

## Choice Literature.

### HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

#### CHAPTER XV

M. RENAULT'S REVENGE.

For days after that terrible night the young mother lay prostrate upon her couch, staring blankly at the tapestry on the opposite wall, and taking no notice of what went on about her, except when the babe in the cradle woke and cried. With secret rebellion against the Giver of life and death, she felt the blood mounting stronger in her veins, and knew that sooner or later she would rise and take up the burden of living once more. It would never be anything but a burden after this—the existence that had been so sweet one year ago; nothing but a dreary rising up and lying down with her grief, a bitter breaking of bread and drawing of breath. She did not reproach herself for what had passed; that would have been to open a black gulf of despair which would have swallowed her up utterly; but she no longer reproached Henri for his share in her misery. The solemn silence of death had extinguished all resentment against him, and the excuses, which the living man had pleaded so vainly, she herself framed for the dead.

He had indeed been sorely tried in his tenderest and holiest affections, and had only yielded after a long and bitter struggle. Why had God tempted him above that he was able to bear? Why had He stood aloof in that terrible contest, and left the breaking heart to meet the enemy alone? Where was the door of escape He had promised to open for them, the strength He had pledged His word to give in their hour of need? Henri would never have forsaken his faith if his God had not at first deserted him! It was God who was to blame; not they. The plea which would have been to Monique Chevalier the disintegration of all hope and help for the universe served her foster-daughter as a last barrier against the beating floods, and enabled her to restore Henri to something of his old place in her esteem without too great injury to her pride. The explanation which he had himself given of his fall she refused to entertain, even for a moment. The mournful humility with which he had confessed that it was he who had forsaken God, not God who had forsaken him, she set down as the ravings of an overstrained but naturally generous nature. If Henri had forgotten God, what had she done? The question would thrust itself upon her now and then, but as often she put it firmly by.

M. Renau had respected her wishes, and had not again crossed the threshold of her apartments. Louis Bertrand, who had included medicine in his studies at the Sorbonne, made her a formal visit every morning to inquire after her health, but his manner was so sad and constrained, and he watched her with such troubled eyes, that she was always glad when the interview was over. He had always been fond of her. She knew that; and he was very sorry for her now. But what did it all matter? He could not give Henri back to her. Her grandfather, too, lay ill in Nîmes with a fever brought on by grief and disappointment, and though she felt a twinge of compunction at the news, she was glad she did not have to look upon his bowed white head just then. But why did not Rene and his mother come to her? It was not like them to think of their own safety before hers, nor to refuse their help because they could not approve of what she had done. They must long ago have ceased to care for her if their affection had been based on anything so uncertain as her words and actions. What kept them? She had shrunk painfully at first from the thought of meeting their eyes after the failure of her boasted confidence in Henri, but her very dread of that first interview made her impatient at last to have it over with, and the old loving intercourse renewed. She did not care for the words of comfort her aunt might speak, but to lay her head upon its old resting-place, to feel Rene take her hand, to know herself cared for and watched over once more, this would be something even now.

The longing grew so intense at last as to wake in her the first sign of interest she had taken in anything since Henri went away. She had the curtains of her window drawn back, and herself lifted to a couch near the casement, where she could see the road on the opposite hill. She was too proud to summon them, or to betray to her domestics that she longed for those who appeared to have forgotten her; but, oh! if they only knew how she needed them. Day after day she sat and waited, watching for Rene's tall figure to come up the hill, or her aunt's black gown to flutter through the wood, as a shipwrecked mariner might watch for a passing sail, until her heart grew sick, and resentment changed to dismay. They could not be indifferent to her, and she had learned by a casual inquiry of Cecile, her maid, that they were all well at the cottage; they could at least have written her a few words of comfort, if it had been impossible to come to her. There could be but one reason for their silence; they held her guilty for Henri's death. She knew what an unspeakable sin self-destruction was in their eyes, she recalled their long friendship for her husband, and her heart told her only too plainly that, deep as was their devotion to the truth, their love and pity for the fallen would have been as abundant as his need. They would never have turned coldly from him in his misery and shame; they would never have laid one reproach of theirs upon the burden that was already greater than he could bear. Then they must believe with Henri himself that she had been his ruin, soul and body; no wonder they could not forgive her.

