

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued).

"She is at La Rochelle with her grand-aunt. I sent her there under Nannette's care a month ago. You have nobly discharged the trust my poor daughter placed in you, but your wife has now enough to take care of her own. But it was not to speak of any of them that I came to you." The banker paused. He was painfully conscious that the precious hour was melting away; yet now that the moment had come, he felt strangely reluctant to open the mission he had been so ready to undertake.

"Then what is your errand?" asked the pastor with some coldness in his tone. He understood his companion, and divined what was coming. "Surely not the hope of tempting me to purchase my release by a recantation?"

If M. Laval had had any lurking thought of proposing such a course, he had certainly not the courage to utter it now.

"Nay, not that," he said hurriedly. "But the appeal to the king's clemency. Father Ambrose says he can back it with much influence at court, and has great hopes of its success, procuring at least a commutation of your sentence."

"That will do, my friend. I have told Father Ambrose, and I tell you now, that not to save my life will I dishonour my Master, and stain my soul by professing penitence for a crime of which I am not guilty. It would be a lie to God and man, and Christ helping me, I will never put my hand to it."

"But this is just where you make a mistake, Godfrey. There is no lie in the matter. You have grown morbid, and no wonder: shut up in this dismal hole, and rack'd with fiendish tortures. You ought to know as well as I that the phrase is a formal one that deceives no one, and which a thousand men as guiltless as you have signed without scruple. I am no bigot, as you know, but I do you full honour for your religious fidelity, and would not utter another word if the matter rested there. But this is not a point of conscience, but of common sense, and I pray you for your own sake to reconsider it."

He paused, as if expecting some reply, but the pastor remained silent, and hoping that he had made some impression, he hastened to press his advantage.

"I knew and loved your father, Godfrey. We were boys at school together, and I have always honoured you, though our paths have lain in different directions. If you like it better, I will meet you on your own ground, and make it a matter of principle, too. Methinks I have heard you say more than once that a man's life was his most precious trust, after his religion, and that only a coward would voluntarily resign it, and only a blasphemer needlessly endanger it."

"Ay, so have I said, and so say I again; but a man's life, M. Laval, consisteth not only in the breath in his nostrils and the heart-beats in his breast. It is written: 'To know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou has sent, this is life eternal.' And it is also written of those who, for a few more such breaths and heart-throbs, shall surrender that subtler and finer principle: 'He that saveth his life shall lose it.' I would gladly die, my friend, to make you see: 'His favour is life; His loving-kindness is better than life.'"

"Then you are resolved to immolate yourself?" asked M. Laval in a broken voice.

"I am resolved to hesitate at no cross that my Master holds out to me. But you seem to forget, my brother, that it is to life, not death, that I am summoned."

"To death in life," retorted the other passionately. "The galley-ship is a hell upon earth. You do not yet comprehend, Godfrey, the depth of the malice that has allotted to you such a doom. I pass over the toil, the suffering, the exposure, for you have proved yourself superior to all assaults of the flesh, but consider the shame, the degradation the contact with the offscouring of the vile. Great as the miseries of this dungeon may have been, they are nothing to what awaits you. Here you have been a prisoner; there you will be a slave. Think of it, Godfrey! You, in whose veins runs gentle blood, and who have ever seemed to live on a purer and higher plane than ordinary mortals!—have you reflected what it will be to herd with thieves and murderers, to be chained for years to one of them, exposed like them to a master's lash, and hearing nothing from morning till night but oaths, and curses, and ribald jests?"

"I have thought of it, my friend; but I have thought, too, of Him who, for our sakes, was numbered with the transgressors, and endured the cross and despised the shame for the joy set before Him—the joy of saving a lost world. And I have rejoiced that he has counted me worthy to suffer for His name's sake. Have you ever thought, M. Laval, what it was for a soul like His to come in contact with a world like ours? Nay, do not weep. You have faithfully portrayed to yourself the cruel and shameful part of my doom. You fail to see the other and brighter side. Believe me, to live will still be Christ, even in the galley-ship, and I will not suffer long. Malice sometimes overreaches itself, and the rack does not put a man's muscles in trim for the oar."

