

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALK OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XIV. (Continued.)

"My heart can break only once," was the quivering answer. "Do not look at aunt Monique, it is not she who gives me strength to speak. It is the thought of Henri. Whatever comes, I must die bravely, as becomes the sharer of his counsels, the mother of his child." She turned and hid her face in her pillow, and the emotion she could no longer restrain, shook her delicate frame.

Madame Chevalier, who had been sitting apart in a window, came forward.

"You had better leave her, her cup is full," she said, looking sadly at M. Laval, but misinterpreting the low, heart-breaking sobs, the banker had drawn back once more to the bed.

The docility with which the Chevaliers had submitted to Eglantine's marriage with Henri had agreeably disappointed him, and he had of late resumed something of his old friendly manner toward them. But he could never shake off the conviction that, in their secret hearts, they looked down upon him for his recantation, and in spite of Eglantine's denial, he was jealous of her aunt's influence at this moment.

"Do not cry so, my girl; I did not mean to be cruel," he said, touching the bowed head with a rough caress. "If I spoke plainly, it was only to rouse you to a sense of your situation, and save you from any such ordeals. You are the one joy and hope of my life, Eglantine. If this sorrow and disgrace are permitted to come upon you, I will go down before my time to the grave. Think of me when you decide this question." He paused as if for some reply. She made no answer, but her sobs were growing quieter, and he went on, encouraged. "Listen to me, my girl; you are making a sacrifice, which your husband, soldier and man of honour as he is, does not demand. Henri is by no means as indifferent to the considerations I have pressed upon you as your romantic pride would lead you to believe. M. Renau is convinced, from his last conversation with him, that he has begun to waver, and he has already obtained a respite of the sentence, and started for Paris."

"And Natalie will add her influence with Madame de Maintenon," added Louis Bertrand, eagerly. "My sister is in high favour with the lady who stands nearest the king; a letter, received to-day, assures me that with M. La Roche's recantation in her hands, she is positive she can have the sentence commuted to that of banishment. Madame de Maintenon has said as much."

But they had overreached their mark. Eglantine started up from her pillows, white and quivering.

"It is false! it is the basest, cruellest of slanders!" she cried. "You have been deceived, both of you; but you should have known better than to repeat the accusation to me. Henri waver, where peasants and children have stood firm! The thought is monstrous! What but the assurance of his fidelity, the endeavour to be worthy of his example, has kept me from going mad with my trouble, and given me strength to live and bear the thought of a life without him?"

Both men had recoiled in dismay. M. Laval was the first to rally.

"It is no slander," he said sturdily. "I saw Henri myself last night. He is by no means as resolute as you persuade yourself. When I left him he was sobbing like a child. Death has no terrors for a soul like his, but the suffering of a helpless wife and babe has moved the will of more than one strong man ere this. If you will add your entreaties to ours, Eglantine, the work is done. Your husband is already wavering."

An angry light flashed across the white face of Henri La Roche's wife.

"I do not believe it!" she retorted proudly, resisting her aunt's efforts to draw her back upon her pillows. "Why do you never let Rene see him? Why am I never permitted to write to him? If you are so confident of his yielding, why have you made this appeal to me? Ah, I see!" as he dropped his eyes, and did not answer. "You are deceiving me out of mistaken kindness; but if you only knew, it would be less cruel to kill me where I lie. If I could doubt Henri, I would doubt everything. There would be nothing left worth caring for, worth living and suffering for not of which I could feel sure. But you cannot shake my faith in him; you have wrung his noble soul with some ungenerous appeal; you have not moved his will one hair's breadth from its purpose."

Her voice, which had been growing fainter and more unsteady, failed suddenly. Pale as death and with closed eyes, she sank back into Monique Chevalier's arms.

"Send one of the servants quickly for Rene," commanded the foster-mother, as she bent anxiously over her, and almost as pale as the blanched face upon the bed, M. Laval hurried out of the room.

