew it out with trembling fingers. Pepin smiled and nodded, laid his finger on his lips, and vanished in the wood. The note bore no visible characters, but this time Eglantine needed no hint to send her hurrying back to her chamber, and, as soon as the door was securely fastened behind her, to light a candle, and hold the scrap of paper to the flame. As she had alternately hoped and feared, the writing was Rene's; but what did his message mean? All at once a hundred hammers began to beat on her brain and the world to recede from her grasp.

"Not in the chateau-pool, but in the prison of Toulouse; not faithless, but believing."

That was all; but the next moment Eglantine La Roche, with a transfused face, was pressing the bit of paper to her breast and sobbing her husband's name. Then she had not murdered him; if he was dead—and even in her first rush of joy she was not blind to the careful wording of Rene's message—he had not died by his own hands, but suffering for the truth. "Not faithless, but believing." For many minutes she could do nothing but sit quiet and take in the intense relief of the thought. Not until now did she realize how heavy had been the weight of remorse which had been crushing out her very life. He must have gone back to Nismes and withdrawn his recantation, while she lay there dumb with misery, holding herself guilty of his death, and reproaching God. He had witnessed a good confession, had kept the faith, and fought a good fight while she had believed him a reproach among his people, and an outcast from the mercy of his God. While she had been mourning him as undone, he was perhaps rejoicing before the throne. Did M. Renau know this all this while? It was not possible that Henri could have been cast into prison without his knowledge. Was this the reason why he had kept her there a prisoner, had intercepted Rene's letters, and dismissed all the old servants from the place? Had he been afraid that the truth would reach, and nerve her soul to a resistance which nothing could overcome? Or had it only been to gratify his revenge for her thwarting of his plans, that he had inflicted upon her these slow months of torture? With a dawning consciousness of the cruelty and craft that had been slowly enfolding her with its coils, the unhappy woman buried her face in her hands. As she did so her brow came in contact with the marble crucifix on her dressing-table, and a low cry of despair escaped her lips. For a moment she had forgotten her own fall and hopelessness of all return for her. But now it rushed back upon her with overwhelming force. The path of restoration, which Henri had trodden with such unflinching feet, for her was irremediably closed. If it had been too much for her to put those baby-hands away from her a few weeks before, it was hundred times more impossible now that the small face upon her breast was growing every day more spiritually fair. A terrible conviction had fallen upon her. Ever since her abjuration, little Gabrielle had been slowly failing, and the delicacy, which could easily be accounted for by her own days and nights of grief, had for the conscience stricken mother but one significance. God had taken notice of her sin after all, and was about to enter into judgment. She had let her child come between them, and he was a very jealous God.

"Henri! Henri! neither in this world or in the next will I ever see thy face again!" she cried, despairingly.

But the longing to hear more, to learn exactly what had been his fate, was stronger than her anguish, and as early next morning as she could leave the house without exciting suspicion, she was in her old seat in the wood. To her intense relief, she had not been there more than a few moments, when she saw Pepin coming down the avenue. This time he came directly toward her and took off his cap.

"M. Renau left for Nismes this morning, madame, to be gone all day, and the men are making merry over some home-brewed ale. We may speak safely for a few moments."

Eglantine had risen trembling at his approach.

"Have you brought me further tidings?" she faltered.

Pepin took a ring from his cap, and placed it in her hand.

"M. Chevalier dares not write more, madame. This is his token, that you may ask me what you like."

The pledge had been her mother's dying gift to Godfrey Chevalier, and had been handed down to his son. As her fingers closed over it, Eglantine's heart told her that Rene must have been as sure of this man's fidelity as of his own soul, to have trusted him with it. She no longer feared to utter the questions hovering on her lips.

"Is my husband still living?"

Pepin's eyes fell.

"God only knows that, dear lady. M. Chevalier would not feed you with false hopes."

"But he has no positive assurance of his death?"

"He can be sure of nothing, except that M. La Roche has not again faltered. The doctor is certain his enemies would have published it far and wide if they had been able a second time to move him."

"Then he did withdraw his abjuration?"

"Publicly, madame, in the great cathedral at Nismes. I was myself a spectator, and saw him struck down and dragged back to prison, but not before he uttered words which have gone ringing throughout Languedoc. Is there a timid heart about to forsake the truth, a backslider who fears to return?—it is only necessary to repeat what M. La Roche said of the peace of conscience that is sweeter than life and liberty, and the weak grow strong, and the faint-hearted bold."

Pepin stopped suddenly, for his listener had sunk down upon the bench and covered her face with her hands.

"And all these weeks I have been suffering to believe him dead—goaded to the act by my own words—to think his name was a reproach and a snare among his people. Cruel, cruel!" she moaned. And then she looked up once more, and fixed her mournful eyes upon the messenger. "It was my just punishment. Yes, I know Rene wrote to me, and M. Renau intercepted the letters; but it was God who saw I did not deserve to know any better. It was not anything I said that made him go back and withdraw his recantation. Who was it that saved him? Was it Rene?"

Pepin cast a hurried glance about him, and dropping on his knee, pressed his lips to the hem of her dress.

"Madame, I have something to tell you, if you can bear to hear it. It is written of the Lord our God. 'A bruised reed will He not break.'"

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"I can bear anything after what I have believed for the last six weeks. The moments are passing. Pepin."

