

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

"You will never love me well enough to be my wife, Eglantine." He spoke quietly, as if in statement of a well-accepted fact.

The blood rushed to the girl's throat and brow.

"Rene!" she cried, with a sharp note of pain in her voice, and then her eyes fell, and her lips were mute.

He sat down by her and took her hand.

"Have I been too abrupt? Pardon me, Eglantine, I have said the words over so often to myself. Do you remember what you said to me when we parted in La Rochelle? You could not love me better if you were my own brother. I have thought of it often since. I want you to let me talk to you to-day, as I would talk to Agnes. I have never told you the condition on which alone your grandfather would consent to let you make us this visit. It was, that neither my mother nor I should try to induce you, while you were under our roof, to fulfil our childish compact. He knew I could not refuse, however hard the price, but he need not have been afraid I would interfere with his plans. I had seen already I could never be more to you than a brother,—do not tremble so, Eglantine—and I had not needed the Abbe Bertrand's hint to tell me that another, better suited to you in name and station, loved you, too. Nay, do not turn away from me, my sister. I heard the truth in my young *sieur's* voice the first time he ever uttered your name! He is brave and honourable, but he could not hide the secret from eyes as keen as mine. Ay, I know all you would say; 'He has been true to me in thought and deed.' At first, he did not know who you were, and when he did, his manner changed, and he went away. But he could not fight against God. Why did I not speak sooner, then! I could not give you up of my own accord, Eglantine—not at first. I said to myself: 'It is a passing fancy with him, he will soon see some other face that pleases him; she is my one ewe-lamb—I have loved and hoped for her all my life. She is young; I will wait and be patient; perhaps her heart will turn to me in time. At least, if he wins her from me, it shall be by his own overcoming strength.' But when I saw you together last night, when I saw how his colour rose under your eyes as the tides rise under the moon, and your face turn to him as the heliotrope turns to the sun—I said to myself, 'It is His will; he has given me the desires of my heart, though not as I asked for them.' And so I walked home with my young *sieur*, and he could not deny the truth, when I pressed him."

"You have spoken to him, Rene?" Eglantine's face was like a rose, as she lifted it for a moment.

"Why not, my sister? Do not brothers settle such matters when there is no father there? And Henri's lips were sealed because I was his friend, and he felt you belonged to me; but when I told him I had given up hoping for your love, and would be thankful to know you were in the keeping of hands so strong and true as his, and showed him the letter I had from your grandfather yesterday,—I would not worry you with it, Eglantine—saying you must be brought home this week, he could no longer hesitate. His honour and his happiness were one. He would have flown back to you at once but for the lateness of the hour."

Rene ceased abruptly. He was remembering how, under the summer stars, he had seen that sudden dawn of joy kindle in his young *sieur's* face—how Henri had thrown his arms about his neck in speechless gratitude, and then, with hand lifted to heaven, had sworn his friend should never repent this hour. "I will keep her as the apple of my eye—as my own soul. She shall never know anything but tender looks and words; my love shall be her covert from trouble, her hiding-place from the storm," he had said solemnly. But Rene could not repeat this to Eglantine. She was weeping quietly, with her face turned from him. In the rapture of this sudden joy there was yet space for remorse.

"And you could do all this for me, when I had been so wilful and ungrateful?" she murmured. "Oh, Rene! you know it was to tease you I talked as I did. I even said you would let my grandfather take me away without lifting a finger. How wicked I was! How good you are!"

She did not add, "How you love me!" She had yet to comprehend an affection which could find it sweeter to serve than to receive, and would measure its gifts by need, not deserts. In her secret heart she knew Henri would never have let her go, if he had had so good a claim upon her. "He would have made me love him in spite of myself," she thought. Yet Rene had never seemed so dear.

"I will try to be a better girl—be more serious and womanly, and to care more for the things that you like," she said, holding out her hands to him. Instinct told her it was the one return she could make.

His sad face lighted up instantly.

