

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC

CHAPTER I

BY FIRELIGHT.

"Will you tell me about my mother to-night, Nanette?" It was a childish voice, clear and sweet as the tinkle of a brook on the hillside, that asked the question, and the face, upturned in the ruddy glare of the wide hearth, was winsome as a flower.

The middle-aged serving-woman, seated on the broad, oaken settle, glanced up sideways from her knitting.

"I cry you mercy, Mistress Eglantine; you should know the story by this time as well as I."

Eglantine laughed. She knew what Nanette's hesitation meant, and how it was sure to end.

"I remember every word, dear old Bonne; but that is not like hearing you tell it. M. La Roche is in the sitting-room with my aunt, and will not go away until my uncle gets back from the consistory meeting, and Rene is doing his lessons. There is no one to talk to me but you, Nanette, and I would not tire if you told me about my mother every night."

"You mind well there is nothing I like so much to tell," answered the woman, stopping her work for a moment to pat the child's cheek with a trembling hand. "But I might well hesitate to burden so young a heart with so sad a tale, if it were not for my lady's own words,—'You will go and stay with my little girl when I am gone, Nanette, and you will tell her the story when she is old enough to understand. Madame Chevalier will make her a better mother than ever I could have done, but I would like her to know that I loved her even when I put her away,—that it was because I loved her so much that I did it.' She spoke but once after that Mistress Eglantine, and then only to murmur a prayer. Ah! there never was a gentler or a truer heart—nay, nor a braver, though it were that of the great Marshal Turenne himself. You mind how the shops were all dressed in mourning for the great captain, my young lady, the first time you went down to Nismes to see your grandfather, three years ago?"

"I recollect the visit to my grandfather very well, but I have forgotten the shops. Please go on, Nanette, and tell me about my mother. Do I look like her?"

How often she had asked that question, and how often Nanette had looked into her face and shaken her head, and sighed—as she did now.

"You are no that ill to look upon, little one, as you have found out far too early for your good, but it is the beauty of your father's house; you have not your mother's face. Her eyes were blue, and soft, like the velvet pansies that she loved, or the summer sky at noon; while yours are dark, and flash like stars on a wintry night. And your hair is black as the raven's wing, while hers was the ruddy gold the painters love."

"Was she very beautiful?" queried the child wistfully. She was seated on the settle now, with her warm cheek pressed against the speaker's sleeve.

"You would have thought so if you could have seen her tripping to church by her father's side, with the young gallants of Nismes waiting to see her pass. But beauty is vain, Mistress Eglantine; I wish I could write that on your memory with a diamond pen. Fair looks did not save your mother's eyes from tears, nor her heart from aching. There were more than a score of gentlemen ready to cross swords for a glance from her sunny eyes, but on none of them would she smile, not even on the rich young merchant whom her father had chosen for her husband. For her heart was set on Captain Bertrand, your father, the young officer whom she had met at Marseilles, and though your grandfather refused to hear of the captain's suit, my young lady would think of none but her lover, night and day. He was of gentler blood than she, and his father had rich estates, and a chateau at Bearn, but he was the younger son, and had no income but his pay, and the master thought more of the fine house M. Baptiste could give his daughter, than of the captain's long line of ancestors. It was the first time he had crossed my lady in all her life and it went hard with her to give up her will about the thing she cared for most. I do not excuse what she did, Mistress Eglantine; it is a sore thing for a daughter to go against her father's will, but the blame was not all hers, and I had no choice when one night she came to my bedside, all dressed for a journey, and told me that she was going to leave her father and be married to Captain Bertrand, that she could never be happy with any other, and then with tears and kisses, and soft arms about my neck, prayed me to go with her. I would have been false to the promise I gave her mother if I had let her go alone, so I dressed, and went with them, though not without heavy misgivings, I will own, and saw them married at the priest's house—for your father was a Catholic—and was well on the road to Bearn with them the next morning before those behind us had found it out."

"Was my grandfather very angry?"

