

Classic Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

"I was beginning to feel discouraged, when the little daughter of the head jailer fell into the canal; she would have died if I had not jumped in after her, and the next day her father sent for me, and asked what he could do for me. I had been so steady at the fishing, none of them doubted that was not my real calling, and the cross I wore on my breast had satisfied them about my religion. I told Master Neville I had no ambition, that I did not need money; but I would risk my life over again to see my master, and give him tidings of his friends. He said it was impossible, that his orders were very strict, and he would lose his place if he disobeyed. But when he found I would have nothing else, and I had sworn by all the saints in the calendar that I would not attempt his escape, he gave way. The little one was his only child, and he loved her as his own soul. So the next night, while the commandant was in the town at a supper, he let me in for an hour."

"You saw him? Oh, Jean! if I could only have known, and sent him a message."

Jean dropped his head despondingly. "I beg your pardon, madame. I did not think of that until it was too late."

"Never mind," answered Eglantine, forcing back her tears. "It is more than I deserve to hear from him. Tell me how he looked and what he said."

"I saw him only in the moonlight, madame. His brow is lined and his hair bleached, as though it had been twenty years since we met. But when he smiled, there was the same look in his eyes, as when we were lads together and I carried his arrows behind him on the hill."

"Then he can smile?"

"Aye, madame, and talk like an angel, of the love of God and the home up yonder. The fire in my heart cooled, and I could weep as I listened, as I have not been able to weep since the night I saw them lying there in each other's blood. The only time he broke down was when I told him about Mistress Agnes, and how we had contrived to get you out of the chateau. M. Renau had told him that you were in a convent and that the little one was dead. He made me tell him the story over and over, snatching at every word, as I have seen the starving wretches in the Flemish towns, after a long siege, snatch at bread. And when I told him that his lady had come to be the joy and strength of us all, and held the truth as dear as any, he embraced me, his poor servant, and bade me tell Master Chevalier that he would bless him for it to his latest breath. He had neither pen nor paper, my lady, but he said I was to tell you he had thought of you and prayed for you night and day, and would love you to his dying hour. He said you were not to reproach yourself for the past, his had been the greater fault, and that you were not to grieve over his sufferings, for there had been One with him in the fire, and his joy no man had been able to take from him. And now they had ceased to torment him. God was very near, and he would soon be at rest, but he would wait your coming in a better world."

"There was a long silence. The dusk deepened, the mountain brook sang on. Jean gazed absently down into the stream. At last the wife lifted her face."

"I must see him," she said in a low, steady voice. "If he is dying, it will make him happier to have me smooth his pillow; and if not, it will give him strength and courage to live. Oh, Jean, surely you will help me—for his sake as well as mine."

The valet recoiled.

"I dare not, my lady! He laid it on me as my last duty, that I should see you did not. 'She will want to come to me, Jean,' he said, 'she will not think of her own safety if she feels there is anything she can do for me, but she must not be allowed to take the risk. Tell her I lay it on her as my last request, my last command, to remain with Madame Chevalier, and, for the sake of our little daughter, if our friends ever decide to leave France, to go with them.'"

It was a sharp test for Eglantine's purer and better love for her husband. The "obedience" that "is better than sacrifice," is sometimes so much harder to render, but after a moment's struggle the wife put herself out of the question.

"Do you go back again, Jean? Will there be any way of finding out when the end comes?"

"I go back, certainly, my lady. The jailer has promised to let me know when my master's sufferings cease."

"And meanwhile, if he should not be as sick as he thinks, if there should come some way of serving him, which he could not foresee, when he asked that promise—you will let me know, Jean? I will never disobey him for my own sake, but ever since Rene and Marguerite have been given back to us, I have been trying to plan some way for his escape."

"Escape!" echoed Jean, his eyes glowing suddenly through the dusk. "God forgive me, madame, but I never thought of that before. Ah, that would indeed be to know one moment of happiness again before I die." And without waiting for reply, Jean broke away from his master's wife and disappeared in the wood.

Eglantine watched anxiously for his return, for days after, but the valet came no more.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST TIE.

Midsummer brought a letter from Pepin, postmarked Southampton. It had been sent under cover to a trusty friend in Nismes, and had passed through many hands in the hills before reaching its destination. But it brought the joyful tidings that the weaver and his family had eluded the vigilance of the coast-guard and were safe in an English home. Pepin wrote enthusiastically of the fine situation that had been at once offered him, and the joy he and Aimée experienced in waiting upon the unrestricted services of the Word, and teaching the blessed truths to their children without fear or hindrance. The letter concluded with an earnest entreaty to his friends to follow their example.

Rene looked at his mother.

"If they persecute you in one city, flee ye to another," she answered sadly. "You can no longer practice your profession here, my son. There may be work waiting you among your exiled brethren."

"And Marguerite?"

Mignonnette de Bertrand laid her soft cheek on Madame Chevalier's shoulder.

"Where thou goest, I will go," she said softly.

"Eglantine?"

But the dark eyes of Henri's wife filled with tears.