His worst enemy need have wished him no harsher companions than his own thoughts, for the next hour, as he wandered desolately up and down the large drawing room, listening to the sounds in the chamber above. He had been so proud to see Eglantine reign as mistress here, and to know it was the fortune he had gathered for her, which had enabled her to bring so much of luxury and beauty into the stately rooms. But what did it all matter now? What did it profit him that a stroke from his pen could shake the markets of the world, that his vaults yet groaned with treasure, and a hundred sails upon the sea were bearing home to him the spoils of as many successful speculations? He had failed to shield his darling's head from the woe he had most dreaded; he was powerless to win from the pale lips the word that could yet avert the blow; the wealth of the Indies could not quench one bitter tear, nor pluck one thorn from her pillow. The gold, to which he had devoted the best energies of his life, which he had held dearer even than his hopes of heaven, crumbled into nothingness in this hour of need. "He that saveth his life shall lose it," a voice sounded in his ears. A door had opened into the past. Once more he knelt in the murky dungeon beside the martyr's bed. Was this what Godfrey Chevalier had meant when he uttered that warning? Did he foresee the hour when his friend would stand grasping the empty chalice, with the subtle elixir spilt forever? Hurriedly M. Laval opened a window and stepped out upon the

sunny terrace; but he could not leave the thought behind him with the hush and shadows of the splendid room. Louis Bertrand had gone down to the hamlet to see the cure, and there was no voice to drown that of the long-silenced monitor. It was the path of his own choosing that had brought Eglantine to this. Side by side with his pursuit of wealth had gone another purpose, equally determined, though less openly acknowledged—to set his darling safely beyond the reach of these religious differences and persecutions. For this he had broken his solemn promise to the dead, and separated her from the Chevaliers, and surrounded her with an atmosphere of worldliness and gayety, which had made her turn instinctively from Rene's stern views of life to grasp at the cup Henri La Roche held out to her. With a proud sense of triumphing over circumstances, the banker had laid the girlish hand in that of the young sieur of Beaumont. M. Renau had been so confident that their love for each other, and the gay winter in Paris would obliterate from the young hearts all early prejudices and silence all doubtful scruples. But how differently it had turned out! Rene Chevalier still walked the earth a free man, and Henri La Roche lay in a dungeon under sentence of death. The crown of thorns M. Laval had vowed should never touch his darling's head, he had himself helped to plait. Bitter resentment against the hand that imposed the doom mingled in his breast with a secret terror of the power that could thus outrun and circumvent his plans.

Had he been successful in everything else, to be a loser here? Fool that he had been to measure his finite skill against the hand that made heaven and earth; to hug to his soul the fond delusion that he could outrun the purpose of God! Too late he saw that he had been, not an antagonist, but an unconscious instrument, and heard—or fancied that he heard—through his crumbling plans the derision of Him who "sitteth in the heavens," the awful laughter of the Most High.

"Eglantine is better," said a low voice at his side, and he started to see that the pastor's widow stood beside him. "I knew you would be anxious, and came as soon as I could leave her." She did not add how long and deathlike had been the swoon brought on by his exciting words, but he read the truth in her face.

"My pretty, laughing girl!" he muttered, turning away with a quivering lip. "It is hard she should be brought down to this when I have toiled all my life to make her happy. Beware how you encourage her to persist in her refusal to the proposition I have made to her. It is the one chance of saving her husband's life."

"Beware how you tempt that noble heart in its hour of weakness and suffering, monsieur! He that saveth his life shall lose it."

M. Laval shook off her hand. He was white to the lips. "We are not likely to agree on that point; let us drop it," he said hoarsely. "I see Jean bringing my horse into the court, Monique. There is business waiting for me in Nismes."

Godfrey Chevalier's widow was looking at him with sad, compassionate eyes.

"Eglantine would like to say good-bye to you before you go," was all she answered. "These are not times to part in anger, monsieur."

He hesitated a moment, and then without a word followed her up the stair. Eglantine was still too much exhausted to speak, and Rene, watching with the old nurse beside her bed, warned M. Laval by a glance to be careful. For one sad, full moment the old man and his grandchild looked into each other's eyes. Then the young wife's brimmed with tears, and the banker turned away to hide his writhing lip.