"But your wife—have you forgotten her?" interposed M. Laval tremulously. "You have nerved yourself to bear your own suffering. Can you bear the thought of hers? She has kept up a brave front before us all, not weeping or moaning like other women, but we can see that behind it her heart is slowly breaking, and as yet she does not know the worst."

It was his last shaft. He had not meant to use it if it could possibly be avoided, but he let it fly now in utter desperation. The strong quiver that ran through the frame beside him told that it had struck home. But the man who had spent his life amassing wealth never knew all that went and came in the few heart-beats before Godfrey Chevalier answered him:

"Monique would scorn me if I came back to her a coward and a perjurer," he said, in a faint voice that yet had in it the breath of a trumpet note. "But even were she less noble, monsieur, it is not to her that my first allegiance is due. It is written: 'Whoso loveth wife and children more than Me is not worthy of Me.'"

For many minutes after that there was no sound in that dreary dungeon but the dry, choking sobs with which M. Laval acknowledged his defeat.

Then the door opened, and Father Ambrose, taper in hand, entered.

One glance at the faces of the two men sufficed.

"Well, monsieur, are you satisfied?" he asked the banker with a bitter smile; but the other made no answer. The priest turned to Godfrey Chevalier.

"Your request is granted, M. le Pastor. You have permission to write to your wife. I will return immediately with light and writing materials. There is no time to lose, and you are to leave for Toulouse before daybreak to-morrow." Then glancing once more at Pierre Laval, Father Ambrose added:

"Come, monsieur. Your time is expired, and we will have the commandment down upon us, if his orders are overstepped."

The banker stumbled to his feet.

"Madame Chevalier and the children shall never suffer need while I have aught," he whispered, as he and his friend exchanged their last embrace.

"I am sure of that. God bless you, my friend. Give my love to our little Eglantine, and tell her I often thought of her, and prayed for her in my prison."

In perfect silence the priest and his companion retraced their steps along corridors and winding stairs, back to the fresh air and glory of the upper world. But at the door of his own apartment Father Ambrose paused and invited his visitor to enter and partake of some refreshment.

M. Laval recoiled in horror.

"Any bread broken beneath this roof would have the taste of blood upon it," he protested fiercely.

Father Ambrose drew himself up haughtily.

"You are less than grateful," he retorted; "but you are mortified at your failure, and I pardon you. You see, he closes with his own hand the last door of escape."

"Nay, there is one other that will soon open into life and freedom—the door that all your popish, bead-telling brotherhood cannot keep bolted, when God lays His hand upon the latch."

"And pray what is that, monsieur? Nay," as the other pointed upward, with gloomy triumph in look and gesture. "That portal scarcely opens heavenward for heretics."

"We will see." M. Laval was far too excited to be discreet. "I would I were as sure of entering those blessed gates as he, and the day may come, M. le Cure, when even you may be glad to touch even the hem of his garment. You will keep faith about the letter?"

"I keep faith ever," was the proud retort.

They had reached the end of the passage, and the gateway of the castle. The porter silently withdrew the bolts, and Pierre Laval, with a sudden lightening of his heart, passed out from under the ponderous arch into the freedom and sunshine of the street.

The gate had scarcely closed behind him when the priest turned to a soldier lounging in the court.

"Did you mark that gentleman, Narcisse, and can you follow him unnoticed and bring me word where he goes?"

"Without doubt again, M. le Cure."

"Then speed you. A louis d'or if you are faithful, but a taste of the pulley if I find you babbling."

From which it would seem that Father Ambrose had still his little game to play, though it had become somewhat involved with events on which he had not counted.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD DEBT CANCELLED.

