

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OPEN DOOR.

Of the anguish and dread of the days that followed what need to speak? There will be few who read these pages who will not have known some such night of sorrow. By dying pillows or on stormy shores watching some battle from afar off or waiting outside some prison gate sooner or later every disciple must come to the Master's summons, "Can ye not watch with me one hour?" And sooner or later, over every quivering heart, will be cast the same blessed shield, "Thy spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The keen frosts of February gave way to the windy bugles and budding boughs of March, March blossomed into April, April was hovering on the threshold of May, when one morning the secretary of the Intendant of Nismes entered the cabinet of his chief.

"M. Laval," he announced.

"I cannot see him. Admit none of the pastor's friends to-day."

"M. de Argoussy will hardly obtain the loans Minister Colbert has asked for if he offends the banker."

"I will take the risk of that. I would sooner see the arch-fiend himself than Pierre Laval or the La Roches to-day. Tell him I am out—sick—anything you like."

The subordinate retired slowly to the ante-room where a stout, gray-haired man in citizen's dress stood waiting.

"The Intendant is closeted with a messenger from Paris, and can see no one to-day. If you will be good enough to call to-morrow—"

The wealthy banker interrupted him with an impatient gesture, and turned sharply on his heel. He had heard M. de Argoussy's complaining voice through the partition, and divined only too heavily the real cause of his refusal. He retraced his steps down the corridor, and was descending the staircase that led to the street, when at a dark turn he felt a hand laid softly on his arm, and turning, confronted a priest wearing the black robe and cowl of a Dominican. The ecclesiastic laid a warning finger upon his lips, and motioned his companion to follow him through a door, which had opened noiselessly, into a small cabinet, apparently in connection with the Intendant's office, but which the banker had never noticed before. Two clerks sat writing at a table. At a gesture from the priest they retired, and the Dominican motioned the banker to one of the empty seats.

"I beg your pardon for this detention, M. Laval, but I understand you are here in the interest of pastor Chevalier. Doubtless you are a friend or relative, and will be willing to do a slight service for us both."

Considering the man's garb and the character of the times it is not strange that Pierre Laval changed colour and hesitated. He had not been able to refrain from telling Madame Chevalier that if her husband had listened to the advice of his friends, he would never have brought them and himself into so much trouble. But he had laboured night and day to save him, all the same, pouring out gold and influence as freely as M. La Roche himself. Now, for the first time, it flashed upon him that his warm espousal of the pastor's cause might have brought his own person and opinions into unpleasant notoriety. His companion hastened to reassure him.

"I come to crave a boon, not to spy out the land, monsieur. The heretic pastor has been anxious from the beginning of his imprisonment to communicate with his wife; but as no one knew of her whereabouts, or was willing to appear to know, it has been hitherto impossible. It was with the hope that as a friend or kinsman you might be able to further such a letter on its way, that I ventured to address you. But I see that I have made a mistake. I will detain you no further."

"There is no mistake," exclaimed M. Laval impulsively, his fears quite disarmed by this explanation, and his heart swelling at the prospect of carrying back such a cup of comfort to the desolate wife. "I have known pastor Chevalier and his wife for years, and am under great obligations to them both. Entrust the packet to me. I will see that it reaches her in safety."

He extended his hand, and the dark eyes, watching him keenly and stealthily from under the black hood, dilated with a sudden flash. A student of men looking on might have said that the priest had tested and now thoroughly understood his tool, but Pierre Laval saw only a dim smile gleam across the wasted features, and heard no irony in the Dominican's voice as he answered:

"You are in haste, monsieur. M. Chevalier has yet to write the letter, but if you will tell me where it may be sent, I will see that it is placed in your hands before evening."

The banker mentioned the name and number of the street upon which he lived, and the monk rose as if to indicate that the interview was over. Pierre Laval lingered.

"May I not know the name of the priest who is so bold and humane as to take interest in the wishes of a Huguenot and a prisoner?" Another faint, indefinable smile flitted across the pale lips.