"It nearly broke his heart, little one, for he had loved my lady as the apple of his eye, and he would not believe but that Captain Bertrand had cared more for the dowry than for the wife he had won. He sent back every letter my lady wrote him, unopened, until her husband would let her write no more. That was the only shadow on their happiness at first. Thou art like thy father, Mistress Eglantine, with thy sunny temper, and thy hot way of loving. Whatever penalty my lady had afterward to pay for her wilfulness, she was at least not disappointed in him. He thought nothing too good for her, and it was not long before, to please him, she gave up going to her own church, and went to his. From that moment my heart misgave me. Your grandfather had never been much of a church-goer, and he would not let our pastor in Nismes talk much to my young lady about her soul, but he came of staunch Huguenot stock, and my dear mistress, your grandmother, had the blood of martyrs in her veins, and would have died miserable if she had thought her darling would ever go to mass or the confessional. But my pretty mistress laughed at my scruples. To her, in her happiness, one religion was as good as another, and her husband's people were greatly pleased, and after that talked no more about the mesalliance, but made her one of them. And then your father was summoned to Flanders, and your little sister was born, and a

new look came into my lady's eyes which said life had ceased to be all holiday. The little one was scarce a month old, when one day, as we sat together in her chamber, she looked up at me suddenly, and said:

"Nanette, what if my mother's religion was the only true one, after all; have I defrauded my baby—have I endangered her?"

"I could only kiss her hand and weep, for I was not as brave to tell her the truth as I should have been, and she never broached the matter again, but after that I began sometimes to miss my little New Testament, and to guess where it had gone, and when the little one was old enough to lisp a prayer, I marked that my lady taught her, not the Ave Marias of her husband's church, but the words she had learned at her own mother's knee."

Nanette had evidently forgotten her listener; her needles were flashing fiercely in the firelight, her eyes were gazing into the glowing coals.

"Try as we might, the matter could not be always kept hid, and it came in time to the ears of Mademoiselle Bertrand, the captain's elder sister, and our little Mignonnette's god-mother. She said nothing, but bided her time, and one day when my lady came back from a ride it was to find that Mademoiselle Bertrand had been to the chateau and taken her little niece away with her. And when our young madame hastened to her and demanded her child, she said, coldly, she had acted for the little one's best good, and dare not return her to a mother who had proved so unfaithful to her trust. For the first time in my life I saw my lady's eyes flash fire, as she said she would write to her husband, and obtain a vindication of her rights. The letter went off that very night, by the hand of a trusty messenger, but alas! instead of the swift help she looked for, came back the heavy tidings that her lord had fallen in battle, and lay wounded unto death in his tent, praying only to see her face once more. No more thought of little Mademoiselle Mignonnette just then. As fast as post-horses could carry her my lady travelled in answer to that call—Antoine, the captain's foster-father, and I, going with her, and taking what care we could of her by the way. But all in vain. M. le Captain had been dead twelve hours when we reached the camp, and our madame fell to the ground, as though stricken with death herself, at the word."

"For four days she lay upon her couch, neither speaking nor weeping, nor breaking bread; but on the fifth, as I sat watching beside her, she opened her eyes and said quietly: 'I will live, Nanette, to save my little Mignonnette. Tell Antoine to have the horses ready, we will start for Bearn to-morrow.' But it was a week later before she was strong enough to undertake the journey, and then, travel with what care we might, we had only reached Beaucaire when you, Mistress Eglantine, were born."

The nurse paused for a moment to lay a caressing hand on the small head nestling in her arm.

"It was the eve of the great July Fair; lodgings were not to be had in the town for love or money; we thought ourselves fortunate to secure one of the booths erected in the meadows along the river's banks, and your mother counted it a happy circumstance, also, that the people in the tents nearest us were from the Levant, and knew no more of our language than was necessary for the purposes of trade. They could not spy into our concerns, she said. There was no light in her eyes when she saw you, little one, as there had been when I laid your sister on her breast. Alas! that the coming of so fair a face should bring so little joy. For she had come to a desperate resolve, Mistress Eglantine; you will never fathom its cost until you have held a babe of your own in your arms. 'It is too late to save my little Mignonnette,' whispered my lady, as I watched beside her that summer night. 'Even if they take pity on my distress, and give her back to me, I must train her in her father's faith, or have her taken from me again for good. But for this innocent little soul there is yet time, Nanette. Do you remember the pretty cottage on the other side of Tarascon, where we took shelter two days ago from the storm? The saintly face of the young pastor, and the tender eyes of the mother as she bent over her little ones, have haunted me ever since. I am sure, for Christ's sake, they would receive even a nameless babe left at their door—all the more, one that was given to them to train in the right way. My husband's people shall never know of the little one's existence, and my father could not help me if he would.'"