There was no hesitation in M. Laval's step, as he threaded his way down the busy boulevard, and turning into a side street, entered the house where Madame Chevalier and her children had found shelter. But the moment he met the wife's desolate eyes he knew that the pain of communicating to her that terrible doom had been spared him.

"M. La Roche has been here. I know all," she said in answer to his startled look, and the blunt man of business forgot the consolations he had meant to utter, and silently took a chair, while she drew her weeping children closer, and her gaze left his to wander once more through the open window, up to the frowning towers of St. Esprit, black against the spring sky.

People talk sometimes about "being prepared" for a great sorrow, as if a blow were less that had added to it the slow anguish of anticipation. But how few seem to have grasped the deep secret, that the only preparation possible is that glad, unhesitating acquiescence to a higher and holier will, which should be the heart-throb and hand-clasp of every moment of a Christian's life—not merely the convulsive gasp and clutch of his soul when he sinks in deep water. It did not lighten the darkness of that hour for Monique Chevalier that for years its shadow had been projected into her soul, but it did brighten the gloom that she knew whom she had believed, and could recognize the sceptre of her King in the wrath of evil men. The quiet grief which awed M. Laval more than a burst of weeping, was not submission to the inevitable, nor the dull patience of a heart grown familiar with its pain, but the blessed speechlessness, which the heart of the psalmist has embalmed for the heart of all time: "I was dumb; I opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it."

"If I could only see him once more." The wife turned back at last to her visitor with that wistful cry. "You have done much for us, M. Laval, very much. Could you not obtain for us this one concession? It would mean so little to them; it would be so much to me."

M. Laval shaded his eyes with his hands. "I fear it is impossible," he answered. "And, indeed, it would only distress you to see him as he is now. He bade me tell you not to attempt it for the children's sake."

"He himself? Then you have seen him? Oh, monsieur," Madame Chevalier's hand carried its cup of bitterness less steadily for the unexpected drop of balm.

"Ay, I have seen him, and had speech with him in his dungeon not a half hour since. Nay, do not look like that and clutch me so fiercely. I will tell you all—every look and word. Nay, there was no special message to you but that he is to have the privilege of writing you himself, and that, I trow, will be more to both of you than any message I could bring." He paused, startled, yet relieved to see that the blessed tears, which save life and reason, were at last streaming down her face.

"Do not mind me," she said softly. "It is for joy I weep. Go on and tell me all. First, how you could procure this boon when it was denied to me."

Somewhat shamefacedly, Pierre Laval explained.

"And you dared to go to him with such a proposition as that?" Godfrey Chevalier's wife did not ask what the result of the mission had been.

"It was for his own sake and yours and the children's. I incurred no small risk in doing it. If you cannot thank me, it is hardly generous to reproach. He did not."

The wife was humbled and penitent at once.

"He never did anything that was not noble and kind," she said warmly. "I am but a child beside him; yet believe me, my friend, I am not ungrateful. Now, once more, tell me all."

Before M. Laval had quite completed his story he was interrupted by a sharp cry. He had averted his eyes from her face that he might not witness the pain that much of the recital must cause her. Now glancing hurriedly at her, he saw her gaze was riveted, not on him, but on some object in the doorway. Following the look, he beheld to his horror and consternation that the object was no other than his new acquaintance, Father Ambrose. The priest, seeing he was observed, advanced slowly into the apartment, addressing no one, but keeping his gaze fixed upon the pastor's wife. Monique Chevalier had uttered no second cry, but, motionless in her chair with Agnes folded close to her heart, faced the intruder with eyes that dared the world. As for Pierre Laval, the suspicions he thought forever laid to rest, rushed back upon his mind with redoubled strength. He had been the dupe, the tool of this wily priest; but it was for Madame Chevalier and her children, not for himself, that the trap had been laid. He saw it all now only too plainly. Hardly knowing what he did, he threw himself in the way of the advancing monk.

"Traitor! spy!" he hissed. "If you hurt a hair of their heads you shall answer for it to me, Church or no."