"I am Father Ambrose, the cure of the fortress, and M. Chevalier's spiritual adviser. Rather a nominal position, the last," answering the look of surprise in the other's honest eyes. "But at least I have tormented him less than any others of my order might have done, and you may say to Madame Chevalier that her husband has had every alleviation to his condition that it was possible to procure."

"Nay, do not misunderstand me, monsieur," as Pierre Laval would once more eagerly have interrupted him, "there was little in my power to do for one so fanatical as Godfrey Chevalier, and I am a loyal son of my Church. I would fain have converted him from his heresies, if that had been possible; but since it was not, I have forborne to annoy him more than my conscience absolutely required. I owe to Madame Chevalier an old and yet uncanceled debt, for which any slight kindness I show to her husband is but scant return." He glanced pointedly at the door, but Eglantine's grandfather now held him firmly by the sleeve.

"If you are indeed kindly disposed to either Godfrey Chevalier or his wife, give me some tidings of the trial. My mission here has been fruitless. M. de Argoussy evades seeing me. When will the sentence be passed, and what is it likely to be?"

"Sentence has been already passed, monsieur. The paper lies at this very moment upon the Intendant's table, awaiting his signature. As soon as that is affixed, his fate will be communicated to the prisoner by the commandant of the fortress, and I must myself be in attendance to render what spiritual consolation is possible under the circumstances."

"But the sentence, M. le Cure! Have you heard what the sentence is?"

Father Ambrose fixed his dark, hollow eyes with an inscrutable expression upon the face of his interlocutor.

"Hard work at the galleys—for life," he replied slowly. Every vestige of colour forsook M. Laval's naturally rosy face.

"Impossible! His enemies could not descend to such a depth of malice as that!"

"It is the penalty attached to the least of M. Chevalier's offences. He disobeyed the king's edict at his peril."

"But Godfrey Chevalier is gently born, and the galley-ship is the doom of the vilest of the vile. There must be some outlet—some door of escape," the banker gasped, as if the atmosphere of the room had begun to suffocate him. "You appear to have some influence here, Father; obtain for me an interview with M. de Argoussy. He must not put his name to that paper. I have means to make him listen to me."

"Impossible, monsieur. The Intendant is not unfriendly to the prisoner; but the pressure brought to bear upon him is such that he dare not refuse his signature. There have been but two chances of escape for the pastor from the first, and through neither of them will he stoop to find exit. The first was a recantation of his errors, which would have procured him a full pardon, or at least an honourable banishment, with permission for his family to accompany him, but to this he would not listen for a second; and seeing how idle it was, I confess I did not press him much. The other, however, was an appeal to the king's grace, and from this I did at first hope much, supplemented by the interest at court I could bring to bear upon it; but here also M. Chevalier proved insurmountably obstinate, absolutely refusing even to look again at the paper, after he had discovered that it involved an expression of penitence for the past. He regrets nothing, he says, except that he did not labour more earnestly while he was still free. I sincerely pity him, M. Laval, and all who are interested in his fate; but it is impossible to save a man who is resolved to immolate himself."

The colour had rushed back to Pierre Laval's face.

"This is madness—fanaticism run to seed," he exclaimed passionately. "A drowning man cannot afford to split hairs. M. le Cure, it still rests with you to save him. Use your influence to get me admitted to the fortress, and give me speech with him for half an hour. I promise you in less than that time to have him listen to reason. If not for his own sake, then for the sake of his helpless family, he must make the concession."

Father Ambrose considered for a moment, his eyes fixed upon the floor. Then he looked up.

"You shall have your wish, M. Laval. The prisoner has prepared himself, I know, for a sharp and speedy death, but it is barely possible that the prospect of years of ignominy and toil may shake his resolution. You shall have the opportunity to avail yourself of the weakness—if there be any. Neither he nor I shall ever say I left a stone unturned that might have saved him. Nevertheless I warn you beforehand that I have no hope of your success. The rack has not moved him a hair's breadth, and as for the mention of his wife, it seems but to add ardour to his obstinacy. Had I not known Monique De Vaux, I would have found it hard to understand. But they are moving overhead. M. de Argoussy has yielded at last, and they come to summon me. It will not do for you to be found closeted with me. This card will admit you to my private apartments at the fortress. Meet me there an hour hence, and God and the Virgin speed our cause."