"Thank you for that promise, Eglantine. It is my earnest hope and prayer that God will lead you both nearer to Himself by this joy, as He does some of the rest of us through our sorrow. But I have not quite finished my story. I went in with Henri last night to see monsieur. He would never have been reconciled to the matter if he thought I felt wronged in any way, and I wanted myself to tell him how noble and honourable his son had been throughout. He looked happier before I left him at the prospect of having a bright, young face once more about the house, and when I said you were young to take such grave responsibilities, and that if it were not for the peril that threatened you, I would urge a year or two of delay, he smiled and said you were no younger than Henri's mother, when he brought her a bride to the chateau. You will have it in your power to shed much brightness about his last days, Eglantine. He and Henri have gone to Nismes this morning to see your grandfather. Monsieur has old-fashioned ideas of etiquette, and he insisted on this before Henri spoke to you. But there is no doubt of the result. I have reason to believe that M. Laval is expecting them, and that he will be too much gratified at the alliance to stumble at the conditions monsieur will impose for a speedy marriage, and permission for his son's betrothed to remain, as long as he wishes, under my mother's roof. I thought you would like to be with my mother for a while, Eglantine. She is your mother, too, you know, though, of course, we must not be selfish, and keep you altogether from M. Laval, when he is soon to part with you forever. He will make no attempt now to make you

change your religion, and you will not refuse to ratify the consent he will give to M. La Roche. Will you, my sister?"

Eglantine looked out of the window, and smiled. There was something she could say to Henri, and to no one else. Rene rose from the rustic bench.

"There is my mother coming up the hill. Let us go up to the house to meet her. You must be very gentle with her," he added, as they passed together through the rows of sweet clove-pinks that bordered the garden-beds. "This has been a great disappointment to her, Eglantine. She has always looked forward to having you for her very own." He did not add that the sharpest pang for his mother had been the consciousness of his disappointment, but Eglantine guessed it.

"Do you mind very much, Rene?" she asked, stopping in the shadow of the sweetbriar over the porch, to look earnestly into his face. "You are so much interested in your work, you will not miss me very much, will you? And you are so much graver and better than I, you deserve a better wife."

For the first time his lip trembled, and he looked straight before him into the misty amethyst of the summer horizon.

"It is my Master's will—that satisfies me," he said in a low voice. "Do not worry about me, Eglantine. He will not leave me comfortless. His favour is life. Perhaps in the path He has marked out for me He sees I can serve Him best alone."

And, then, as she still lingered irresolute beside him, he put her away gently but firmly, and passed on into the house.

Through all the golden, enchanted days that followed, Eglantine could never quite forget the look upon his face.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECOND HOME-COMING.

It was March of the next year. The wild winds of a stormy night swept the slopes of the Cevennes, as a coach slowly made its way up the mountain road in the direction of the towers of Beaumont. The snow, which had been falling all day, had ceased, and lay in white, frozen masses along the road, obliterating every landmark. The few stars that endeavoured to shine were only occasionally visible through the murky clouds drifting across the sky. More than once the driver had paused, and descending, examined with a lantern the way before him; but in spite of his care the frequent jolting of the vehicle over unseen obstacles elicited indignant remonstrances from some one within. Finally, there was a sharp call to halt, a window was thrown up, and Captain La Roche's voice demanded impatiently:

"Is it not possible for you to be more careful, Martin? You will kill madame with your rough driving. If it were not for leaving her, I would come out and take the reins myself."

"With all respect, M. Le Capitaine, I fear you would not do much better," answered the man sullenly. "It is the sense in our horses' heels, not the hands upon the reins, that will keep us off the precipice to-night."

"Nonsense! If we have the road to Beaumont, and keep the middle of it, there is no danger," but as Captain La Roche spoke, he opened the door of the coach, and springing out, came up to the box. "Keep a stiller tongue in your head, if you would not frighten my lady out of her wits," he said in a low, stern voice; then to the valet seated beside Martin: "Jean, you ought to know the country by night as well as day. Cannot you help Martin to keep the road?"