The Dominican paused for a moment, and surveyed his opponent with a look of quiet scorn, but no ill-will, then put him aside with a quiet strength, of which few would have thought the slender frame capable.

"Your tongue will yet get you into trouble, M. Laval, in spite of the elasticity of your religious views. It is well for you that I bear no resentment." Then turning to Monique Chevalier, he addressed her with grave politeness.

"I am sorry to have alarmed you, madame. Believe me, your alarm is quite unnecessary; my errand is one of peace."

The Huguenot mother turned a shade paler, but made no answer. Yet her heart had already begun to relax something of its terrible tension. M. Laval's words had identified their visitor with his new acquaintance of the morning, and she could not forget the kindness shown to her suffering husband. But for her children's sake she must not give her trust too soon.

Evidently disappointed at her silence, the monk advanced a step nearer, and pushed back the black cowl from his brow.

"Madame Chevalier has a bad memory," he said harshly. "Has she quite forgotten old friends? Perhaps Mademoiselle de Vaux's memory may be better." He turned, so that the light fell full upon his face.

"Leon—Leon di Vincy!" The name fell from Monique Chevalier's lips like a cry, sharp with sudden recognition and a new fear. A bitter smile curved the thin lips of the man watching her.

"Ay, madame, Leon di Vincy, or at least he who once bore that name, the man who once loved you with such insane fidelity, who was happy to touch a flower that you had worn, and would have risked his soul to bring one upon which your heart was set, but who was less to Monique de Vaux than the shadow that dogged her steps or the blossom she cast aside. The wealth, the station he laid at your feet, the fame he might have won with you for his inspiration, were as nothing to you, madame, compared with the hardships, the poverty that another had to offer. Leon di Vincy, the playmate of your childhood, the friend of your youth, the lover of your whole life, was forgotten, cast aside the moment Godfrey Chevalier, the heretic, the fanatic made his appearance. Madame Chevalier has probably never regretted her decision?"

"Never, Monsieur." The colour had come back to Monique's face. She drew herself up proudly, and the flash in her eyes warned the questioner that on the shield of her great love and her great sorrow, the lava-torrent and the rapier-thrust had both fallen powerless. "To have been Godfrey Chevalier's wife for even a few short years is to have known all of bliss that earth could give. The memory of it will be to me, even in my desolation, a benediction and an inspiration."

The low, sweet passion of her voice trembled into silence as if borne down by the weight of its own music, but Father Ambrose neither spoke nor moved, and in a gentle voice the Huguenot's wife added:

"But my old friend must have greatly changed if his mission here to-day is to upbraid me in my sorrow. You have reverted, M. le Cure, to circumstances which methinks might better have been left where they have long lain in oblivion; but since you have opened the door, one word I must speak in mine own behalf. You do me but scant justice, sir, when you complain that I was incapable of appreciating, because unable to accept, the gift you offered me. Only too conscious was I even then, I assure you, of the honour you did me, and my own unworthiness. Your friend, your sister, I would gladly always have remained, had not you yourself rendered that impossible."

A strange light that could scarcely be called a smile, glanced across the white, mask-like face, as the priest lifted his head.

(To be Continued.)

BISHOP ALEXANDER declares that the clergy, instead of being the "sacred vegetables" described by Sydney Smith, are now the most locomotive, the most loquacious, the most speculative, and the most experimental of English citizens.

Hints on Art Silk Needle Work.

Ladies who are interested in this beautiful work should send for a copy of our sixty-four page book entitled "Hints on Art Needle Work," just published, handsomely and profusely illustrated with patterns of many new and beautiful articles, also stitches for the decorative work with our Art Wash Silks, now so popular for home fancy work. It also contains a table of shading for flowers and birds, and much information, valuable and instructive, for those who have a taste for Silk Embroidery Work. Sent free by mail on receipt of six cents in stamps. Belding, Paul & Co., Silk Manufacturers, Montreal.