He opened the door, and Pierre Laval, thrusting the bit of pasteboard into his breast, hurried down the stairs and into the street, barely in time to escape the eyes of an officer, who the moment afterwards descended the stair.

Punctually at the hour named he was at the citadel of St. Esprit, and on presenting Father Ambrose's card, was at once admitted to a small, scantily-furnished apartment on the ground floor. The door closed, and he was left alone. Ten, fifteen minutes passed. Father Ambrose did not appear, neither came there any tidings from him. His visitor sprang up, and began to pace the room restlessly. Once a faint suspicion of the priest's fidelity crossed his mind, but he thrust the thought from him as unworthy. His heart, however, had already begun to misgive him as to the success of his undertaking. With growing uneasiness, he recalled the occasions on which, for one cause or another, he had attempted to make the pastor see things as he saw them: occasions on which he, Pierre Laval, had certainly not come off victorious. But he had put his hand to the plough, and could not turn back; besides, he could never go back to Madame Chevalier with that fatal sentence, without making one more attempt to save her husband. Loudly as he might rail against their fanaticism, he was sincerely attached to them both, and like many another time-server, in his secret heart admired the heroism he dared not imitate.

At last steps were heard without; the door opened and the Dominican entered. His dark eyes glittered with excitement, and the hand with which he grasped M. Laval's was icy in its touch.

"Come, monsieur; now is your opportunity, if ever. He has learned his fate with perfect calmness. There seems no limit to his infatuation. He even thanks God that he is permitted to suffer longer. How much of this may be assumed to blind us, who can say? You are to have an hour with him alone; make the best use of it you can."

He led the way from the room, and Pierre Laval followed, more than ever ashamed of his momentary suspicion. Down many a winding corridor and stair they passed, the light of the upper world receding as they went, until the damp breath of the underground vaults smote upon the banker's overwrought senses, and he would have stumbled for very blindness in the gloom, had not Father Ambrose lighted a taper and preceded him the remainder of the way. Before a heavily barred door at the end of the next passage, the gendarme, who stood on duty, withdrew at a whisper, and the priest, opening the door, pushed Pierre Laval silently forward into what appeared to be a gulf of midnight blackness.

"A light! I must have a light!" cried the banker, turning hastily back and attempting to stay the closing door.

There was no answer but the settling of the massive portal in its socket, the creaking of the bolts as they were hastily drawn without, and the echo of a faint laugh down the vaulted corridor. Instantly every slumbering doubt flamed up into open conflagration.

"My God, I am a lost man!" he cried; and in his despair he was about to precipitate himself down the steps.

"He loseth nothing that loseth not God," answered a calm voice somewhere within the gloom. Faint and altered as it was, M. Laval at once recognized it; even to the woman that loved it that voice could not have sounded more sweet.

"Godfrey, are you indeed here? Thank heaven! I thought for a moment that I had been entrapped, and the moment seemed an eternity. But tell me how I may find my way to you in this pitchy dark, for I can see no more than an owl at noon."

There was a second's intense silence, then the pastor cried out:

"Is it you, M. Laval? I did not know you when I first spoke. Then I will hear of Monique and my children before I go. My God, I thank Thee! Thou knowest I did not look for this—that I had prepared myself to drink the cup without one mitigating drop! But Thou art ever better to us than we can ask or think."

Guided by the voice and the dull clank of a chain, as the prisoner raised himself upon his iron bed, Pierre Laval groped his way down the steps and across the damp floor of the dungeon to the spot whence the sounds proceeded. The pastor stretched out his hand to guide and welcome him; the other clutched it eagerly, and the next moment, with a gush of womanlike emotion, threw himself upon his friend's shoulder.