"It was a sad blow to me, Mistress Eglantine, and it took me more than one night to see the right of it, for the touch of thy rose-leaf hand on my cheek had bewildered my conscience, and it seemed a disgrace, too, to cast my lady's babe on the world like that. But my lady's will was adamant, and I saw at last I was endangering the life I cared for most in the world, and yielded—and talked Antoine round too,—no easy matter; but after he was once convinced that our young madame's life hung on the issue, he was as true as steel. So at the end of the week we took our departure from Beaucaire with the pleasure-seekers; but while my lady and I travelled slowly to Anduze, Antoine turned back over the bridge of boats to Tarascon, and passing through the town, reached the hamlet where the pastor lived, as the summer dusk was falling. We had put a purse of gold with you in the basket, little one, and robbed you in folds of finest wool and linen, and my lady pinned a note upon thy breast, saying thou wert of gentle and stainless blood, but giving no name, and praying pastor Chevalier and his wife to bring thee up in the faith which thy unhappy mother dared not teach thee. Thou shouldst think of this sometimes, Mistress Eglantine, when thy aunt tries to teach thee what is right, and the pastor sets thee the long tasks in the catechism, which thou dost think so dull."

"I do think of it, Nanette—only the catechism is so hard to remember. Please go on: tell me how Antoine watched through the hedge until they heard me cry, and came out into the porch, and how Rene was the first to open the basket, and how my aunt took me up in her arms and kissed me, and how uncle Godfrey said God had given me, in place of the little daughter they had lost, and how they called me Eglantine, because the vine was in blossom on the porch."

"You mind that part of the story well enough yourself, Mistress Eglantine; there is more than one can tell you that tale. I thought it was about your mother you wished to hear."

"Indeed it is," peeping round to print a kiss on the averted face. "I will be good, and ask no more questions if you will tell the rest."

But Nanette was gazing into the fire, her usually busy needles motionless in her hands. There was always something awesome to Eglantine when Nanette's hands were still.

"Please go on," she whispered. "My mother was very ill at Anduze, was she not?"

"Nigh unto death, mademoiselle. The figs had fallen, and the grapes were purple on the hillsides when we reached Bearn, and then it was only to meet sorrow upon sorrow. Mademoiselle Bertrand had placed her little niece in a convent as soon as she heard of M. le Capitaine's death, and in vain my lady appealed from her to the convent, and from the convent to the cure, and from the cure to the prefect. They either could not, or would not help her. There stood the king's edict, that permitted even children of tender years to choose the faith in which they would be reared, and this Mademoiselle Bertrand claimed her little niece had done, and though my lady knew a toy might have tempted the baby lip to utter the *Ave* which was all that would have been considered necessary, she had no proof, no redress. It had been hard enough to be simply separated from the little one, but to think of her behind convent bars, fretting her timid heart out among strangers, neglected, perhaps ill-used—it was more than any mother could have heart to bear. For she was such a gentle child, our little mademoiselle, with none of thy dash and sparkle, Mistress Eglantine, but with loving, nestling ways that crept round one's heart unawares, and an angel face that was like her mother's, and yet not like. It seemed to have so little in common with this world of ours."