"I will do what I can," he said in a broken voice and followed Madame Chevalier from the room. The angel that withstood him in the way was forgotten once more, and the unequal contest was resumed. He must save her from the sorrow that would forever blast her life!

Before he knew what she was doing, Monique Chevalier had led him into the nursery beyond, and he stood beside the large carved cradle in which the heirs of Beaumont had been rocked for generations.

"You must not go without seeing your grand-daughter," she said softly. "She has been named Gabrielle, after Henri's mother; Eglantine wished it."

The infant was asleep. She was a fair, tiny creature, as unlike the rosy, dimpled babyhood of her mother, as a snow-drop is unlike an apple-bloom, yet with something in her face which reminded M. Laval of his little grand-daughter when he had first come up to see her in these Cevenol hills—a kind of spiritualized likeness, as though her soul had entered into her child—such a look, Rene had once said to his mother, as Eglantine's angel might wear, looking into "the face of her Father in heaven." Slowly, as M. Laval gazed, the bitterness vanished from his heart, the vague sense of injury he had cherished against the little intruder melted like icicles in the sun. She at least knew nothing of his sin; nothing of the sharp theological distinctions which were working such havoc in the world around them. Her innocence disarmed him, even while it made him afraid. With a strange sense of unworthiness he touched his lips to the little hand, soft and pink as a rose-petal, lying on the coverlet. When he looked up, Agnes Chevalier, who had been reading in a window near at hand, stood beside him. She was never far away from the cradle.

"Does M. Henri know about his little daughter?" she asked wistfully. She had never been able to call the young sieur by the name by which she had first known his father.

Pierre Laval nodded silently. He could not for worlds have spoken just then. The soft eyes saw the trouble in his face. Godfrey Chevalier's young daughter laid her hand upon his arm.

"My mother has told me how good you were to us when I was a little child, and my father was in prison. I never forget to pray for you, monsieur."

"Your mother would tell you that was time wasted," he returned shortly, but there was a suspicious tremor in his voice, and he avoided Monique Chevalier's glance as they went down-stairs.

"I wish you were all safely out of the country," he grumbled, as he stood in the sunny courtyard, with his hand on his horse's neck. "You have been a mother to my girl, Monique, and I would be sorry to have anything happen to you or yours. If you can make up your minds to leave France, you shall have all the help in my power."

"Thank you; I believe that," she answered gratefully. "But the risk is too great. We have decided to remain where we are, and trust God to take care of us here. I wish your

anxiety was for yourself, my friend," she added, with a quick, gentle glance.

But M. Laval uttered an impatient exclamation, and sprang into his saddle. He bent down the next moment, however, to whisper in her ear.

"M. Renau speaks of visiting the chateau in a few weeks; beware of him! He will do all he can for Eglantine, but he bears you no good-will. He has discovered Rene's profession, and will not scruple to use the information when it suits his purpose. Remember! you are warned."

Before the startled mother could reply, he had clapped spurs to his steed, and was gone.

It was several days before Eglantine recovered from the exciting effects of his visit. When she did, it was to convalesce rapidly, and to display a degree of courage and self-control that had hitherto been lacking. She no longer hesitated to utter her husband's name, but spoke of him even to the domestics that ministered about her couch, in proud, unfaltering tones encouraging them to strengthen their hearts, as she did hers, with the thought of his heroic example. If she wept, it was when no eye saw; no word passed her lips that could be construed into an accent of doubt or timidity; her dark, tender eyes burned with a quenchless flame. It was evident that her grandfather's appeal had not only failed of its purpose, but stirred all the latent forces of her nature, and welded them into one firm resolve—to show her unshaken confidence in Henri, and her anxiety that no look or words of hers should be interpreted as a weak wish that it were otherwise.

Monique Chevalier watched her with a might of speechless tenderness. Too well she knew the breaking heart would sooner or later feel the need of a more present help in its trouble than any human love—that the levees of wifely pride could not always keep back the floods of wifely anguish. But when she would have hinted this to Eglantine, and won her to the surer strength of a patient waiting upon God, Henri's wife turned upon her reproachfully.