"Good heavens! they have almost killed you with their fiendish cruelties!" he gasped, shocked to find how wasted and feeble was the frame that had lately been so strong and stalwart.

"The rack is hardly a health-giving couch," was the faint answer; while with a mighty effort Godfrey Chevalier concealed the shock that the embrace had given to wrenched muscles and shattered nerves. "But even that hath its soft side if Christ Jesus turn the screw. Nay, shudder not, my friend. They have done their worst, and it is over. God's grace has been once more sufficient for human weakness, and His glory magnified, I trust, in the least of all His saints."

"I would I could see His judgments visited upon the heads of your tormentors," growled M. Laval fiercely. "Out on that false priest who bade me tell Madame Chevalier he had procured for you all possible alleviations. What more could they have done to you, I wonder?"

"Nay, if you speak of Father Ambrose, he has indeed proved himself a friend to me throughout; though why, is more than I have been able to make out. I should be far weaker than I am, if he had not supplemented my prison-fare with nourishing food from his own table, and tended my hurts ever since I was taken from the rack, with the skill of a leech and the gentleness of a woman."

"But have you lain here all these weeks in this hole in the earth—this pit of darkness? He might have done better for you than that, methinks."

"He has done all for me in his power, I doubt not. I have only been here four days, monsieur, since they have added the charge of treasonable correspondence to my other crimes. God forgive them the falsehood. My first cell was above ground, and had air and light in plenty; neither is this as dark as it seems to you fresh from the outer world. There is a grating in the ceiling which lets in a little light from an upper room, and through it, for one instant every day, a sunbeam flashes in. I call that my little Agnes. When my girl is old enough to understand, bid her mother tell her that her father named for her the one bright thing that visited him in his dungeon. But I waste these priceless moments talking about myself. You have come to bring me tidings of those I love."

M. Laval moved uneasily. "I was in Paris when I heard of your arrest, Godfrey. I lost no time in coming home, but when I reached the hills the cottage was deserted, and I could get nothing out of the weeping, frightened peasants, but that they had found it so the morning after you were taken. I might have had hard work to find the whereabouts of my little granddaughter, if I had not met M. La Roche on the street next day, and learned from him that Madame Chevalier and the children were living concealed in the house of M. Rey, the advocate. It seems the young sieur followed you that morning to Nismes, and late in the day, getting a whisper that the Intendant had given an order to take the children into custody, rode back to the hills as for his life. It was midnight when he reached there, but he gave Madame Chevalier the alarm at once, and had them all to the chateau before the first streak of light. They lay hidden there for a day or two until the first search was over, and then the young sieur and his father brought them down by night to Nismes. Your wife would hear of nothing else, Godfrey. She must be near you, she said, and though it was running a great risk, M. La Roche had not the heart to say her nay, especially as M. Rey had offered her the protection of his roof, and could be so fully trusted. She has borne up well thus far, but I fear she is buoyed up by false hopes of your escape, and that this terrible sentence, which I have just learned, will smite her to the earth."

"I have not prayed for her in vain," was the faint answer.

"What of our little Eglantine?"

(To be continued.)

PRODIGIOUS MEMORIES.

There have been stupendous memories enough in ancient and modern times to stagger belief, such as those of Theodectes and Hortensius and Cincas, of whom Cicero speaks, and in our latter days, Pascal, who, it is said, never forgot anything he had seen, heard or thought; and Avicenna, who repeated by rote the entire Koran when he was ten years old; and Francis Suarez, who, Strada tells us, had the whole of St. Augustine in his memory—enough, one would think, to destroy all his mental power of digestion; and Justus Lipsius, who on one occasion offered to repeat all the "History" of Tacitus without a mistake on forfeit of his life; and, in our own days, Jedediah Buxton and Zerah Colburn among others, who had such a prodigious power and rapidity of calculating in their minds. Colburn, it is said, could tell the number of seconds in fifty-eight years almost before the question could be repeated. The story is told that Jedediah Buxton was once taken to the theatre to see Gar-