

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XVII. *Continued.*

Scarcely ten minutes had passed since the first alarm, but the moonlight, which had at last broken through the clouds, revealed a ghastly spectacle. Many of the Huguenots had been wounded by the first discharge, others had been hewn down by the sabres of the dragoons while endeavouring to effect their escape. Some lay writhing in the last agonies. Old Marie and her son lay dead in each other's arms. Rene looked anxiously about him for his other friends. His mother and Eglantine, he felt sure, had succeeded in making their escape. Jean was nowhere to be seen, but a white, upturned face at his feet made the physician start with horror. It was that of Lucille Bonneau, cold in death, as was also the babe, whom she still clasped close to her breast. They had been killed by one bullet. It would be a mercy if Jean too had perished. Instinctively Rene uttered his name, as he glanced once more about him. A low groan from one of his fellow-prisoners answered. He turned and met the husband's glance of tearless misery. For a moment they gazed in silence into each other's eyes, then Rene looked down at the slight figure, trembling at his side.

"It is well with them, Jean," he said hoarsely. "At least you will not have to see them suffer;" and Jean bowed his head. Even in that hour he could acknowledge that a bitterer cup than his own had been placed to the brother's lips.

The bugle of the officer in charge now recalled the soldiers from their pursuit of the fugitives. The prisoners were placed in the centre of a hollow square, and the dreary march to Nismes began. The soldiers, who were well mounted and anxious to get their prisoners under lock and key before daylight, showed no consideration for the weary feet that toiled on at their side, and more than once urged some laggard forward with a touch of their whips.

Rene watched his sister in an agony of suspense, fearful every moment that her strength would give way, and feeling as if his heart would break if he saw that cruel goad applied to her. But for nearly an hour Agnes marched on bravely at his side, uttering no complaint, even when the rough flints pierced her feet, and always smiling faintly when he spoke to her. Then, without so much as a warning cry, she dropped upon the road. The nearest rider lifted his lash threateningly, but Rene threw himself between them.

"Mercy, Monsieur! She is young, and her feet are bleeding."

"We cannot stop for that," returned the man brutally.

"Unbind me, and I will carry the rest of the way."

"And give you an opportunity to give us the slip? Hardly, M. le Doctor." But the captain interfered.

"The girl is nearly fainting, and we have no time to lose. Loosen his hands, and keep a watch on him, two of you. Shoot the girl if he shows the least attempt to escape."

Even in his bitter grief the brother felt a thrill of joy as he lifted the slight form once more in his arms. Agnes did not speak, but the tenacity with which she clung to him told him that she too apprehended the separation that was about to befall them.

It was near dawn when they reached Nismes. The Huguenots were conveyed to the town hall and left in charge of a guard until daylight, when the authorities were expected to pass sentence.

The soldiers gathered about the fire at one end of the room and made merry, after their cold, wet ride, over a hot supper and foaming bumpers of ale, while the unhappy Huguenots, huddled together in a farther corner, began to hope they were to have a few hours' rest.

Rene had just closed his weary eyes in hopes of inducing Agnes to do the same, when a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"Not quite so fast, doctor; we have a little score to settle with you before you take your nap."

"And we mean to see that the little one says her prayers to the Blessed Virgin before she sleeps to-night," said a second voice. "Out with them, you young heretic, if you do not want us to teach you."

"See how she shrinks from the holy crucifix and clings to him!" added a third. "I say, comrades, that's too pretty a face to spoil with the irons. Let us put him to the test instead, and we will convert her soon enough."

Agnes turned an anguished glance upon her brother.

"Rene, if they torture you, I will not be able to bear it; I know I will not be able to bear it."

"You must," he said firmly. "This is no time to falter, Agnes; remember your vows. Remember that He loved you and gave Himself for you."

"I do remember," moaned the girl. "But, oh Rene strengthen me! I feel ready to faint."

For a moment the brother gazed in speechless compassion into the pale, appealing face. Was it possible that she could pass unscathed through the threatened ordeal—his gentle, loving darling—was her hold upon the truth so firm? He put the doubt firmly by. It was not her hold upon the truth, but Christ's hold on her, which should give him confidence in this terrible hour—not the strength of a girlish heart to endure, but the power of an infinite God to fulfil His promises.

"Agnes," he said solemnly, "I have prayed for you that your faith fail not, and I have hope given me to believe that my prayer is answered. Remember the word: 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.' Put your trust in Him who 'made heaven and earth.' These men can only hurt my body. If I see you falter in your allegiance, it will break my heart."

"Take that for trying to strengthen the girl in her obstinacy!" interrupted a fierce voice, and a dragoon smote him so roughly upon the mouth that the blood streamed from his lips. "You will be glad enough to bid her speak before we are through with you."