"When at last the truth dawned on your mother she took to her chamber, and gave way to such comfortless grief that M. Bertrand at last became uneasy, and sent for the cure. He was an old man, and seemed really touched by my lady's despair. He told her that it was because of her Huguenot leanings that the child had been taken from her, but that if she would reassure the Church as to her attachment, he would use his influence to have the little one restored. I think you, mother had anticipated this, for she said at once she would do anything, suffer anything that he would dictate. She had been only feeling after the truth, little one, she had not found it, and it was a sore test. In thy case, conscience and mother-love had been on the same side, but now there was a strife between the two, and the human love was the stronger. God is pitiful: I think He will not judge harshly where He had given so little, but from that hour there was a broken hearted look in my lady's eyes, which told me she felt she had turned her back upon the light, and must henceforth walk in darkness."

"They were heavy days that followed, sweetheart: I like not to dwell upon them. Our young madame was worn to a shadow with prayers and pilgrimages; but when in the early spring she ventured to ask for an interview with Mademoiselle Mignonnette, Father Joseph confessed that the child had been removed to a distant convent, and that it would take time to have her brought back. I think my lady's heart misgave her from that, but she redoubled her penances and fasts, until the year was gone, and the Christmas snows lay white upon the hills, and Father Joseph could no longer conceal the truth, and told her plainly that the bishop had decided to train the little demoiselle for a nun, and her mother must resign all hopes of ever seeing her again. My young madame was borne fainting from the confessional where the fatal word was spoken, and many a time in the sore illness that followed, I hoped God was going to take her out of this troublous world. But He is wiser than we, Mistress Eglantine, though we would often mar His counsels if we had the power. When the winter was ended, and the gentians began to purple in the sheltered places, my lady came forth from her chamber; but though she took her old place in the house, there was a spirit-look in her face, and a noiselessness in her step which told that some link between her and this life was broken. She showed no anger to those who had so sorely wronged her, but it was only the suffering of the poor and sick in the hamlet that fully roused her. To them she was an angel of mercy—especially the mothers, who knew her story, loved her, and many an hour would she sit in their lowly cottages, with their little ones on her lap, or round her knee. It was one day that summer, after she had helped a young shepherd's wife to nurse a feeble baby back to life, that I found her weeping bitterly, and the cry on her lips was not for Mademoiselle Mignonnette, but 'My baby! my little, lost, unnamed baby.' A heart may count something of the cost of its gifts beforehand, little one, but it is not until afterward that we wholly tell the price. I think it was not the first time your mother had cried out for the child she had put from her, though she had never let the word escape her until now. And I spoke out square and strong: 'The little one is rosy and well, madame. Antoine saw her this spring when he was in the Cevennes, where pastor Chevalier and his wife are living now. She is the darling of the whole country-side, Antoine heard, and the pastor and his wife love her as their own flesh and blood, and have planned to marry her to their only son when she is grown; but you have only to speak the word, my lady; you have gold to pay them for their trouble.' But she would let me say no more, Mistress Eglantine. 'My heart shall break before I utter the word,' she said; 'who am I, Nanette, that I should take an innocent soul to train for God?' And she dried her tears at once and would never reopen the subject. But that fall there came to the chateau a young priest, with a face like a Saint John. M. Fenelon was his name, and he has since come to be a great preacher, but then he was still at his studies. He was a distant kinsman of your father's and had heard of my lady's trouble; it was not many days before he had won from her the whole story, for he had a gentle, kindly way about him, little one, which made even the most timid ready to put their trust in him. My lady told him everything, saying what had happened at Beaucaire, and he comforted her like a young brother. He bade her think no more that God had forsaken her, but believe that he was a tender Father, who had only suffered these trials to come upon her that He might draw her nearer to Himself. He told her that it was God Himself, not her child, for whom her heart was truly hungering, and that He alone could satisfy her. But he reminded her, too, that the little one was still in the Good Shepherd's keeping, though removed from hers, and that if she would only trust Him, He would give His angels charge concerning the little feet that they should never go astray. And he spoke of the love and sympathy of the Lord Jesus, and the joy of following in the prints of those blessed feet, until his own face glowed like an angel's, and my lady's caught the reflection. Sometimes he added learned words of the perpetuity of the Church, and the sacredness of its ordinances, but to these she only listened absently, though she liked well enough to hear of the holy sisters of Port Royal, and a little book by M. Pascal, which he lent her, she said, read like the words of one who had seen