From the moment the conviction forced itself upon Eglantine, she turned her back on the lovely vista of wood and hills, that lay beneath her window, and seemed to have no interest in life beyond the tiny creature in her arms. Little Gabrielle did not grow fast, though that was not to be wondered at, considering the atmosphere of sorrow and dread that had enclosed her young life from its beginning. Neither did she cry as much as rosier and stronger babes. For hours at a time she would lie quiet upon her young mother's lap, with her dark, wondering eyes fixed upon the sweet face bent above her, as if she would unravel the secret of its sadness, herself as pale, and frail, and fair as a flower that has ventured out too soon and felt the touch of frost. Eglantine watched her with the jealousy of a heart over its own treas-

ure, never letting her go out of her sight, seldom out of her arms. All the light of her life had gathered itself up into that tiny face. She wondered how she could have told Henri she hoped God would be good, and let her baby die. What would she do if this last straw of love and hope were reft from her sinking fingers? She began to take more care of her rest and diet, and to teach her sad lips to smile once more.

The hour Monique Chevalier had foreseen had come and passed. The prop on which the wife's heart had leaned had gone down with a crash, but the mother had come up from the floods, clinging with the death-grip of despair to the frail cord of a baby's life and love. The storm had failed to cast her on the rock of God's perfect grace and strength, and the hour for which M. Renau had waited had dawned at last.

The heat of the summer had passed. The sultry weather had given place to cool, sun-steeped days, when it seemed as much a part of life to remember as to breathe. Eglantine sat in the balcony outside her chamber, keeping watch over the terrace below, where old Marie walked with the babe. It was as near the outer world as she ever ventured now, and she would have recoiled from facing even so much of the sunshine to day—for it was the anniversary of her marriage—had not Louis Bertrand hinted the day before that the child was pining for the outer air, and the instinct, which made the young mother unwilling ever to let her out of her sight, made her able to put aside her own pain, while she kept watch over her darling. But she had no power to bar the bitter-sweet memories with which the day was charged, and before long her stern self-control faltered; she bowed her head upon the balustrade before her, and wept.

"Has my kinswoman any fresh trouble?" asked a familiar voice beside her, and she started up to find that M. Renau had stolen upon her unannounced and uninvited.

"Monsieur!" she exclaimed, drawing herself up haughtily. "I thought it was understood that we were not to meet again."

"I believe you did express such a wish, my fair cousin, a few weeks back, and you will bear me witness that I have taken pains not to annoy you with my presence. It is something novel, though, for the sieur of Beaumont to be forbidden access to any part of his chateau by a guest."

"A guest!" Eglantine La Roche repeated the words with white, shaking lips, while she laid hold of the balustrade to steady herself.

Her kinsman made her a low, mocking bow.

"I presume you can scarcely be ignorant, madame, that your husband's estates have been forfeited by his treason to the Government. As near of kin, and a good Catholic, I preferred a claim which his majesty has been good enough to recognize, in consideration of some past services, and my promise to eradicate the last seed of heresy from these Beaumont hills. Do not look so distressed, my fair kinswoman. I am aware it must cost you much pain to relinquish all hold upon such fair lands; but I assure you, you and your child shall never be grudged a shelter beneath my roof."

"I will write to my grandfather to-morrow to come and take me away," interrupted Eglantine with flashing eyes.

But M. Renau only smiled, and continued.