The Huguenot made no reply as his sister was torn from his grasp, and a second soldier, seizing him by his hair, dragged him roughly across the floor. One glance at the coals upon the hearth, and the stocks placed in front of them, told him what form of suffering awaited him, but his glance did not falter. The real torture of the hour lay in the thought that Agnes would be compelled to witness his suffering; she would have more to endure than he. But he must be strong for them both. With a silent prayer for grace and power to

witness to her and their fellow-prisoners of their Lord's sustaining love, he suffered his feet to be bared and thrust into the stocks. The soldier who had torn Agnes from his embrace stood a few paces off, supporting the trembling girl with his arm. She had buried her face in her hands, to shut out the fearful spectacle. No tears flowed through the slender fingers, but the brow quivered with speechless pain. Rene had resolutely closed his lips; no extremity of pain could wring from him one moan that would add to the torture that she was suffering. But the hand of the soldier in a few moments roughly uncovered her eyes.

"Look up, and see what you are doing," he said. Agnes gave one look at her brother's pale, convulsed face, and uttered a cry. A crucifix was thrust into her hands.

"Kiss it, and you are free," said her tormentor.

The girl's hand wavered, and then slowly, slowly drew the image to her breast. A moment more and it would have touched her lips, when Rene's voice, broken with suffering, cried:

"Agnes, remember your vows! If you falter now, you crucify your Lord afresh, and put Him to an open shame."

It was enough. The words were scarcely off his lips, when the idolatrous emblem was hurled into the fire, and Agnes, breaking from the grasp of her persecutors, with one bound reached her brother's side. Neither spoke, save by the silent tightening of their arms about each other. The dragoons, who had stood transfixed with astonishment for the first moment, quickly rallied.

"There is more venom in the young viper than comes to the surface at first," growled the owner of the crucifix. "I move we give her a taste of the fire, and let her see what she will have to expect in the next world, if she does not forswear her heresies."

The threat seemed to fall unheeded on the girl's ear, but the brother half started from the floor.

"As you are men, and not fiends, forbear; torture me, if you will; I am a man and can bear it, but spare her—she is little more than a child."

The eyes of the dragoon glittered savagely.

"Oho, master intractable! Is that the key to your heart? Very good. Every Achilles has his weak point, and we are fortunate to have discovered yours. I say, lads, take the fellow away, and put the girl in his place, and we will have an abjuration here in a few moments."

"Mercy, M. le Capitaine!" interposed the Huguenot hoarsely. "You will only kill her, and draw down upon your heads the vengeance of an offended God. I will never renounce my faith. For the sake of your own mothers and sisters, do not torture her in vain."

"You are an earnest pleader, monsieur; every word you speak convinces me that our plan is a good one."

Rene sank back upon the floor and covered his face. He scarcely felt the pain with which his blistered feet were torn from the stocks. A rough hand was already upon Agnes' shoulder, but the cup he dreaded was not to be put to his lips. There was a stir in the court, the great doors were thrown open, and the provost, followed by a train of monks, entered the hall. With a feeling of joy he would not have believed possible, the young surgeon heard the order given for the instant removal of the women and children to the neighbouring convent, and of the male prisoners to the dungeons of the citadel.

With a muttered curse the dragoon loosened his hold. "You have escaped us this time, young heretic, but I shall take care the Intendant hears how to tame your brother," and with that threat he sullenly retired.

The brother and sister scarcely heard him. They had but a few seconds left in which to strengthen each other's hearts for the coming parting.

"Agnes! even the frail support of my presence is now to be taken from you. Remember that no bolts and bars can shut out Him who has said: 'I will never leave you, nor forsake you.' My sister, for the last time, let me hear you promise to stand fast in the faith for which our father died, and to witness to the darkened souls about you the exceeding riches of His grace. Remember, the truth you hold is a trust for them as well as yourself."

She was too much overcome with grief to comprehend his last words. All that she could realize was that he desired some last assurance, and she roused herself to give the one drop of balm to the great heart that only trembled for her.

"God helping me, Rene! As I hope to see you and my mother in a better world, I promise: Do not worry about me, my brother. They have broken my heart to-night! I will not suffer long."

"Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"

There was a tremour in the young man's voice, for he saw a monk approaching them.

The priest laid his hand, not unkindly, on the shrinking girl. Rene pressed one long kiss on the speechless lips, and suffered her to be lifted from his breast.

"God deal with you as you deal with her!" he said sternly. "As there is justice in heaven, the mercy you mete out to her shall be the measure of your own."

The eyes of the priest had been riveted upon his face. Now they dilated with a sudden flash which the Huguenot could not interpret.

"Heretics have little to do with the mercy of God," was the chilling response, and something in the cold metallic voice grated unpleasantly on Rene's recollection. "I accept your challenge, M. Chevalier. The Church is a tender mother. She has nothing to fear, if she shows herself tractable." And without giving the brother time to reply, the monk turned, and bearing the now insensible girl in his arms, glided away. The next moment Rene Chevalier was himself seized, and hurried off to prison.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT.

M. Laval sat in his library the next evening, gazing absently into a glowing bed of coals. The crimson curtains were drawn across the windows, the soft light of an alabaster lamp filled the room. A pile of unopened letters lay on the table, beside a scarcely-tasted meal. The banker's white head was bowed upon his hand. At the sound of a low tap upon the door, he looked up, and frowned.