"Surely you do not doubt him, aunt Monique—you, who know so well his high sense of honour, and all he has dared and suffered for the religion?"

"If I hope to see him stand faithful to the end, my child, it is because I trust he is leaning on God's grace, not because I think his courage above assault. Be patient with me, Eglantine; the best and bravest have failed without that support. Remember Peter. 'Though I die yet will I not deny Thee'—and do not stake your faith on anything less than God Himself."

"I have staked my faith on Henri's constancy," was the proud answer and the young wife turned away with a flush of resentment upon her cheek. "It is disloyal in me to permit it to be called in question, even by you, and I will not. Why do you try to make me think otherwise? It is because I can trust him so utterly that I have strength to live and suffer."

"It is her only gospel," said Rene, when the words were repeated to him that night. "Do not let us rob her of it, my mother, until God has shown her her need of something better. We can afford to be patient, if He can. She says truly, it is all that keeps her heart from breaking."

The conversation took place on the eve of their departure from the chateau. M. Renau was expected at Beaumont the next day, and Pierre Laval, in the letter conveying the information to his granddaughter, had repeated his warning to Rene. Eglantine, who had not before heard of it, insisted feverishly that they should run no risk on her account. She was now able to leave her chamber, and did not need such constant care; M. Renau's visit would be short, and she could easily send for them in case necessity arose; nothing would so embitter her full cup of sorrow as to have harm come to Rene through her.

The claims of his profession, and care for his mother and sister, left Rene no choice but to comply. His life was not his own to put in needless peril, and the day might come when Eglantine herself would need him more. From M. Renau she had certainly nothing worse to fear than attempts to undermine her faith, and these, the young surgeon felt sure, would prove futile as long as Henri remained steadfast. On the other hand, should the dragoons penetrate to the hills, during the courtier's visit, the presence of her powerful Catholic kinsman would afford Eglantine a protection he would be powerless to supply. Nevertheless it was a sad parting, and in spite of his clear conviction of right, a heavy foreboding fastened upon Rene's heart, as he closed the bocage gate behind him.

Had this parting, after all, been only for a few days? What would elapse before he would again hold that slender hand in his, and look into the depths of those sweet, mournful eyes? Well was it for him that he could not part the curtains of the future, and knew not what even "a day might bring forth"; well it is for us all that a pitying Father is mute to our questions of the way, and will not suffer us to increase to-day's burden by a glimpse of to-morrow's load!

Eglantine had parted from them very quietly. To her stricken heart the going and coming of other feet made little difference, since one foot would cross the threshold no more. The days of Henri's respite were nearly over. One last boon remained to be wrested from the hard hand of fate, and for this her heart was gathering all its strength. M. Renau could, and must, obtain an interview for her with her husband. He had done all he could to save his young kinsman; he would not refuse them this one grain of comfort, now that his last hope of shaking Henri's constancy had been relinquished. To pillow her head once more upon Henri's heart, to feel his arm for one brief hour enfold her—it was all she asked; while with words of proud and passionate fondness she would gird up his soul for the last ordeal, and pour into his heart a balsam which would rob even pain of its sting. She grew impatient for M. Renau's arrival, as she dwelt upon the thought. The hours of the summer day seemed endless as she listened in vain for the sound of his horse's hoof upon the road. At last the sun stooped behind the hills, the purple twilight folded down upon the plain. Must she live through another long, lonely night without that certainty upon which to pillow her head? Hark! there was the sound of wheels at last. A coach was coming rapidly up the hill. It rolled in through the bocage gate, up under the avenue of stately elms, into the stone-paved court. She could hear M. Renau's cold, polished tones, and Louis Bertrand's gay, soft laugh. She was glad her cousin had come too: he would add his entreaties to hers. She laid her hand upon the bell; she would send word to them to come to her at once, as soon as they had shaken off the dust of their travel. But listen! One of them