"I have given orders that your comfort shall be as strictly cared for as when you were mistress of the chateau. You will, of course, be left undisturbed in your present apartments, and your desire for seclusion shall be carefully complied with. I would not, myself, have intruded on your privacy to-day but for a communication from the Intendant of Nîmes, about which it is imperative I should speak to you. Allow me, madame, to present to you the holy father who has been appointed by M. d'Argoussy spiritual guardian to your own child."

"My child!" almost screamed the young mother, taking no notice of the priest, who stepped out from the shadow of the window with a low obeisance.

"Ay, madame, your child," repeated the courtier, meeting her frenzied glance with one of perfect calmness. "You must have known that Henri La Roche's child would eventually be removed from your care to the bosom of that Church to which her father returned an humble penitent before his death, and which is unwilling to let the innocent perish with the guilty. In consideration for your desolate condition the step has been delayed thus far, but now in justice to the child herself we can wait no longer."

"You will kill her if you take her from me now," answered Eglantine. She had heard him with dilated eyes and frozen lips, but now the seal was broken, and she could speak with the courage of despair. "You cannot deceive me with this talk of the Intendant, monsieur. This is some cruel scheme of your own. The Church had no claim upon my husband after his recantation. He told me himself that his sentence had been commuted to exile, with permission for his family to accompany him."

"You seem strangely ready to avail yourself of the benefits of that arrangement, madame, considering the scorn with which you rejected it a month ago," remarked M. Renau sarcastically.

"I know my rights too well to relinquish them," she retorted, but her lips trembled. Oh, had Henri known this when he warned her to think well before she spoke?

"Madame appears to be under some strange delusion," interrupted the harsh voice of the priest. "The fact that M. La Roche did sign the recantation not only gives us the right to rear and protect his child, but lays it upon us as a sacred obligation. It is the duty of the Church to see that the innocent babe is not robbed of the benefits of his father's act."

"And to prove to you that I have no part in the matter, you have only to cast your eyes over this paper," added M. Renau haughtily. "It is no more in my power to refuse the king's officer, Eglantine, than in yours. Let us end this painful scene."

With a sinking heart the young mother glanced over the documents he put into her hands. It was a requisition from the Intendant of Nîmes for the person of Gabrielle La Roche, only child of Henri La Roche, late sieur of Beaumont. Father Le Grand was appointed to receive the babe and convey her safely to the convent of St. Veronique, where, it was the decision of the court, she should be reared for a holy vocation, that by a life of piety and self-denial she might atone for the error of her family.

Eglantine dropped the paper with a cry, and threw herself at her kinsman's feet.

"Spare me, spare me!" I know I have been proud and defiant, but if you will only help me to keep my baby I will

be your slave all the rest of my life. I know you can help me if you will. You used to be fond of me once. You meant to be good to Henri, I own it now. Do not let them take my baby from me. It will kill her. She is too frail to bear the separation. Oh, if you are angry at what I have said and done, punish me some other way. Give me pain, torture, imprisonment—anything but this. Do not take away my one comfort, my one anchor." Her voice died away in sobs.

"Eglantine," said her kinsman kindly, "I have already told you that I am as innocent and as helpless in this matter as yourself. Rise, and put an end to this miserable spectacle."

But Eglantine knelt on. Where was the pride that had upheld her in other ordeals? Lost, swallowed up in the terror of her outraged motherhood.

"At least promise me some delay," she pleaded. "It is sheer cruelty to take her from me when she is too young to know one creed from the other. Let me keep her a few years longer, and I will give her up without a word."

"Give you the opportunity to steal away with her, where we will not hear of either of you again," interrupted Father Le Grand with a sneer. "We are hardly so simple, madame."

M. Renau had already turned haughtily to the door.

"But I will promise not to take her away," pleaded the despairing woman, laying hold of the priest's robe as a last resource. "I will pledge you my sacred word to stay just here in this room, if you like, if you will only let me keep my baby."—"She cannot live long in confinement," she was thinking to herself, "and I care not what they do to me when she is gone."