"Might we not wait a little longer?" she pleaded. "I cannot refuse to go with you; yet, while Henri lives, my heart is in France."

"Then we will let the matter rest for the present," decided Rene. "It is the last resource, and I confess while there is an atom of hope that things may brighten here, my duty is not clear."

But though the subject was dropped, the possibility of such an alternative in the future was now fairly before them all.

The second anniversary of Eglantine's wedding had passed, without bringing any tidings from Agues-Mortes, and the first frosts of October had touched the woods with gold, when Fulcrand Rey one evening entered the little hut. More than once, in his journeys to and fro, the young minister had found it convenient to tarry a night with his friends, but this time he came charged with a heavy errand. The blow which the Huguenot subjects of Louis XIV. had long had reason to dread had at last fallen. The noble bulwark, which the genius and policy of Henry the Great had raised ninety years before, and against which the fury and craft of Rome had long been beating like a flood, was now swept away with one stroke of a pen. The Edict of Nantes had been revoked, and the Protestants of France had no longer the right to exist.

"The king pierced the dyke on his coronation, when he refused to receive the deputation of our minister," said the Cevenol pastor sorrowfully. "It has been only a question of time ever since, yet while the name of their liberties was left the Huguenots of France have clung to the delusion of the clemency of their king."

"And now?" asked Monique Chevalier.

"Now, I believe, in spite of the increased penalties, attached to emigration, hundreds will at once leave France. The looms of England and Holland await our artisans, the shores of the new world invite our emigrants. The truth will spring up on other soil, but for us there has come a long night."

"Then you will not leave France?" said Rene.

"I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the Cevennes," was the quiet answer. "For their sakes, I stand ready to be offered." And when he parted from them the next morning, something told them they would see his face on earth no more.

Eglantine laid her hand on Rene's arm, as he stood gazing sadly after his friend.

"Is your duty clear now, Rene?"

He was silent.

"Our existence has sunk to a mere battle for bread, and it will be worse as the winter comes on. We can no longer worship God even in secret, and the revocation has taken away all hope of remedy. Great as are the risks of emigration, they cannot be greater than the perils that confront us here."

"I will never leave France without you, Eglantine."

"And you will not ask me to go, while my heart says stay; that is like you, Rene, but I am not so selfish as to exact the sacrifice. I will write to my grandfather to-day, and if your friends in the farm-house will speed the letter on its way, I feel sure he will devise some plan to aid us."

The rare tears stood in Rene's eyes.

"You are doing this for our sake, Eglantine."

"For yours, and my child's; but for Christ's, too, Rene. I have no right to entomb here the life He has given back to me, and for which He may yet have use."

"If you see it in that light, I dare not refuse the sacrifice," he answered in a low voice. "Eglantine, your prayers can reach Henri as well there as here, and you have lifted a sore weight from my heart."

She looked tenderly into his face. "May I speak to you freely, Rene?"

"As freely as to your own soul, my sister."

"You love Marguerite?"

A tremor ran through the strong man's frame.

"How could I help it?" he asked. "Has she not been to me like light in darkness, and rest in pain? It is not the joy of my first youth, Eglantine, but the peace of a sorrow God has comforted."

"And that is something deeper and better! Oh, Rene, I have loved Marguerite a hundred times more, since I last saw it was in her power to make up to you for all you suffered through me. Yet you have not spoken to her."

"I must not. It would be an unfair advantage for me to take in my position, and her grandfather might well resent it. If we ever reach a happier land, and I have a home of my own to offer her, it will be time enough to speak. Then, she will have learned to appreciate her own social position, and be able intelligently to choose between what her grandfather can do for her, and the most I will be able to offer. These are not days for marrying or giving in marriage."

"Nor are they days in which to keep silence toward each other," urged the younger sister warmly. "Rene, who knows but that at any moment death might come between you? Marguerite might go hungry all her life for the words you might have spoken, or you be left vainly to repent that you did not tell her what she was to you, before it was too late. As to our grandfather, it would ill become him to withhold what he would never have had but for you and Agnes."

"Do not tempt me," interrupted Rene hurriedly. "My mother feels that I am right. Even were I free to speak to Marguerite, I would not dare to do it yet. She is sweet and gentle with me, as she is with you all, but I cannot misunderstand her manner. She looks upon life as a child, or an angel might. I would only pain her, if I spoke to her about love."

"Marguerite is neither a child nor an angel," retorted Eglantine, with a sudden gleam of her old archness, fringed with tears. But she was wise enough to say no more. Only from that hour she urged on the preparations for their departure with ardent, self-forgetful zeal.

Her grandfather's reply had been prompt and to the point. He had lately established a branch office in London, and was about to despatch a clerk by a schooner then in port at Agde. If Rene thought he could personate the man who was about his height, though beyond middle age—Madame Chevalier

and Eglantine might take the place of his wife and daughter, for whom passports had been also obtained, and Marguerite pass for their maid. There was no provision for a child, but the little one, M. Laval thought, could be smuggled on board without much difficulty. He would have to keep quiet in the matter himself, for fear of arousing suspicion. It was possible he might not be even able to see them before their departure, but the captain of the schooner was in hearty sympathy, and he had written to his London agent to meet them at Southampton, and provide them with all necessary funds. There was little danger, he thought, of the ruse being detected by the officer who would examine their papers, as the clerk and his family were strangers in Agde. At any rate the plan presented fewer difficulties than an attempt to elude the coast-guard by a secret embarkation.