"Come in," he said fretfully, and Madame Chevalier entered.

If one of the marble figures shining out from the folds of tapestry had suddenly stepped down from its pedestal, the old man could not have looked more terror-struck.

"Monique! This is, to say the least, very imprudent. Are you—are you aware that you imperil me as well as yourself?"

The widow quietly closed the door.

"I have taken care that I should not be recognized. You need give yourself no uneasiness," she answered. And then she came close to the hearth, and looked into her face with her sad, clear eyes. "I see that you have already heard that my children were among the prisoners taken at the preche last night. Can you give me any tidings? Where have they been confined, what will be their fate?"

M. Laval sank back into his chair and shaded his eyes.

"You should know that as well as I, Monique. The penalties attached to these secret gatherings are no secret. Good heavens! how could you let a child like Agnes run such a risk? I have not known a moment's peace since I heard that she was taken. Yet I can do nothing for her—absolutely nothing!"

There was a frightened protest in the last words. The Huguenot mother looked at him in compassion. Too weak to espouse the right, too kind to sympathize with the wrong—was he not most to be pitied, after all?

"I did not ask you to involve yourself for us," she said gently. "I only asked for tidings, monsieur. You need not be afraid to tell me what you know. I am prepared for the worst."

The old man tapped the floor uneasily.

"I do not understand you, Monique. I never could. Anybody would think you had nerves of iron. There is not much to tell. The women and children have been consigned to the convent of St. Veronique, the men to the vaults of the citadel to await their trial. Agnes is sick with fright and exposure, but received no harm at the hands of the dragoons. Rene, I am sorry to say, had the impudence to aggravate his captors at the outset. But that is only what might have been expected of him."

The mother's hands were clasped firmly together. "You forget that if it had not been for Rene, it is Eglantine who would be in the convent," she said in a low voice.

M. Laval started from his chair and came close to his visitor.

"I think you might have comprehended my anxiety and mentioned my granddaughter's name sooner," he said fretfully. "Is she well and safe? I live in constant terror lest she should be captured by the dragoons. Surely, you did not permit her to attend that meeting last night?"

"I had certainly not the right to deny her the comfort," was the quiet answer. "But you may set your heart at rest, monsieur. She and her child are both safe and well. There is her own word for it." She drew a letter from the pocket of her gown and handed it to him. She knew that it contained as earnest an appeal for his aid as lay in the power of the warm-hearted, impetuous girl to write. In glowing words, Eglantine reminded her grandfather that it was Rene, who, at the risk of his life, had saved her from a convent-doom, when even he dared not interfere—Rene, who had won her babe back to health—Rene, who had led her own soul to the fountains of living water, that had filled her heart with a joy, even her happy girlhood did not know. She told him, what he had not heard before, that it was Agnes who had saved Henri from self-destruction, and saved her heart from breaking beneath its load of remorse. She bade him remember all she owed to Madame Chevalier from her earliest infancy, and the promise he had made to her mother never to forget that debt.

M. Laval's hand trembled violently as he refolded the sheet.

"I did not know all this; Rene did not tell me half," he said nervously.

"Rene would never boast of what he had done," answered the mother.

The old banker had begun to pace the room.

"Of course I would have done what I could for you, anyway; you might have known that, Monique. I promised as much to Godfrey years ago. I am not as rich a man as I was then; these priests are sad leeches; but I will try what gold can do. Rene has been good to my girl. He shall see that I am not ungrateful."

"And Agnes?"

Pierre Laval was silent.

"Is there no hope there?" asked the mother in a stricken voice.

"None, except submission. You may as well make up your mind to that, Monique. Surely, it can matter little in what form that sweet child worships God."

"I would rather see her dead than know she had denied her father's faith," was the low, passionate reply. "But there is one resource still, monsieur—an appeal to the priests. I will see them, and intercede for my child."

"Impossible!" grasping her quickly by the dress as she turned to go. "Are you mad, Monique? The Jesuits have no conscience where heretics are concerned. You would be seized and dragged before the Intendant before you had uttered a dozen words. Stay; there is one man. I wonder I did not think of him before. Do you remember Father Ambrose?"

(To be continued.)

NORTH AMERICAN LIFE ASSURANCE COMPANY.—The assets of the North American Life have now reached the handsome figure of \$823,250, as shown in the balance sheet. To this sum must be added the unclaimed guarantee fund, which makes the security to policy-holders no less than \$1,063,000; while the surplus on policy-holders' account, after deducting reserve, is \$550,000. To have reached this point of success at the end of nine years is remarkable. It is further gratifying to find the assets in excellent shape, of safe character, and well looked after—\$557,000 of them is in first mortgage on real estate. The semi-continuous investment policies issued by this company have become widely popular. An insured is offered a variety of choices under them, and the power of compound interest is forcibly exemplified in them. It is to be remarked, by the way, that in respect of per centage of surplus to assets the North American shows better than some bigger and older foreign companies, which reflects additional credit upon its wide-awake and prudent managers.—*Monetary Times, February 7, 1890.*

See advt. on page 287.