But Father Le Grand had turned away from her, unmoved by the appeal. With a wail of despair she threw herself before him.

"You shall not go until you have promised to let me keep my child," she gasped. "There must be something that will appease your hate besides this. I have jewels, costly jewels; my grandfather will add gold. Take them all. Only do not separate us."

"The child's soul is of more value in the eyes of the Church than the wealth of the Indies," answered the ecclesiastic sternly.

"But there must be something I can do—something I can give up instead," sobbed the young mother, hardly knowing what she said. "Is it the torture of this weak frame, the racking of these delicate limbs? I will bear anything you can inflict."

"There is one condition alone on which the Church could consent to leave the child in your care," replied the priest coldly.

M. Renau, who had reached the threshold, paused to mark the effect of his words.

"And that?" demanded Eglantine breathlessly.

"Is your own recantation, madame. Abjure your errors and promise to rear your child in the true faith, and there will no longer be any need to carry this painful order into execution."

He had no difficulty now in withdrawing his robe from her shrinking fingers. "Mon Dieu!" was all the unhappy mother said, as she recoiled and hid her face upon the floor. M. Renau and his agent exchanged glances, and turned once more to leave. But at sound of their retreating footsteps Eglantine started up with a look so wild that her kinsman, thinking her about to throw herself from the balcony to reach the child below, caught her firmly by the arm, and dragged her back into her chamber.

"Are you mad?" he demanded. "Father Le Grand remains with us until to-morrow, and you have time to consider the matter. Marie shall bring the babe to you at once, if you desire it."

"Yes, yes, at once," she replied feverishly, and M. Renau departed with the glow of coming triumph in his heart. Even his enmity might have been satisfied had he been able to appreciate the agony he left behind him.

When Marie entered with the little one, Eglantine caught the child fiercely from her, and paced the floor excitedly, like a caged lioness, pouring out such torrents of maddened grief and tenderness that the child shrank from her in terror. "Oh, my baby, don't do that!" she cried piteously. Then, with the heroism that unselfish love teaches to even the most undisciplined natures, she forced back her tears, and reassured the babe with gentle tones and caresses, until it fell asleep. Not until then did she suffer the bitter waters to overflow again, and permit herself to face the full cost of the sacrifice that was asked of her. There is a sweetness about slumber, an abandonment of trust, which appeals peculiarly to our care and tenderness, whether the sleeper we love be the strong man or the little child. Eglantine's heart failed as she bent above the shut eyelids and unclasped hands, as it had not done while the grave baby-ones were looking into hers. How fair she was, how frail! Who would notice and rejoice in her beauty as she had done? Who would watch over the fragile life and shelter it as the mother who bore it? She thought of those to whose care the babe would be consigned,—cold, loveless women, who had never known this tenderest and sweetest of all passions, nay, who made it a part of their religion to crush out every germ of earthly tenderness, who would not dare to let the stifled womanhood within them wake at the sound of a baby's cry. Could she resign to them this timid little creature, who felt a cold look like a bruise, and trembled at a touch or tone that was not full of love? She burst into tears, and sobbed until she was too much exhausted to do more than go on thinking again.

That life of gloom and penance which they had planned out for her little daughter, what did it mean? An existence without joy, without love, certainly—perhaps, an existence with sin. There were dark stories told and believed of convent life in those old days, and the mother, looking down on her unspotted lily, cried out that her God had no right to demand such a sacrifice. Then her fears took a fresh turn; that was an impossible terror. Little Gabrielle would soon sicken and die among those strange faces, shut in by those gloomy walls. Fresh agony contracted the mother's heart. How could she bear it? Surely, God would not exact so cruel a surrender. There must be some way of escape; something must happen. She forgot how bitterly of late she had been accusing her Maker, and began repeating to herself all the assurances she could remember of His love and compassion. Surely He would let her keep her baby; surely He would send somebody to help them. She started at last to notice that the shadows had begun to lengthen, and that