"It is a far safer one than anything I had been able to think of," said Rene joyfully, and the day after the letter was read, the little chalet was abandoned, and they were on their way to the coast. Partly on foot and partly in a wagon, furnished by secret friends for the latter part of the journey, the refugees succeeded in reaching a fishing hamlet near Agde three days before the schooner sailed. The host of the little seaside auberge proved to be a Huguenot, who gladly undertook to give the ladies shelter and protection, while the doctor went alone into the city to complete the arrangements for their departure. As it was possible Rene might not have been able to find the English captain at once, Eglantine and her aunt tried not to be anxious when night closed in before his return. But when the long hours of darkness had worn away and another day dawned without his arrival, they could no longer meet each other's eyes, and by noon Henri La Roche's wife had whispered a piteous entreaty into their landlord's ear that he would send into Agde and make inquiries. In two hours the messenger was back with the tidings they most feared. M. Chevalier had been recognized by a party of dragoons on his way home the night before. He had refused to surrender at their summons, and the last seen of them they were in hot pursuit, with levelled carbines, while he was only a few yards ahead. There could be no doubt of the result, though the soldiers had not returned to Agde with their captive. They must either have overtaken him or shot him down. Master Blanc ended his sorrowful story with an earnest entreaty to his friends not to feel themselves forsaken, as he would himself see them on board the schooner the next night, but they scarcely heard him. The blow had come with two-edged sharpness at this moment, when they were in sight of safety and freedom. Even the mother's courage, trained in so long a school, gave way.

"It is his hand, but it presses me sore," she moaned.

Eglantine threw her arms about her neck.

"Perhaps it is only a rumour. Do not lose heart yet," she whispered; but the hope had no root in her heart, and died in a sob upon her lips.

Marguerite stood aloof, watching them, wistfully. Monique Chevalier suddenly remembered her, and held out her hand.

"We do not shut you out of our grief, my child. You have a right to weep with us," she said.

Marguerite caught the outstretched hands to her breast and covered them with kisses, but she did not speak. Through those long hours of waiting she had been strangely quiet; now there was a still joy shining in her eyes, which perplexed Eglantine. Was it possible that she had been mistaken in thinking that her sister's heart had been opening to Rene's deep, though unspoken love? or could it be that Marguerite held the honour of martyrdom so high, that she could rejoice in it even for the man she loved? If so, her convent rearing had indeed unfitted her for the common joys and sorrows of life, and with the first chill that had ever fallen on her warm love for her sister, Eglantine turned back to her aunt and let Marguerite undress little Gabrielle and sing her to sleep.

She wondered at her own blindness the next morning when she woke to find Marguerite's bed empty, and a note to Madame Chevalier lying on the table.

"Be comforted!" had written the trembling, girlish hand. "God has at last put it into my power to repay what I owe to you for Agnes. By to-night M. Chevalier will be returned to you. He must not blame me for doing what he would have done for any one, and my grandfather cannot resent the exchange which gives a protector to you and Eglantine. I go gladly." MARGUERITE.

"Then she does love him!" exclaimed Eglantine, when she was able to speak.

The paper slipped from the mother's nerveless hand.

"She thinks to purchase his liberty with her own, poor child! But she cannot succeed; she will only ruin herself, and I will lose them both. Quick, Eglantine, my hood and mantle. The sacrifice, even if it could avail, cannot be permitted."

Eglantine laid her hand upon her arm.

"There are steps and voices in the corridor. Can she have returned?" she whispered.

The door opened, and Rene stood before them.

"My son!" exclaimed the mother in a thrilling tone.

"Have you been anxious about me?" he asked, hurrying up to her. "I have had a narrow escape, but I hoped the tidings would not reach you before I did." He stopped abruptly, struck by the expression of her face. "What is wrong—where is Marguerite?" he asked, glancing round.

She could not answer him, but Eglantine, who had picked up the note from the floor, put it into his hand. His quick eye grasped the contents in a second; the next he had turned to the door.

"What road did she take? How long has she been gone?" he asked in a voice hardly recognizable.

"We knew nothing until we found the letter a few moments ago. Oh, Rene, where are you going? What can you do?"

"Do I will bring her back, or perish in the attempt." He was gone the next minute.

Master Blanc stopped him in the court.

(To be Continued.)

DR. J. H. WILSON, who many years ago founded a "ragged kirk" at Aberdeen, on completing his eightieth year was presented lately with an ornate timepiece by the members of the new Kent Road Church, London. The Doctor has recently recovered the sight of his youth and holds himself ready to climb Ben Nevis. He hopes to attend and record the Evangelical Alliance meetings at Florence in the autumn.