Jean scrambled down, and came round to his master's side.

"I begin to fear we are not on the road to Beaumont at all, Monsieur. We ought to have passed the ruins of the old temple before this, but not a familiar landmark have I set eyes on to-night."

"You must have had bat's eyes to recognize your own mother in such darkness as this," retorted the young *sieur* hastily. "I am sure we took the right turn at the cross-roads, and Martin could not have wandered much from the track since then, without my perceiving it. Come, my good fellow, take the lantern and go before him a little, that he may have light upon his path, and let the thought of your good Lucille, watching for you at Beaumont, be a lodestar to your feet. Eglantine," he added, re-entering the coach, and bending anxiously over the slight figure, wrapped in furs and shawls in the corner, "I fear this hurried journey will make you ill. I wish I had listened to my better judgment, not your siren voice, and insisted upon your stopping overnight at Anduze."

"No, no," answered a faint but cheerful voice. "This is a hundred times better, Henri. I could never have been happy left behind, and I have such a strange presentiment that you are wanted at Beaumont, that I would not have dared to ask you to stay with me."

"Our hurried flight from Paris, and your fear lest a *lettre de cachet* is at my heels, has not a little to do with that presentiment, I fancy. My little wife forgets that I am of less consequence in Minister Louvois' eyes than in hers." Henri La Roche put his arm tenderly about the figure beside him, and his young wife leaned her head upon his shoulder, and laughed. They had been married in the golden September weather, and now the March snows were upon the ground, but it was still summer in their love.

"I begin to wish we had never accepted Natalie's invitation, and gone up to Paris," murmured Eglantine, as they moved on slowly once more. "It has all been very wonderful and beautiful, Henri, but I would have been just as happy at Beaumont with you, and I am afraid monsieur has missed us very much."

"I am afraid he has, my beautiful, but you were so eager to see *la belle Paris*."

"And you could not bear to say me no, Henri. I am afraid I have been selfish, yet not wholly so: M. Renau was so sure it would help to secure your promotion to bring you under the personal notice of the king, and I did so long to have my husband receive the praise and honour he merited. It has all been like a winter's ball-room, when the flowers in the conservatory make one forget that the snow is without, and the feet of the dancers drown the sobbing of the storm."

The words were scarcely off his lips when the coach, which had been moving forward with more speed, came to so sudden a halt that they were almost thrown from their seats. Henri was out in the snow in an instant, and, by the faint starlight

struggling through the clouds, saw that they had reined up on the very verge of a precipice. The horses were trembling in every limb, and Martin's attention was fully occupied in endeavouring to quiet and reassure them. Jean, with a dismayed face, stood looking over the edge of the cliff, down which his lantern had disappeared in his frantic clutch at life.

"There can be no more doubt about it, monsieur; we have lost the road," he said sorrowfully. "The only thing to be done is for you to keep madame as warm as you can in the coach, while I strike out in search of some shepherd's hut. It would be madness to go on without a guide, even if Martin could induce his horses to attempt it."

There was nothing to do but yield a reluctant assent. Henri did so, and having seen the stout-hearted fellow strike out boldly into the darkness, turned back to the coach. But Eglantine, alarmed by the plunging of the horses, had already alighted, and entreated piteously not to be compelled to re-enter immediately.

"I am sure I hear the sound of distant singing," she said. "We must be near some dwelling. If Jean could only find it."

"Perhaps we have come upon some midnight gathering of our brethren," answered Henri, "though it is a wild night even for a *preche*. Hark, my love; Jean has started a sentinel already."

Firm and clear, from the gloom beyond them, came the challenge: "Halt, or give the pass!"

"That is a Cevenol voice," whispered Henri to his wife, and they heard Jean answer sturdily:

"I give no word except that the young *sieur* needs help, and asks it. Dost thou not know thine own mother's son, Philippe?"