"I saw M. La Roche the night he left the chateau. Nay," as she turned suddenly dead and white, "control yourself, dear lady, or you will never be able to hear me through. I had gone up into the hills to seek a hiding-place for my wife and little ones. It was no longer safe for them at Lodeve, and I had promised to stop overnight with M. Chevalier, to let him know what success I had met with. As I rode down the hill, I saw mistress Agnes gathering cresses at the lake yonder. I thought it was late for her to be out alone, for the twilight was falling, so I left my horse by the road, and went down to carry her basket for her. She had just put in the last bit of green, and was handing it to me, when we heard some one running hard and fast down the terrace, and the next moment a gentleman broke the brushwood, and pulling off his coat and doublet, would have leaped into the water, when he saw Mistress Agnes looking at him."

Pepin paused, and looked uneasily at his auditor. Eglantine had hidden her face once more in her hands, but she made him a hurried signal to proceed, and he obeyed.

"She looked like an angel, madame, standing there in the dim light, with her white dress and golden hair, and the gentleman—I did not know then who he was—stared at her as if she had indeed been a vision from another world. The moment saved his life. The next instant she had laid her hand on his arm. 'What were you going to do do, M. Henri?' I heard her ask him, and at that a great trembling fell on him. He turned away and leaned against a tree. 'Do not ask me,' he said to her. 'I am mad with trouble; my punishment is greater than I can bear.' I had no right to listen, madame, but I could not go and leave the young lady there alone, and I had a feeling I might be needed presently. She seemed to understand everything at once; she is as grave as a woman, the doctor's young sister. 'You have signed the recantation,' I heard her say to him once more, and when he groaned, and shrank away from her, she turned very pale, but kept her hand upon his shoulder. 'Oh, I am so sorry, so very sorry,' she said, and then she took his hand, and raised it to her lips. 'You did not do it until you were sorely tempted, I am sure of that. Was it not to save my cousin Eglantine and your little daughter?' And at that he burst into tears, such tears as I hope never to see a strong man shed again. And when I could see through the blur that rose to my own eyes, he was lying on the ground, and she was on her knees beside him."

An uncontrollable sob broke from Eglantine. Pepin paused at once and looked anxiously at her.

"Madame is not strong enough to hear more," he said pityingly.

"I deserve all I suffer," was the choked answer. "Go on; I would hear the rest now, though M. Renau stood at my side."

"When he grew quiet, he told her that his wife had rebuked him for his weakness, and refused to accept the safety he had purchased for her with his dishonour, and that he would not save himself alone, and he could not live here to see her suffer, and know that his fall was a stumbling-block to his people and a boast among his enemies. 'I hoped, in another land, to begin a humbler and better life, but that is all over now,' he said to her; 'I had given God the second place in my heart, and He has punished me.'"

"Would you decide differently, if it was to be done over again?" she asked him, and he lifted his head and looked at her.

"I would suffer a hundred deaths before I would let go my hold on God's truth again," he answered; "I begin to see, Agnes, it was worth more than all else in the world; but it is too late to talk of that now."

"It is not too late for God to forgive, nor for you to go back to Nismes," she said it quietly, madame, as though it were the only thing to be done. "I trembled as I heard her; I knew better than she the fiery path she was pointing out, and so did M. La Roche. But he started up as though he had heard the voice of an angel. She was right, he said; he would go back to Nismes and withdraw his recantation—he wondered he had not thought of it before. And there was no time to lose, for M. Renau must now suspect his purpose. And then I saw my time had come, and I went and knelt at his feet. He looked thunderstruck for a moment, for until then he had thought himself alone with Mistress Agnes, but I think something in my face told him he need not fear, and when I said my horse was at the roads' end, and would he use it for the truth's sake, he thanked me and said I was God's messenger, and it was a token for good. Mistress Agnes would have run to fetch her brother, but on that point he was firm. He even made her promise that she would not mention having seen him, until she had heard from Nismes that he had accomplished his purpose. It would be better for the doctor and his mother to be able to say they had neither seen nor heard of him when search was made; no one would think of asking her. He was resolved now, come what might, not to adhere to his recantation, but he wanted, if possible, to withdraw it publicly, and undo something of the harm he had done. And then he made her put her arms about his neck, and promise to pray for him every day. He had learned his own weakness, he said, and could not stand unless God would help him. And then I saw his lip tremble, madame, as he glanced back at the chateau. He had been very angry when he parted with his wife, he said, and had spoken words he would give much to recall, but it was impossible for him to go back now. Mistress Agnes must see her, and tell her so—tell her that he would love her to his dying day, and that she must never reproach herself for what she had done. It was better so; he might never have given God the first place in his heart while he had her, and he would try to meet her in a better world."

"Never," Eglantine started from her seat and confronted her messenger with a frightened look in her eyes. "Do not say that word again. It is impossible for me to go back. Tell M. Chevalier so; tell him that I thank him for his message, but he must not try to communicate with me again. There is a gulf fixed between us."

But Pepin still knelt at her feet.

"Do not send the doctor back a message like that, madame. He will not rest until he gets you out of M. Renau's keeping. Nay, listen to me one moment. I wear the sieur's livery, but I am here only in your service, to watch and wait for the moment when we may attempt to rescue you; the doctor and Jean Boneau have already devised a scheme—"

But she would hear no more; she was white with terror.