"Jean!"

There was the sound of a hurried colloquy as the brothers embraced: then a cry, hoarse and fierce from Jean. Henri cleared the space between them with a bound.

"What is it?" he demanded, laying a heavy hand on his valet's shoulder. "Is aught wrong with your good wife, Jean? Speak!"

But Jean was speechless.

"Philippe! hast thou a tongue in thy head! Tell me! is there aught wrong at the chateau—with my father?"

"You are well come, monsieur," answered the younger brother sadly. "But none too soon. There is no time to be lost if you would not have our old *sieur* laid in his grave, with you away. They are burying him now, down yonder in the glen."

Henri put his hand to his forehead. He was only dimly aware that his wife stood beside him, her pitying hand upon his arm.

"My father dead!" he said in a muffled voice. Then, rousing himself, "But why this haste, this midnight burial? Why was I not summoned? Go on, Philippe! you are keeping something back."

The mountaineer drew his hand across his eyes.

"We have done the best we could for him, monsieur. If it had not been for Master Chevalier, our old *sieur* would be lying to-night in a grave he would have thought too foul for a dead hound."

Henri's fingers were upon his throat.

"Take back the word, Philippe, and I will make a rich man of you! Swear to me that I have not heard aright. They have not dared to lay hands on that good gray head?"

Philippe released himself with mournful dignity.

"I speak truth, monsieur. Our old lord has been failing ever since the new year came in, and last week he had a stroke. Master Chevalier sent off a messenger to tell you, and tried to keep his sickness quiet. But somehow the priests got wind of it, and forced their way into his chamber. When they found they could not move him with their arguments, they had drums beat under his windows day and night, that he might not have an instant's rest. They thought to wear out his resolution by wearing out his poor feeble body, but they did not know our old *sieur*. Master Chevalier thinks that he would have rallied from the stroke, and lived to see you again, if it had not been for their doings."

"That is not all," Henri La Roche spoke now in a tone of awful quietness. "They had still the deserted tenement upon which to wreak their vengeance. Finish your story, Philippe."

There was the sound of a stifled sob from Jean but his brother answered sadly:

"I should be able to speak it, who had to stand by and see it, monsieur. Again and again, as he lay dying, they placed the alternative before him—the public sewer for his grave, if he would not confess to the priest, and as often our lord told them boldly they might do what they please to the body he left behind him, his soul would be with God. Not once did he waver."

"Do you think I doubt that?" retorted the *sieur* La Roche, and his voice made even the wife, clinging to his arm, tremble. "Do you think I need to be told that that great heart, ever brave and stainless, did not stoop to the vilest of all sins at the last? But what I do want to know, Philippe, is this: was there never a man among my father's people to silence those murderous drums, and save his white hairs from this outrage? Have his years of ceaseless kindness gone for nothing?"

"Those who did the deed wore the king's livery, my lord, and were armed with the teeth. Yet neither our loyalty, nor the fear of their bayonets, could have held our hands, if it had not been for monsieur's own charge. We were to make no resistance, but to bear all things patiently, he sent word to us by Master Chevalier. It was his last command, and we obeyed, though it broke our hearts."

"And where was Rene Chevalier all this while? Did he, too, stand tamely by and witness this outrage to his father's friend and his?"

"He was ever beside our old lord's bed, doing what he could to alleviate his sufferings, monsieur, and cheering him with brave, unfaltering words, until the end had come, and they had done their worst. Then, as we sat stricken and helpless in our homes, he came to us and bade us, if we had the hearts and hands of men, rise up and help him rescue the head we loved from its foul resting-place, and give it decent burial. There were plenty to answer the summons, my young *sieur*, but it was Master Chevalier who first thought of it, and has managed the whole affair."

Eglantine looked up wistfully into her husband's face.

"Have you forgotten, Henri, what is going on in the glen yonder? Ought we not to be there?"

He started like one waking from a dream.